

Traditional Baul Singers and Their Esoteric Practices in Birbhum

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ABSTRACT: The Bauls represent a unique song and musical tradition and esoteric cult practices of a religious group in Bengal. The baul songs are not only an expressive musical tradition, but also carry a dubious symbolic sexual communication hidden in their songs. The aesthetic appeal of their presentation is coupled with their typical robes, instrumentation and body decoration with sandalwood paints. The cult is said to have its origin in 16th century following a confluence of the Tantra, the Vaisnavism and the Sufism in Bengal. We find a special status of baul as a musical tradition and as singers after the poet Rabindranath Tagore took an active interest in it. Since then, there have been a number of literary and anthropological works on the bauls. The cult has caught the attention of the elite urban classes and got popularized through media, films and literary exercises. Now, many baul festivals are organized throughout the year, the baul singers visit several countries of the world and perform the cultural identity of Bengal. Though, the common people still nurture an image of typical baul which remains a point of attraction because of the mystic nature of their life and the performing art. The baul tradition has been passing through a number of transformations at present. The paper attempts to focus on the present state of the art and associated practices of the baul singers.

INTRODUCTION

Let me start the writing on the *bauls* by recounting an experience of noted *baul* researcher Jeanne Openshaw. Openshaw (2004), while ‘seeking the bauls of Bengal’ met a Vaisnava man on her way to a baul *astana* (residence). The man when came to know the purpose of her visit could not control himself to vent his displeasure over such an unworthy mission undertaken by her. The Vaisnava man started to undermine the *bauls* as ‘degraded, lecherous, anti-social.’ For that man, these baul people were responsible for breaking down of families and social derangement. Openshaw (2004) probably had little time or intention to explore further how these people

could have been responsible for such destruction of social fabric, but her story amply suggested the wobbly look at this community by a section of Bengal gentry.

Citing a departure from the foregoing narrative, my own experience is completely different when I went to meet the *bauls* at their place where they were residing. Alighting from bus at Suri, the headquarters town of the Birbhum district, in the month of September in 2018, I travelled up to the famous Visva-Bharati, an university founded by the great poet Rabindranath Tagore. In Suri, asked for the address of Mahadebdas Baul, a famous *baul* singer and was guided by the people to reach his residence. It was far from the main bus stand of the town. Passing along

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the serpentine allies of the old town, I reached to find a middle-aged multicoloured robbed man well ensconced in a family with wife, daughter, and mother among other relations visiting him that day. I presumed that much water has flowed down the Ganges or Mayurakshi that skirted the town between Openshaw's work (late 1970s and 1980s) and mine at present, in the year 2018. There has been a change of attitude towards these traditional singers and esoteric practitioners. However, the reasons of such enthusiastic motioning me to the thoroughfares might be otherwise that I had tried to indicate by putting the contrasting narratives. Mahadebdas Baul belonged to a very respectable lineage of Nabanidas Baul, praised by Tagore himself and as being a cousin of 'baul emperor' Purna Das Baul. But my own impression at the factual level was very different in a sense that I found a contented family man instead of destroyer of family virtues and values, as accused by the vaisnava man of Openshaw's account (2004).

This personal encounter of mine could well serve as my entry point into the discourse on the bauls since it beckoned a new light into the issue amidst a number of works done on the bauls. In the backdrop of which the obvious question is what knowledge addition the present discussion is going to make to the existing plethora of researches on the bauls. There are a good number of anthropological studies (Sarkar, '90; Ray, '94; Openshaw, 2004), folkloric and literary works (Dimock, '66; Karim, '71; Datta, '78; Sen, '93; Jha, '99; Chakrabarty, 2002), ethnomusicological studies (Bhattacharya, '69; Bandyopadhyay, '76; Bhattacharya, 1388 BS; Capwell, 2011), and religious and philosophical studies (Bandyopadhyay, '67; Capwell, '74, '88; Chakraborti, '80; Dimock, '90; McDaniel, '92; Young, 2014; Knight, 2011), among others. The studies often share overlapping interests. The studies dealt with the songs and mystic symbolism of the bauls, their sexo-yogic practices, history of the baul tradition, and philosophy of the bauls, their performing practices, material aspects like dress, instruments, syncretism, position of women in their society and their social organization. My primary aim is to present the changing facets of the bauls and their performative tradition and anthropologically positing this exercise in the contemporary theoretical discourse. My methodology is rather grounded in a

