

**Harmony of Riverine Rhythms: A Study of Traditional Ecological Episteme in the
Melodic Memoryscape of the Folk Ballads of Bengal**

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Abstract

The folk ballads of Bengal serve as a repository of ecological knowledge that have been transmitted across generations. This paper aims to explore the traditional ecological knowledge that is embedded within the narratives of the folk ballads of Bengal, with a special focus on Bhatiyali and Baul songs. Bhatiyali and Baul songs are a genre of folk ballads originating from the riverine regions of Bengal, which have a strong ecological connection. The Bauls and Bhatiyalis perceive the riverine ecosystem as a source of life, spirituality and creative energy. They sing about the changing moods of the rivers, from the tranquil and serene to the turbulent and destructive. They also sing about the flora and fauna that inhabit the riverine ecosystem, including fishes, birds, and plants, which are often used as symbols of human emotions and experiences. These songs are part of an oral tradition that has been passed down from generations and serve as a rich reserve of ecological knowledge and cultural memory. These songs negotiate memory, ecological episteme and spirituality in a unique and profound way. This paper investigates the representation of ecological themes in these folk ballads and their contribution towards the intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge and values. By analysing these songs, the paper offers an insight into how communities have historically navigated and adapted to their natural surroundings, which is embedded in their folk wisdom.

Keywords: Folk ballads, traditional ecological knowledge, Baul songs, Bhatiyali songs, Bengali community, participation, sustainability

At exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike.

—Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

The cultural and ecological heritage of the Bengal region, which implies both the present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, is deeply intertwined with its riverine landscapes, and this profound connection finds expression in the traditional folk ballads of the region. The region is blessed not just with major rivers, such as the Ganges, Teesta and the Brahmaputra, but also several tributaries and distributaries of these rivers whose count run into several hundreds. These hundreds of rivers are not merely geographical features but are revered as sources of life, spirituality and inspiration for creativity by the local communities. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between the ecology of the Bengal riverine region and the folk ballads, particularly focusing on the *Bhatiyali* and *Baul* songs. These songs encapsulate a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge and cultural memory, which are transmitted across generations through oral tradition. Through the lenses of memory studies and folklore studies, this paper seeks to illuminate the representation of ecological themes within these ballads, elucidate their role in intergenerational knowledge transfer and examine their impact in shaping cultural attitudes towards ecological sustainability.

Bhatiyali and Baul are arguably the most widely known folksongs of Bengal; and the popularity of these songs is partly owed to the film industry—both Bollywood and Tollywood (Bengali film industry)—as well as to their appropriation of the tunes and lyrics of these folksongs. However, it would be erroneous to assume that Bhatiyali and Baul are the most dominant folk music that Bengal has to offer. In fact, there is no hierarchy among the Bengali folk musicscape;

rather they could be categorised into different groups based on their themes and places of origin. The primary reason for selecting especially the Bhatiyali and Baul variants of Bengali folksongs is that they are, relatively, more intricately connected with not just the physical form of nature but also engage with the philosophical conceptualisation of nature. However, prior to delving deeper into the nuances, it is pertinent to get acquainted with the different varieties of folksongs that originated in different parts of the undivided region of Bengal.

Culturally, the folk ballads of Bengal occupy a central place in the hearts and minds of its people. These ballads are emblematic of the region's vibrant cultural diversity and its synthesis of various traditions, including Hindu, Islamic and indigenous beliefs. They transcend linguistic and religious boundaries, serving as a shared cultural reservoir for Bengali communities irrespective of their specific affiliations. One of the remarkable facets of these ballads is their role in fostering a sense of collective identity. They are not confined to a specific group or class; rather, they permeate the everyday lives of Bengalis across different strata of society. This universality is reflective of their ability to resonate with the shared experiences and aspirations of the people, forging a sense of unity and continuity across generations. For example, the musical tradition of Baul–Fakiri is practised harmoniously by mendicants from both Muslim and Hindu communities (Ahmed 1997: 74). Concurrently, throughout history, region-specific folksong traditions have emerged such as Gambhira in Malda and Rajshahi districts, Bhawaiya in northern Bengal and adjacent districts of Assam and Jhumur in the western districts of Bengal including Burdwan, Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum, and Midnapore. Baul songs have also originated from certain districts in East Bengal, Birbhum district of West Bengal and Bhatiyali in former East Bengal and present-day Bangladesh.

