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Re-visiting the Bauls: Tagore's Contribution in the Revival of the Bauls

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Music is the soul of Bengali culture, and the traditional folk music mirrors the image of rural Bengal. The Bauls, a genre of folk carry the essence and spirit of rural Bengal. The Baul songs are highly philosophical, devotional and lyrical. Nowhere did these Baul songs leave their imprint more powerfully than on Tagore who not only imbibed the folk literary tradition in his writings but also contributed immensely in keeping the folk culture of Bauls alive through his songs in collections like *Geetobitan* and *Gitanjali*. This article focuses on Tagore's contribution in establishing the image of Bauls in acceptable manner in Bengali 'bhadrakok' culture.

Art, Culture and literature form the foundation of a typical Bengali society and a Bengali household without music and literature is somewhat unimaginable. Music is the soul of Bengal and the traditional folk music mirrors the image of rural Bengal. The folk music has its origin as early as the 4th century with the advent of the invaders in Bengal and other provinces of colonial India. Bengali folk music has poetry, drama, epic, folktales, ballads and proverbs etc. The ethnic folk music forms the heart of Bengali culture. Folk music can be categorized in terms of love, devotion, occupation, labor, ritual and philosophy. These folk songs have many forms such as Bhatiali, Bhawaiya, Jatra, Kavigan, Palagan, Jhumur, Meyeli geet, Baromasi and Baul. They are mostly sung in accompaniment with some form of musical instruments. The folk tradition of Bengal has immense contribution in keeping the Baul culture alive. The Bauls are an ancient group of wandering minstrels from Bengal who can sing of life, love, spirituality and divinity in an utmost casual fashion on a one-string musical instrument called Ektara. Contrary to the casual attire, attitude and appearance of the Baul singers there looms a deep philosophy of life. The Baul songs are mostly sung on the beliefs of "Dehatatwa", a philosophy which embodies that the human body is ecstatic where everything resides, including the Supreme Being (Snai) as well as the Man of heart (Moner manush). Thus the Baul proverb turns out to be:

The elements that are present in the Universe are to be exactly seen in the human body (Sarkar 174)

What is not in the body is not in the universe. Human body is placed above everything. The Bauls believe in a simple life and adhere to that by emancipating love from the dominance of 'self'. Thus their love is selfless. They believe that it is the self, that makes man possessive about worldly things; make him care more for material gains and eventually he forgets and distances away from the Supreme Being. The Baul philosophy, thus, has a deep spiritual connotation unlike the casual appearance of the Bauls. Baul philosophy has mixed elements of Tantra, Sufi, Vaishnavism and Buddhism. There are Vaishnava bauls as well as Sufi muslims. The origin of this sect is shrouded in mists. Much is not known about their origin except that the word "Baul" has appeared as early as 15th century in Bengali texts; and the bauls were recorded as a major sect in the mid 18th century. One recent theory suggests that bauls are descendants of a branch of Sufism called "ba' al". Like ba'al the bauls also quest for the "Maner Manush" i.e The

Ideal Being who is found caged in the human body; And this Maner Manush is Sain(The Lord), Mursheed(guide), or Guru(preceptor). Dr. Jeanne Openshaw writes:

The music of the Bauls appeared to have been passed down entirely in an oral form until the end of the 19th century when it was first transcribed by the outside observers. (Openshaw 56)

Hence the end of the 19th century recorded the Baul traditions through transcription.

The most celebrated poet practitioner of the Baul songs was Lalon Shah (1774-1890) popularly known as Lalon Fakir in Bengal. He was a Baul personified. Lalon had no formal education as such but his songs can educate the most educated of minds throughout the world. Here is an example of Lalon's profound thoughts sung beautifully in a Baul song:

Ami Kothay Pabo Tare, Amar Moner Manush je Re
Haraye Shei Manushe Kaar Uddeshe,
Desh Bideshe Barai Ghure
Lage Ei Ridoy Shoshi, Shoda Pran Hoy Udashi
Pele Mon Koto Khushi
Dekhtam Noyon Bhore, Ami Premanol E Morchi jole Nivai Kamon Kore?

The English translation goes like:

Where shall I meet him the Man of my heart?
He is lost to me and I seek him
wandering from land to land.
I am listless for that moonrise of beauty,
Which is to light my life;
Which I long to see in the fullness of vision in gladness of heart. (fhiredexha.com)

We can clearly see above that the choice of words Lalon made despite his lack of any formal education is worth appreciation. There is poise and magnanimity in the tone and the expression is so refined.

