Article

Reclaiming songs of wisdom in rural Bangladesh: four pillars of a unique music pedagogy

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Abstract

What kind of music teaching and learning takes place among folk musicians and young ones, aiming to reclaim their oral tradition and educate new master teachers? This question will be answered by drawing on extensive fieldwork at nine song-and-music schools in rural Bangladesh, applying critical realism as a meta-theory. An overall aim is to expand views on what music teaching and learning can be, with potential implications for education beyond rural Bangladesh. The empirical material was collected through a focus group interview with 12 students in an advanced class and in-depth interviews with these students and their three master teachers. The analysis shows that the generational transmission can be seen as based on the 'four pillars' of music pedagogy. These are re-described through dialectical critical realism in an abductive process, showing that music pedagogy can open an ontology and dialectic on being and becoming human for the participants. Results are discussed with *absence* and *remembrance* as key concepts. The study provides practical and philosophical insights into a music pedagogy about deep learning and resonance: towards transformative praxis.

Keywords: rural Bangladesh, vanishing folk songs, dialectical critical realism, resonance, transformative praxis

Introduction

*A stranger
has the keys to my house.
So how can I unlock the door
and see with my own eyes
the treasures inside?[1].*

With this question begins a song by Lalan Fakir, a Bengali mystic poet and composer of Baul songs, living during British occupation in South Asia, known as a rebellious voice against oppressive power structures and systems (Sæther, 2017; Salomon, 2017).

In song-and-music schools in two northern regions in rural Bangladesh, children and young ones are learning to sing folk songs, among them songs by Lalan Fakir. While there are strong oral and musical traditions in Bangladesh dating back to pre-colonial times (Sæther, 2005; 2017), folk songs are fading and losing their relevance. This has been explained, among other things, by processes of commercialization and digitalization (Banik, 2016), but, as I will return to, this is complex and part of a global trend (Grant & Schippers, 2016). The initiative to create song-and-music schools for children is an ongoing attempt (since 2004) to counteract the tendency of vanishing folk songs, *reclaiming* their importance, driven forth by local folk musicians, that is, master teachers ("guru").

Outside under trees and in tin sheds, with hand-made instruments and two teachers at each place, one for singing/voice and one for rhythm/singing, girls and boys from different religious backgrounds come to learn. The teaching methods have evolved from the guru-sishya-tradition (Sæther, 2017), in many ways like an apprenticeship, and stretches beyond the dyadic relationship between expert and novice (Rogoff, 2008, p.61). It is about long-lasting and mutual involvement from both teacher and student, where keeping the songs alive is a common goal, and the apprentices gradually become more responsible participants. One of the students, now a young adult, has for example initiated a new song school in his village. Before a new song school is initiated, local coordinators visit the village to locate the atmosphere and interest for a new 'gurugriho' (literally meaning *house of the teacher).* Fostering local ownership and engagement by involving the broader community has been found to be of crucial importance for music sustainability (Schippers & Grant, 2016). In areas where more conservative forms of Islam are widespread, singing can be seen as forbidden ('haram'). Some song schools have had to close due to such dogmatic resistance.

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[1] Song by Lalan Fakir, in: Salomon, 2017, p. 97

Once accepted by the community, the song school often becomes a vibrant point of gathering in the village. In 2022 more than 400 children and young ones are participating at least twice a week. The young ones are thus involved collaboratively in keeping alive and reclaiming folk songs that can be said to be the *cultural commons* of poor people in rural areas; referring, in short, to "cultures expressed and shared by a community" (Bertacchini et al., 2012, p. 3). Collaborative learning and teaching in real-life settings have gained an increased interest within the field of higher music education and have been described as a promising approach with the potential of broadening both musical and social skills (Sætre & Zhukov, 2021). Previous research on ways to revitalize endangered musical traditions also recommends *collaborative* strategies, compared to *authoritative* and *competitive* strategies (Grant, 2015; Grant & Schippers, 2016).

Involving children and young ones in learning to know their own musical traditions, thus enabling *living archives*, is an idea that has been carried out differently in countries such as Cambodia and Afghanistan (Grant & Schippers, 2016) as well as in Malaysia (Tan, 2008). But the global problem of endangered musical traditions, which ethnomusicologist Catherine Grant characterizes as a *wicked problem,* remains unsolved (2015). The concept of *wicked* was originally introduced by Rittel and Webber in 1973, referring to complex problems, defined differently by multiple stakeholders and difficult to solve (Grant, 2015; Price, 2016). Findings from comparative musicology studies point to the *praxis of transmission* as a key factor of importance in understanding music sustainability (Schippers & Grant, 2016). Informed by this perspective, it is of scientific as well as practical interest to map the methods by which the unique Bengali folk songs are taught to young ones, equipping the most engaged students to become master teachers, an effort that has remained unresearched until this study began six years ago (Jordet, 2020; 2022). This study aims to expand views on what (music) teaching and learning can be, focusing on the unique pedagogical approach among folk musicians and students in rural Bangladesh and their strong oral tradition(s).

