



Kobigaan Bengal's Fragile Heritage of Poetic Duels



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Abstract

Kobigaan, a unique and vibrant art form that emerged in the cultural heart of Bengal in the 18th century, was a poetic duel between skilled kavials (poet-singers) who engaged in extempore battles of verse, wit, and satire, often accompanied by traditional music. Rooted in a blend of classical Sanskrit traditions and indigenous folk forms like Baul and Kirtan, Kobigaan flourished as both an intellectual and artistic exercise, bridging the sacred and the secular, and engaging audiences in urban centers such as Kolkata, Howrah, Krishnanagar and Murshidabad. This article argues for the revival of Kobigaan, emphasizing its continued relevance in the modern cultural landscape. With its resonance in oral traditions and its potential to merge with contemporary art forms such as slam poetry and rap battles, Kobigaan can serve as a powerful medium for social protest, cultural identity, and linguistic pride in today's globalized world. The article outlines several strategies for revival, including its inclusion in educational curricula, digital platforms, and grassroots workshops, aiming to ensure that this rich tradition not only survives but thrives in the 21st century. By reinvigorating Kobigaan, Bengal can reconnect with its cultural heritage while adapting it to the demands of modern society.

Key words: Kobigaan, Baul, Kavial, Tradition, Kirtan

Research Paper

Introduction

Kobigaan (কবিগান), literally meaning “poet-song,” has deep roots in the cultural and literary soil of 18th-century Bengal, blossoming during a transformative period when the region's literary landscape was expanding rapidly. This growth was shaped by the intertwining influences of classical Sanskrit traditions and indigenous folk forms. While pinpointing the exact origins of Kobigaan remains difficult, scholars commonly agree that it evolved from a confluence of the Baul and Kirtan traditions, both of which were renowned for their focus on lyrical and musical storytelling. These folk traditions, with their emphasis on spiritual themes, community interaction, and oral performance, laid the foundation for what would become the distinctive Kobigaan art form. (K. Das, pp 289-309, Feb 2006)

In particular, the Mangal-Kavya tradition, a genre of religious narrative poetry that told mythic and spiritual tales, and the oral debating practices common at Bengali village fairs and religious festivals, played a significant role in the formation of Kobigaan. By the late 1700s, Kobigaan began to take on a more defined shape, with clear conventions regarding its structure, rhythm, and

lyrical content. It became a highly popular form of entertainment and intellectual discourse, especially in the urban centers of Kolkata, Howrah, Burdwan, Krishnanagar and Murshidabad, where it gained prominence in the lavish gatherings hosted by landlords and zamindars (landowners). These events often featured renowned kavials, skilled poets and musicians who would engage in spirited poetic exchanges, blending wit, wisdom, and humor in their performances. (Basu. P, 2024)

Through its evolution, Kobigaan became not only a form of entertainment but also an intellectual and artistic exercise, merging the sacred with the secular, the philosophical with the playful. Its role in the cultural life of 18th-century Bengal helped bridge the gap between the formal literary tradition and the vibrant folk practices, contributing to the richness of the Bengali literary heritage.

The Origin of Kobigaan

The origin of Kobigaan date back to the early 18th century, during the flourishing of Bengal's cultural renaissance under the Mughal and early British rule. It emerged as a blend of various local and classical

traditions, heavily influenced by baul music, kirtan, and other regional poetic forms. In its early days, Kobigaan was rooted in the rural landscape of Bengal, where peasants, landowners, and travelers would gather to exchange stories and engage in verbal sparring. The structure of these duels was informal but intensely competitive, with poets challenging one another on topics ranging from mythology, politics, and social issues to personal vendettas.

The kaviales were often seen as local heroes—intellectuals who wielded their knowledge of folk traditions, philosophy, and current affairs like weapons. The audience, whether gathered in a village square or at a local mela (festival), was an active participant, judging the duels, laughing, or expressing awe at the quick wit and sharp repartee of the poets. (Das. B, July 2023)

The Evolution of Kobigaan: From Village Squares to the City Stage

As time went on, Kobigaan began to evolve, reflecting the changing dynamics of Bengali society. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of more formalized competitions. What was once a spontaneous, grassroots art form began to take shape as a structured performance art, often with professional kaviales traveling from one town to another.

