



Book Review

The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in South Asia.
Priyanka Basu. London and New York. Routledge, 2024. Hardcover.
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and Distributors)

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Dhol baahey, hoy Kobigaan
Banglar maan, Banglar gaan
[As the drum plays, Kobigaan proceeds
It is the song of Bengal and its pride] (Basu 31)

Priyanka Basu's book *The Poet's Song: 'Folk' and its Cultural Politics in South Asia* explores the 'folk' performance genre of Kobigaan, a dialogic song-theatre form in which performers verse-duel in contemporary West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Part of the South Asian History and Culture series, this book claims to be a major intervention in South Asian folklore and performance studies.

The book is divided into seven chapters and begins with a note on transliteration and translation where the author explains the logic behind transliteration and translation of all Bangla words and phrases used in the book. Bangla words and phrases are an integral part of this book as it explores Kobigaan, a Bangla folk performance genre. Understanding of the nuances of the language is crucial for any folk performance hence this note of transliteration and translation is an important addition for global readers who may not be familiar with the subtleties of Bangla as a language.

The introductory chapter, aptly titled "Nomenclatures", defines the genre of Kabigaan [made up of two words 'Kobi' (poet) and 'gaan'(song)] and differentiates it from other similar musical folk performances such as Jaarigaan and Gambhira in Bangladesh, Rasiya (Rajasthan), Akhara (Madhya Pradesh) and Dugola (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh) in India, Ladishah in Kashmir, Dohori in Nepal, and Virindu in Sri Lanka. All these folk performances contain "social commentary, humour, verbal ribaldry, religious sermonising and

entertainment” (3). Two other indigenous Bangla folk forms namely Jatra and Tarjaa are close to Kabigaan but Kabigaan is an elaborate performance that mingles song and theatre, has a distinct structure of “Invocation- Narration-Verse Duelling-Songs-Concluding duet” (3). A typical Kobigaan performance comprise of two groups (kobir dawl), headed by a lead singer (kobiyaal or sarkar), at least two chorus singers (dohaar) and a set of instrument players (4). The chapter also briefly focuses on how the folk genre has adapted itself to modernity and emergence of social media platforms. The issue of ‘authenticity’ is crucial to the understanding of any folk genre. Hence, apart from mapping out the structure of the book, the author also spells out her purpose, methodology adopted, sites of field-work, historical journey of the folk form, kobigaan as a ritual performance, existing archive and limitations of archival documents, connections between ethnography and archive in order to establish “what is and what is not Kobigaan?” (6).

The second chapter, titled “The Travelling Archive” analyses two ‘authentic’, full-length Kobigaan performances, one each from West Bengal and Bangladesh and makes a comparative-contrastive study between the performances. Apart from entertainment and refreshment of cultural memory these performances also act as platforms for mass-awareness-building as performers are often employed by the government to educate rural people on issues such as gender violence, women empowerment, polio vaccination. The author as an ethnographer learns through the process of fieldwork that Kobigaan is claimed by three groups of performers-the kobiyaals from West Bengal, the sarkars from Bangladesh and the cross-border Matua community who use Kobigaan as a tool to foreground their identity as Namasudras. The third chapter titled ‘Afterlives’ critically analyses the archival documents, literary canon on Kobigaan performances and focuses on the role and contribution of individuals like Rabindranath Tagore, institutions like the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Marxist cultural movements like the IPTA which helped to develop and transform Kobigaan into a folk cultural practice. The fourth chapter titled ‘Past Continuous’ critically engages with several cinematic and literary adaptations of Kobigaan. Along with the written, official, historical archive of the nineteenth century the importance of the archival effect of cinema cannot be overlooked and

the chapter diligently explains the necessity of looking at cinema as an archive of Kobigaan performances. The fifth chapter- “Temporary Exhibits”- focuses on truncated Kobigaan performances that are included in fairs and festivals to trigger cultural memory and act as souvenirs, markers of Bengali identity. The author calls such performances as “vestigial” and “emblematic as remnants of a once dominant and popular tradition” (179).

The sixth chapter, titled “Writing Sisterhood” focuses on the challenges of becoming a woman Kobiyaal. The chapter begins by briefly analysing the life of Nati-Binodini and her position within Bengal’s performance history, looks into the life and challenges faced by Jogeshwari, a nineteenth century woman Kobiyaal. It discusses the challenges faced by women kobiyaals as Kobigaan performances involve travelling with the troupe, space-sharing with troupe members- acts which may harm the reputation of a woman kobiyaal. Women Kobiyaals of contemporary West Bengal such as Dulati Chitrakar, Sanchita Paul, Madhumita Pradhan, Buri Murmu Hembram and Ambika Ghosh are well aware of the challenges posed by gender and develop several strategies to deal with such challenges. The chapter analyses such strategies at length. Questions of caste and ethnicity further problematise the understanding of the politics of gender. The chapter also focuses on the reception of Santhali women performers who have joined mainstream practices and provides a detailed account of the life of Dulati Chitrakar, a veteran woman kobiyaal from West Bengal. In the ‘Epilogue’ to the book, the author focuses on the representation of ‘Kobir Larai’ (verse-duelling between poets) at the Hay Literary Festival, 2012 in Dhaka. The ‘Kobir Larai’ is only a part of an authentic Kabigaan performance but is used interchangeably with Kabigaan in several modern performances thereby re-visiting the key issue of ‘authenticity’ and ‘vestigiality’ with which the book critically engages.

The book is the result of seven years of painstaking research and fieldwork. It is noteworthy that every chapter contains endnotes which provide the reader with detailed accounts of references made in the text and also suggest secondary reading materials on various topics. This added information might be extremely useful to students of literature or advanced researchers. There are several illustrations,

tables inserted at key moments of the text to explain the nuances of Kobigaan performances. These techniques, along with detailed bibliography and index, further add to the usefulness of the book. The book is well-researched, well-organised and well-explained. The author is extremely disciplined and spells out her purpose in each chapter of the book. However, a noticeable gap in the book is the unavailability of any separate chapter on the history and refashioning of the cross-border Matua community as Kobigaan performers. The contribution of this book lies in problematising and historicising 'folk' (260) thereby enabling the readers to critically re-think existing concepts and stereotypes associated not only with Kobigaan but also other folk practices present within the broader disciplines of Performance Studies and South Asian History and Folklore.