Transmitting endangered folk songs

The Bengali folk songs are also referred to as songs of the poor. For those who own little or nothing, singing can be the most available artistic expression. Using one's voice does not cost money. Some of the singing communities are situated on sand islands ('char'), pieces of land that are taken by the river at regular intervals, while new sand islands reappear further down or upstream of the river. People here live extremely exposed. As one of the young participants in this study said: "Eighteen times, we have moved away from the river. We live on the road now". The content of the songs is entangled in the river landscape in which they have been created. Words such as water and boat are often-used; both concretely and metaphorically, such as in the song- extract below:

So this is the happiness I find here,
And yet I don't know where else to go.
I got a broken-down boat
And spent my life bailing water[2].

The fragility and endangerment of Bengali folk songs were recognized internationally when UNESCO inscribed the Baul songs on the List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2005 and 2008 (Openshaw, 2017). A vital source of inspiration for the participants in this study is Lalan Fakir. He is considered within the Baul tradition of singing wanderers and is often regarded as the iconic Baul (Openshaw, 2017; Salomon, 2017). Lalan's songs ask straightforward questions with deep philosophical and existential content, are performed with emotional expressions and, as with Baul songs in general, are often accompanied by dancing (Salomon, 2017; Sæther, 2017; Harding, 2021). In the northern regions where the song schools are located, two other and much less known musical traditions are widespread: Bathiali ('boatmen/river songs') and Bhawaiya ('village songs'). Many Bhawaiya songs are about forbidden love and various forms of loss and are sung with a sore, melancholic timbre, often from the perspective of the woman. The songs also put words on what is about to disappear or has already disappeared, such as cow-carts, which are almost no longer in use, and the boatmen rowing across the river, which they rarely do any longer, as most boats now have engines. The practical basis for the songs exists as a *remembrance* of what existed (not so long ago). Hence, the songs serve as *containers* for collective memory.

Learning to know one's tradition in the 21st century

Potentially, there is a feeling of fellowship arising from awareness of a shared past. This may be an important component of, or even a precondition for, citizenship education in the contemporary world. I argue that musical traditions and music education can play an important role in inspiring such awareness. Furthermore, singing together can create experiences of coherence and meaning, across educational settings and life stages, as is captured in the term 'co-singing' (Strøm et al., 2022).

Already in 1954, Hannah Arendt brought to the fore the ongoing loss of tradition. She describes the *ambiguity* of tradition, as a safe and guiding 'thread', but one that also can bind us to the past (Arendt, 1954). We are about to lose the entire dimension *of depth* by losing remembrance of where we come from, Arendt argues: "depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance" (1954, p. 2). The dissolution of tradition that Arendt described, can be said to be even more critical today. The contemporary sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2013; 2021) describes *acceleration* as a driving force in the current capitalistic system that depends upon constant economic growth, a force also

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[2] By Lalan Fakir, translated to English by Salomon, 2017, p. 144 and to Norwegian by Sæther, 2005, p. 145

dissolves tradition. Countless digital platforms are providing quick stimulation that on a deeper level has a low value of resonance (Rosa, 2021). By not being able to keep up with the pace of society, people can become *alienated* and hindered from experiencing *resonance* – awareness of being in a deep relationship with the world (Rosa, 2021). According to Rosa, children today are learning to be more concerned with passing the exam than understanding a phenomenon in-depth (2021). Turning to the Bildung tradition, education could rather represent an alternative, resisting accelerating forces and creating spaces for learning that allows for remembrance and in-depth learning. Wolfgang Klafki (2001) emphasized that allowing students to become immersed in a topic is necessary to gain *depth knowledge* and a precondition for real formation/Bildung. This requires a radical reduction of the number of topics taught to students, Klafki argued, calling for new ways of thinking about pedagogical methods (2001). The Bengali song schools[3] act as a case in this article, representing a unique approach to teaching and learning, where students are guided towards becoming master teachers. As briefly implied through the song poetry, and as I will return to in the results, an important dimension in this musical tradition is about gaining *insight* into oneself and about *transformative praxis* in the world.

Theorizing change: dialectical critical realism

As a theoretical tool in exploring this key quality of the empirical material*,* dialectical critical realism (DCR) will be applied analytically. DCR theorizes change and transformation, originally developed by the philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar (2016; Jakobsen, 2021). *Absence* is a core concept, understood as the very driving force of change, representing all that has been lost and all that is possible (Bhaskar, 2016; Nunez, 2014, Alderson, 2013). DCR is a further development of the first philosophical phase in critical realism. Since it is beyond the scope of this article to explain the philosophy of critical realism, I will only imply now that it brings *ontology*, being, into the center. DCR adds *a procedural perspective* to this first phase; in a movement from being to becoming (Jakobsen, 2021). A basic idea is that being must be understood in the light of absence; non-being (Norrie, 2010). Bhaskar uses the concept of absence in two ways: as a verb (absenting) and as a noun (absence) (Annamo, 2020). DCR thus seeks towards "absenting of absences" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 121).

> It would be impossible for you to hear me unless there was space, a gap between my words and indeed unless there was actually a physical gap between us through which that sound could travel. Absence is necessary to any phenomena. Most importantly absence is necessary to change. (Bhaskar, 2002, p. 37).

