

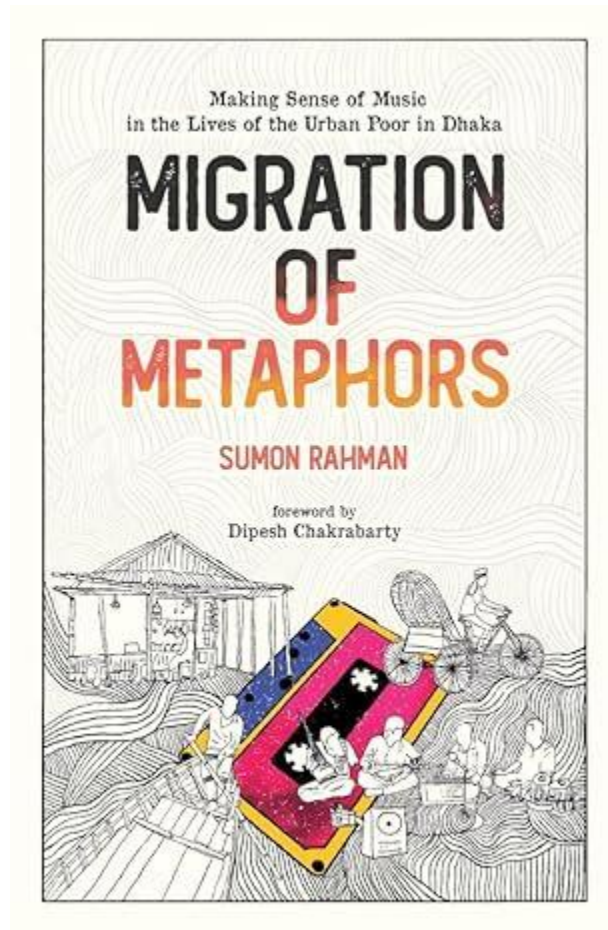
Migration of Metaphors: Making Sense of Music in the Lives of the Urban Poor in Dhaka

Sumon Rahman

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Whenever we think about slums and the poor people living in the slums, we often associate them with poverty, malnutrition, and many other negative connotations. In his book “Migration of Metaphors: Making Sense of Music in the Lives of the Urban Poor in Dhaka,” Sumon Rahman explores the cultural identity of the urban poor beyond these connotations through their musical tradition. Though the urban poor is not a homogenous category, Rahman focuses on the folk musical experiences of the poor people who migrated from rural areas to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Rather than perceiving the cultural identity of the urban poor as static and fictional, he considered it “... situational and performative.” While focusing on the identity formation of the urban poor of Dhaka, it primarily deals with the historical revival of folk music in Bangladesh, which can be traced to the late 1980s. To explore the processes by which the cultural identity of the urban poor was produced, the author focuses on three cultural locations:

- A case study of an organization including a large number of urban folk musicians
- The musical contents of selected urban folk songs

- Ethnographic exploration of a television reality show

Migration is one of the most effective phenomena in the urban poor's cultural identity, which largely shapes their lives and livelihoods. By analyzing the lyrics of popular folk songs, Rahman shows that the massive changes they have to endure in their lives due to migration are also reflected in the metaphors of the folk music they practice. For instance, while the river and the boat have signified human activities on the Earth in the Bengali folk tradition for a long time, the automobile (bus) replaced these in the urban folk as the lives of the urban poor are closely associated with that vehicle.

Despite the dominance of the urban folk genre in terms of the increased number of consumers and performers in the music industry, the authority of urban folk does not remain unchallenged. The author identified ideological warfare between two classes by analyzing the visual contents of selected urban folk productions of the educated class and the subaltern class. While the educated middle class tends to impose their taste on their 'subordinated class' by creating such content, the urban poor creators tactfully reject this moral superiority by showing strict moral standards and passivity.

The author also depicts the politics of producing the images of the urban poor by ethnographically exploring a music idol show named "Tin Chaka" on television, wherein rickshaw pullers were the contestants. Though the idea for this music competition originated from two 'ordinary men,' it was later usurped by the corporate media. They also shaped the presence of the urban poor in the competition by selecting the songs they could perform on the stage and imposing their moral standards on the contestants, eventually influencing the judgment. Moreover, the show appeared to be more of a charity than a competition. However, the contestants utilized their agency by occasionally deviating from these imposed values. On the other hand, the audiences belonging to the urban poor were very much aware of its classist nature and did not find any interest in watching it.

However, the processes by which the cultural identity of the urban poor as the performer, producer, and audience are formed in a specific location, become evident in chapter 4 of this book. Every Thursday night, the urban poor gather in numerous small groups where performers and audiences are present. At the courtyard on that Thursday night, music functions as a form of resistance against all forms of inequality. On the other hand, the urban poor, who migrated from rural areas, tend to have a passion for music and often use music to express their agony related to migration. During the performance, no demarcation between the performers and the audiences can be identified. Another prominent characteristic of such musical events is: that the shrine of Shah Ali works as a space of salvation where they feel empowered. Unlike white collar professionals, the urban poor do not have regular days off on Fridays. Still, they feel a spiritual responsibility to attend the gathering at the gathering where they perform music according to their spiritual traditions. A significant number of folk musicians from the urban poor follow the Baul tradition.¹ However, they do not want to become engaged in the extreme rituals of traditional Bauls whose lifestyle and musical content makes them vulnerable to the attacks of fundamentalists, which also questions their authenticity as Baul musicians. As a result, just like the hybrid nature of urban folk, the identity of urban folk musicians has been constructed as 'in-between.' On the other hand, despite enormous demand, the mainstream music industry often downplays the needs of these Baul musicians. However, they negotiate with the industry, utilizing their agency.

The book is methodologically nuanced. Rahman investigates how the cultural identity of the urban poor is produced across different tangible and intangible sites, including Karail slum, the biggest slum in Dhaka, the lyrical content of the urban folk songs, visual content about the urban poor and television programs,

¹ Ed: Bauls are mystic minstrels or itinerant musicians who profess a syncretic form of spirituality.

which Marcus defined as “following the metaphors” of the multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). On the other hand, Rahman utilizes a unique method named “Rhythmanalysis,” an approach for critical analysis wherein the researcher dives into different fields of knowledge, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and economics to adopt a transdisciplinary approach while emphasizing the spatial rhythms. In other words, it can provide insightful guidelines for empirical research (Lefebvre, 2004).

Apart from the methodological stances, the representation of the urban poor was quite impressive. Unlike most of the literature that deals with the problems the urban poor face in their everyday lives, the author describes how a significant number of urban poor, who migrated to Dhaka from the rural areas, expressed their feelings about the changes, challenges, and pain of the urban lives and livelihoods through music that eventually contribute to creating the dominance of the urban poor in the music industry and shaping their cultural identity. Naturally, the elite-dominated protests against this dominance utilize different tactics. In this context, the author ethnographically explored how they used their agency to resist such attempts. In this way, the author sheds light on another unnoticed dimension of our urban life.

Besides, this book can be used as a useful resource for studying the intangible cultural heritages in Bangladesh because it explores the significance of urban folk as a popular genre of music, in forming the cultural identity of the urban poor of Dhaka.

References

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Aditi Sharif, postgraduate student, University of Dhaka