The folksongs of Bengal trace their roots deep into history, reflecting the intricate tapestry of the region's socio-political and economic dynamics. They offer a unique lens through which to

view the progression of time, providing insights into the lives, struggles and aspirations of generations past. These songs often narrate historical events, mythical tales and socio-political commentaries, effectively functioning as historical archives in an oral tradition. Through the ages, they have served as a means of passing down the collective memory of communities, capturing both the triumphs and tribulations that have shaped Bengal's history. Beyond their role as musical narratives, the Bengali folksongs have left an indelible mark on the region's artistic and literary expressions. They have inspired poets, writers and artists, providing a wellspring of themes, motifs and creative inspiration. Prominent literary figures, such as Rabindranath Tagore, drew from the imagery and ethos of these songs in their literary works. Consequently, the songs have transcended their oral tradition, permeating written literature, visual arts and contemporary performances.

Musicsphere and Soundscape of Bengal: Bhatiyali and Baul Songs

Baul songs, a venerable genre of mystical and philosophical folk music originating from the Bengal region, represent a profound cultural and spiritual legacy. These songs, with their distinctive blend of lyrics, melody and mysticism, encapsulate the essence of the Baul tradition—a syncretic, heterodox Sufi and Bhakti-inspired movement that has flourished for centuries. Baul songs transcend mere musical expression; they offer a glimpse into the inner landscapes of spirituality, philosophy and ecological consciousness, making them a captivating subject of academic inquiry.

Baul songs trace their origins to the rural, often marginalised, wandering minstrels known as Bauls. These mystical troubadours, transcending religious boundaries, have traversed the Bengal countryside for generations, singing of divine love, personal transformation and the search for spiritual truth. Their lyrical compositions serve as repositories of the profound spiritual and philosophical insights garnered through their journeys and contemplations. At the

heart of Baul songs lies a unique blend of mysticism, spirituality and philosophical inquiry. Baul philosophy centres on the pursuit of the *Moner Manush*, a Bengali phrase meaning: ‘Person of the Heart’, emphasising direct experiential knowledge of the divine. These songs, through metaphor and allegory, convey a profound understanding of the inner self, the nature of existence, and the union of the individual soul with the universal consciousness (Ahmed 1997: 49). Baul songs are not mere musical compositions; they are philosophical treatises that explore the intricate dimensions of human consciousness and the divine.

One of the distinctive features of Baul songs, often overlooked in academic discourse, is their deep ecological resonance. Bauls perceive the world as a holistic entity, where the external natural environment mirrors the inner landscape of the soul. The rivers, forests and landscapes of Bengal become metaphors for the journey of life and the interconnectedness of all beings. Baul songs celebrate the earth as sacred, emphasising the need for harmony with nature. This ecological consciousness, rooted in the songs, offers valuable insights into the intersection of spirituality, culture and environmental ethics.

The songs composed by Lalon Fakir, one of the most revered Bauls, are collectively called Lalon Geeti and use nature imagery to highlight the binary between spirituality and materiality. For instance, a Baul song composed by Lalon Fakir compares the soul with a bird and the human body with a cage that tries to bind the bird. The lyrics goes as: ‘*Khanchar bhiton achin pakhi kemone ashey jaye*’ (The unknown bird within the cage flies away at its own will), thereby drawing an analogy between the unbridled nature of the soul and the wild and free-spiritedness of birds. Though the bird might appear to be securely locked within the cage, it might fly away at any moment leaving the cage empty and desolate. Similarly, another Lalon Geeti also employs the imagery of bird to portray the inherent unknowability of soul. The refrain of the song goes as: ‘*Chirodin pushlam ek ochin pakhi, bhed porichoy daye na amay ei*

khede jhore ankhi’ (For ages I nurtured a mysterious bird, but it doesn’t reveal its identity, causing me to weep with regret). Although every human has a soul, hardly anyone could decipher its true nature. Only those who comprehend the true identity of the unknown bird that they nurture within themselves attain freedom from the fetters of the world. A Baul expresses his/her philosophy and worldview through metaphors from nature. Another Baul song expresses a detachment from the material world again through natural imagery: ‘*Amar jyamon beni temni robey chool bhejabo na*’ (Just as my braid remains untouched, I will not let my hair get wet). The deeper reflection beneath the quotidian expression implies that while enjoying the pleasures offered by the world, it is important to not become ensnared by its materialistic and superficial allurements.

