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When singing strengthens the capacity to aspire: girls' reflexivity in rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper, we explore the impact of singing for girls in rural Bangladesh. Previous findings in this field-based interview study (with 18 girls) have demonstrated that singing can act as a driving force in young girls' psychological individuation processes, implying increased agency and autonomy. A critical question, however, is to what extent the village girls will manage to maintain a feeling of agency as they pass through puberty. How do they navigate between their own wish to continue singing and pressure from cultural norms (such as getting married)? Using Margareth Archer's morphogenetic approach and Arjun Appadurai's approach to culture as a capacity as analytical tools, we connect different *modes of reflexivity* to the girls' *capacity to aspire*. We discuss specific mechanisms that emerge as relevant for the girls/young women as they navigate their way through the Bengali rural society.

KEYWORDS

Girls' voices; reflexivity; morphogenetic approach; capacity to aspire; Baul songs; Bangladesh

Introduction

In what way(s) can experiences with singing in a vibrant community of song-and-music schools be a resource for girls in the transition phase to becoming women in the context of rural Bangladesh? From the very first fieldwork, it was possible to observe that the girls' agency and autonomy increased through singing (Jordet 2018, Jordet and Gullestad 2020), agency referring to their 'ability to act' (Archer 2000) and autonomy to their 'ability to speak out' (Gullestad 1992). Interviews revealed how some girls were facing obstacles, like neighbours spreading rumours about them, or resistance of family members to their singing. Thus, their will to sing despite negative consequences indicated their deep motivation (Haavind 2007). A systematic follow-up study was needed to explore whether the girls' emerging (song-) voices would affect their navigational capacity in the village societies as they passed through puberty. Would their feeling of increased agency – of having found their 'own voice' (Jordet and Gullestad 2020) and their connection to the song school – enable them to resist the pressure of cultural

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norms, such as being married early? These were questions we wanted to explore through follow-up interviews of some selected village girls in this field-based study.

The interviewees, growing up in the outskirts of two northern regions in Bangladesh, had all, for at least five years, been part of local song-and-music schools reviving vanishing folk songs. The vision of creating these song schools – in Bengali ‘gurugriho’ – including children regardless of gender, class and religious affiliation emerged (in 2004) in a cooperation between Bengali folk musicians and the Norwegian author and photographer, Wera Sæther. Almost all the children as well as musicians and song teachers are poor, and subject to cultural norms and practices in Bangladeshi villages, such as child and forced marriage, that, observed from the outside, stand in contrast to girls’ free, vocal expressions.¹

To explain the differences between the girls’ trajectories, we use the morphogenetic approach developed by Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) as an overarching theoretical framework. This approach avoids the problems of both upward and downward conflation by acknowledging that human agents, as well as societal structures, are ontological realities and mutually constitutive (Bhaskar 2016). Archer applies *analytical dualism*² as a methodological strategy (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019). Her approach contains a clear time-dimension: Social structures pre-exist us, they provide possibilities and constraints, and are eventually reproduced or transformed by humans (Archer 2018). Both human agents and structures have their emergent properties and powers (Archer 2000). *Reflexivity* is introduced as a mediating variable, defined by Archer as ‘the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa’ (2007, 4). Although reflexivity is becoming increasingly more important in modern, fast-changing societies, according to Archer, the *process* it denotes has been ‘underexplored, undertheorized and, above all, undervalued’ (2007, 1).

While Archer’s framework is rich both in terms of philosophical and practical aspects, it can be further developed when it comes to application in specific cultural and structural contexts (Stenseth 2022). Women’s, and particularly girls’, experiences in the social context of rural Bangladesh are in themselves under-researched. Our main research question is:

How do girls, who are given the opportunity of singing in a community in rural Bangladesh, mediate their emerging (own) voice with pressure from cultural norms and customs, such as getting married during or right after puberty?

Lalan Fakir: songs in reflexivity

The girls accounts’ are particularly interesting with regard to reflexivity not only because of certain conventional strict customs in Bengali rural societies but also in light of the lyrics they learn to sing. Bangladesh is a country with rich oral and musical traditions dating hundreds of years back in time. *Songs of the poor, songs of wisdom, songs of the soil* and *songs of deep emotions* – these are some of the many names the folk songs go by. Originally, the songs served an important didactic and enlightening function in rural places where people, until quite recently, have been illiterate (Sæther 2017). The teaching comprises learning about ‘becoming human’ (‘manoosh haowa’), i.e. about

becoming more truthful and about increasing knowledge of oneself. The participants often speak about one specific poet, Lalan Fakir (eighteenth to nineteenth century), as deeply inspiring. Lalan Fakir³ has previously been described as a poetic genius (Salomon 2017), and is considered to belong to the Baul tradition of singing wanderers, walking on the road with their *ektara* (a one-string instrument), having no home but the wind and the song (Openshaw 2002). The Bauls belong to a tradition of devotion inspired by several practices, in Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufi Islam (Sæther 2017). Their song poems consist of simple sentences, often with deep philosophical content that is performed with emotional expressions. Lalan Fakir's lyrics ask existential questions and reflect the song poet holding inner conversations with himself (and sometimes directed towards the guru, to God or the transcendent). These are *songs in reflexivity*, one could say.

