

Attitudes and Involvements in Maizbhandari Sufi Music of the People of Chattogram: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Many Sufi saints have travelled to our Indian subcontinent from all over the world to spread the eternal message of Islam for centuries. The music produced around the Sufi's affectionate lifestyle and actual perceptions is called Sufi music. The main purpose of Sufi music is to awaken divine love, overcome all kinds of evils, and develop a pure spirit in humans. One of the most popular Sufi music in Chattogram, Bangladesh is Maizbhandari Sufi music. The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitude of Chattogram people about Maizbhandari Sufi music and their involvement in it. The data have been gathered through a survey of 50 people. The descriptive technique was used to conduct this research study. The study found that the majority of respondents like listening to Maizbhandari music and have a positive attitude toward it, while a small minority do not listen to it and have a neutral attitude toward it.

Keywords

Maizbhandari Sufi Music, Field Survey, Sufi Music, Spiritual Music, Divine Love

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Introduction

Sufism is an Islamic path of “getting closer to Allah”, clearing the barriers that separate us from God through improving human lives. The teachings of Sufism are often presented through literature, poetry, dance and prayers. According to Pirani et al., “the wisdom of Sufism is found in their teaching, often appearing as books, poetry, dancing, art, calligraphy, exercises, and prayers” (Pirani et al. 379). It's termed ‘Sufi music’ when the poems are sung with musical instruments. Sufi music's primary aim is to promote Sufi doctrines and beliefs to all people. As a result, several Sufi orders or Sufi sects utilized it as a means of contact with the general public. As Markoff said,

Through ritual, many Sufi orders and Sufi-related sects throughout the world of Islam have been able to articulate doctrines and beliefs through artistic traditions such as sung poetry, instrumental music and dance-like movements (157).

Sufism started in the Middle East and expanded across Islam, particularly in India. About Sufism Hashmi and Khawaja wrote: “Such mystic dimension of Islam formally originated in the Middle East between ninth and tenth centuries and influenced the world of Islam predominantly the Indian Sub-Continent” (1476). The four major Sufi orders in the Indian sub-continent are *Quadriyyah*, *Chishtiya*, *Suhrawardiyya*, and *Naqshbandehiyyah*. About these Sufi order Hasmi and Khawaja stated that,

[...] the Sufi *sīlsīlāhs*(orders) prevalent here especially the Qādīriyyāh, Chīshtīyyāh, Suhārwardīyyāh and also Nāqshbāndīyyāh contributed a great deal in the literature, philosophy, theological ideas, doctrine of peace and upholding of human rights and social justice (1476).

Bangladesh is a South Asian country that belongs to the Indian subcontinent. This region is a hotspot for Sufism. Maizbhandari *tariqa* (Sufi sect or Sufi order) is a popular sect in this country.

According to Harder Maizbhandari *tariqa* is: "... the only Sufi order originated in Bengal and which has gained immense popularity in recent years" (5).

Gauth-ul-Azam Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari (1826-1906), the founder of Maizbhandari *tariqa*, is a descendant of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He was born in Maizbhandar village under Fatikchhari Upazila of Chattogram city in Bangladesh. It's the reason that Maizbhandari *tariqa* is called after the village. The Maizbhandari *tariqa* is very unique. Because Bertocci said that, "...the Maijbhandari tariqa reflects a melding of several of the Sufi orders..." (14). It is essentially a fusion of two prominent Sufi *tariqas*. As Alam said, "... it accommodates the two most dominant Sufi orders of South Asia, the *Qadiriyya* and the *Chishtiyya*, together" (30).

The Maizbhandari sect incorporates the *Quadriyyah* sect's *telawat-e-ozud* or 7th types of *dhikr* (the remembrance) into its *usul-e-sab'a* (Seven ways). On the other hand, it adopts *sama* (spiritual music) from *Chishtiya tariqa*. Alam explained it as,

Officially part of the *Qadiriyya* order, the Maizbhandariyya *Tariqa* integrates *telawat-e-ozud* or seven kinds of *dhikr* (invocation) from the *Qadiriyya* order with its *usul-e sab'a* or seven fundamentals of restraint (35).