Bhatiyali songs, a genre of traditional folk ballads originating from the riverine regions of Bengal, stand as cultural jewels deeply entwined with the waterways that traverse this historically rich and ecologically diverse landscape. These songs, with their lyrical poignancy and emotive melodies, have not only captivated the hearts of Bengali community but also offered profound insights into the human relationship with rivers and the intricate ecological tapestry they encompass. As the Government of West Bengal’s official website on Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) projects state, the word ‘Bhatiyali’ could be derived either from *bhati*, which means riverbank or the word *bhata* which refers to low tides, because these songs are typically sung by fishermen while fishing and boatmen while rowing their boats during low tides ([GoWB](#) n.d.). Bhatiyali songs have thrived for centuries as an integral part of Bengal’s cultural legacy. Originating from the waterborne traditions of boatmen and fishermen, these songs embody the essence of life along the riverbanks. They resonate with tales of tranquil voyages, arduous journeys and the ever-changing moods of the rivers. Historically, Bhatiyali songs served as solace to those navigating the vast network of waterways that define the Bengal

region, providing companionship during long, solitary voyages and articulating the profound connection between the river and its people (Abbasi 2010: 117).

Bhatiyali songs, much like the Baul songs, bear the historical imprint of Bengal's diverse cultural influences, including Hindu and Islamic traditions, reflecting the region's syncretic ethos. They serve as a timeless bridge between generations, linking the past and present through lyrical narratives that resonate with universal themes of human existence, longing and aspiration. In contemporary times, Bhatiyali songs continue to thrive, albeit within a changing cultural and ecological landscape. They have adapted to modern forms of expression while retaining their cultural essence. From academic perspectives, these songs offer a unique window into the intertwined realms of culture, ecology and memory. Their ecological wisdom, often transmitted through oral tradition, can inform sustainable practices and environmental stewardship in the face of contemporary environmental challenges.

What renders Bhatiyali songs particularly captivating and academically significant is their intimate portrayal of the riverine ecosystem. Through poetic verses and soulful tunes, these songs depict the vibrant ecology that thrives along the banks of Bengal's numerous rivers. Fish, the lifeblood of these waters, is celebrated not just as a source of sustenance but as a symbol of life's cyclical nature. Birds that grace the riverbanks become messengers of freedom and spiritual transcendence. The songs also personify the rivers themselves, portraying them as maternal figures nurturing the land (Abbasi 2010: 37). Some of the popular Bhatiyali songs are: *Nodir Kul Nai* (The River is Limitless), *Amay Bhashaili Re* (You Brought me Ashore), *O Parer Majhi Re* (O Boatman from the Other Shore), *Ore O Paraner Majhi* (Hey O Boatman of My Soul), and *Sagar Kuler Naiya Re* (O Boat of the Ocean Waves), among others. The riverine connection of these songs is apparent in their lyrics. Moreover, these songs are not just pastoral lyrics, celebrating the beauty of the riverine landscape, rather they encapsulate the deeper

philosophical meanings encapsulated within these landscapes. The lyrical beauty of Bhatiyali songs lies not only in their poetic expressions but also in their ability to capture the collective consciousness of the people who have, for generations, called the riverbanks their home.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) represents the intricate web of insights, practices and beliefs developed and transmitted across generations within specific cultural or community contexts. This multifaceted knowledge system encapsulates the holistic understanding of the environment, incorporating ecological, social and spiritual dimensions. Rooted in oral traditions, folklore and customary practices, TEK stands as a testament to the profound interconnection between communities and their ecosystems, offering a lens through which the dynamics of human–nature relationships can be comprehensively examined.

TEK is characterised by its adaptability and resilience, shaped by the experiences and observations of communities over time. It extends beyond conventional scientific paradigms, encompassing a range of knowledge domains such as ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnoecology, and ethnomusicology, which is of particular relevance in the context of this paper. This knowledge is often embedded in the daily lives of communities, evident in their agricultural practices, resource management strategies, folk artforms, and spiritual rituals (Rikhi with Virmani 2019: 124). The richness of TEK lies in its ability to integrate empirical observations with cultural values, providing a nuanced and context-specific understanding of ecological phenomena.