The Influence of Social Reform Movements

During the British colonial period, Kobigaan found itself intertwined with the social reform movements sweeping across Bengal. Poets used the duels to comment on issues such as social justice, the caste system, the rights of women, and the plight of the marginalized. Figures like “Raja Rammohan Roy” and “Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar”, with their progressive ideas, were often subjects of Kobigaan performances, which critiqued or praised their efforts in equal measure. (Basu. P, 2024). Recognizing the significance of this popular art form, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar extended his praise to Bhola Moira & said “To awaken the society of Bengal, it is necessary to have orators like Ramgopal Ghosh, amusing men like Hutom Pyancha and folk singers like Bhola Moira.” (Banglapedia, Jun 2021)

Structure and Performance: The Art of the Duel

A typical Kobigaan performance followed a duel format between two poet-singers and their respective troupes. These duels could last for hours, sometimes even throughout the night, drawing huge crowds.

Key Components

Kavial: The lead poet-singer, known for sharp wit, spontaneous poetry, and commanding presence.

Dohar: A chorus or side-singer who repeated refrains and provided rhythmic support.

Dhak, Dhol, and Khol: Traditional percussion instruments that infused energy into the performance.

Themes: Mythology, social satire, politics, romance, or even philosophical debates. (Das. B, July 2023)

Structure

Bandana or Vandana: Invocation of gods or a patron to begin the duel.

Agamani: Devotional songs depicting divine love.

Sakhi Sambad: Dialogues celebrating Radha-Krishna romance.

Biraha: Expressing the pain of separation.

Kheur: Songs about gods or gossipy devotional themes, occasionally mixed with mild humor or slang.

Lahar: This verbal sparring is the performance’s emotional & intellectual core where poets exchange improvisational verses filled with satire, wit & sharp repartee.

Unlike classical literature, Kobigaan was dynamic and oral, often reflecting real-time societal issues. It was improvisational yet stylized, emotional yet intellectual. (Borg. Sondre, March 2020)

Icons of the Art: Legendary Kaviales

Over its vibrant history, Kobigaan produced several iconic kaviales whose brilliance is still remembered by folk historians and cultural scholars.

Kavial Haru Thakur (1738-1812)

Often known as “Harekrishna Dirghangi” regarded as the earliest known organized performer of Kobigaan. His duels attracted thousands, often compared to today’s stadium concerts. (The Statesman, April 2024)

Kavial Bhola Moira (1775-1851)

Born as “Bholanath Nayak”, a folk hero and a rebel, Bhola Moira’s Kobigaan performances were marked by radical themes, satire, and anti-authoritarian tones. His popularity transcended caste and class divisions. (Banglapedia, Jun 2021)



Kavial Ram Basu (1786-1828)

He was called “Biraha Sangeeter Raja” (King of separation songs). His compositions touched on morality, human nature, and societal order. (Sarkar. Jatin, Dec 2017)

Hensman Anthony (1786-1836)

Better known as “Anthony Firingee”. Despite his Portuguese origin, he embraced the Bengali language and culture so deeply that he became one of the most celebrated kavial and rose to prominence. (Madras Courier, Jul 2025)

Kavial Bijoy Sarkar (1903-1985)

Although his real name was “Bijoy Adhikari”, but he was also referred as “Pagol Bijoy” by his fans & locals. He was felicitated by “Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad” in 1983 & was awarded the “Ekushey Padak” (posthumously) in 2013. (News g 24, Dec 2022)

These kavials weren’t mere entertainers, they were public intellectuals, shaping cultural and social discourse through poetry.

Kobigaan and Bengali Society

Kobigaan wasn’t confined to entertainment. It played multiple societal roles.

1. Social Commentary

Kavials were unafraid to speak truth to power. Whether it was corruption, feudal excesses, or colonial oppression, Kobigaan became a medium for subaltern voices and public dissent.