The spiritual songs or Sufi songs produced in the context of the Maizbhandari *tariqa* are referred to as Maizbhandari *giti* or *gaan*. According to Harder, "In a broader, cultural sense, Maijbhandari songs (*māij'bhāṇḍārī gān* or *gīti*) are the centerpiece of the Maijbhandari tradition" (15).

The important feature of these songs is that the founder of Maizbhandari *Tarika* or the later spiritual greats did not compose any songs themselves, these songs were written around them. All these songs are composed mainly by

Maizbhandari devotees and followers⁴ (Jahangir 2012, 186).

The reformers of the era, the perfect saints, are used to call mankind to the path of Allah by applying various types of technique. They accept or permit *Zikir-e-Jali* or *Khafi* performances in honor of Allah, the Prophet, and the perfect saints with musical instruments and rhythmic dancing for some people in an effort to awaken love for Allah and His Prophet (pbuh) (Hossain Maizbhandari 150).

In the nineteenth century, Maizbhandari songs first appeared. Despite being a nineteenth-century kind of song, it is linked to Bengal's old *Marphati* and *Murshidi* songs. As a result, “Maizbhandari songs are an essential part of the *Marphati* and spiritual music genres” (Jahangir 1999, 179). Followers of Maizbhandari *tariqa* wrote and sang these songs throughout the years, making them famous across East Bengal's various socio-economic classes. These songs influenced people from all walks of life in East Bengal, whether they lived in the city or in the rural, whether they were well-educated or not. As a result, estimating the exact value of the number of Maizbhandari songs and composers is very challenging. However, according to Hans Harder, “While it is certainly impossible to even come close to determining the number of songs ever written, we can quite safely estimate that it runs into five digits – a figure” (15). On the other hand, Jahangir mentions that “Based on the data we have so far, 85 Maizbhandari songwriters have been identified”⁵ (Jahangir 2012, 195). Prominent among them are:

⁴ The quoted extract is translated from original Bengali text:

এই গানের গুরুত্বপূর্ণ বিশেষত্ব এই যে, মাইজভাণ্ডারী তারিকার প্রবর্তক বা পরবর্তীকালের আধ্যাত্মিক মহাপুরুষেরা নিজেরা কোন গান রচনা করেননি, তাঁদেরকেই কেন্দ্র করে এই গানগুলো রচিত। মূলত মাইজভাণ্ডারী আশেক ভক্তরাই এ সমস্ত গানের রচয়িতা।

⁵ The quoted extract is translated from original Bengali text:

আমাদের এ পর্যন্ত প্রাপ্ত তথ্যে ৮৫ জন মাইজভাণ্ডারী গীতিকারের সন্ধান মেলে।

Maulana Abdul Hadi Kanchanpuri, Kabiya! Ramesh Shil, Maulana Abdul Gani Kanchanpuri, Maulana Abdus Salam Bhojpuri, Maulana Aminul Haque Harbangiri, Fakir Abdur Rahman, Maulana Bazlul Karim Mandakini, Abdul Gafur Hali, Monmohan Datta, etc”⁶ (Jahangir 1999, 182) (Jahangir 2018, 20)

Kabiya! Ramesh Shil (1877–1967) was a renowned songwriter, poet, and artist who established a new era in Maizbhandari song. About Ramesh, Priyanka wrote:

[...] Ramesh introduced a new phase for the Māijabhāndārī songs which came to be considered as a genre in itself. Ramesh started composing the Māijabhāndārī songs from 1923, although he is not the originator of the genre (324).

“Maulana Abdul Hadi Kanchanpuri is called the original creator of Maizbhandari songs”⁷ (Jahangir 2018, 21). In 1923, Ramesh Shil paid a visit to *Pir* Golamur Rahman (1865-1937) of Maizbhandar, who was Syed Ahmadullah Maizbhandari's spiritual successor and nephew. Priyanka stated it as, "It was in 1923 that Ramesh Shil first visited the *Pir* Golam Rahman (or Baba Bhandari) of the Māizabhāndār Darbar Sharif in Nazirhat near Chittagong" (324). Ramesh shil wrote many songs in his honor. “He has contributed to the world by writing more than 300 Maizbhandari songs”⁸ (Jahangir 1999, 183). His songs are very popular across East Bengal, particularly in Chattogram. Since Maizbhandari songs are so popular in Chattogram, we have looked at how involved and what kind of attitude people have towards them in this research.