In the context of academic research, TEK assumes profound importance as a valuable source of insights into sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation and adaptive strategies to environmental changes. The significance of TEK lies in its capacity to offer an

alternative perspective to Western scientific approaches, enriching the depth and breadth of ecological knowledge. By studying TEK, researchers gain access to a wealth of information that may not be captured through conventional scientific methodologies alone. TEK serves as a reservoir of practical knowledge related to resource utilisation and conservation. Communities often develop sustainable practices rooted in generations of trial and error, adapting to the ecological intricacies of their specific locales (Rikhi with Virmani 2019: 158). For instance, indigenous agricultural practices may incorporate traditional planting calendars, optimised crop rotations and soil conservation techniques that have evolved over centuries. Incorporating TEK into research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of these folk practices, which are often dismissed by Western scientific discourses, as they potentially offer innovative and sustainable solutions to contemporary challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

TEK plays a pivotal role in biodiversity conservation by encapsulating traditional approaches to species identification, habitat protection and wildlife management. Indigenous communities often possess an intimate knowledge of local flora and fauna, recognising the ecological roles and interdependencies of various species. This knowledge is transmitted through generations, contributing to the preservation of biodiversity hotspots. Researchers engaging with TEK can benefit from this accumulated wisdom, gaining insights into effective conservation strategies and the potential identification of keystone species crucial for ecosystem health.

One of the distinctive features of TEK is its adaptive nature. Communities relying on TEK often develop strategies to cope with environmental variations, including changes in climate patterns or fluctuations in resource availability. For example, pastoral communities may have traditional mobility patterns for their herds that align with seasonal changes. In the face of

contemporary challenges, understanding these adaptive strategies becomes crucial for devising resilient and context-appropriate solutions.

In an era marked by unprecedented environmental challenges, TEK emerges as a critical tool for addressing complex ecological issues. Indigenous communities, drawing on their historical knowledge, often exhibit resilience in the face of changing climates, deforestation or other anthropogenic impacts. Studying TEK provides a window into these adaptive responses, offering valuable lessons for developing sustainable policies and practices. Furthermore, the incorporation of TEK into research fosters a more inclusive and collaborative approach, acknowledging the expertise and perspectives of local communities in environmental decision-making processes (Rikhi with Virmani 2019: 81). Beyond its ecological contributions, TEK also holds immense value in preserving cultural diversity. Indigenous knowledge systems are closely intertwined with cultural identities, reflecting the ways in which communities perceive and interact with their environment. TEK contributes to the safeguarding of cultural heritage, promoting inclusivity and recognising the intrinsic value of diverse knowledge systems.

The Embedded Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Bhatiyali and Baul Songs

Bhatiyali and Baul songs, intrinsic to the folk musicscape of Bengal, stand as repositories of TEK. Rooted in the riverine regions, these genres go beyond mere musical expressions, encapsulating a profound understanding of the ecological nuances of the landscape. Bhatiyali and Baul songs intricately depict the riverine ecosystem, portraying rivers as lifelines, sources of inspiration and spiritual entities. The changing moods of the rivers, from tranquil to turbulent, become metaphors reflecting the dynamic balance of nature. Fish, birds and the flora along riverbanks are not merely poetic elements but symbolic representations of the interconnectedness between human experiences and the natural world. In this symbology lies a reservoir of TEK, where the songs become narratives of ecological understanding.

The flora and fauna mentioned in Bhatiyali and Baul songs transcend their literal representations, serving as cultural metaphors deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. The choice of specific plants, animals or landscapes reflects a nuanced understanding of the ecological dynamics. For instance, a mention of a particular bird may signify the changing seasons or serve as a symbol of emotional experiences. Many of the folksongs use the imagery of the enigmatic bird called *chatak pakhi* (bright bird) to symbolise the deep yearning of nature for rain. In decoding these metaphors, one unveils layers of TEK that connect cultural expressions with the ecological fabric. Bhatiyali and Baul songs often mirror the seasonal rhythms and agricultural practices of the riverine communities. References to sowing, harvesting and cyclic patterns of nature highlight an embedded knowledge of agricultural calendars deeply intertwined with the local ecosystem (Capwell 2011: 91). These songs, thus, become oral records of sustainable farming practices, informed by generations of observation and adaptation to the region's specific agro-ecological conditions.