When will I get to touch the dust of the feet of a true human being
waiting for this with no end in sight
I am sitting here on the shore

like a bird that drinks rain-water only
I am waiting day and night watching the clouds
I am like the thirsty, almost fainting
only water can give him life

I have not learned how to serve and to meditate
I pretend that I know it all
oh sai I know only your name
I am a sinner, have mercy on me

I have heard about the compassion of sadhus
have heard that what the sadhus touch will become gold
but I did not get any part of this
*fakir Lalan says he is far away*⁴

Although the Baul songs are known for being created and sung by people from low castes or the casteless ('dalit'), they have nevertheless increasingly gained recognition among people in higher social stratas in search of their roots (Openshaw 2017). As Bangladesh has been decolonized twice: from the British Empire in 1947 and from Pakistan in 1971 (Mukherjee 2015), many folk songs also represent continuity and resistance to the chaos and fragmentation resulting from colonial violence (Openshaw 2017; Smith 2012). The singing wanderers have something rebellious about them. They question power structures, religious rituals and other kinds of ceremonies, and sing about going into oneself to gain insight there. The master teacher ('guru') is a precondition on such a path, according to the Baul tradition: one is not self-sufficient, but in need of the other: a friend, a master, a mirror, God.

When the Baul songs were inscribed on UNESCO's List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2005 and 2008 (Openshaw 2017), this tradition gained recognition beyond Bangladesh. By then, the song schools in this study were already established. That young girls from poor, rural areas – subaltern, one could say, with Spivak (1988) – learn and revive a treasured tradition, thus contributing to society, may move them from being outside to belonging, and give them a sense of dignity. Providing a platform, the song schools may strengthen the girls' ability to feel as someone, a voice, in the society. As one of the girls expressed in the first study: 'If I

can sing, everyone will know who I am, and everyone will know me!' (Jordet and Gullestad 2020). Thus, participating in a cultural activity implies a process of transformation that can be conceptualized as participatory appropriation (Rogoff 2008, 65).

While most Baul singers are men, the Baul tradition is also known for respecting women, lifting up the female strength as admirable. Indeed, the idea of gender equality has indigenous roots, quite contrary to the perception that this is a value introduced to the East from the West (Openshaw 2002).

Part of the pedagogical method in the song schools is to reflect together on the lyrics and learning to know them by heart. It seems warranted to assume that the reflexive quality of the songs may also contribute to enhancing the girls' own reflexive capacity.

Cultural context: singing as a village girl

Girls growing up in rural Bangladesh face some major constraints and few opportunities for social mobility. Marriage for girls before they turn 18 is still a widespread practice in some areas in Bangladesh, even if forbidden by law through the Child Marriage Restraint Act from 2017 (Akther 2021a), and in spite of the harmful consequences associated with this practice having been well documented (Human Rights Watch 2015). Child- and forced marriages are deeply intertwined with poverty. The traditional custom of dowry in Bangladesh implies that the bride's family gives goods, most often large sums of money, to the groom's family (Alston et al. 2014). The demands for dowry have escalated in recent times, explained by growing consumerism, rising expectations of living standard and dowry being used as a source of capital accumulation for the groom's family in times of uncertainty (Alston et al. 2014; Chowdhury 2010). The dowry increases with the age of the girl: younger girls are considered to be more attractive and healthy – one year can make the dowry 50% higher – creating a clear economic incentive for child marriages (Alston et al. 2014). Poor families with more than one daughter are, therefore, particularly affected by this custom. The girl is in danger of being reduced to a financial burden, especially the second, third or fourth daughter. Climate change also seems to increase the number of child marriages, as poor families are struggling to cope with floods, riverbank erosion, failed crops, etc. (Alston et al. 2014). A recent paper on how extreme weather influences marriage behaviour for girls in northern Bangladesh explains that marriage is used by families 'both as ex ante and ex post adaption strategy' (Carrico et al. 2020, 2). Within the first strategy, the main motivations to marry a girl early are keeping the dowry down and avoiding the reputational risk a family runs with an unmarried daughter (Carrico et al. 2020). Since unmarried girls in their adolescents are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, early marriage can be arranged to protect her as well as the family honour (Alston et al. 2014). As an ex post strategy, a daughter is married to reduce the household expenses with one less mouth to feed (Carrico et al. 2020). In line with tradition, the married girl immediately moves to the house of the in-laws. Many girls suffer from undernutrition: gender norms prescribe that girls receive smaller food portions than boys (Blum et al. 2019). As Martha Nussbaum, analysing the Indian society, has stated: If there is scarcity of food, the sons are prioritized (2011). The well-being of the son is considered more important for the survival of the family, since the daughter will leave, and he is prioritized for education and other types of resources, such as medical consultations (Nussbaum 2011; Blum et al. 2019).