⁶ The quoted extract is translated from original Bengali text:

মাওলানা আবদুল হাদী কাঞ্চনপুরী, কবিয়াল রমেশ শীল, মাওলানা আবদুল গণি কাঞ্চনপুরী, মাওলানা আবদুস সালাম ভূজপুরী, মাওলানা আমিনুল হক হারবাসিরি, ফকির আবদুর রহমান, মাওলানা বজলুল করিম মন্দাকিনী, আবদুল গফুর হালী, মনমোহন দত্ত প্রমুখ।

⁷ মাওলানা আবদুল হাদি কাঞ্চনপুরীকে এই গানের উদ্ভাবক বলে অভিহিত করা হয়।

⁸ তিন শতাব্দিক মাইজভাণ্ডারী গান রচনা করে তিনি এই জগতকে সমৃদ্ধ করে তুলেছেন।

Research Questions

- a. What is the attitude of the residents of Chattogram to the Maizbhandari Sufi music?
- b. How much involvement does the Chattogram community have in this particular music genre?

Literature Review

Bekkaoui and others (47) conducted a survey on Moroccan 1054 young participants to get a better understanding of how they see Sufism and religion. Their research showed that Moroccan youngsters have a positive view towards Sufism. More significantly, most participants believed that Sufism is crucial in preventing youth from going down the path of extremism. The authors of this paper said that,

The findings reveal that among Moroccan youth the adoption of Sufism's goals of moderation, introspection, spirituality, and mutual respect may be increasing while support for violent jihadism is waning (Bekkaoui et al. 47).

Butler-Dines (28) conducted similar research to evaluate whether youngsters engage in Sufism promotion sponsored by the Moroccan government. Additionally, "they used 2010 survey findings" (Bekkaoui et al. 47) to learn more about the youth perspective (Butler-Dines 3). According to the findings of this research, only a tiny percentage of young people join Sufi orders, despite having a favorable attitude towards Sufism. Butler-Dines claimed that,

The state's promotion of Sufism has not led to significant growth of youth participating in *tariqahs*. Only a small minority of youth actively engages with *tariqahs* and the importance of Sufism to Islam in Morocco is contested (28).

In Egypt, El-Taher and Amin examined what drives someone to listen to religious and spiritual music and then investigated if the music influenced individuals to adopt certain cultural behaviours.

The research found that religious and spiritual music has a strong influence in Egypt. People use this music genre for emotional healing. However, El-Taher and Amin showed that,

[...] there is no relation between using the spiritual and religious music and doing some cultural activities such as reading books, attending concerts, or buying and selling related objects (93).

Iqbal and Farid made an effort to explain why Sufi shrines are visited. They analyzed why Sufi followers visit Sufi shrines and perform Sufi rituals, as well as how these activities fill them with happiness. After taking interviews from the followers, they found that many devotees travel to shrines to fulfill their most basic human needs, including social, economic, political, religious, physical, emotional, and spiritual ones. Besides this, most people go to shrines out of love and respect for Sufis. Iqbal and Farid asserted that,

The major objective of paying visits to Dargahs is the fulfillment of the desires based upon social, financial, political, religious, physical, mental and mystical aspects of the visitors' life. Also, a majority of visitors visit Dargahs owing to their devotion and reverence for the Sufis (951).

All of the preceding literature focused on people's perceptions of Sufism, Sufi rituals, and spiritual music, as well as their engagement with them. However, in this study, we have tried to study the very specific term "Maizbhandari Sufi music." The main aim of this research is to determine how individuals perceive and engage with this musical genre.

Methodology

Data collection process

We mainly collected data through a questionnaire. The survey was generated using the Google Form application. Later, the survey was made available to everyone via WhatsApp and

Facebook. We sent the form to a number of Facebook and WhatsApp groups as well as to individuals. The people of Chattogram were our primary concern. Before distributing the survey to everyone, a pilot or mini-survey was conducted with four people. Then their feedback was taken into account. We modified the survey based on comments from the pilot survey participants, translated it into Bengali, and distributed it to our target audience. We used these techniques to obtain a decent response.