In Bhatiyali and Baul songs, the concept of sustainable practices is woven into the fabric of their lyrics and narratives (Chakravarti 2017: 46). These songs often carry messages that promote responsible resource utilisation. For example, they may emphasise the importance of utilising natural resources, such as fish from the rivers, in a manner that does not deplete their populations or harm the overall ecosystem. This could involve advocating for methods of fishing that are sustainable, selective and do not cause undue harm to aquatic life. Through such messages, these songs serve as cultural expressions of ecological wisdom, offering guidance on how to interact with the environment in a way that ensures its long-term health and productivity.

Some of the Bhatiyali songs employ the imagery of river to signify the trials and tribulations of life. One of the most popular Bhatiyali songs, *Amay Bhashaili Re* by Polli Kobi Jashimuddin

draws a parallel between the vastness of life with the broadness of river, and the difficulties of keeping one's boat afloat: '*Kul nai kinar nai naiko doriyar pari, sabdhane chalaya majhi amar bhanga tori re*' (Neither bank, nor shore, the river has no end, oh boatman carefully row my broken boat). Another popular Bhatiyali song by Jashimuddin, *Nodir Kul Nai* similarly expresses the predicaments of life through the choppy water of river: '*Visham nadir pani dheu kore hanahani, bhanga e tarani tobu bai re*' (The unruly river is churning tumultuous waves but still I row my broken boat). Both songs employ the metaphor of broken boat to portray the inevitable difficulties of life. The vast river could seem daunting, but an individual should cultivate enough mental strength and resilience to cross the choppy water even with limited resources, like a broken boat, a recurring imagery in these riverine songs.

The notion of harmonious coexistence with nature is a central theme in Bhatiyali and Baul songs. These songs often depict a way of life that respects and aligns with the natural world. They celebrate the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems, portraying a deep reverence for the rivers, the flora, the fauna, and the broader riverine landscape. The lyrics of these songs reflect a sense of balance between human activities and the need to preserve the health and vitality of the environment (Capwell 2011: 217). Through their portrayal of harmonious coexistence, these songs convey a cultural understanding of how communities in the riverine regions have historically interacted with their environment, recognising the importance of sustaining the delicate web of life upon which both humans and nature depend. In essence, sustainable practices and harmonious coexistence with nature are fundamental aspects of the embedded traditional ecological knowledge found in Bhatiyali and Baul songs. Through their lyrics and narratives, these songs impart valuable insights into how communities have historically maintained a balanced and respectful relationship with their natural surroundings, offering timeless lessons in responsible environmental stewardship.

Central to the essence of Bhatiyali and Baul songs is their role in oral tradition, serving as vessels for the intergenerational transmission of TEK. Passed down from one generation to the next, these songs carry within them the accumulated wisdom of the riverine communities of Bengal. Through this oral tradition, practical insights into navigation, fishing techniques and coexistence with the riverine environment are seamlessly woven into the cultural fabric. Beyond the practical aspects, Bhatiyali and Baul songs also embody a spiritual connection with nature, emphasising the sacredness of the riverine landscape. The rivers are not mere physical entities but are revered as sources of life, creativity and spirituality (Baul 2021: 73). This spiritual lens adds a dimension to the ecological knowledge embedded in the songs, where the rivers become conduits of both practical sustenance and transcendental experiences.

Embedded within the verses of Bhatiyali and Baul songs is an inherent adaptability to environmental changes. The songs, over time, have accommodated shifts in the riverine landscape, be it due to natural processes or human interventions. This adaptability, reflected in the songs, mirrors the resilience of the indigenous communities and their ability to navigate changes while maintaining harmony with the environment (Chakravarti 2017: 116). In essence, Bhatiyali and Baul songs emerge not just as cultural expressions but as living embodiments of TEK. Through their verses, these songs offer a profound insight into the ecological wisdom of the riverine communities, encompassing not only practical aspects of sustainable living but also the spiritual and cultural dimensions of their relationship with the environment. TEK embedded in Bhatiyali and Baul songs becomes a timeless narrative, echoing the harmonious coexistence of the cultural and ecological realms in the vibrant landscape of Bengal's riverine heritage.