In such conditions, one may ask: how are daughters to develop a sense of agency, if no one confirms or asks for it? Different families will, of course, apply different strategies. Although it is beyond the topic of this paper to explore this complexity, the overall tendency that climate change increases girls' vulnerability seems clear (Carrico et al. 2020; Alston et al. 2014). When governmental schools reopened after 18 months of closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, some regions reported a rise in girls' marriages, explained by the increased economic differences and the insecurity that follows from the pandemic (Akhter 2021a, 2021b).⁵

Theoretical positioning: linking critical realism and the capability approach

That the freedom people have to choose is deeply dependent on societal structures, has been demonstrated through the capability approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum, theorizing social justice by providing a conceptual framework for looking at development, achievements and well-being in terms of the actual opportunities available to each person (Nussbaum 2011). The capability approach is best understood as a philosophical exercise that prepares the ground for science, Nuno Martins argues (2006, 2015). He is referring explicitly to the metaphor of *underlabouring* also applied by Roy Bhaskar to describe an aspiration of critical realism (2016).⁶ Putting *freedom to achieve* at the centre in his analysis of 'capabilities', Sen is emphasizing *real* opportunities and drawing the line to causal powers, thus elaborating a category on an ontological level (Martins 2006, 673). Ismael Al-Amoudi argues along the same line, introducing *reflexivity* as a power ontologically 'of the same sort as the capabilities discussed by Sen and Nussbaum', but that has nevertheless not been acknowledged for its relevance for social justice matters (2017, 67).

Analysing how the village girls make their way through the Bengali society, we will apply the notion of *capacity to aspire*, developed by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, building on Sen's work. *Capacity to aspire* is defined as a meta-capacity that synthesizes a navigational as well as a cultural capacity manifesting in future aspirations (Appadurai 2004). Appadurai emphasizes an often neglected dimension of poverty implying cultural deprivation. Since the tools from which to draw future-oriented maps are culturally embedded, such deprivation can have devastating consequences. Hence, the meta-capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed in society and is closely related to underlying structures such as class: 'the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire ... because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options' (Appadurai 2004, 68). Social justice is therefore about much more than re-distributing material goods and has to do with strengthening poor people's capacity for voice and for taking part in their local society (Appadurai 2004). In line with this perspective, the song schools may provide children with cultural recognition and contribute to strengthen their voice as well as making future aspirations possible.

It is the girls' unique accounts that are at the centre of this study. Archer's modes of reflexivity (2007) are used to explain some of the differences between the trajectories that emerge from the girls' accounts. Archer has described three dominant modes of reflexivity: Communicative, Autonomous and Meta-, each mode entailing distinct characteristics (2003, 2007). A fourth mode is labelled Fractured, referring to the reflexive ability

being hindered or heavily disturbed (see also Wimalasena 2017, 387). Reflexivity modes have been found to correlate with social positioning and different stances towards constraints and enablements in society (Archer 2003), thus generating different social mobility patterns: Communicative – social immobility; Autonomous – upward social mobility; Meta – volatile social mobility; and Fractured reflexivity tends not to have a clear pattern (Archer 2003, 2007).

We do not claim that these four modes are necessarily representative of girls in rural Bangladesh. There might be other modes of reflexivity forthcoming, as both Al-Amoudi (2017) and Carrigan (2017) suggest. However, the basic idea underlying the morphogenetic approach, searching for the reflexive orientation and the *direction* regarding social mobility in the girls' different stories, seems relevant for our study.

Methodology

The present study is field-based and longitudinal. We have followed 18 girls through the transition into womanhood, making it possible to highlight singing within a life-course perspective. It was the nature of the phenomenon that guided our choice of qualitative methods, not the other way around (Bhaskar 2016). In light of the overall topic, village girls' voices, it was crucial to speak directly with the girls. From a critical realist point of view, in-depth interviews have been claimed to be of particular importance to provide knowledge about a complex phenomenon (Brönnimann 2022; Porpora 2016). The main methods comprise focus groups, individual semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Also, the first author was a participant observer in the song schools. The first author (I) has carried out the interviews with Wera Sæther (WS), speaking Bengali fluently, as a mediator. WS was known to the participants as a person with deep respect for their song traditions. Obviously, when investigating a phenomenon in another culture, it is critical to get access to the field (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Being introduced through her, I (the first author) was immediately welcomed into homes.⁷ Ahead of the first field work, through video recordings of the children, I had been struck by the girls' intense concentration and courageous vocal performances, invoking my curiosity on several levels. Which mechanisms were enabling them to sing out with such a strength, apparently fearlessly, in the midst of their village society? To search for mechanisms behind the manifest expressions (Bhaskar 2016) was a core drive in the research process. I was interested in learning not only about the girls' self-conceptions but also about what enabled and constrained them in using their voice (Archer 2007). The force with which some of the young girls stood up singing in front of everyone present had a strong potential to challenge cultural norms of silent obedience. In analysing how the culture interfered in complex ways with the singing girls' agency, the morphogenetic approach was integrated in an abductive process. Abduction here refers to the process by which empirical material is re-described in light of theoretical concepts (Fletcher 2017).

Participants

In the very first field work (three years prior to the latest), 18 girls were chosen by local coordinators of the song schools.⁸ They were asked to choose girls who had been learning to sing for at least two years, belonging to different song schools, coming from different

villages and religious backgrounds and being of different ages. Of the elected 18 girls, one third were children (around 12 years of age), one third were in their adolescence (between 14 and 15) and the remaining girls were in the age where most village girls traditionally get married (between 16 and 18 years old).

The participants have since been followed up yearly, in new field works, each piece lasting over about three condensed weeks. With the great effort of the local coordinators, some of the girls were even found after having been married or having moved to work in the textile industry in Dhaka, though not all of them. In this article, we concentrate on the thirteen girls that were interviewed through in-depth interviews just before the Covid-19-pandemic began.⁹ By this time, they had all reached an age where the question of marriage was present.