The questionnaire preparation and analysis process

We have two goals based on our research questions: to assess people's attitudes towards Maizbhandari Sufi music and their degree of involvement with this music genre. This research uses a descriptive method to achieve these goals. Several open-ended and closed-ended questions are produced, which are divided into two parts based on the two goals. Most of the closed-ended questions used the nominal scale measurement.

Figure 1 shows the steps associated with developing the questionnaire. First, we questioned the participants about whether or not they listened to Maizbhandari Sufi music. If they say yes, we have asked 14 questions to determine their level of involvement in Maizbhandari *gaan* as well as their attitudes towards it.

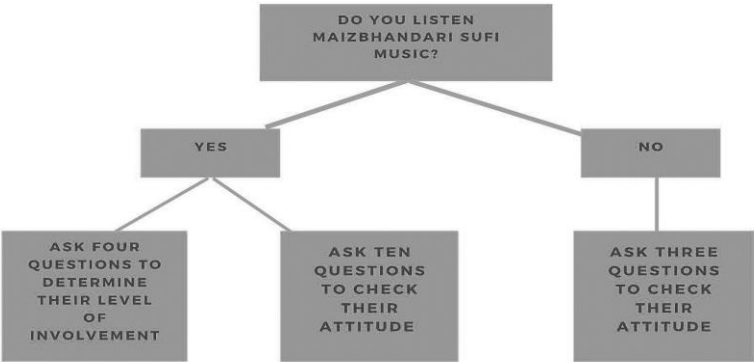


Figure 1: The procedure for designing the questionnaire

If they answer no, we have just asked three questions to assess their attitude toward Maizbhandari Sufi music. We can see that there is a distinction in the question as there is a division of opinion between those who listen to Maizbhandari music and those who do not. After receiving responses to the questionnaire, we evaluated the data using SPSS.

Results

Filtering Question

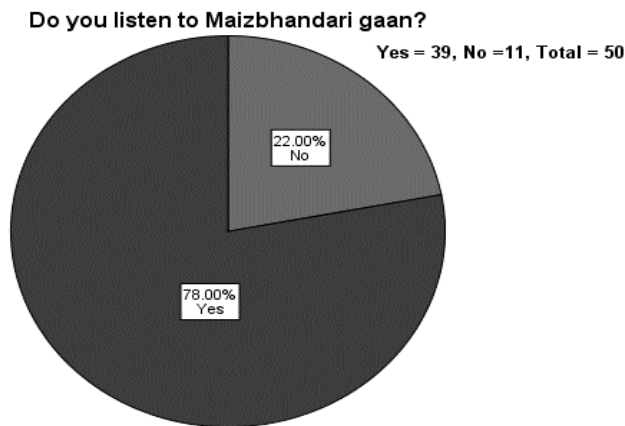


Figure 2: Filtering question

The first question directed towards the participants was “Do you listen to Maizbhandari *gaan*?” “Out of 50 people, 39 listen to Maizbhandari music and 11 do not. That is, 78% said yes and 22% said no.

Involvement in Maizbhandari Sufi music of those people who listen to it

Fourteen questions were addressed to the participants who listen to Maizbhandari music in order to identify their attitudes and participation with Maizbhandari Sufi music. Among these 14 questions, there were four questions in all to assess the extent to which participants were engaged with Maizbhandari Sufi music.

Questions		Frequency	Percent
Do you participate in Maizbhandari <i>gaan Sama</i> rituals?	No	12	30.8%
	Yes	27	69.2%
	Total	39	100.0%
Do you listen to Maizbhandari <i>gaan</i> ___?	daily	9	23.1%
	frequently	8	20.5%
	hardly	3	7.7%
	occasionally	19	48.7%
	Total	39	100.0%

Table 1: Q1-Q2: Listeners' level of involvement with Maizbhandari songs

The responses to these 4 questions are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Table 1 shows the answers to the first two questions. In the first question, we can observe that 69.2% of people participate in Maizbhandari *sama* rituals. While just 30.8% of people do not take part in *sama*. The second question reveals that 48.7% of individuals occasionally listen to Maizbhandari *gaan*, which is the highest percentage. While 23.1% listen to music daily, 20.5% listen frequently, and 7.7% listen rarely.

From which source do you listen to this music?