sense that I argue for dynamic theories instead of searching for some overarching meta-frame. I shall start with an general idea of the meaning of *baul* and their performative tradition including organizational networks (that roughly corresponds to social organization), then pass on to the changing dimensions of the cult. At the end, I shall try to bring in focus some of the theoretical issues I have been able to identify.

THE BAULS

Bauls: Who they are?

The word '*baul*' has been defined variously from etymological, historical, philosophical and ethnographic perspectives. Rajsekhar Basu in his Bengali dictionary *Calantikâ* (Basu, '54) has given the meaning of baul as singing mendicant group of devoted people free from all religious bigotry. The baul also includes the songs composed by these people. Another meaning of baul has been provided by Gyanendramohan Das in his *Bānglā Bhāshār Abhidhān* (Das, 1323 BS) as 'mad, eccentric' people. Haricharan Bandyopadhyay has three different meanings of the word baul. According to his *Bangiya Sabdakosh* (Bandyopadhyay, 1340 BS) the Bauls are: i) frenzy, mad; ii) ardent; iii) branch of Sree Chaitanya community, they keep beard, long hair, wear cloth inner garment and bead necklace, put sandalwood dot marks on the body. These dictionaries and encyclopedia give an idea of a group of people in their physical and behavioural attributes. The authors who have done works on the bauls have tried to add historical inputs into the etymological derivatives. However, the subsequent understandings of the word baul revolved round the meanings provided above. Upendranath Bhattacharya (1388 BS) wrote that the word 'baul' did not enter into Bengali vocabulary until first half of seventeenth century to mean a particular religious group. His opinion is that the word has been derived from Sanskrit word *bātul* meaning 'mad'. The attribute of madness in the metaphorical sense has also been accepted by Khsitimohan Sen ('93). He defined baul as a 'casteless unlettered people against all scriptural stubbornness'. Anwarul Karim ('71) has provided us with a complete understanding of the baul. Tracing root to Arabic language, he has mentioned that the baul mean 'consort'. The etymological exposition as provided by Karim ('71) is

that *bâul* > *bâ ul* where *bâ* means air and *ul* means direction. Therefore, the bauls are those people know how to control the air or breath inside the body.

The meaning of the word baul as Mahadebdas (male of about 50 year) told me came much closer to what Professor Karim indicated. For Mahadebdas, *ul* means control – therefore mastery over the air passing through one’s body. The baul does *bâtâser sâdhanâ* (disciplined and dedicated practice of air i.e. controlling air). Hridaydas (age about 30 year), an educated baul performer conceived baul more on the basis of inner philosophy of the behavioural practice. He said that the baul is basically religious practice. One can only become a perfect baul when he would not acquire anything for storing for the next day – one he does not know what he will eat tomorrow. He opined that such bauls were seldom met with. Ray (’94) mentioned about two types of bauls – *Mâulidhârî* and *Kistidhârî*. The former category of bauls carry about a hollow coconut pot called *Mâuli*, whereas the *Kistidhârî* carry elongated coconut pot (*Kisti*) with them. Nowadays, the bauls can be divided into two main types, as Hridaydas indicated. These are – *Grihî bâul* and *Akhrâdhârî bâul*. Sometimes the word *Udâsîn bâul* is used to mean the baul who has renounced house. These bauls are often equated with *Akhrâdhârî bâul* (*akhrâ* means here the hermitage of the bauls) those who live in *akhrâ*. Openshaw (2004) mentioned about the category of *Bartamân-panthi*.