Interviewing

Interviewing village girls was challenging. At first, they did not speak as freely as they sung. The song teachers had warned that they were not used to being addressed directly outside the song place: Who would ever ask a village girl: 'What are your concerns (or wishes)?'. We, therefore, developed an approach to provide the girls with a safe space. We began with the focus group to allow the girls to inspire and encourage one another. Cooperating closely with WS as an interpreter, a woman whom they had met several times, was important. She facilitated the interviews, speaking to the girls with respect and concentration, while at the same time invoking smiles and laughter. I was careful to sit on the same level with them, sometimes on the floor, sometimes on a chair. Presenting myself as someone who was there to learn from them about their singing and everyday lives, I routinely told them explicitly that this was no exam with right and wrong answers. The semi-structured format allowed for focus on some main topics, while at the same time being open for their spontaneous accounts (Parr 2015). Each girl was also given space to share personal stories and to go more in-depth on important topics. The follow-up interviews begun with the question: 'Describe what is the most important thing that has happened (in your life) since we last spoke?', establishing a line between the last interview and the here-and-now. This question was also targeted to identify changes/empirical interaction events (Brönnimann 2022). The second main topic was directed towards singing: 'What place does singing have in your life now?' and exploring possible concerns and aspirations: 'What are your main concerns for your future?'. The interviews then took shape based on the circumstances that the different girls were in, not following a strict list of questioning, but rather the flow of energy within what each participant said. The overall aim was to gain insight into their concerns and wishes and the constraints and opportunities they experienced, as macro-level changes/morphogenesis begin at the micro-level (Brönnimann 2022).

All interviews were audio-recorded and (the translated words) later transcribed by the first author. The audio recordings conserved the participants' spontaneous words and made possible a second translation to ensure the quality of the empirical material. A Bengali researcher at the University of Oslo, Mrinal Das (MD), without a personal connection to the participants, translated randomly selected extracts from the chosen interviews. These were then compared with the main interpreter (WS)'s translations. The two were found to be consistent with one another.

Ethics

There have been several ethical concerns to consider. On a formal level, the study follows all ethical standards given by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The participants gave both oral and written informed consent (also obtained from the parents for those under 16). But ethical considerations go beyond formal aspects. It was underlined that the girls could withdraw at any time without this affecting their participation in the song-and-music school. They were not pushed to talk about upsetting themes and had the opportunity to debrief with their music teacher later. I was aware not to go into a therapeutic conversation, although this line was sometimes ambiguous (Parr 2015). The girls seemed to appreciate the opportunity to speak and to be listened to, some also shared painful circumstances. I abstained from directly inviting them to go further into their pains, but listened attentively to what they spontaneously shared. Several of them said they felt proud to take part in the study. The girls were accompanied to the place of the interviews and back home before it was dark. All participants were provided with a meal before or after the interview.

The field work was carried out with a profound respect for the Bengali culture, seeking to learn from the informants and to avoid what Spivak refers to as 'epistemic violence' (1988). In practice, this has for example meant not to impose any categories on the participants, neither in the field nor in later text. When I in the first field work understood that some of the initial interview questions were too abstract, I adjusted the questions. I learned to concentrate on the girls' concrete circumstances, and then integrate more abstract thinking later in the process of analysis while also seeking for underlying mechanisms (Bhaskar 2016). The women's own accounts are the centre of this study. While we claim that their 'raw' words can express a subjective or psychological truth, we recognize that the knowledge production is a fallible process – as described in two of the pillars of critical realism through, respectively, ontological realism and epistemic relativism.

It is an inter-disciplinary understanding, for example in childhood studies as well as in feminist and post-colonial theory, that full representation of the other is not possible (Parr 2015; Schnoor 2012; Spivak 1988). Selecting excerpts from interviews also reflects the researcher's interpretation and emphasis. Transparency of and reflexivity in the process of knowledge production are methodological strategies to enhance the precision and validity that we aim for in this study (Berger 2015).

Analysis

All three authors have worked as a research team on the analysis, bringing in different perspectives and working towards consensus in understanding the central topics in the girls' accounts. Guided by the research question (how do the girls mediate their emerging voice with pressure from norms such as getting married during or right after puberty?), 10 out of 13 interviews were chosen for an in-depth analysis from the follow-up interviews. Three interviews were left out of further analysis due to circumstances that did not appear as relevant to answer the research question.¹⁰ The girls' answers were analysed also in light of what they said in previous interviews. We looked for life changes and important decisions they had made, as well as the current status of singing in the girls' lives. What

were their main concerns now and what was restraining or enabling them to live these out?

In the preliminary analysis, the interview transcripts were read and re-read, and sorted according to two main dimensions: singing/not singing and married/not married. A rough trend – or a demi-regularity (Fletcher 2017) – was that those who were still singing were not married; and vice versa. However, as two exceptions remind of, this tendency was not conclusively predictable.

- a) still singing and not married: 4/10 girls
- b) not singing and married: 4/10 girls
- c) not singing and not married: 1/10
- d) still singing and married: 1/10

The analysis paid special attention to conflicts with and stance towards cultural norms or structural powers (Archer 2007); changes or contradictions between what was said in the first and the second interview, and; concerns and aspirations about the future. The research question played an instructive role, while also searching for personal expressions and the complexity in what seemed to be at stake for each girl (Haavind 2007). What kind of capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004) could we find in their accounts? How did they negotiate different constraints and enablements (Archer 2007) – with regard to being a singer and being known as one – and the contested cultural practice of early marriages? Along these lines, we included the *process* (reflexivity) as well as the *outcome* (choices and aspirations).