2. Education Through Entertainment

Through mythological and philosophical themes, Kobigaan transmitted moral values, historical narratives, and religious teachings, especially in an era with low literacy rates.

3. Celebration of Linguistic Aesthetics

Kobigaan emphasized the richness of the Bengali language, particularly its spoken and dialectical variations. It was a platform where linguistic creativity thrived, blending Sanskritized Bengali with local idioms and folk rhythms.

4. Cultural Democratization

It bridged the gap between the elite and the commoner. In a Kobigaan gathering, a peasant and a zamindar could

enjoy the same performance. In this way, Kobigaan democratized artistic consumption and participation. (Basu. P, 2017)

The Decline: How Modernity Silenced the Duel

Despite its early glory, Kobigaan began to decline in the mid-20th century, and by the 1980s, it was nearly extinct specially in the urban areas. Several factors contributed to its fall.

1. Rise of Mass Media: With the advent of radio, cinema, and later television, people's entertainment habits changed. Kobigaan, rooted in live performance and long durations, couldn't compete with fast-paced, broadcast media. The rise of mass media and specially the internet, replaced the communal gatherings where Kobigaan had once flourished.
2. Urbanization and Migration: As people migrated to urban centers, traditional village fairs and zamindari patronage systems eroded, along with platforms where Kobigaan could thrive. As cities grew and rural communities shrank, the village-based nature of Kobigaan became harder to sustain. Though in conversation with Rajat Ghai, Priyanka Basu states that, “The life of Kobigaan will continue through festivals and fairs which are the main sites of its performances now. There has been a renewed interest in non-academic writing as well”. (Ghai. Rajat, May 2024)
3. Loss of Patrons: Many landlords and cultural patrons who supported Kobigaan financially disappeared after Zamindari Abolition and land reforms. Without sponsorship, the art form lacked institutional support.
4. Changing Taste and Globalization: Post-liberalization India saw a surge in Westernized pop culture. The advent of new forms of entertainment like cinema, television dramas, and contemporary music distracted the younger generations, who were no longer as invested in the ancient art of poetic duels.
5. Lack of Documentation: Kobigaan was primarily oral. Very few performances were transcribed, and even fewer recorded. As old kavials passed away, their verses died with them. (Das.B, 2023)

Among those verses, the present composition attributed to Bhola Moira, offers a depiction of the diverse culture of various regions of Bengal.



“The mug of Mymensingh is better, and the kai fish of Khulna;

Dhaka's pataksir is better, and the yoghurt of Bankura;

The sweetmeat makers of Krishnanagar are better, and the mangoes of Maldaha;

Ulo's male monkeys are better, and the blackberries of Murshidabad;

The fathers-in-law of Rangpur are better, and the sons-in-law of Rajshahi;

The boats of Noakhali are better, and the midwives of Chittagong;

The Kayets of Dinajpur are better, and the wine sellers of Howrah;

The Vaishnavas of Pabna are better, and the mudi of Faridpur;

The cultivators of Burdwan are better, and the milkmen of 24-Paraganas;

The girls of Guptipara are better—beware your line will soon become extinct.

The fighters and ruffians of Hughli are better, and the buttermilk of Birbhum.

It is better if the rhythm of the dhak stops and all utter the name of Hari in chorus”. (Banglapedia, Jun 2021)

6. The Popularization of Kheur: As Srikumar Chattopadhyay states, “The decline of kobigaan can also be attributed to the emergence of Kheur, a cruder, more raunchy form that deviated from the refined tastes associated with earlier iterations. Kheur’s popularity undoubtedly contributed to the gradual dwindling of Kabi Gaan’s presence in the Bengali cultural landscape”. (The Statesman, April 2024)

Remnants and Revival Attempts

Though largely forgotten, Kobigaan still survives in fragments.

Archival Recordings: Institutions like Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi and Visva-Bharati University hold a few rare audio recordings.

Documentaries and Theatre: Directors like Goutam Ghosh and theatre groups like Bahurupi have tried to recreate Kobigaan scenes in plays and films.