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[3] The song schools are radically different from the governmental education system in Bangladesh, explained by both teachers and students in this study.

Bhaskar's philosophical notion of absence, as the driving force of change and learning, resonates with the understanding of *negativity* as developed from the pragmatist tradition by Andrea English (building on Dewey and Herbart)[4]. English argues that *negative* or *discontinuous* experiences, such as doubt, confusion and struggles are *constitutive* of learning (2013). In other words, learning is not about adding pre-defined knowledge, but about an internally driven and creative process (Bhaskar, 2016). Keita Takayama (2020) further draws attention to the relevance of this understanding for cross-cultural research, theorizing a *negative comparative education*. Particularly when faced with another culture, *unlearning* can be just as important as *generative learning* (Takayama, 2020). This perspective is also relevant as a methodological principle: remaining unresolved tensions and oppositions can lead to new discoveries and insights (Takayama, 2020). Before continuing with the methodological approach, I will present the research questions guiding this study. First, my interest is to map out the applied teaching methods and learn from empirical data. Next, I will explore how dialectical critical realism may shed light upon the pedagogical approach and its extended relevance. The main research questions are:

1. Which pedagogical methods are applied by master teachers in local song schools ('gurugrihos') to teach young people old songs of their Bengali culture?
2. What can be learned from this unique music pedagogy, illuminated by dialectical critical realism, for education beyond rural Bangladesh?

Methods

I have done extensive fieldwork between 2016 and 2022 inquiring about this grassroots effort and its effects on the participating young ones. Guided by the nature of the phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2016), the main methods comprise focus groups, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, as well as participant observation. I was introduced to the song schools through an author and translator (Wera Sæther) who has been a driving force in creating the schools together with the local folk musicians. As someone who speaks Bengali fluently and knows the local culture from more than two decades of long visits, she was a mediator in the field as well as an interpreter. Coming with her, who had built trust through many years, I was immediately accepted into the community, could be present during lessons and social gatherings, and received open-hearted stories in interviews with students and teachers. This cooperation has created a solid field anchorage making it possible to continuously follow up the grassroots effort[5].

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[4] In a recent special issue of the Journal of Critical realism, 21(3) (2022), the link between pragmatism and critical realism is explored.

[5] Even during the Covid-19-pandemic, with video interviews and written 'life-stories'. This article analyses empirical material collected right before the pandemic.

For this article, I concentrate on a focus group interview with twelve participants in an advanced class, to which the most committed students have been selected by the main coordinators. 'The boat class' meet for a full day once a month to sing together, learn new songs and speak about life. The name, boat ('tori'), is referring to the collective effort to reclaim the songs – in a landscape marked by rivers. It also connotes an experience, expressed by some participants, of being carried by these old songs. The class is an addition to the regular music classes. Being part of it requires commitment: attending the monthly gatherings and supporting the younger ones in their learning. This is also a space to confront difficulties and conflicts.

In a condensed way, this focus group provides an empirical window into the music teaching methodology. It was supplemented with in-depth interviews with the same participants and their three master teachers. However, I was also informed by previous fieldwork, as this is a longitudinal study (Jordet & Gullestad, 2020; Jordet et al., 2022). As a participant observer at the song schools, I have been able to get a sense of the community atmosphere and see how they practiced what they spoke about – aware that my presence would have an impact on their behavior, as described in the 'Hawthorne effect' (McCambridge et al., 2014).

Focus groups and in-depth interviews

All participants in The boat class were in the age range of 16-23 (11 males, one female)[6], selected by local coordinators as aspiring singers and potential new master teachers. Interview questions followed a semi-structured approach, with concrete and exploratory questions. The participants were asked to describe the teaching and how it affected them. I was particularly concerned with the *changes* they had experienced as participants over time (Brönnimann, 2022). They were invited to talk about how they related to the song poetry, about which constraints and possibilities they faced as young singers and future concerns (Archer, 2007).

The direct and expressive tone in the interviews demonstrated that these youths had indeed spoken seriously together before. Certain concepts, such as 'bhab' (deep emotion) were often referred to by the participants and expressed in a way (with intensity, emphasis etc.) signalizing that this was of importance (Haavind, 2007; 2015). My awareness of these concepts became sharpened at an early stage, with the assistance of the interpreter and her knowledge of Baul practices and poetry. I, therefore, addressed these concepts directly in the focus group interview, asking the participants to explain, (e.g., what does it mean to *become human* ('manoosh haowa')? Or: how do you teach

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[6] It is difficult for village girls to remain in the song school after puberty (see Jordet, 2022). Only one of the twelve students in the boat class was a girl. When this article is written, three new girls have been admitted.

children to sing with *deep emotion* ('bhab')?) My aim was to bring taken-for-granted understandings into the light. These concepts are analyzed in-depth and further addressed when presenting the results[7].

All interviews were carried out with Wera Sæther as an interpreter, for the participants to be able to speak in their mother tongue. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. I also have video-recorded song sessions and classes. A second interpreter, a Bengali researcher without a personal connection to the participants, assisted in a second translation from the audio recordings to ensure the quality of the interpretation in the field (this is described more in detail in Jordet et al., 2022).