(One respondent may hear these songs from multiple sources)

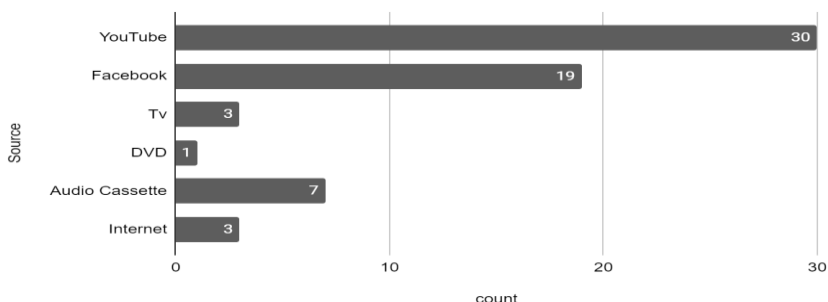


Table 2: Q3: Listeners' level of involvement with Maizbhandari songs

Table 2 illustrates the third question. This question indicates that the majority of people listen to these songs on YouTube and Facebook. Besides, only a specific audience enjoys these songs on ancient DVDs and cassette tapes. Some people watch television and surf the web as well.

Bengali	English (self-translated)	Songwriter	Count
চলো গো প্রেম সাধুগণ প্রেমেরি বাজার। প্রেম হাট বসাইয়াছে মাইজভাণ্ডার মাঝার...	Oh love saints; let's go to the love market. He (<i>Ghawth-ul-Azam</i> Maizbhandari) has set up a love market in the middle of Maizbhandar...	Maulana Abdul Hadi Kanchanpuri	3
চট্টগ্রামে আছে রে ভাই, নাম যে তার ফটিকছড়ি। আরে আজগবি এক কল বসাল আমার বাবা ভাণ্ডারী...	Oh brother, there is a name in Chittagong that is Fatikchhari. My Shaykh Bhandari set up a strange factory there...	Kabiyal Ramesh Shil	2
ইস্কুল খুলিলাছে ওর মাওলা। ইস্কুল খুলিলাছে। গাউছুল আজম মাইজভাণ্ডারী ইস্কুল খুলিলাছে...	<i>Maula</i> opened the school. He opened the school. <i>Ghawth-ul-A'zam</i> Maizbhandari has opened a school...	Kabiyal Ramesh Shil	12
অন্যান্য	Others		22

Table 3: Q4: What is your favourite Maizbhandari song?

Participants were asked to share their favorite Maizbhandari songs in the fourth and final question of this section. Participants mentioned many songs. We've just included the top 3 Maizbhandari songs in Table 3. Kabiya! Ramesh Shil's songs are the most popular among the community. Besides, Maulana Abdul Hadi's Kanchanpuri-written songs are noteworthy.

The attitude of those people who listen to Maizbhandari music

Table 4 illustrates the 10 questions. Among them, the first five questions are about how Maizbhandari music assists individuals in times of distress, connects them to the Almighty, and enriches their lives and spirituality. These five questions have a high proportion of positive replies (71.80%, 61.50%, 69.2%, 76.90%, 82.10%) relative to negative responses (2.60 %, 5.10 %, 2.60 %, 5.10 %). This proves that the vast majority of them had affirmative responses to these queries. A further key finding from these five questions is that 82.10 % of respondents indicated that Maizbhandari songs help them to cope with distress. This percentage is the highest of the five questions. Moreover, 76.90% believe that Maizbhandari songs improve their spirituality. Notice that this question has no negative responses.

Questions		Count	Subtable N %
Does it improve our way of life?	No	1	2.60%
	No opinion	10	25.60%
	Yes	28	71.80%
	Total	39	100.00%
Do you believe the presence of spiritual master while listening these songs?	No	2	5.10%
	No opinion	13	33.30%
	Yes	24	61.50%
	Total	39	100.00%
Is it one of the ways by which people can get closer to the Almighty?	No	1	2.60%
	No opinion	11	28.20%
	Yes	27	69.20%
	Total	39	100.00%
Do you think Maizbhandari gaan improves our spirituality?	No opinion	9	23.10%
	Yes	30	76.90%
	Total	39	100.00%
Does it console in our distress?	No	2	5.10%
	No opinion	5	12.80%
	Yes	32	82.10%
	Total	39	100.00%

