

# Chapter 61

## Linking Folklore to Agricultural Sustainability Accounting in Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

*The Bangladeshi folklore cultural heritage embraces myriad proverbs, adages, sayings, folktales, and folksongs, including the songs of the Baul mystic minstrels. Many are linked to various aspects of agriculture – from tilling to harvest, storage of yields, and consumption. The paper draws on this folklore to develop the concept of traditional sustainability accounting in agriculture. Although without formal quantification, these proverbs and songs guide agricultural practices in rural Bangladesh maintaining a socio-economic system that promotes sustainable activities, counteracts the damage caused by the 1970 Green Revolution, and encourage sustainability accounting. In recent years, Bangladesh has achieved many of the Millennium Development Goals but has also witnessed environmental deterioration. An agro-ecological management informed by folklore and traditional wisdom has the potential to transform the country's progress along the lines of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.*

## INTRODUCTION

Being a complex phenomenon, folk or mass culture was created during pre-industrial times through face-to-face personal interactions in the organic village communities of small-scale, predominantly agrarian societies where communications were mainly oral-aural, visual, direct, shared and enjoyed by most people (Briggs, 1990). This popular culture developed a large body of shared knowledge and beliefs through vernacular expressions as well as practices described by the term “folklore”. Although there is not one clear-cut definition of folklore, what it represents or comprises (Bendix & Hasan-Rokem, 2012), there is wide-spread understanding that it is shared by a group of people who share some common characteristics, such as belonging to a particular ethnic, national, religious or spiritual community. According to Bauman (1990), folklore is recognized for its durability and social efficacy. Albala (2013) points out the importance of folklore in anthropology, religious studies, literature, arts and most other humanities disciplines as well as for public policy, community development, social justice, cultural interpretation and education.

In many industrialized societies folklore might seem to have lost its social importance and may appear to be anachronistic or belonging to the past. There are however many communities around the globe which continue to maintain agricultural economies combining traditional practices with modern sustainable agro-ecosystems and agro-forestry production systems. Their folk culture encourages sustainable practices suited to the local conditions and which have evolved and are being maintained as a part of their cultural tradition and identity. Rural Bangladesh is such an example where unwritten stories and tales, proverbs and wisdom sayings, folk and spiritual songs, beliefs in myths and legends, adages and riddles together with many other expressions of folklore continue to be created, believed, valued and used by the folk masses. The Bauls – saintly mendicants, mostly unlettered singing gurus, are very popular in rural Bangladesh and their poetic, musical and philosophical talent is often seen as being at the root of the Bengali folk culture (Hossain, 1991; Hossain & Marinova, 2009a). Combining principles from Hinduism and Islam (Chaudhury, 2013) as well as Christianity, Buddhism and any other spiritual path (King, 2008), the Bauls are unique in socio-religious syncretization. The famous Lalou Fakir “used to say that... the only religion he believed in was humanism” (Chaudhury, 2013, p. 5). In 2005, the Bauls were recognized by UNESCO (2008) as part of the intangible heritage of humanity as they have been influencing the popular culture of Bangladesh for centuries.

Because of their lifestyle and experience, the Bangladeshi rural people rely more on the guiding messages embedded in their folklore with which they are familiar, than on modern knowledge to which they have more limited access. Being an inherently oral tradition, folklore is transmitted from one generation to another. It offers common perspectives and allows people with diverse backgrounds and occupations to live in socio-cultural unity.

A very good example of this is food and its production through agriculture (Albala, 2013). This paper explores the link between folklore, agriculture and traditional sustainability accounting. Food production is required for human survival but agriculture is also the foundation of the national culture of Bangladesh. The following proverbs clearly state these links: “No culture without agriculture”<sup>1</sup>; “There is no living culture where there is no agriculture”<sup>2</sup> and “As is a nation’s dependence on agriculture, so is the dynamic strength of its culture”<sup>3</sup>. This kind of proverbial wisdom sends powerful messages not only about the synergy between culture and agriculture but also that food production needs to be strong and maintained in order to sustain Bangladesh. It puts agriculture at the core of the long-term development of Bangladesh and links this to future goals and aspirations. The remainder of the paper draws on

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