For the presentation of cases in this article, we chose at least one girl from each main trajectory. From the trajectories with more than a single case, the two with the most variation and saturation have been chosen for presentation. These six cases represent the diversity as well as the depth of the empirical material. After presenting the main properties in the girls' stories, we propose one dominant reflexivity pattern with a tentative outcome for each of the six girls, which we then discuss.

Findings

Sultana (still singing, not married): won the song, but lost my arm

In the first interview, Sultana had been singing in the song school for about two years. Her younger sister Rasheda was also singing and participating in the study. Rasheda was the more outspoken of the two. *Three years later*, this dynamic has changed in a dramatic way: I speak with the two sisters in a room next to the song school. Rasheda sits quietly, with her head bowed, and looks down when I invite them to tell me about the most important event(s) that has happened since we last spoke. Sultana immediately takes the floor:

Yes, I will tell everything. Actually, the marriage was decided by father, but do never tell that to him! He wanted to marry me off, but I said no.

She describes in clear detail how she resisted their father's pressure on her marrying, for several weeks. Despite his explanation of being too poor to keep both daughters in the house, she is not willing to sacrifice her educational pursuits. The power struggle went on between them, to the point where she stopped eating in protest.

My father then told me: If you refuse to get married, I will marry off Rasheda. But I said: I do not want that either! ... My father said: One of you has to get married for the pressure on us to ease ... I will not support you with any money for your education at all (her voice shaking).

Sultana not only stands up against her father, she *persists* in doing so. This reflects an immensely strong will. In the rural context, where paternalistic attitudes stand firm and the norm for a daughter is to obey silently, one can imagine what courage it takes to resist such social expectations.

I asked for money from friends to be able to pay for my school books. People came again to the house to see my little sister; I sent them away.

Then she describes a moment of change where suddenly her faith in herself breaks:

Then I lost faith in myself. I had nothing (eyes fill with tears). How could I go to school ... I did not eat anything. I was so angry! ... After a lot of trouble I gave in. I told Rasheda: father wants you to get married. Then I fulfilled my father's wish (silence).

The last extracts reveal Sultana's double position in the house. She is subject to her father's will, feeling helpless and is ultimately powerless in preventing her sister's marriage. But the subtext also tells that she is someone her father listens to. She was able to prevent her own marriage, and, for a while, also her sister's. The sentence: 'Then I fulfilled my father's wish' tells that she had a say in the decision. There was no marriage before she gave in. Her mother understood her, she says, but *could not do anything*. Sultana explains this due to gender roles and expresses that she feels let down:

Because I am a girl. What I say is: is it only the boys that are able to? Are not the girls able to?

By resisting the culturally prescribed pathway of marriage and being able to continue going to school; she is transforming cultural norms and structural forms. But she could not rescue her sister. The price she pays is heavy:

Now I am alone. It is like I have lost my arm. I wasn't able to explain to my father! I failed! (tears falling from her eyes).

She is attributing guilt to herself, despite this being beyond her control. She still holds on to singing:

When I sing all worries disappear. Then my mind becomes easy. Sometimes when I feel lonely.... When I sing I forget Rasheda. When I'm in a lot of pain, I sing. That's how I find joy!

Though not changing the painful reality of losing her sister, singing gives her a break from worries and is a source of comfort and joy. She describes her ultimate concern as to be able to continue on her own path and to educate as a nurse.

Rasheda (not singing, married): I did what my father asked me to

In the first interview, Rasheda was determined to sing and would not even think about marriage as an option for her when asked about it. She appeared as a devoted song student. *Three years later*, when invited to speak in the interview with Sultana, she has only a few words to say, such as: 'I did what my father asked me to.' And: 'What is the point of talking about this?'

Kohinoor (still singing, not married): aiming towards an artistic career abroad

In the first interview, Kohinoor expressed: 'When I sing the hunger doesn't burn in my stomach'. She repeatedly stated: 'I cannot live without singing!' Kohinoor came from challenging conditions on a sand island ('char'). *Three years later*, she has left the sand island as well as the local song school and has been accepted by a music college in Dhaka. She is now on a path to becoming an artist. As a child, Kohinoor learned to sing from her father, and, unlike Sultana, has her father's support to sing. In Dhaka, she has been embraced by the warmth of a well-known female Baul singer, as one of her chosen students. In the interview, she proudly describes the process leading towards her being elected. Kohinoor says explicitly that she does not want to marry anyone, which indicates that she is actively resisting cultural norms from her rural background. What she wants is to continue to study music to Masters level.

Now I have only one wish: That the song will remain with me. I want to learn everything I can ...

After the field work, a co-worker in the field sent a video of Kohinoor performing in a TV show. She was singing on stage, wearing a dress and heavy make-up. How she lives through the transition from lacking food while growing up, to performing on TV, is unknown. Will she be able to keep her authenticity and the deep feeling ('bhab') from the *songs of the soil* while performing in Dhaka? She says in the interview she will stay committed to the folk songs. Kohinoor dreams of moving to a new place to learn more – Kolkata in India – where all the best musicians she knows of have studied. She aspires to go further, with a clear upward pattern of social mobility.