Ethics

The fieldwork has been carried out with respect for the Bengali culture, seeking to learn from the participants. When first initiating the study, I received a formal welcome letter to conduct my research in Bangladesh administered by the University of Dhaka. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data has reviewed and approved the collection and storage of personal data, ensuring the privacy of the participants[8]. At an early stage, I discussed my role as a researcher with an advisor at the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) and I have been aware of the NESH guidelines throughout the research process, such as considering the participants' safety and well-being, by for example making sure that they were provided with a meal before or after the interview, ending interviews before it got dark, giving the participants opportunities to debrief etc. The participants gave their informed consent, both written and oral. It was emphasized that their participation in the study, or potential withdrawal, would not affect their opportunities at the song schools. The participants expressed the joy of taking part and showed eagerness to share their experiences.

Translating an oral tradition to an academic and literary context is a challenge, as also Saether (2003) emphasizes in her study on Gambian musical traditions. I have strived to apply theory that does not reduce the empirical material but enriches it. Cooperating with Wera Sæther was also important in terms of avoiding coming as an outsider and suddenly leaving again, as has been warned about when doing research in another culture (Takayama, 2020). Instead, I became part of a cooperation that had been built over many years, and that continues after my fieldwork. I have pursued to learn from

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[7] The relevance of these concepts is also supported by the literature (on English) within the Baul-field (Salomon, 2017; 1995; Openshaw, 2017; 2002).
[8] Some participants expressed disappointment when being informed that their names would be anonymized in publications as they wanted to be known.

post-colonial insights, such as not imposing pre-defined categories (Spivak, 1988). An important inspiration in this respect has been Lalan Fakir, whose songs are about engaging with 'the stranger', not least in oneself[9].

Analyzing interviews with advanced students and master teachers

The analytical work was divided into two main phases (Hastings, 2021); one empirical analysis, reading and re-reading interview transcripts, searching for main themes and concepts; followed by a more abstract and theoretical abductive process. Abduction here refers to the theoretical redescription of the empirical themes (Fletcher, 2017). In the empirical analysis, four key concepts emerged as pillars in the music teaching: deep emotion, becoming human, fellowship and transformative practice. In the abductive part of the analysis, I realized that these *four pillars* corresponded interestingly with the four levels of Dialectical critical realism: being, becoming, totality and transformative praxis (Bhaskar, 2016; Norrie, 2010; Jakobsen, 2021). This gave direction to the analysis and provided a platform on which to reflect upon the more philosophical content of this music pedagogy. In other words, the choice of relevant concepts was guided by the empirical material, in line with a critical realist approach (Bhaskar, 2016).

Results

The results are presented in two main parts, corresponding respectively to each of the two research questions: the first being about the pedagogical methods by the song schools, with a more descriptive and concrete focus; and the second part addressing research question two about the more general relevance of this music pedagogy, with a more analytical and abstract focus.

Part one: the music pedagogy

The participants in the advanced class share an awareness of contributing to a larger cause – the transmission of a tradition. Starting out as children, going through adolescence, the students have gradually taken more responsibility and gone deeper into the songs. Only one of them has, so far, established a new 'gurugriho' in his village, but the others are contributing in different ways, for instance by assisting in instrument teaching or in song classes with the newcomers. The main content and areas of focus in different teaching phases are described in the table below.

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[9] The 'unknown bird' is a famous image from his song poetry, often understood as a symbol for the soul (Salomon, 2017, p. 584).

Table 1. Overview of teaching phases in the process of generational transmission

Teaching phase	Main content
Recruitment and admission	Both girls and boys are recruited together, which is new. Traditionally the songs have mainly been taught to boys. Parent meetings are organized; each child's name is written down; there is no entrance exam. If a child is unable to learn rhythm over time or does not attend classes, he or she loses the place.
Participation as newcomers	Classes are held at least twice a week. 'Foundational work': scale and voice exercises; learning a new song together, writing it down, and practicing the tunes. Around thirty songs are known by all and sung together. Teachers notice which voices suit which songs best; divide into sub-groups; learn the words by heart, reflecting on the content together.
Specialization in separate instrument classes	Choice of an instrument based on interest, capability, and availability of the instrument. Students practice at their master teacher's house. Particularly important for boys in pubertal voice change. Common instruments are Ektara (one-string), Dotara (four strings), Banshi (flute), Mandira (bell-shaped cymbals), Khamak (percussion), Tabla (pair of hand-drums), Bangla Dhol (hand-drum), Dholok (hand-drum), Khanjoni (percussion), Harmonium (hand-pumped keyboard from India), Violin (the only instrument originating from the West).
Selection of participants in an advanced class	Learning more advanced songs, understanding songs in-depth; searching for the emotion of each song. The most dedicated and committed students over time are invited to 'the boat class'.
Becoming master teachers	The most experienced and remaining students take part as assistants, co-teachers or initiates establishing a new school.

A many-layered practice

While Bengali music teaching certainly is about acquiring musical skills, it goes beyond the technical

aspect. Singing is described in relation to a yearning to become a better person in the world –

understood as more truthful – with the community, in an ongoing, potentially transformative, practice. Even if presented as four separated pillars below, they are part of a coherent whole, working more as cornerstones of a joint construction that connects floor and ceiling. Quotes below are from both students and teachers, presented in that order, and selected to represent diversity as well as depth in the empirical material.