Academic Interest: Cultural studies departments in Jadavpur and Presidency University have taken up research on Kobigaan’s history and impact.

Rural Bengal: In pockets of Murshidabad, Nadia, and Burdwan, old performers still hold small-scale Kobigaan

sessions, especially during religious festivals. (Basu. P, 2024)

Why Kobigaan Still Matters

Even in its decline, Kobigaan holds relevance in the modern world. Though its influence is still deeply felt in Bengal's artistic expression. Poets like “Kazi Nazrul Islam”, who emerged during the early 20th century, incorporated elements of Kobigaan into their own revolutionary poetry. Additionally, the tradition continues to inspire contemporary Bengali artists, musicians, and performers who recognize the depth of its cultural significance.

In today’s context, Kobigaan offers a unique lens through which we can explore the intersection of language, rhythm, and social consciousness. As Bengal faces the challenges of globalization and rapid modernization, rediscovering Kobigaan offers a way to reconnect with the cultural roots that have shaped its identity for centuries. The revival of such folk traditions could serve as a means to foster a deeper appreciation for language, heritage, and the power of storytelling in a rapidly changing world.

1. Revival of Oral Traditions: In an era of digital storytelling and live rap battles, Kobigaan’s format aligns closely with modern art forms like slam poetry, freestyle rap, and spoken word duels.
2. Cultural Identity: As Bengal grapples with the dilution of its folk traditions, Kobigaan can serve as a symbol of linguistic pride and regional heritage.
3. Resistance and Voice: Kobigaan’s confrontational style is perfect for contemporary protest art. Its tradition of confronting injustices through poetry can inspire new generations of activists and poets.
4. Fusion Opportunities: There is potential to revive Kobigaan through fusion with contemporary music, including hip-hop, jazz, or electronic beats, creating a hybrid genre with mass appeal. (Basu .P, 2024)

The Way Forward: Reviving Kobigaan

Reviving Kobigaan is possible with a thoughtful strategy involving education, technology, and community engagement.

1. Inclusion in Curriculum: Incorporating Kobigaan in school and college syllabi can create early exposure and interest in this unique tradition.



2. Digital Platforms: Launching YouTube channels, podcasts, and Instagram reels featuring short Kobigaan-style duels can attract the youth.
3. Workshops and Competitions: Organizing Kobigaan festivals, college duels, and spoken word battles inspired by the format can help adapt it for a modern audience.
4. Government and NGO Support: Grants, fellowships, and funding from bodies like Sangeet Natak Akademi, ICCR, or UNESCO could preserve and promote Kobigaan.
5. Translation and Globalization: Translating classic Kobigaan verses into English or other languages can attract international attention to Bengal's rich poetic heritage.

Conclusion

From the rural folk songs that still echo in the villages to the poetic rhythms heard in contemporary performances, Kobigaan endures as a symbol of the enduring power of the spoken word. In a world increasingly dominated by digital media and globalized entertainment, there is a profound need to preserve and celebrate the traditions that shaped our past and continue to define who we are. Perhaps, in revisiting the art of Kobigaan, we may find not just nostalgia, but a path forward that honors the wisdom of our cultural heritage. Kobigaan today exists at the crossroads of tradition and innovation. Academics are providing renewed focus and critique, particularly regarding representation and cultural politics. Though not always centerstage in policy, ongoing folk revival efforts in Bengal create an enabling environment for Kobigaan's resurgence.

Kobigaan, Bengal's fragile heritage of poetic duels, is more than an art form, it is a mirror of society, a battleground of ideas, and a celebration of language. Though time and modernity have pushed it to the margins, it need not stay forgotten. With renewed cultural interest, digital tools, and community effort, Kobigaan can rise again, not merely as nostalgia, but as a vibrant, living tradition reinvented for today. As Bengal rediscovers its roots in an increasingly homogenized world, Kobigaan can once again echo through its lanes, not as a forgotten relic but as a resurgent rhythm of rebellion, poetry, and pride.

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