Questions		Count	Subtable N %
Do you think it is a blessing to all it's followers?	No	2	5.10%
	No opinion	9	23.10%
	Yes	28	71.80%
	Total	39	100.00%
What do you think about using the musical instruments in Maizbhandari gaan? Is it necessary?	No	8	20.50%
	No opinion	7	17.90%
	Yes	24	61.50%
	Total	39	100.00%
Can every nation can quench its thirst by hearing this music genre?	No	3	7.70%
	No opinion	7	17.90%
	Yes	29	74.40%
	Total	39	100.00%
Does it encourage or guide us to do good things?	No	1	2.60%
	No opinion	4	10.30%
	Yes	34	87.20%
	Total	39	100.00%
Do you think is it allowed in Islam?	skip	1	2.60%
	No	1	2.60%
	No opinion	11	28.20%
	Yes	26	66.70%
	Total	39	100.00%

Table 4: Q1- Q10: The attitudes of Maizbhandari music listeners

From the sixth to tenth questions, the topics include whether Maizbhandari songs are blessings for their followers, if they are permitted in Islam, whether musical instruments are required in these songs, and whether this music may serve to do good and satisfy nations' thirst. As can be seen in Table 4, the vast majority of respondents (71.80%, 61.50%, 74.40%, 87.20%, 66.70%) answered these questions favorably, while only a small percentage (5.10%, 20.50%, 7.70%, 10.30%, 2.60%) answered negatively. Notice that the biggest percentage (87.20%) of respondents among these 10 questions feel that Maizbhandari songs motivate them to perform good things. About two-thirds of respondents (66.70%) agreed that Maizbhandari music is acceptable within the Islamic faith. In contrast, using musical instruments in Maizbhandari *gaan* is required - received 20.50% unfavorable answers, greater than other questions.

The attitudes of those who are not listeners of Maizbhandari music

Out of 50 respondents, 11 people who do not listen to Maizbhandari Sufi music were given three simple questions to assess their opinions on the music. Table 5 shows the questions and their replies.

Questions		Count	Subtable N %
Do you have a positive view of Maizbhandari gaan?	No	3	27.30%
	No opinion	6	54.50%
	Yes	2	18.20%
	Total	11	100.00%
Do you think is it allowed in Islam?	No	6	54.50%
	No opinion	4	36.40%
	Yes	1	9.10%
	Total	11	100.00%

Question		Count	%
Why don't you listen to Maizbhandari gaan?	Because, I can't find any meaning in these songs.	1	9.10%
	Due to lack of time	1	9.10%
	I am confused about whether it's allowed or not in Islam because of using instruments in these songs.	1	9.10%
	I don't hear any songs	1	9.10%
	I hardly listen to songs	2	18.20%
	I listen to the nat-e-rasul all the time.	1	9.10%
	Music listening is prohibited in Islam	1	9.10%
	The songs have no significance meaning, drums and tabla are used unnecessarily	1	9.10%
	There is no reason for that	2	18.20%
	Total	11	100.00%

Table 5: Q1-Q3: Attitudes of non-listeners to Maizbhandari music

As shown in Table 5, when questioned if they have a positive or negative attitude towards Maizbhandari music, the majority of non-listeners remained neutral. So then, we questioned them why they didn't listen to this music. The majority of people said that they hardly listen to music, and there is no reason for not hearing Maizbhandari music. However, some individuals had an unfavorable attitude toward it.

Conclusion

One of the most popular Sufi music in Chattogram, Bangladesh is Maizbhandari Sufi music. In this study, we have investigated the attitude of the people of Chattogram towards Maizbhandari Sufi music and their involvement in it.

The result showed that a large portion of the respondents liked to hear Maizbhandari songs. The listeners are mainly involved with Maizbhandari songs via *sama* and the Internet. The majority of the listeners claimed that they listened to Maizbhandari songs through YouTube and Facebook. We also found that the listeners of Maizbhandari music have a positive attitude towards it. They believe that Maizbhandari songs help develop a closer connection with the Almighty, strengthen spirituality, improve one's way of life, comfort people in distress, and inspire one to do good deeds. Many listeners said that using musical instruments is required in Maizbhandari music, and that these songs are also permitted in Islam. However, some respondents showed a negative attitude towards hearing Maizbhandari songs.

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