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From Folk Community to Digital Self: Identity and Performance in Contemporary Bengali Cinema and Web series

Payel Dutta[1]

Abstract

Nowadays, storytelling plays a crucial role in shaping identity and collective belonging in Indian society, particularly in Bengal. Bengal possesses a rich tradition of folklore, reflected in practices such as Baul songs, Jatra theatre, and Patachitra storytelling, which have created communal cultural spaces where identity is formed through participation and shared experience. Traditional folklore, including folktales, proverbs, and chants, largely reflect the social values, norms, ethics and cultural practices of specific communities. Such practices emphasize collective values, moral instruction, and community participation rather than individual self-expression. However, contemporary Bengali society shows a keen interest in digital and media-driven environments, where identity is increasingly shaped through social media and digital visibility. Individuals today often construct and perform their identities online, seeking validation through likes, shares, and digital recognition. This shift in the modes of dissemination of Bengali folklore: from traditional storytelling to digital self-representation in the early twenty-first century, has led to new forms of anxiety and self-consciousness, often described as an algorithm-driven performance culture. In the modern era, the mediums of storytelling have transformed from print media and performative traditions such as Baul songs and Jatra theatre to electronic media, television, animated cartoons, cinema and web series. Contemporary Bengali screen media captures the transformation of urban relationships and social interactions shaped by digital culture. This study seeks to explore how identity shifts from collective folk belonging to digitally mediated self-performance by analysing selected works of contemporary Bengali cinema and web series. By comparing folk traditions with modern narratives, the study examines

1 Payel Dutta is an Independent Scholar and a Post Graduate in English from University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. Email: payelmikki@gmail.com

how storytelling reflects evolving modes of identity in contemporary Indian society. It further seeks to examine how contemporary Bengali cinema and web Series represent this transformation from collective community belonging to individualized digital selfhood, while also analysing the social and psychological consequences of digital visibility.

Keywords: Folk tradition, Storytelling, Cinema, Web series, Identity, Bengali Culture, Digitalization

Traditional Bengali folk culture plays a dominant role in defining the identity of Bengal. Bengal is a rich repository of folklore, in which folk literature is deeply intertwined with its cultural fabric and has become an integral part of it. Over time, it has undergone a transformation: from being rooted in oral storytelling traditions to finding expression in the digital era through cinema, animated cartoons, and web series. While earlier forms of storytelling emphasized collective identity and communal participation, contemporary digital culture, as reflected in contemporary cinema and web series—promotes individualized self-performance shaped by material aspirations, visibility and social evaluation. Over the past decades, Bengali folk culture has followed a long path—from oral traditions to digital platforms—emerging as a significant area of concern and transformation across generations. Notable works such as *Thakurmar Jhuli*, and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mujumdar represent significant efforts to preserve and restore the cultural identity of Bengal, particularly at a time when Indian markets were increasingly influenced by Western folktales. At the same time, print media also played a pivotal role in transforming oral folklore into written form, thereby ensuring its preservation and wider dissemination. In the present digital age, the mediums of folklore have further evolved from print to electronic platforms such as television, animated cartoons, cinema and web series. Adaptations like the animated *Panchatantra*, *Gopal Bhanr* on Zee Bangla and web-based narratives such as *Bulbbul* on Netflix have gained popularity among both children and adults, especially in urban contexts. Although the modes of expression have changed, folklore continues to revive and sustain the ethics, customs, and cultural values of Bengal, maintaining a continues link between tradition and modernity.

> "Folklore is the total creation of life practice and the ideational pursuit of mainly collective, spontaneous and synonymous effort of an integral

> society" (58). Dr. Tushar Chattopadhyay has outlined a definition of folklore in the All India Science Congress, held in Chandigarh in 1973. It interprets that some elements of folklore have originated from superstitious beliefs, colourful rituals, various god's worships, customs and village festivals of the folks. It also proves that although it took shape among the uneducated rural peasantry, it has transcended the boundaries of primitive culture and extended its legacy into the postmodern age, as revealed through cartoons, cinema and web series. The terms "Folk literatures" includes superstitious tales, ancient epic narratives, God's proverbs and Rashlila which represent another dimension of literature that spreads through the oral transmission. It evolves over time and sustains human experience for its continued existence. Storytelling through folklore, now often considered an understated form of expression, constitutes a core product of a unified and progressive society that preserves its cultural legacy. Similarly, it also forms the foundation of folk literature, which is grounded in the interdependence of members within a particular society. Contemporary storytelling media are not only the creators of folk literature but also, the holders and carriers. It is essential to keep in mind that these various storytelling media, which are based on ancient folk culture, are not only meant for joy and leisure but also carry important messages—they act as recorders of the incidents of a particular age and place. Unfortunately, the oral tradition of storytelling through Jatra, theatre, Patachitra, and even earlier screen medias such as televisions, cinemas, animations— are gradually being forgotten due to modern busy lifestyles. As a result, folk culture is now being experienced in new forms in this digital era.