Singing with deep emotion (bhab)

'Bhab' can be translated as singing with deep emotion. It is about becoming aware of the unique emotion in each song. Paradoxically, contact with this deep emotion is described both as a precondition to singing these songs and as what characterizes mature singers.

> Nader: The boat class is for those in whom the deep emotion (bhab) has risen, for those who in and by the song can have expanded consciousness.

Several participants describe 'bhab' as a quality they receive or that emerges within them. Others focus on it as something they dive into that gives them direction in life:

> Shanto: In the boat class we can learn a lot and we can dive into the deep emotion to reach our destination. That opportunity we get in the boat class!

> Sumena: Singing is a matter of the heart! And the deep emotion comes from within.

Hence, 'bhab' is both a result of their own rehearsing and something beyond their control. Bilal tells about how it took time for him to discover the deep emotion, leading to an experience of unity:

> What I now think about 'bhab' has to do with the heart. When everything in me - body, heart and consciousness - becomes one, and when this is expressed: this is *bhab*.

He elaborates on the process by which he became aware, first struggling with not being able to grasp or understand it. His master teacher ('guru') encouraged him to continue:

> In my childhood, I did not understand *bhab*, but when I sang I forgot everything else! I did not understand what I was singing. I said: But guru, I do not understand *bhab*! He replied, you do not have to understand it, just continue where you are.

The patience from his teacher turned out to be fruitful, leading Bilal to a sudden discovery, demonstrating the aforementioned *negative learning* process:

> When he (the teacher) started explaining to me the words in the song, I was really amazed! 'Oh, is *that* the song I sing – I did not know what song I had sung!' I tried to sing even more wholeheartedly. And *then* my love for song and music came from within…

Similarly, the master teacher explains that 'bhab' begins with understanding the words of the song. Piash says:

> When we interpret the words in the songs to the children, then this emotion *comes by itself.* Then they are *filled* with that feeling.

Becoming human (manoosh haowa)

'Manoosh haowa' can be translated into becoming human. Becoming human is referring to the very change singing leads to. The participants, both teachers and students, convey an attitude of *always learning*. As one of the young adults, Shanto, who has initiated a new 'gurugriho' in his village says:

> I'm someone who is learning. I am not done learning! I am in the process of learning. Oh, if I only could teach someone as I have been taught! And when I die, there will be someone who can teach after me...

Becoming human is described as an ethical category and singing the means to get there. An often-mentioned quality arising from singing is truthfulness: "Whoever is in the song cannot lie", one student says. The songs are containers of wisdom.

> Shanto: The folk songs that I wish to preserve, Lalan songs, within them there is great wisdom and if the songs are lost then the wisdom is also lost!

Becoming human is also about becoming aware of one's lack of knowledge. It is from an absence that an urge to learn more emerges. Acquiring new knowledge begins with what is not yet there.

One participant, Arif, talks about this from a Marfati (Muslim mystical musical tradition) context. Explaining what Marfati is, he refers to it as 'the secret teaching' about an intrinsic dimension of one's consciousness and body:

> If someone says, 'the world is beautiful', then it means the inner world is beautiful.

> I can try to make it simple: To see God through the song. Many people sit together and start crying. What are they crying for? The source of the cry is the question 'will I ever receive you'?

Awareness of absence is expressed in a particular way within the Marfati 'songs of separation' ('bittched'). These songs express longing for 'the other'; the one awaited for or the one lost, referring to God, a teacher, close friend, or partner. Arif uses singing and seeing synonymously and explains the teaching as a gift he received.

> I see so much with my eyes, but that was when I learned to see the song. He (the guru) taught me that it is possible to see a song... And from then on, I began learning how to see, how to go in the world, and how to become human.

Singing together (songho)

'Songho' means together. This effort is collaborative and intergenerational. Coordinators of the work repeatedly tell that the main difficulty is finding reliable and solid master teachers. As described in the aforementioned pillars, the teachers are role models musically as well as in the world.

One of the students, Arif, says that the community keeps him and his peers away from drugs:

> Many people who are singing without a community, take drugs. Through my singing, I have gained this fellowship. And it is a place where I can stay firm and find a clear path.

When asked to elaborate on this, he explains how the music community helps him discern and navigate between what is right and wrong.

> I am human ('manoosh'), 'man' means respect and 'oosh' - consciousness. The one who created us has given this to all. The possibility to know what is true, what is wrong and what is noble is present here in the community.

Learning together is also about learning from different musical traditions – but not by diluting or mixing them. For example, a student with a Hindu background can learn to sing with a Marfati guru and a student from a Muslim background can learn from a Hindu guru. Student Shanto says:

> Religious (institutional) belonging does not matter. Each of us is just a body. The body is an amazing factory[10]. Many people say they hate another person or maybe many people. But they do not know what they hate, and in whom. They do not know who this other person really is.