Esoteric Sexo-Yogic Practices

The practice (*sadhana*) of sexo-yogic cult (*rati sadhana*) (Ray, ’94) has been a major point of discussion since it appears to a distinctive feature of this community. In this practice the woman/wife is the *sadhan-sangini* (consort) of the baul. The *guru* (spiritual guide) has a special role in a baul’s life. They talk about two types of *guru* – *dikhsa guru* and *sikhsa guru*. The *sikhsa guru* and *dikhsa guru* may be the same person. *Dikhsa guru* initiates the neophyte as disciple (*sisya*). He gives *mantra* (sacred words) into the ear of the *sisya*.

Dikhsa (initiation) is an important stage in the life-cycle of the baul. When the body starts to produce *brahmabastu* (semen), then on one can take *dikhsa*. The *dikhsa guru* gives the *koupin/kopni* (single cloth piece used as undergarment to cover the genital

portion of the body) to the disciple. The disciple would offer his hairs as he gets tonsured. This is the only one time in life that a baul shaves his head. He never shaves his head even after the death of his parents as customary to the Hindus. This custom differentiates the baul community from the neighbouring Hindus. As mentioned earlier, it is seen that the *dikhsa guru* may be different from *Sikhsa guru*. Mahadebdas’s *dikhsa guru* was Bhutnath Bedanta Shastri, whereas his *Sikhsa guru* was Charandas babaji. He also received training in music from his father. Sometimes another category of *guru* is seen among them. It is *Kula guru* (spiritual guide of the lineage).

The *kopni / koupin* is a very important material attribute of the Baul. There are some taboos and observances in wearing *kopin*. There are specific mantras for wearing it. It cannot be worn without purification. The *kopindhari* must be a vegetarian. He must be careful that the *kopin* is not defiled by the urine drops. One does not engage in intercourse with the *kopin* on, it is to be put off aside while doing intercourse. But the *kopin* has to be kept at the side of head. With *kopin*, *poita* (ritual thread) and *mala* (garland of beads) are also given at the time of *dikhsa*. The *poita* is immersed after nine days, however, one continues to wear garland for life. It can be mentioned in this regard that the *dikhsa* is composed of three major components: *mantra dikhsa*, *sikhsa dikhsa*, and *sanyas dikhsa*. *Mantra dikhsa* is conferment of *biz mantra* (sacred personal words) to the ear of the disciple. *Sikhsa-dikhsa* is the initiation into esoteric sexo-yogic practice, and *sanyas* is symbolized with the conferment of *dor kopin*. During *dikhsa*, *malsabhog* is offered to *gurus* and *mahaprabhus* in the ceremony called *machchoba*. In this ceremony, *guru* gives personal ritual name to the disciple. After this, the *sisya* is known after the *sampradaya*, *gotra*, and *paribar* of his *guru*.

It has been mentioned that the *Sikhsa guru* (ritual instructor) guides the disciple in the right way of sexo-yogic practice (*rati sadhana*). There are four stages of *sadhana* – *sthula*, *pabartaka*, *sadhaka* and *sidhdhi*. The *sikhsa-dikhsa* is preceded by the selection of *sadhan-sangini* (female consort). With the *sadhan sangini*, a ritual marriage is held, which is called *konthibadal* (exchange of holy basil-beads garland). The aim of the baul is to attain the perfection

through the unison with *moner manush* (man after heart). The bauls have their own conception of human body. To them, there are five *cakras* in human body, namely *Sahasrâ*, *Âñjâ cakra*, *Manipura*, *Vishuddha*

and *Mulâdhâra*. According to this conception, *Sahasrâ* is composed of eighteen cells metaphorically called room (*mokâm*). Of these, in the chamber called *Manikothâ*, the *Maner Mânush* dwells.