The legend of the Indian educationalist and patron of art and literature, Dr Ashutosh Mukherjee, is often associated with bringing the folklore of Bengal to the limelight. With the help of his close friend Dr. Dinesh Chandra. Sen, he decided to publish this folk literature of Bengal for a wider audience. As this initiative opened the door to reimagining folklore, a large number of researchers followed his path and maintained this legacy in their own ways. A vast collection of Bengali folktales was collected from *Mymansingh Gitika*. A detailed analysis of the folklore of Bengal and its culture legacy is presented in Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen's *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, where he offers a significant comparative study of Indian and foreign folktales. One notable example of such collections is *Thakurmar Jhuli*: *Banglar Rupkotha* (Grandmother's Tales: Fairy tales of Bengal), a collection of Bengali folktales has been published by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder in 1907. This classic work not only relates to Bengal's

cultural identity but also holds historical significance in relation to the Swadeshi Movement of Bengal. In the late twentieth century, many renowned filmmakers showed a keen interest in incorporating Bengali folklore into films and television serials. To preserve indigenous identity and counter the growing impact of Western cultural trends, another group of Bengali intellectuals in the early twentieth century focused on collecting and documenting folklore, including folktales, proverbs, and legends. These classic collections played an important role in resisting Western cultural influence. Renowned scholars such as Hayden White, in his seminal works *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of the Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973), and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), has commented on such collections. Referring to *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Mitra Majumder, it has been observed that "the collection is looking glass of the Swadeshi Movement. The work not only reflects the principles of the movement but also carries flaws inherent in the movement which divided the Indian society" (Paul 156). The main goal of this movement, popularly expressed as "bideshi drobyo borjon", emphasized the rejection of foreign goods.

Moreover, the history of print culture in Bengal folklore reflects the transformation of oral traditions into written documents. This storytelling mass medium became not only the repository of folklore but also reshaped the structure of Bengali folktales. As Maitra observes, "traditional folktales saw immense popularity once again in the booming broadcast industry" (Maitra 90). Folktales such as *Thakurmar's Jhuli* and *Gopal Bhanr* became hugely popular in urban culture through their animated adaptations of the same folktales on television (Zee Bangla). In the era of digitalization, the internet has become a global network that connects millions of people belonging to multiple regions and cultures. The renowned scholar Stith Thomson recognised the animated cartoons as a powerful medium of storytelling. He observed that cinema, especially animation, is perhaps the most effective medium for presenting fairy tales, as it vividly brings the creatures of folk imagination to life…Many adults who had long lost interest in fairy tales have unexpectedly found great pleasure in such imaginative narratives. (Thompson 130)

In the digital era, the rapid development of platforms such as Netflix, Hotstar, and YouTube has enabled Bengali folktales to

transcend regional boundaries, transforming them from oral and auditory traditions into visual forms of entertainment. The continued relevance of Bengali folktales is evident in many modern films, television serials, and web series that are based on Bengal oral folklore. A classic example is *Saat Bhai Champa*, a well-known folktale first published by Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumder in book *ThakurmarJhuli* which was later broadcast as a television series on Zee Bangla from 2017 to 2019. Although folklore functions as a mediator between past and present cultures, it continuous to sustain itself through the ongoing practice of arts, crafts, ballads, rhymes, lyrics, tales, along with traditional musical instruments that embody ancient norms and ethics. In a nutshell, the folklore of Bengal has traversed a long path— from Jatra theatre and oral storytelling to the world of television and digital media. It has successfully extended into web-based platforms such as Netflix, Zee5, Amazon Prime, Hoichoi, Voot, MX Player, where modern web series based on Bengali Folklores have gained prominence.

