



# BANGLADESH

## Preserving the Baul community of wandering minstrels

**S**ong is one of the most important expressions of Bengali culture, infusing society at all levels. It is a 1,000-year-old tradition that has been perpetuated by a sect of wandering musicians who travel from village to village singing songs of love for God.

Their repertoire also includes songs for particular events such as festivals, weddings, rice planting and husking. Embracing elements of Sufism and Hinduism, the Baul tradition pre-dates the Islamic period and embodies the pluralism which is an important element of Bengali identity.

But the indigenous music tradition of Bangladesh has become marginalized with the

arrival of satellite television, videos and the Internet. Bauls have found their services less in demand and the rich heritage of their songs is in danger of being lost.

To safeguard the community and record its oral heritage, a group of Bangladeshis formed the Pally Baul Samaj Unnayan Sangstha. The U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation gave the organization a grant in 2005 to record hundreds of Baul songs and to fund a group of performers to tour schools throughout the country. The Sangstha also collected examples of Baul instruments, and used grant funds to support workshops to pass on skills to a new generation of performers.



## Preservation of metal casting traditions at Dhamrai, Bangladesh

**B**angladesh boasts a rich tradition of fine, handmade, metal casting work, producing religious statues, decorative animal figures and household utensils. But the craft has faltered due to competition from cheap, manufactured wares and the decline of the industry's custodians, the Hindu community, since partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

This 2,000-year-old tradition survives in 30 villages around Dhamrai, in the Manikganj district

northwest of Dhaka. Here, metal crafters practice four traditional handmade processes: lost wax, clay casting, sand casting, and hammering. By the late 1990s, only a handful of artists were practicing the most demanding of these techniques, the lost wax method.

Sukanta Banik, who represents the fifth generation of a metal trading family, formed the Initiative for the Preservation of Dhamrai Metal-Casting to keep the tradition of metal casting alive in Bangladesh. A grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2003 helped Banik and other artisans build an apprenticeship program and a skills exchange program with metalworkers doing similar work in Nepal. The grant also helped promote the craft as an important part of the country's national heritage; Bangladesh Television broadcast a 20-minute program produced with the assistance of the American Center, and a Dhaka art gallery held an exhibition on the art form.

"After the exhibition, lots of Bangladeshis came to see our workshop," says Banik. "Before, we only had four or five artisans making small pieces, and the quality was not so good. Now the artists compete with each other to make better pieces. It's the confidence of the artists that is different now, because of the recognition."

The lost wax method of metal work has a special place in Bangladeshi culture. Sculptors first make a model of the image using a mixture of paraffin and wax. They coat the image with a layer of fine clay from a nearby riverbank, followed by two coarser layers. The mould is placed in a kiln, where the wax is allowed to melt out, and replaced with molten bronze or brass. Once the image has cooled, the craftsman removes it from the mould, files and polishes it. Because the mould has to be broken, each piece is unique.

A small image takes 15 to 20 days to produce, while a big one may take six to eight months.