Cakra	Location	Number of petals
<i>Sahasrâ</i>	Top of the head	Thousand petals of lotus
<i>Âñjâ cakra</i>	Between two eyebrows	Two petals
<i>Manipura</i>	Chest	Ten petals
<i>Vishuddha</i>	Naval pit	Sixteen petals
<i>Mulâdhâra</i>	Between genital and anal orifices	Four petals

The Bauls believe that the eternal feminine energy of creation remains docile as a coiled serpent (*kundalini*) at the *Mulâdhâra*. The Baul yogic practitioner (*sâdhaka*) enlivens it through *sâdhanâ*. By this act, the dormant *kundalini* moves through *susumna* (spinal cord) and passes through stages of *Vishuddha*, *Manipura*, *Âñjâ cakra* one after another. The baul say that moving *kundalini* requires great austerity and the *sâdhaka* could move from one stage to another by years' effort. On the two sides of *sushumnâ*, there are said to be two veins (*nâri*) – *Irâ* in left and *Pingalâ* in right. The baul practitioner controls his *dam* (air) in his body and channelizes this to exert pressure on the *Bindu* to move the imagined serpent climbing up the *susumna*. At being successful in *sâdhana*, the *bindu* reaches the *Sahasrâ*. That is the stage of eternal bliss – a union with *moner mânus*. Since the Bauls channelize the *bindu* upwards, opposite (*ulta*) to its natural flow downwards, they call it *ultasâdhanâ*.

The Bauls clothe all these ritual practices of sexo-yogic nature in an ambiguous language (*sâner bhâshâ*). The songs are coded with these suggestive words having symbolic meaning for the baul *sâdhaka*. They used to say that the cardinal feature of baul sexo-yogic act is *Câricandra sâdhana* (practice/ritual of four moons) or *câricandra bhed*. The *câricandra* are the names of four elements they use during their ritual austerity. These elements are again symbolically called – *khsir*, *mâti*, *rupa*, *rasa* or alternatively *rasa*, *mâti*, *ratî*, *raja*. The period of menstruation is called *amâbasyâ* which is considered as the most auspicious time for ritual intercourse (*jugâl sâdhanâ*). The body is often compared with a boat (*naukâ*), the female genital organ is indicated by the word *nadi* or bend of the river. The six *ripus* (senses)

are symbolized as boatmen (*mâjhi*) and the *guru* is considered as helmsman. All these physical practices and conception of body are communicated through baul songs. The initiated disciple can understand the inner-meaning of the songs or the guru explains the meaning of the songs to his disciple.

Baul Songs: Communications or Communion?

The *bâul gân* or songs bauls sing are forms of ritual language – however their interpretation and application may vary and may tend to be secular from sacred ones. Bhattacharya (1364BS) characterized the 'baul dharma' with reference to their songs. Quoting him, Openshaw wrote (2004:62): "...Bhattacharya argues that the term Baul song (and, by implication, the word Baul) has been used too loosely from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards. Only those songs which express and are rooted in the philosophy (*tattva-darsana*) and practice (*sâdhana*) of 'Baul religious tradition' are authentic Baul song."

Since, the creation of Baul songs are seen as praxis, only the true Baul cult members can compose these songs. However, this conception about baul songs is far from the actual situation prevalent today. The Baul songs can be defined on the basis of following criteria:

- i) The theme of the baul songs are marked with the use of certain suggestive words in the composition of the songs. The songs are thematically or indicatively based on the conceptions of *maner manush* (man after heart), *adhar manush* (uncatchable man), *pakhi* (bird), *ghar/mokam* (house), *arsi nagar* (city of mirror), *haowa* (breadth), *nauka* (boat), *majhi* (boatman), *nadi* (river), *chand* (moon).

- ii) The baul songs have a particular style of being performed. The notes or tunes bear the influence of regional singing styles like jhumur, bhatiyali etc.
- iii) Bauls songs are traditionally accompanied by musical instruments like *ektara*, *dotara*, *gabgubi* or *gupi jantra*, *khanjani*, flute etc.
- iv) The dress of the baul performers at the time of singing song before the public is also typical.
- v) The singers at the time of singing baul songs dance in a particular gesture – gyrations with the body bent forwardly, spot jumping or throwing of body, rhythmically moving feet or striking ground by feet on which anklet bells are tied.

Therefore, it can be said that the bauls songs are distinguished with regard to its composer, theme, musical note or tune, style of performance and accompaniment.