A question arises: how do most contemporary Bengali cinema and web series feel in relation to this transformation? They trace a shift in identity from communal folk roots to individualized digital personas, blending tradition with modern performance. This evolution greatly reflects broader cultural changes in Bengal, where folklore once unified communities but now intersects with urban, teach-driven self-expression. At the same time, it can be argued that Bengali Cinema needs to reconsider its roots in order to sustain its cultural legacy. The Bengali Film Industry often does itself a disservice by expecting large amount audiences solely on the strength of its cultural heritage; however, it sometimes overlooks the fact that cultural legacy alone does not ensure commercial success, compelling content does. At times, an uncritical fascination with Bollywood persists within Bengali Cinema, despite the fact ongoing challenges faced by Bollywood itself. Rather than imitating Bollywood's grandeur, Bengali cinema should focus on storytelling, texture, and authenticity. The Bengali Films Industry needs to focus that sometimes revival is not merely an option but a necessity. In comparison to other film industries, Bengal has always been a land of cultural rebellion, but somewhere its cinemas have lost its spark. The pressing question remains—will Bengali cinemas dare to reclaim its

roots? The answer lies not in the coffee houses or the banks of Ganga in Kolkata, but also in the rural landscapes and cultural heartlands, where the real stories continue to exist. It is time to reconnect with these roots before the folk spirit and cultural heritage lose their vitality and become a forgotten footnote.

Contemporary Bengali films and web series blend traditional storytelling with modern cinematic techniques to revive folklore and its cultural legacy: such as Chhau dance, Baul songs, and Gambhira (a popular folk form of west Bengal) to articulate collective cultural identity and foster a sense of shared belonging through myths and performances. Directors like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak integrated folk elements into New Wave cinema to evoke regional solidarity and Marxist aesthetics. Ritwik Ghatak had envisioned making a film titled *"On Vietnam"* which he planned to make it in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He articulated his ideas, including a schematic outline, in an essay titled *"Vietnam niye je jhat karke chai"* (The Film I want to make on Vietnam) published in a brochure for a Bengali Youth Festival in 1968. A few years later, he explored similar themes in his 1964 film *Two: A Film Fable*, which is based on an allegory of war. Similarly, Satyajit Ray's Goopy, Bagha series represents a landmark in Bengali fantasy-adventure comedy cinema. Based on a story of Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, the series includes classics such as *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969) and its sequel *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), both of which draw upon elements of Bengali folklore and cultural imagination. However, recent critiques point to a gradual shift toward urban narratives, which dilute these authentic communual ties. Platforms such as Hoichoi and Netflix facilitate the construction of "digital selves" through personalized narratives, where characters negotiate social media, addiction, and modern relationships. For instance, the web series *Srikanto* (2022), adapted from Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's classic novel *Srikanta*—explores identity formation amid emotional turmoil. Similarly, *Dhimaner Dinkaal* (2017), written by Padmanabha Dasgupta, satirizes the disruptive influence of social media on traditional family values—portraying the life of a simple man who resists mobile and digital culture. This shift reflects a growing tendency toward performative individualism, standing in contrast to earlier forms of folk collectivism. Contemporary

examples, *Bulbbul* (Netflix, 2020), carries folk element through reinterpreting patriarchal folklore and witch myths to empowers individual female avenger in supernatural frame. Likewise, *Kantara* (a film in 2022), drawing on the Bhuta Kola folk ritual tradition, foreground community-centric narratives and ritualistic authenticity, thereby offering a compelling model for the revival of indigenous storytelling traditions.

Digital media revives folklore globally but challenges authenticity. Web series address patriarchy and identity through folk motifs while attracting tech-savvy youth. With the introduction of digital technology, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak (2020), new media platforms have emerged, and the modes of distributing oral folk traditions have significantly evolved. Cinema, too, has been transforming with the passage of time. Some renowned music platforms such as *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa* and *Dance Bangla Junior* on Zee Bangla have contributed to this trend by popularizing new forms of storytelling. These platforms have secured a massive space of reviving its Bengal's cultural legacy leading to a new direction.

Several Bengali web series and films now adapt folktales, such as *Bulbbul* (2020), which reimagines patriarchal folklore and witch mythology into a tale of female empowerment. *Bulbbul* (2020) is an Indian Hindi-language horror film written and directed by Anvita Dutt (produced by Anuska Sharma and karnash Sharma under Clean Slate Flimz, and featuring Tipti Dimri the lead role alongside Avinash Tiwary, Paoli Dam, Rahul Bose, and Parambrata Chattopadhyay), set against the backdrop of the 1880s Bengal Presidency, the film revolves around a child bride and her journey from innocence to strength. Satya confronts Bulbul in the forest, accusing her of the murders after discovering her backward feet and her role as the village "chudail," but a confrontation sparks a massive fire that engulfs her, seemingly ending the last of her mortal ties, especially as her lingering love for him shatters. One year later, Indranil returns to the ruined haveli, haunted by guilt over his abuse and family legacy. He awakens to Bulbul's spectral figure beside him; her faint smile and fiery touch on his cheek signal her full supernatural rebirth, poised to exact a final revenge on her husband without explicitly showing the act itself. Many critics explain that the blood-red moon evokes kali's blessing, transforming Bulbul from a victim and freeing her spirit