Oral Tradition and Memory: A Theoretical Framework

Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), an eminent French sociologist and philosopher introduced the collective nature of memory in his pioneering 1925 work, *On Collective Memory*. Central to his theory is the idea that memory is not an individual, isolated phenomenon but a social construct shaped by collective experiences within a community. Halbwachs argued that individuals recall and reconstruct their memories in relation to their social groups, emphasising the communal nature of memory formation.

The collective memory theory finds profound relevance in the context of the riverine communities of Bengal, where the river serves as a central element shaping collective experiences. Rivers are not merely physical entities; they are cultural and ecological lifelines intimately tied to the identities of communities dwelling along their banks. The ebb and flow of the river become intertwined with the rhythm of daily life, forming a shared collective memory embedded in the cultural consciousness of the indigenous communities inhabiting the riverine planes of Bengal. Bhatiyali and Baul songs vividly exemplify Halbwachs' collective memory theory. These songs act as living archives, carrying within them the collective memories of the communities that generate them. Through the lyrical tapestry of these songs, one witnesses the interplay of individual and collective memories, reflecting the shared experiences, rituals and traditions of the communities along the riverbanks.

Halbwachs introduced the concept of a social framework of memory, suggesting that individual memories are framed within the temporal and spatial contexts of the social group. In Bhatiyali and Baul songs, the temporal framework is particularly pronounced. These songs often carry historical narratives, recounting events, rituals and myths that have been passed down through generations. The river becomes a temporal anchor, weaving past and present into a cohesive narrative that shapes the collective memory of the riverine communities. Halbwachs also placed emphasis on the spatial dimension of collective memory, arguing that memories are not

only temporal but also spatial constructs (Halbwachs 1992: 149). In the context of Bhatiyali and Baul songs, the spatial dimensions are intricately linked to the geography of the riverine landscape. Specific locations along the riverbanks, the confluence of rivers and the surrounding ecosystems serve as spatial markers within the collective memory. The songs navigate the spatial intricacies, creating a mental map that aligns with the lived experiences of the communities.

Halbwachs highlighted the interconnectedness of individual and collective memories within social structures (Halbwachs 1992: 32). Bhatiyali and Baul songs exemplify this interconnectedness through their communal nature. These songs are often sung collectively during communal events, festivals or daily activities, reinforcing the social bonds within communities. The shared singing of these songs fosters a sense of belongingness and strengthens the social fabric, contributing to the formation of a collective memory that transcends individual recollections.

Halbwachs acknowledged the dynamic nature of collective memory, subject to continuous reinterpretation and adaptation. Bhatiyali and Baul songs embody this dynamism as they evolve over time while retaining the core elements of riverine life. The songs serve as adaptive narratives, incorporating new experiences, challenges and ecological changes within the riverine environment. In this way, the songs become dynamic carriers of collective memory, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of the folk communities. In the contemporary context, Bhatiyali and Baul songs offer innovative avenues for interpreting and preserving collective memory. Digital platforms enable wider access to these songs, transcending geographical boundaries and facilitating a global dialogue on the collective memory of the riverine communities. The digital preservation of these songs becomes a modern manifestation of

Halbwachs' theory, where collective memory is not only sustained within local communities but also shared and appreciated on a broader scale.

Therefore, it could be conclusively argued that Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate interplay of individual and collective memories within the indigenous communities of Bengal. Bhatiyali and Baul songs emerge as powerful manifestations of this theory, encapsulating the temporal, spatial and social dimensions of collective memory. These songs serve as dynamic expressions of the riverine experience, weaving together the threads of tradition, ecology and communal identity. As living archives, Bhatiyali and Baul songs not only preserve the collective memory of the riverine communities but also offer an innovative lens through which one can explore the evolving narratives of the riverbanks.

Intergenerational Ecological Knowledge Transfer: Role of Bhatiyali and Baul Songs

Bhatiyali and Baul songs serve as cultural bridges that transcend mere musical expressions. An exploration of their role in intergenerational ecological knowledge transfer reveals a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, providing insights into the ways these songs bridge generations through the transmission of ecological wisdom. Intergenerational ecological knowledge transfer is crucial in sustaining the delicate balance between communities and their natural surroundings. In the riverine ecosystems—where the environment is both a provider and a challenge—the seamless transmission of knowledge across generations ensures the continuity of sustainable practices, adaptation to changing landscapes and the preservation of cultural identities intimately tied to the river (Majumdar 2010: 73).