It is said that the baul songs are thematically categorized into three major types: *Atma tattva*, *Paratattva* and *Gurutattva*. Ray ('94) has mentioned about the following three types of songs on the basis of his study of the Bauls of Birbhum – *Gurutattva*, *Dehatattva* or *Sadhantattva* and *Prema* or *Lilatattva*. From the names of these categories, the thematic concern of the songs can well be discerned. *Gurutattva* deals with the nature or importance of guru and the relationship between *guru* and his *sisya*. The *dehatattva* or *sadhantattva* as the name suggests deals with the esoteric practices of the cult. *Prem* or *Lilatattva* brings out the essence of Baul philosophy of love.

The baul songs are mainly transmitted orally. The *sisya* learns the songs from the *guru*. By this feature of orality, the baul songs can well be cited as a case for folkloric tradition. However, the baul songs are not anonymous so far as the name of the composer of a baul song is concerned. The composer leaves his name in the song:

*Lalon bole jater ki rup
Deklam na e najare
Sab loke koi Lalan
Ki jat sansare*

(Translation: 'Lalon says, what is the form of caste/ I have not seen/ Everybody asks Lalon / what is your caste')

In the above song, we come to know that Lalon composed the song. In this way the baul songs are inter-genre category. These songs dislodge the boundaries between folk or oral and urban or written categories.

Baul songs are also a unique case as we consider their creation or genesis. The theory of origin of the baul songs, as they claim is that the bauls compose their songs or rather express their state of ritual status with regard to the attainment of merit while they pass through the stages of *Pabartaka*, *Sadhaka*, and *Siddha*. They practitioners would express their feeling and experience accordingly. The bauls in the *Pabartaka* stage, compose the songs that are very humble submission before the ritual guide by expressing their insignificant existence. The *Sadhaka* songs would express the nature of practice and feeling. The songs composed by the *Siddha* are more philosophical and reflects the elevated level of attainment.

Anthony Seeger (2004) has shown how the music is linked with the cosmology of the Suya people of Amazonian basin. Apart from this, the creation of music was shown to be linked with two other conditions:

- i) '... a particular relation between humans and rest of the universe' (Seeger, 2004:62).
- ii) '... the non-human order provides a model for music' (Seeger:: 2004:62).

The Baul case is peculiar in this context because a baul considers his own body (*dehabhanda*) as the universe (*brahbhanda*). His song is a depiction of the cosmological belief related to his body (body cosmology). Here, it is distinguished from the Suya songs which were based on duality principles. In contrast to this the baul songs are based on non-duality principle. The baul is 'seed' (*bij e ami*) – the male and female forces are coming into unison. The baul's idea of his body as Radha's form again blurs the male –female dichotomy and points towards non-duality. Therefore, the idea expressed in song is echoed in philosophy that is also translated into the behavioural practices that shuns any distinction of human on the basis of caste, creed or religion. This clearly shows how *habitus* is shaping the *practice*.

The creation of baul songs goes with another

observation after Turner (Turner, '68; in theory) and Seeger (Seeger, 2004; in illustration). Seeger has demonstrated with his Suya data that music is created by people in their liminal state. It is also true for the bauls as well. The stages of austerity – *prabarta*, *sadhaka* and *siddha* – are no doubt liminal in character.

*Hereticism, Syncretism, Humanism: Debating
Local and Universal*

The baul cult has been discussed with regard to many of its overlapping features across genres and categories exemplifying mix of accommodation, appropriation and plurality of existence of tolerance. The etymological root of the word baul points to the essential hereticism of its practitioners. The bauls discard religious and casteist divisions in their cult. But, at the same time, it cannot be said that they do not believe in caste system (Sarkar, '90). The bauls drew elements from various ritual traditions like Vaisnab, Tantricism, Saiva, Sufism. People belonging to both the Hindu and the Muslim religions embrace the baul cult. This gives rise to syncretism. This syncretism has contributed to the strengthening of the humanism that played a foundational role in the emergence of this cult.

However, it cannot be said that the bauls show uniformity of traditions and beliefs. They have some regional or local identity manifest through *sampradaya* as well as universal principles of esoteric practice and humanism. The practice reflects a very different philosophy towards life. The baul epistemology is directed towards material and empirical orientations. In this search, they have caught their body as instrument or means to knowledge. The connotation of *bartaman-panthis* reveals this characteristic orientation of ritualistic *anuman-panthis* engaged in idolatry.