completely rather than destroying it. This theme leaves viewers to ponder whether her powers are real or metaphorical, representing inner strength rising against patriarchy, making her an avenger for oppressed women through fire. It is evident that *Bulbbul* uses Bengali folklore as a lens to critique patriarchy, transforming the "chudail" (witch) myth into a metaphor for women's suppressed rage. It reinterprets deshi tales of bloodthirsty witches with backward feet, drawn from oral storytelling traditions, into symbols of justice against abusers. The Chudail myth is reclaimed in these films, along with kali symbolism and supernatural imagery, which beautifully echo Bengal's traditions of goddess worship interwinded with rural ghost stories. This revival of *Thakurmar Jhuli*-style tales highlights folklore's role in narrating misogyny, where innocent women become "witches" when trust is broken. The film was released on Netflix on 24 June 2020. Several others Bengali web series adapt folktales similar to *Bulbbul,* reimagining patriarchal folklore and witch myths into narratives of female empowerment. *Pett kata shaw* (Chorki, 2022), a popular web series on Hoichoi, revitalizes traditional Bengali ghost stories and folk tales, such as Alor and Nishi. It is a Bangladeshi horror anthology consisting of four standalone episodes retelling traditional Bengali folklore—such as ghostly spirits and rural myths into modern horror narratives passed down through generations, emphasising eeric, community-rooted experiences without a connected storyline. This blending of supernatural elements with contemporary horror is similar to *Bulbbul'*s use of chudail motif. Another important example is the *Saat Bhai Champa* adaptation *(Zee Bangla / Zee5).* This story, drawn from *Thakurmar Jhuli's* classic folktale of seven brothers turned into birds, has been adapted into a popular Television-to-web series (2017-2019), preserving the magical realism of oral folklore while updating it for digital audiences. Recently, platforms such as *Netflix*, Zee5, Amazon Prime, Hoichoi, Voot, and MX player have become popular spaces where modern web series based on Bengali folklore are released. This has enabled the emotional realism of Bengali Cinema and Web series to reach global audiences. One striking point is that its option for online comments have strengthened social solidarity and facilitated the global circulation of regional folklore. In India, the digital revolution is mainly driven by the increasing number of smartphone users, the

widespread availability of 4G and reduced data costs, have increased time spent on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Many Web series based on Bengali folklore expand the chances for Bengali culture to reach the distant corners of the world, as they serve as innovative and effective mediums that maintain a close connection with large number of audiences.

Some recent Bengali movies that are strongly rooted in folktales, myths, and legends include Soukarya Ghosal's *Pokkhirajar Dim* (2025), an Indian Bengali-language science fantasy film produced by Jio Studios and SVF Entertainment. Serving as a thematic sequel to Ghosal's 2018 film *Rainbow Jelly*, (role played by Anirban Bhattacharya as Batabyal), an eccentric mathematics teacher, alongside Mahabrata Basu as Ghoton, a struggling student determind to master mathematics, and Anumegha Banerjee reprising her role as Poppins, Ghoton's only friend, while Alexx O'Nell portrays the antagonist, a British archaeologist. Set in the fictional village of Akashgunj, the narrative blends Bengali folklore with science fiction elements, theoretically based on Einstein's famous general theory of relativity, which shows light does not travel in a straight line in space—the story revolves around a supernatural relic capable of reading minds. This film was released on 13 June 2025.

Dhrubo Banerjee's *Raghu Dakat* (lead role played by Dev as Raghu, 2025*)*, is drawn from Bengali folklore and centres on a legendary eighteenth-century Bengali outlaw often portrayed as a "Robin Hood of the Bengal" figure who robbed wealthy oppressors to help the poor. Raghu, depicted as the "son of Maa Kali" is associated with ritual practices and divine intervention, reflecting the Bengali folk tradition of deifying rebels. He was known for his devotion to Goddess Kali and reportedly informed victims before raids and avoided harm to women, children, and the elderly. This film incorporates strong folklore elements such as Kali devotion, ritual dances, Dakat Ma's maternal guidance, and legendary outlaw myths rooted in Bengal's Indigo Revolt era, elevating Raghu to the status of a folk hero. These elements reinforce Raghu Dakat's identity as a cultural figure, similar to how *Bulbbul* draws upon oral traditions to construct identity. Besides this, Anirban Bhattacharya's *Ballabhpurer Roopkotha* (2022), a horror-comedy based on a popular play, features a ghost in a dilapidated ancestral mansion—a recurring motif in

folklore. Soukarya Ghosal's *Bhootpori* (2024), a horror-comedy mystery film, depicts a young child encountering the ghost of a deceased woman. Tathagata Mukherjee's *Bhotbhoti* (2022), a romantic fantasy film rooted in the folklore of mermaids, focusing on a young dweller named Bhotbhoti (role played by Rishav Basu) who became obsessed with finding a mermaid in the Ganges River. Prantic Basu's *Sakhisona* (2016), a film that reimagines longstanding Bengali folktales, presents a blend of mythology and cultural preservation. It merges regional folklore with archaeological findings from a sixth-century monastery in Mogulmari, south-western Bengal, exploring the story of a couple who elope into an abandoned forest, where the narrative shifts between their lives and mythical, fragmented stories of a shaman who possesses the power to transform men into goats.