Bhatiyali songs, originating from the riverine expanses of Bengal, play a pivotal role in transferring ecological knowledge from one generation to the next. The lyrical narratives of Bhatiyali songs often mirror the changing dynamics of the riverine ecosystems. Older generations use these songs as a medium to pass on insights into traditional fishing techniques, navigation skills and an understanding of the river's nuances. The rhythmic flow of Bhatiyali tunes becomes a conduit for the transfer of practical ecological knowledge, encapsulating the wisdom needed to navigate the river of time. Bhatiyali songs, as innovative storytelling devices, encapsulate not only practical knowledge but also the cultural and emotional dimensions of the riverine way of life. The use of metaphors and symbolism in the songs transforms ecological knowledge into a vibrant narrative (Dalrymple 2004). Through these stories set to music, the younger generation not only learns about the river's ecosystem but also absorbs the cultural values, ethics and the emotional connection that define their relationship with the river.

Baul songs, on the other hand, with their spiritual and philosophical undertones, offer a unique dimension to intergenerational ecological knowledge transfer. Rooted in a deeper connection between spirituality and nature, Baul songs guide younger generations not just in the practicalities of living along the river but in fostering a spiritual ecology that emphasises harmony with the environment. The metaphorical language of Baul songs transcends the tangible, imparting an ecological philosophy that goes beyond immediate practicalities, aiming to cultivate a profound respect for the interconnectedness of all living beings. Baul songs often express the harmony between humans and nature, portraying the river not just as a physical entity but as a source of spiritual nourishment (Baul 2021: 61). Through these songs, the younger generation imbibes the idea that ecological sustainability is not merely a set of ritualistic practices but a way of life that resonates with the rhythms of the natural world. The

intergenerational transfer of this spiritual ecology is pivotal in instilling a holistic understanding of ecological balance.

Both Bhatiyali and Baul songs are deeply embedded in oral traditions, forming a critical part of the cultural heritage passed down through generations. The oral nature of these songs facilitates a direct and personal connection between the older and younger members of the community. The act of singing or listening to these songs becomes a shared experience, fostering a sense of continuity and communal identity. In the oral tradition, ecological knowledge is not just transmitted as information but as a living part of the community's narrative (Capwell 2011: 197). While rooted in tradition, the transmission of ecological knowledge through Bhatiyali and Baul songs have also undergone innovative transformations in recent years. In contemporary settings, digital platforms and recordings provide new avenues for preserving and sharing these songs. The accessibility afforded by technology ensures that the wisdom encapsulated in the songs can reach wider audiences, not only within the local community but also beyond geographical boundaries.

The participation of the community in the creation and continuation of these songs enhances their role in intergenerational ecological knowledge transfer. In singing together during community events, festivals or daily activities, community members actively contribute to the preservation of their shared ecological heritage (Majumdar 2010: 78). This communal engagement fosters a sense of collective responsibility for the riverine ecosystem, contributing to its resilience in the face of environmental changes. Bhatiyali and Baul songs, thus, emerge as powerful agents in the intergenerational transfer of ecological knowledge. They are more than musical expressions; they are living archives of the riverine way of life. Through innovative storytelling, spiritual ecology, oral traditions, and community participation, these songs bridge generations, ensuring that the wisdom embedded within them continues to flow

like the rivers they celebrate. As these songs traverse the river of time, they carry not only the practical insights needed for survival but also the cultural richness and ecological philosophy that define the enduring relationship between riverine communities and their natural environment.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that the folk music of the region of Bengal represents an invaluable cultural and historical treasure. They are not mere musical compositions but profound narratives that encapsulate the essence of Bengal's past, present and, one might argue, its future. Their continued relevance underscores their ability to serve as both a mirror reflecting the evolving identity of Bengal and a bridge connecting generations through a shared melodic memoryscape. As we explore the intricate relationship between these ballads, traditional ecological knowledge and cultural memory, it becomes apparent that they are pivotal in understanding the dynamic interplay of culture, ecology and heritage in the riverine regions of Bengal. This study, therefore, stands as a testament to the enduring resonance of the folk wisdom of the riverine communities of Bengal, encapsulated in the melodic memoryscape of folksongs that weave the threads of tradition into the very fabric of the river's flow.

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