PERFORMATIVE TURNS: THE INS AND OUTS OF
CHANGES

The bauls, though now live in family except those who are dwellers in ashrama have idealized family as *nityananda-paribar* (family of perpetual bliss). The concepts of 'husband', 'wife', 'children' are ideally absent in such family. The *sadhaka* live with his *sadhan sangini*. Utmost care is taken to avoid conception during coitus. The basis of the *bond* between husband and wife is love (prem). They use

to call them *khsepa* and *khsepi* respectively. But, we find the performer *grihi baul* who lives with a complete family in a particular locality among other castes. It is also seen that sometimes they set up a colony of their own where most of the residents are bauls. The baul family is also seen to live in their own ashrama as found in Joydeb-Kenduli village under Ilambazar police station in Birbhum. This place is famous as centre of baul cult. Each year a huge congregation of people takes place during the annual fair in January. In ashrama (called *akhra* also), some bauls live, who do not have formal family. They live as a disciple of the same *guru* and *gurubhai* (ritual brother) to each other.

The Bauls usually belong to particular *sampradaya* named after a guru. The individual singer baul who professionally perform set up his own troupe (*dal*). The troupe consists of a lead singer and the musicians/instrument players.

From the above discussion, we may now say that the householder baul can be a professional singer. Apart from these, there are lay individuals who perform baul songs as a singer (*gayak*). The common people consider the baul practitioner as more authentic singer. For them, the image of mystic baul who renounces all worldly wealth is still very imposing. However, the initiated bauls themselves admit that such bauls of high religious merit and practice are almost nonexistent. Now, they keep their savings for future. They live or aspire to live in good houses. And they are not completely averse to comfortable and luxurious life. They have transformed into more of a performers who do stage performances in different places during various occasions like religious festivals, fairs, or cultural festivals or meeting (namely *Lokosanskriti Utsav*, *Baul Utsav*). Due to the high pitched rhythmic singing and attractive style of presentation with lyrics full of innuendoes, the baul songs remain a all time favourite in such programmes. A more or less reputed baul cannot find time to take rest during the season. As a result the baul songs are now part of the popular culture of Bengal. Large scale digitization and wide exposure of the bauls in the country and abroad have triggered a 'culture industry' in which the esoteric practitioners of the cult are not the only 'producers' or 'performers', several renown singers from the mainstream industry are also taking part in it. The recent government policy to promote and preserve the intangible heritage

has definitely played a role in shaping the nature of these baul songs particularly indirectly influencing the cult practice as well. Under ‘*Loko Prasara Prakalpa*’, the Government of West Bengal gives a pension to the enlisted bauls. The complain is that many people who just sing baul song and not an initiated baul are getting this pension and thus becoming representatives of bauls. This phenomenon dilutes the traditions and presents a distorted picture of the cult. The baul songs are also being composed to advertise government programme or policy as well as generating consciousness (Saha, 2008). The traditional baul singers (cult members, too) do not accept these as original baul songs and call them songs composed in baul tune. One such song composed by Byankashyam Das of Birbhum runs as the following:

Bānkā bole dine dine sāmāj niche nāmche,

Ar sātṛyā ki mithyā ki bhāi dekh nā behebe

Abār ei sāmājer sātṛu holo

Sātṛu holo Pānprāthā

(Translation: ‘Byankashyam says, the society is downgrading day by day/ Brother, please think what is true and what is false/ The enemy of this society/ the enemy is dowry.’)

Therefore, the baul songs present a wide spectrum of phenomena and categories. The singing tradition, too, does not remain fixed at a point. It is also changing fast. We are accommodating all these varied performances under an umbrella term ‘baul’. We are now more concerned with the visible performance that is presented before us. Often, these performances are deviating from the earlier ones and continuing to weave another set of meaning. We are negotiating with these changes of meaning and reshaping our understanding of *baul*.

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