Srijit Mukherjee's *Lawho Gouranger Naam Rey* (Subhashree Ganguly played the lead role, 2025), further extends the engagement between folklore, performance, and identity, presents a layered narrative that moves across different historical periods, including the devotional era of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the theatrical world of Binodini Dasi. By intertwining religious folklore, theatrical performance, and modern cinematic storytelling, this film highlights how identity is not fixed but continuously performed and reinterpreted across time.

Thus, contemporary Bengali films and web series beautifully blend traditional storytelling with modern cinematic techniques to revive folklore and its legacy, marking a profound evolution from folk community identity to digital self-performance. Both *Bulbbul* and *Raghu Dakat* transform communal folklore, patriarchal witch tales and indigo rebel epics—into narratives of empowerment, critiquing oppressions while shifting from village gatherings to digital platforms. Bulbbul's vengeful supernatural heroine and Raghu Dakat's kali-anointed outlaw embody this transformation, where folk motifs fuel individual agency against systematic oppression. In a nutshell, these stories affirm the vitality of Bengali screen culture, weaving ancestral myths into digital forms that redefine identity for global audiences while still urging a return to communal roots.

> Now the question arises: can folklore in the digital era represent Bengali culture and its legacy in the same way as the traditional folklores once did? In this digital era, the internet has made it easier to

> reach them global audiences through electronic devices. As Krishenblatt-Gimblett has stated that "the very technologies that threaten to displace oral traditions are also instruments for preserving them" (177).

Bengal stands as a fertile ground of folklore traditions, deeply rooted in its cultural history. Bengali folklore plays a pivotal role in shaping and establishing the identity of Bengal. In this digital era, when people are constantly struggling to return to their own roots and maintaining cultural identities, the dissemination of folklore through different media plays an extraordinary role in preservation. Folk literature of Bengal forms the foundation of the thousand–year's history of the Bengali language. Folklore acts as an important element of Bengali nationalism and reflects Bengal's contribution to the Indian Independence Movement. The rich treasury of Bengali folklore is closely linked with social, economic, and political transformation of the region. In order to maintain this legacy, efforts to collect and document folklore were initiated. In the digital era, folklore has shifted from printed forms to cinematic and digital representations. Whether in Patachitra, manuscripts, cinema, or web series, folklore continues to carry the responsibility of preserving and disseminating cultural values, a role it has fulfilled since the earliest storytelling traditions of Jatra and theatre. The contemporary child, shaped by rapid social and technological change in urban environments, encounters folklore through animated and digital formats. Although the medium has changed, the desire to return to cultural roots remains constant. While the original essence of storytelling through Patachitra, Jatra, and theatre may no longer be fully experienced, folklore has found new life in digital media, continuing to shape, influence, and nurture contemporary identity.

Notes

1. *Bulbbul* (2020), directed by Anvita Dutt, presents a new way of looking at the traditional Bengali "chudail" myth. Instead of showing the witch as something frightening, the film recasts her as a symbol of a woman's resistance against oppression and injustice in a patriarchal society.
2. *Thakurmar Jhuli*, collected by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, is one of the most significant collections of Bengali folktales. It ensured the survival of oral storytelling traditions and mirrors the cultural values and beliefs of Bengal during the colonial period. (Majumdar 1–10).

3. In the wake of the digital revolution, storytelling has undergone a profound transformation. Folklore is no longer confined to oral or printed traditions; it now finds new expression through films and web series on platforms like Netflix and Hoichoi, reaching wider audiences and reshaping modern identity in the process. (Thompson 130)
4. Recent popular Bengali films like *Raghu Dakat* (2025) and *Lawho Gouranger Naam Rey* (2025) show how folklore continues to evolve in modern cinema. While *Raghu Dakat* presents a legendary folk hero associated with resistance and devotion, *Lawho Gouranger Naam Rey* explores devotional and cultural identity through historical and performative storytelling. Together, these films highlight how traditional narratives are being reinterpreted for contemporary audiences.

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