

Jennifer Reid
Independent scholar

Linking work songs

There has been relatively little research into the similarities between the Industrial Revolution in England and the developing garment industry in Bangladesh. No research has been undertaken exploring these links by using work song. The largest collections of English songs available are broadside ballads, songs printed cheaply and sold in the streets and alehouses of cities like Manchester. Though the nineteenth century was a period of enormous growth for the print industry, the printed ballads were rooted in a tradition of performativity that transcended the written word. The ballads' roots in the oral and dialect traditions of Lancashire meant that many different versions of the same songs were printed in each Lancashire town. This performativity continues with people local to Manchester continuing to sing them, albeit in very different modern venues.

This paper, which mixes discussion and performance, is based on six weeks of research in Bangladesh exploring similarities between the textile industries of nineteenth century Manchester and modern day using work songs as a source. Work songs in Dhaka are diverse, from hand loom weaving instructional songs to factory workers singing about love or even pop songs. Jamdani weaving uses the oral tradition to convey patterns and shapes to be woven on the loom. Weaving formed a large part of Manchester and Lancashire culture, crossing over into dance. The songs and dances took on the rhythm of the looms in the factories. On the margins of an industry is the music of the people. The international tradition of work songs can be used as a resource for students and educators to understand the garment industry in a deeper way and give important insights into the lives of people - both in the present day and the nineteenth century - who are often excluded from academic narratives.