Anamika (not singing, married): holding on to the song, but only within

In the first interview, Anamika spoke about how important her teacher was for her and her singing. She described him as a role model, someone she looked up to, and as someone who believed in the capacity of her voice: 'It is because of Noyon-guru I have the voice I now have!' Living at home and attending a governmental school, Anamika described a struggle with her mother, who did not support her singing: 'Sometimes my mother says: Don't go there, don't go there. But I say: What, should I not go? I will go, I will learn!' This obstacle was not enough to hold her back. Her song teacher's faith in her seemed to be crucial:

Noyon-guru said: Of course you can! And I went home to practise and practise. My mother said: You cannot do that, you don't have a voice for that. I told my mother: Of course I will make it!

Three years later, she has been married off and now lives in the house of her in-laws, mainly dealing with her mother-in-law, and not her new husband.

This year, since we last spoke together, has been different. ... My mother and my in-laws forbade me to sing: 'People will talk bad about you. You're a married girl'. After that, I did not go to the song school. ... I have to do a lot of work for my mother-in-law. And she often yells at me. It is also difficult to concentrate on school work with this pressure.

Thus, it is primarily the women in the family who hold her back. The reluctance from her mother-in-law towards Anamika's singing is of a devastating nature. Neither her husband,

now working in the textile industry in Dhaka nor her father seems to have anything against her singing: 'My husband loves singing. He likes my song'. When I ask her about the power of her father, she replies: 'I am Hindu and after a Hindu girl gets married, all power is with the in-laws'.

Anamika is being controlled by her mother-in-law, who denies her wish to sing. She lacks agency and autonomy in her life as a married woman. The fact that she is able to articulate her painful situation in a direct manner shows some sense of agency, notwithstanding. Singing has kept its value as an inner resource; a memory she longs for and as an inner source of comfort. The active participation and still-developing aspirations of being a singer are lost.

How was she then able to attend the interview? Anamika revealed that she had hidden it from the in-laws, as they would not have approved of her participation. Instead, she had an agreement to visit her father's house over night as he would not stop her. By taking this risk she shows that the interview was important to her and that she was able to pursue her wish, even if only a small one.

Shila (not singing, not married): my whole future depends upon this exam

In the first interview, Shila had a very striking presence. She joyfully expressed an experience of emancipation: 'By singing we gain a sense of freedom inside of us - I become freer through singing! Then we can be freer in the society'. *Three years later*, she asks if she can begin the interview with a song. Closing her eyes, clearly in concentration, she sings: 'God, did you not find any other human being to play with than me. Did it have to be me that had to go through all of this?' The atmosphere is tense as she makes clear that the song text is of great importance to her. Now she is almost overwhelmed by pressure to achieve high school results:

I had such a big hope when it came to singing. But I do not come regularly to the song classes any longer. But my wish is still to study and to sing! I will soon start 12th grade; it is that exam which my whole future depends upon.

When I remind her that in the last interview she told me how she gained strength through singing, Shila emphasizes that she has not fully left the song behind:

If I do not come to the classes, I still sing at home. I study for one or two hours, then I sing.

The pressure to achieve comes from her parents, particularly from her mother, she says, who did not have a chance to go to school herself. Shila may have internalized her pressure. The school ambitions might also reflect something she wants herself: To study in a college where only a few per cent are accepted. This is her priority.

Kona (still singing, married): I am singing in the house of my husband!

Kona's outcome is surprising. *In the first interview*, it was already known that she and her family were planning for her marriage. She was almost 18 back then, the eldest of my interviewees. The marriage did not seem to be against her will, she spoke about it happily. *Three years later*, she is the only one in this study who is still singing after having been married – to a drummer.

He plays the drum and I dance! ... Just like I am a happy person, so is my husband. Just like I love the song, so he loves the song. ... My husband is a good man. He hears everything I say.

Her husband has given her permission to take part in the interview, she says. They share the music. Kona now wants to give her daughter the same opportunity to sing as she has had herself.

I want to teach my daughter to sing. Now she is two years old. I want to start teaching her next year, when she is three. I haven't been able to make real my own dream when it comes to singing, but through my daughter I will ...

My daughter, I will let her go to school, teach her to sing and make her an artist!

When asked what if her daughter does not want to sing, Kona insists that she *will* want to learn. Kona seems happy, even though she has not been able to pursue her dream of becoming an artist.

Modes of reflexivity

Autonomous reflexivity: Sultana and Kohinoor

With a clear capacity to aspire for something better and a willingness to fight to achieve it, Sultana's reflexive deliberations are about how to become someone, help her father, study further, while continuing singing. Through her agentic response, refusing to accept what she is offered by her father, she is resisting the structures and cultural norms, and thereby transforming them instead of reproducing them. Singing is closely related to making her own way in the world; an ultimate concern for her.

Unlike Sultana, Kohinoor has a supportive figure in her father. She is also the most ambitious one, with a clear direction of upward mobility, from life on a sand island to the stage in Dhaka. She aspires to go further: to study abroad. Thus, both of the participants who exercise autonomous reflexivity envision a future which they are actively co-creating.

Fractured reflexivity: Rasheda

Resembling a pattern of fractured reflexivity, it is as if Rasheda's internal conversation, as well as expressivity, has shut down. She shows no concerns nor aspirations in the latest interview. Her story confirms what is included in Archer's theory (2003), namely that one can move between different dominant modes of reflexivity in different life phases. Unlike the first interview, there is no purposeful direction to trace now, rather there are signs of resignation.