To not condemn or reject anyone belonging to another category, whether religion, class, or caste, is an important theme in Lalan-songs:

> Only the One (Allah/God) can discern and judge. No human being has this right to judge. The priest and the compost driver drink the same kind of water. There is so much waiting for me to be learned in the songs of Lalan Fakir.

Following this work during time, I have witnessed students breaking up and leaving the effort. Some young ones pursue a path towards becoming a performing musician, others leave due to family pressure. Master teacher Noyon shares some of his grief over losing students:

> When I have taught and taught and taught a child who has reached a certain level, and then that child goes away, then I think: Oh, all that hard work, what kind of effort was it that I did!

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[10] Factory is a much-used term in songs by Lalan Fakir. Food, emotions, thoughts, yearnings reside in the body and are transformed in the body.

He mentions the names of several young ones and says: 'Oh, if they had still learned!' (implying they could have reached so far), revealing his deeply personal investment. At the same time, the master teachers speak with conviction that the (slow) transmission between teacher and student is the only possible method of reviving the old songs - if it is never so time-consuming and vulnerable.

Practice (sadhana)

The term 'sadhana means practice. It opens the possibility of transformation, containing an insight that one is formed by one's choices. This practice is inseparably linked with the three other pillars. Master teacher Sakil speaks about 'sadhana' as a core characteristic of their effort. The overall goal is to find a truthful way in the world:

> For people to understand our effort, we call it 'work', but in reality, it is not about work. We practice ('sadhana') how to find the way and how to get eyes to see with.

He further emphasizes societal challenges for young people nowadays, saying:

> If we can give them this concentration in the song, then they will not be able to hurt anyone around them. Those who live within the songs will never be able to hurt anyone. They become people among people. That is the practice I'm doing. Our main purpose is to take children and young people on a true path, a real path.

These condensed sentences summarize similar other statements about their teaching. When asked how they do this, concretely, he refers to the folk songs they aim to revive:

> Strangers, when they ask me: Sakil, what are you doing? Then I answer them in a simple way: What the ancestors did, the inner words that were in people then, in the folk songs, what is now disappearing, this is what we try to bring back into the flow of life. Folk songs – it literally means the song of people.

The deeper meaning of the song words inspires both the young ones and the teachers. These are not 'children's songs'; rather children are involved in the 'adult' world, learning advanced songs. However, not all songs are transmitted, the teachers explain carefully selecting songs.

> There are many types of folk songs. But we select those by which the children can learn about *becoming human.* When we teach a given song, we try to shed light on the meaning of the words. And when they hear what the word means, then they are amazed and even more eager to learn.

Learning from the children, is at the core of this music pedagogy: 'I must remember, that also I am a child', says teacher Noyon.

> Oh, I've learned so much! By having to interpret the words, I have learned them myself. It's not like we're just teaching the kids. We learn a lot from them. Many times, they know what we do not know, and we learn from them. We have so much to learn from the children.

Hence, the young experience that the master teachers can learn from them. This can nourish confidence in their own capacities as actors who can make a difference in the world.

Part two: Re-describing the four pillars through Dialectical critical realism

What these four pillars of music pedagogy can be said to support, in addition to educating new master teachers, is a deeper movement towards transformative praxis. This dimension can be illuminated by the four levels outlined in Dialectical critical realism (DCR). I will, below, briefly present these levels, forming the acronym MELD[11] (Bhaskar, 2016; Norrie, 2010; Jakobsen, 2021), before re-describing each pillar considering the corresponding level. It is not suggested that the four levels correspond perfectly to the four pillars, but rather that it shows that this music teaching and learning inspire an ethical dimension of transformative praxis.

Table 2. The four pillars of the song schools and dialectical critical realism

Bengali concept	English translation	Dialectical level (MELD)
Bhab	*(to sing) with deep emotion*	1M Being
Manoosh haowa	*Becoming human*	2E Becoming
Songho	*Together*	3L Totality
Sadhana	*Practice*	4D Transformative praxis

The first moment (1M) is about being and the world (Norrie, 2010, p.12). Being is characterized by difference and reality is viewed as stratified (Jakobsen, 2021). The phenomena we can observe at an empirical level originate in underlying generative mechanisms. Hence, the potential and the invisible are also considered part of the real and exist independently of our knowledge. We can get to know reality by meeting it (Hawke, 2016). This is where the dialectic begins. There are several common features between the participants' accounts on 'bhab' and this first level. 1M is a sphere for thinking ontology, Bhaskar writes (2016). Something which is there to discover, also within oneself. Singing with deep emotion is about getting in touch with such deeper layers of the stratified reality, remaining in the emotion of the song while expressing it. The performances are personalized. As beginners, the children often imitate their master teachers in expression and bodily movement (a form of model learning), but those who remain over time find their own, distinctive expressions. As with 1M, 'bhab' begins with the difference in a stratified reality.

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[11] Within the limits of this article, there is only space to summarize the dialectic, but for further elaboration on it, see Bhaskar, 2016; Norrie, 2010; Jakobsen, 2021.