Communicative reflexivity: Anamika and Shila

The more typical communicative reflexivity pattern is exercised by Anamika, who is now married and without the community of the song school, continuing within existing structural and cultural forms. Although communicative reflexivity is associated with social conformity and immobility (Archer 2007), this participant reveals that she still performs some reflexive engagement within her limited situation by showing up to the interview knowing that this goes against her in-laws. Her previous experiences with singing may

be a key to understanding this. She does *not*, however, talk about *aspiring* to a future. She is reproducing the structural and cultural forms of marriage and, to some extent, obedience towards the mother-in-law.

Shila seems to be somewhere in between communicative and autonomous reflexivity – based on the empirical material available. It appears as if she has transformed her singing into another activity, which is studying. Although heading towards higher education and social mobility, she seems to be subordinated to the will of her mother and has not been able to maintain singing in the community, which she so vitally expressed gave her a feeling of freedom.

Meta-reflexivity: Kona

Unexpectedly, we found a young woman who, against all norms, is singing in the house of her husband. Such an example of reorienting structures may be the result of a meta-oriented pattern of reflexivity (Archer 2007; Wimalasena 2017). Having married a husband that loves music, she exemplifies a unique trajectory. Another way of female life is possible, while also staying within the cultural norms. According to Archer, what is most distinctive in the sub-group of meta-reflexivity is the importance they attach to living up to an ideal (2007). Kona solves the potential conflict between two different ideas, being a good housewife and a performing singer, by aspiring for a musical future through and with her daughter.

Discussion: vocal sound and the mechanisms behind it

There are, as shown above, several ways to solve the conflict between singing/agency and family expectations/cultural norms. For the girls and young women in this study, this is an existential challenge as they pass through puberty. A tendency on the empirical level is that the capacity to aspire, expressed through articulations of future ambitions, is connected to the continued practice of singing. This can be understood on several levels.

Since the song school is the only culturally embedded and creative activity these girls and young women have access to, we cannot know what is most important – the singing as such, being part of a vibrant community outside of the family where new possibilities are available, or the personal connection to the song teacher and other students? All these aspects are likely to make a difference.

On a deeper level, singing seems to represent the possibility to discover, express and develop a voice of one's own in a village life with many restraints for girls and women. The voice, expressed in singing, becomes an anchor in their lives. To lose the position in the song school is to lose a place of new possibilities and a platform to aspire from – unless, of course, the girls find another platform.

An overall impression from this study is that it is not easy to find nor to remain in a way and a voice of one's own – even with strengthened autonomy through singing – for girls in rural Bangladesh. Although studies in South Asian countries reveal that the traditional patriarchal social system is gradually challenged by, and coexist with, a more modern social system (Wimalasena 2017; Hansen and Svarverud 2010), the conventional mindset still exists in Bangladesh (Akhter 2021a, 2021b; Carrico et al. 2020; Alston et al. 2014). This is confirmed throughout the analysis of follow-up interviews.

With the longitudinal design, different dynamics have been revealed in what the girls have been able to do within their socio-cultural context as they enter into womanhood: Two participants are navigating between studying and singing actively while having remained unmarried (Autonomous reflexivity); one has lost all contact with singing as a married young woman (Fractured reflexivity); two participants channel their attention and energy into continued studies – with the song mainly as an inner resource – one is married and left with no choice, while the other is not married (Communicative/Autonomous reflexivity); and one young woman is singing in the house of her husband (meta-reflexivity). A key point from Archer is thereby confirmed, namely that people do not respond in the same way to their circumstances; there is no such thing as structural or cultural determinism (2018). While structural and cultural factors play an important role, they depend upon the human agents to be activated through their reflexive response (Archer 2007).

Some girls thus seem to have been empowered and emancipated through singing, in a way that lasts, others seem not to. We argue that the very contradictions in the empirical material are a particularly interesting source of knowledge.

Many questions arise from the findings. Why do, for example, the two sisters respond so differently to their father's request? The sharp contrast in their patterns of reflexivity (fractured and autonomous) is striking. The youngest (Rasheda) had a model of resistance in her older sister, but resigned and submitted herself to her father's, and in the end, also her sister's, will. Maybe she felt let down by her older sister? She might have known intuitively that there was no space for both daughters to go against the father. It can be more difficult to be born as the second daughter in a poor family, as it also implies yet another dowry for the parents. Some structures are shared for all participants in this study: such as poverty and gender. But which mechanisms may account for the differences?

Explaining some of the differences

One important mechanism in the trajectories is the availability of a supporting figure (whether external or internal) – or lack thereof. From childhood, Kohinoor had the support of her father, and in her present life, she has been able to find a warm-hearted mentor who guides her career. Likewise, Kona has had a say in planning her own marriage. She was not married against her will and has been able to choose a husband whom she loves and who loves and supports her singing. When the singing of the girl/woman resonates with and is confirmed by at least one person in the family structure, this makes it easier for her to continue. And even if Sultana describes her mother as helpless, she feels understood by her mother. This emotional support may have given her strength, enabling her resistance towards her father. Sultana also says that she has learned from seeing her mother struggle what she does *not* want for herself.

The role of some mothers in reproducing social and patriarchal structures is striking. Anamika is the victim of both the mother's and the mother-in-law's harsh critique and condemnation of her singing. Why, one could ask? Is there envy of the young girl's free expression and joyful singing? – *'You shall not have what we did not get'*. Certainly, it would be interesting to understand in more depth the role of the mothers in this patriarchal society. Some mothers are understanding, but powerless, like the mother of Sultana and Rasheda. Others seem to make their daughters 'delegates' of their own

unfulfilled ambitions, like Shila's mother and like Kona with her little daughter. Through conversations with song teachers, it has also become clear that the potential spreading of rumours still has a strong power in the rural societies. The fear of losing honour ('shamon') seems to work as a mechanism of its own. Family decisions are made in light of preventing the spread of rumours and to keep respect in the village: 'People will talk bad about you [if you sing]. You are a married girl now', Anamika had been told. While the girls live in the same society with shared gender ideologies, there are differences in the extent to which they submit to these. The fear of reprisals from the society is more powerful in some families than in others.

The very possibility of resisting cultural norms shows that something in rural society is changing. Dependent on a variety of elements, such as family support, personal abilities and models/ lack of models, some will make it, others will not. Hansen and Svarverud (2010) have also shown that traditional institutions can provide the necessary support to pursue one's wishes. The song school provides such a support, especially for girls of a younger age. Learning to know the lyrics of the folk songs is also a potential source of inspiration to question, engage critically with and speak out against oppressive structures and practices, as Sultana demonstrates.

After puberty, the expectations and cultural norms have a strong power, and the song school does not seem to be enough in itself. It requires an immensely strong effort from the girl (as with Sultana), or another important person that supports her (as Kohinoor's father and Kona's husband). After puberty, the cultural norms are so strong that only a few are able to pursue a path of singing.

Implications and cross-cultural relevance

Our conclusion is that it *is* possible to transform structures from within through girls' singing in a community, providing them with empowered agency and autonomy. The potential power that lies in giving girls access to musical participation and how contested this can be have also been demonstrated in other countries, for example when Afghan authorities imposed restrictions on when and how girls were allowed to practise music (Riisnæs 2021). Contrary to the present Afgan society, the song-and-music schools in this study have a broad support in the society where they exist. We emphasize that efforts to empower girls must be anchored in personal aspirations as well as in the local culture. When it is imposed from the outside, the effect can rather be a 'dis-empowerment' as has been studied for example in a Malawian rural context (Adolfsson and Moss 2021).

The importance Archer gives to internal conversations for the reproduction or transformation of structures (2003, 2007), can be enriched from a developmental psychological point of view: Children internalize the values and norms of their caregivers, and their ability to resist their parents will also depend on their personality structure, and not least their attachment pattern. A person with a relatively secure attachment will be more able to trust her own will, whereas an insecurely attached person may unconsciously fear that she will lose the love and support of the other if she does not obey. Archer's morphogenetic approach has been criticized for underplaying important (social) psychological mechanisms, such as processes of internalization (Wimalasena, Galloyay, and Kapasi 2021). Nevertheless, applying Archer's analytical tools in this empirically

based study in South-Asia strengthens the cross-cultural relevance of the morphogenetic approach.

Conclusion

The activity of singing in informal song-and-music schools is an opportunity for village girls to have a place of their own from which to express vocally and aspire to a future. Learning folk songs in a local and vibrant community also offers a platform of cultural recognition. The broader long-term effects of the girls' participation are diverse and ambiguous. It emerges from all trajectories that this form of singing (traditional songs) is connected to the girls' capacity to aspire. Further, singing over time *can* act as a vehicle for emancipation – mediated by reflexivity – but not in a causally simplistic way. Rather, there is a complex interplay of mechanisms, some of which have been identified in this study. Certainly, the connection between singing and reflexivity is of interest to study further.

Notes

1. In 2022, there are ten of these song schools, with more than four hundred children and young ones taking part in weekly teaching (on afternoons/Saturdays). The activity has been reduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, though not fully stopped, and they are now resuming activity.
2. On this point, her model differs from Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity. Bhaskar argues for a *duality* and a form of 'inner action' (rather than a dualism and a 'between'), as explained by Price at the conference of the International Association of Critical Realism (2021) and in Bhaskar (2016).
3. Fakir refers to an ascetic (Islamic term) with connotation to renunciation (Openshaw 2017)
4. Translated by Sæther 2022. For a collection of published Lalan songs in English, see Salomon (2017).
5. Before the pandemic, almost 80% of all Bangladeshi girls were married by the age of 18, the median age being 15 (Alston et al. 2014), and almost half of Bangladeshi women gave birth by 18 years of age (Blum et al. 2019).
6. Bhaskar writes that 'critical realism aspires to clear the ground a little, removing, in the first place, the philosophical rubbish that lies in the way of scientific knowledge' (2016, 2).
7. As a literary translator, WS also assisted in finding relevant sources for the Bengali song poetry.
8. Singing boys and song teachers have also been interviewed. This paper concentrate on the girls' accounts.
9. Five of the original (18) participants were not interviewed at that time: Two girls were denied participation by the family or family in-law, one had a sick child and two girls were not able to travel to the song school on the day of the interview.
10. Two of the girls' affiliated song schools had been closed, one girl suffered from a health condition making it difficult to sing.

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