The second edge (2E) is about negativity (Norrie, 2010). It describes the dimension of absence as a prerequisite for creation and change. Absence can signify a lack of knowledge as well as the fact that emptiness comes before form (Hawke, 2016). In this respect, absence comes first and acts as a driving force in a creative learning process. This expands the perspective on reality (Jakobsen, 2021). It is, for example, the actual space in a conversation that makes it possible to create meaning from the language (Bhaskar, 2002). As with the "second edge", "becoming human" begins in what is not yet there: it is about the process rather than the outcome. Aspiring to become an honest person, is emphasized by many participants. Awareness of not being finished and that there is more to learn, as demonstrated by students as well as teachers in this study, is in line with the critical realist understanding of how real change happens: it is driven forward by absence.

The third level (3L) is about being as a totality and describes integration (Norrie, 2010). Reality is understood as open, complex, and consisting of internal relations (Bhaskar, 2016; Jakobsen, 2021). People and things exist in a context and must be understood accordingly, rather than based on divided and divisive understandings. Being is about being in relations, connected to a larger whole (Price, 2016). The interdependence between teacher and student and the awareness of not being self-sufficient is deeply rooted in the tradition, corresponding to the third level, based on the premise that being exists in relation to others (Jakobsen, 2021). As in 3L, it is about internal relations: between the master teachers, the master and the student, among the students, and to their ancestors.

The fourth dimension (4D) is about transformative praxis (Norrie, 2010), emphasizing human beings as intentional actors with the capacity to transform or reproduce society and the structures we are born into (Archer, 2007; Bhaskar, 2016). Just as human actors have created many of the contradictions and problems we find ourselves in, humans can also solve these (Jakobsen, 2021). "Sadhana" contains an insight that one is formed by one's choices and can be linked to 4D: Transformative praxis. To change oneself is also to change the world. In DCR, this is related to structures in society that are created by humans and can be changed by humans (Jakobsen, 2021). Sadhana also refers to the practice of abstaining from something, such as taking drugs or lying. Hence, there is a strong ethical dimension in this music teaching.

Absence and Remembrance

As presented, the concrete goal of the Bengali grassroots effort is the generational transmission of a strong oral tradition, selecting and engaging students in becoming master teachers. The philosophy in teaching and learning, its inherent dialectic, has been illuminated by the four levels of dialectical

critical realism. Overall, music teaching is about learning to know oneself through singing and in relation to the master teacher and the community, leading towards transformative praxis: taking the young ones 'on a true path, a real path'. So, while the results of this teaching matter, such as gaining musical skills and survival of the tradition, the main concern in this effort is on the process itself. Hence, the pedagogy does not aim at adding pre-defined knowledge to the students, rather it resembles more what Bhaskar describes in his learning theory; which is a creative process of "unfolding the enfolded" (2016, p. 167). The song poetry and its tunes are, of course, given forth by the master teachers, but the deep feeling and the rhythm to sing it with is brought out through an inner process of discovery, enfolding in community. Reclaiming endangered songs is an ongoing effort. Hence, this pedagogy is concerned with 'knowing' as a dynamic learning process, rather than a more static view of 'knowledge' (Saether, 2003; Rogoff, 2008). What is there to learn from this pedagogy for education beyond rural Bangladesh? With the presented findings as a backdrop, I will concentrate on two main themes, namely: *remembrance* and *absence*

Remembrance. The song schools demonstrate the importance of remembering where one comes from. The folk songs resonate with the participants both in concrete and transcendental ways. As explained by one student who could not understand the deep emotion of singing, by simply continuing to practice the song – the concrete – he suddenly came to an awareness of everything in him "becoming one". Other students use the term "expanded consciousness", revealing experiences of something new emerging or growing within them. This can be understood considering Arendt, referred to in the introduction: by keeping the old songs alive – through remembrance – they reach a dimension of depth. "If the songs are lost then the wisdom is also lost", another student said. How are the students brought to these insights? One answer may have to do with temporality. While this effort does not have many material resources, beyond instruments, it is time-consuming. The transmission is slow in the sense that it takes time to teach and learn these songs, the song poetry contains insights that have stood the test of time for hundreds of years. The transmission never finishes but is ongoing and future-oriented: the teachers are deeply committed to keeping the songs alive after them. The teaching and learning are about presence and rhythm, alternating between rules (a 'right way' in the tunes and words) *and* improvisation ('unfold it your way' in voice and performance).

This combination of anchoring in a musical tradition while at the same time inspiring the personal and emergence of the new seems vital. It may explain how the song schools provide spaces that open for experiences of *resonance*, which is the very goal of education and Bildung, according to Rosa (2021). The teachers focus on the content or object of learning; the treasured songs. Learning

the songs is about going beyond oneself and described as being eye-opening ("from then on I began to learn how to see, how to go in the world, how to become human" – Arif, p. 13). Hence, there is not only a forgetting of self, but also a discovery of new layers of meaning in oneself and in the world. This resonates with what Rosa argues that education primarily must do, that is to evoke interest in the subject, instead of having students evaluate their feelings (Rosa, 2021). This Bengali music pedagogy demonstrates a way of doing this. By insisting on another way of moving forward: through remembering and reclaiming the vanishing songs of their own culture, this teaching may be working as an antidote toward acceleration and alienation (Rosa, 2021).

Absence seems to act as a driving force behind this grassroots effort*.* The oral musical traditions are vanishing; the absence is a theme in many songs; the ancestors are absent. As with vocal sound itself, the songs have a spontaneous character, ceasing to exist in the moment the sound is gone[12], with only the reverberation in memory. The songs are brought to life by being sung, learned, and listened to. The participants share something invisible and immaterial in the community. Experiencing this deeper sense of fellowship through a shared commitment can lay a foundation for a form of citizenship education. The students learn from their teachers' commitment who are freely giving up time as performing musicians to remain with them week after week, serving a cause they believe in: "the inner words that were in people then, in the folk songs, what is now disappearing, this is what we try to bring back into the flow of life" (Sakil, p. 14).

The strong emphasis on the *inner* dimension is explicitly related to one's praxis in the outer world (through 'sadhana'). Hence, this point resonates with the circle of creativity in Bhaskar's learning theory, where transformative learning and transformative praxis goes hand in hand (2002; 2016). Real change, moving from being to becoming, cannot be imposed from the outside but must come from within (Bhaskar, 2016; Jakobsen, 2021). This approach to learning, as a way of emancipating inner resources and capacities, and the fact that these young ones and musicians live at the margins of society, also resonate on a deep level with Paolo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1970). As mentioned in the introduction these songs have been made and sung by poor people. Reclaiming their importance, and counteracting the tendency of the songs being lost, is also about empowering the young ones. Now they have something to be proud of.

This effort goes beyond individuals. It is collective and inter-generational. The participants are remembered also when no longer present. Master teacher Noyon expressed how the loss of students having left is strongly present with him, revealing his deep commitment. Previous studies

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[12] unless recorded, of course.

on vital traditions also confirm the crucial role committed individuals to play in keeping the tradition alive (Schippers & Grant, 2016). For future studies, it would be of interest to study more closely the role of the master teachers. Since transformative praxis and interpretation of the song lyrics play an important role in the pedagogy, under guidance by the teachers, there is of course a danger that the influence of specific persons can become too heavy. Strength lies in the community as a corrective factor, however, and there are at least two master teachers involved at each song school.

The continuous 'struggle' to learn and understand thought-provoking and existential song poetry, such as the songs by Lalan Fakir, may explain how the students and teachers remain inspired year after year. Hence, *discontinuous* or *negative* learning is a crucial component of this effort; working with enigmatic and double-layered sentences, and challenging established categories, which in turn is opening new horizons, new ways of thinking and being human in the world (Takayama, 2020; English, 2013).

This study reflects a meeting point between the oral and literal worlds of knowledge (Saether, 2003). One of Bhaskar's aspirations for critical realism was unity between theory and practice, what he referred to as its "seriousness" (2016). DCR brings out the ethical dimension in this music pedagogy; beginning in the first moment of the deep emotion, moving on to the absence, what one has not yet become or what is being lost, in the community of the song school in a continuous transformative practice/praxis. The music pedagogy in rural Bangladesh and DCR are developed independently of each other. The song teaching is part of an old oral musical tradition, aimed at becoming more human by practicing self-discipline and truthfulness. DCR is developed as part of philosophy, critical realism, with the ambition of changing the world for the better through increased reflexivity and transformed praxis (Bhaskar, 2016). While the two perspectives have emerged in different contexts they share some deep qualities – an ontology and dialectic on being and becoming human – and can be said to validate the relevance of one another. Bhaskar (2016) suggested that learning and knowledge acquisition processes in general follow a similar pattern to the one described in DCR (Jakobsen, 2021). The empirical material in this study provides substance to this philosophy.

According to Klafki (2001), any formation (Bildung) must begin with the contemporary time-typical key issues each generation is facing. If both Bhaskar and Rosa are right in their analysis of alienation as a main cause and consequence of the current global crises; then it is necessary also for education to counteract this. A slow pedagogy that opens for remembrance, resonance and deep learning can certainly be part of building citizenship and of the solution(s) required[13].

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[13] Interestingly, some scholars have connected slow pedagogy with ecopedagogy (Payne & Wattchow, 2009).

Dialectical critical realism illuminates that when the world is too tightly filled with *movement*, real change is being hindered (Alderson, 2012). A key argument in this article is that some transformative learning processes depend on a slow and ethically oriented pedagogy, challenging the focus on easily measurable results that sometimes characterize international comparative education.

The study may give hope for future education since it identifies a pedagogy that already exists. While the Bengali music pedagogy has been found to coincide with DCR on important dimensions, this study does not make universal claims. It simply sheds light on an example of pedagogical inventiveness and depth among many societal constraints to be learned from.

Concluding remarks

Through practical and theoretical examples, I have argued that education holds the potential in resisting accelerating forces and making possible in-depth learning. The Bengali song schools represent a unique pedagogical approach, anchored in reclaiming (vanishing) songs of wisdom in collaboration. Creating spaces for resonance through concentrating on endangered and engaging song poetry, is in turn related to an ethical imperative of making the world better through the transformative praxis of individuals in a community. Held together with dialectical critical realism, this music pedagogy provides timely perspectives on what citizenship education in the 21st century can be like.

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