The early bauls were the so called low caste like the fisherman, weaver, farmer from rural Bengal so it was quite obvious that the Baul- folk essence has no respectable place in the Bengali "Bhadrok" (the upper middle class Bengali) society .But at the hands of a few people the Baul culture met its desirable destiny: Prof. Roy Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen (1861-1939) took the initiative towards collecting folk literature and succeeded in finding the suitable place for them in "Purbo Bongo Geetika" (1926-1931). He translated these folk ballads and named them Eastern Bengal Ballads, published in four volumes by Calcutta University in 1923. Then Jasim Uddin

was the first to publish an article on Lalon Shah in “**Bongobani**”, Calcutta, 1926 and finally Mohammad Mansuruddin (1904-1987) whose collection of Baul songs in “**Haramoni**” enthralled many others. No wonder that the songs of the Bauls and their philosophy influenced a large swath of Bengali culture but nowhere did it leave its permanent imprint more strongly than on the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore’s literary genius needs no amplification yet this is mention worthy that many of his writings bear stamps of Baul traditions. Not only this, he even in his collection of poems called *The Fugitive* has translated nine Baul songs. These attempts were the result of his real associations with Baul culture. Tagore got influenced by Baul philosophy during his stay in Shelidah (around 1890) where he was sent by his father away to take care of his family estate therein. He had to spend ten years there to take charge of his family Zamindari business in East Bengal and Orrisa. It was there for the first time ever Tagore chanced to interact and live among the poor and learnt about the rural Bengal in its local ethos and music of the country folks. Tagore admits in his autobiography *My Life in My Words* :

A little later, when I was more mature, it was in Shelidah that my nature developed. (*My Life in My Words* 99)

Shelidah became a turning point in Tagore’s life, philosophy and major works. He was highly impressed by Gogon Horkara, a post man and a Lalon-devotee. He made Tagore’s acquaintance with songs like *Ami kothay pabo tare, Dekhechhi rup-shagorey moner manush* and others.

Inspired by these songs, Tagore composed his great songs *B hengey mor ghorer chabi, niye jabi ke amarey, Jodi tor daak shuney keu na ashey, Amake paray paray khepiye beray kon shey khepa, Ami jokhon chhilem, Mati toder daak diyechhey* and *Tomar khola hawa lagiye paale* these songs were also influenced by Baul songs.

Thereupon Tagore managed to write and compose nearly one hundred and fifty songs, influenced from those of Lalon from which only a few songs were published in the monthly called *Prabashi* in 1920. Mohd. Mansuruddin In the introduction of the fifth volume of *Haramoni* mentioned that:

In 1322 Bangla saal Rabindranath published his collection of the songs of Lalon Fakir in the *Prabashi* and being inspired by this I started collection of village songs. (qtd. in Introduction in *Haramoni* Vol. V)

From the above statement it becomes obvious that Tagore not only got himself enlightened with the Baul thought and philosophy and music but equally inspired others to look into the much neglected folk tradition of Bengal. Thus his contribution happens to become immense in keeping the Baul culture alive.

Tagore wrote that it is a fact that he infused the theme of Baul in many of his songs and dramas. In the song collection *Geetobitan* thirteen songs are Baul songs and the *Gitanjali* bears no exception where poem no.1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 bear Baul philosophy. *The Fugitive* has nine Baul songs in translation. These songs are simple, crisp and bereft of linguistics ornamentation yet, strong and rhythmic. These are short but intensely meaningful poems. Tagore writes in *The Fugitive*:

THIS longing to meet in the play of love, my Lover, is not only

mine but yours.

Your lips can smile, your flute make music, only through
delight in my love; therefore you are importunate even as I.

I SIT here on the road; do not ask me to walk further.

If your love can be complete without mine let me turn back from seeking you.

I refuse to beg a sight of you if you do not feel my need.

I am blind with market dust and mid-day glare, and so wait, in hopes that your
heart, my

heart's lover, will send you to find me. (*The Fugitive* 58)

Here is another beautiful Baul song from **Geetabitan** that talks about the Baul philosophy of
'Dehatawtta':

Amar praner manush ache prane tai heri tare sokol khane

Ache se noyon tarai alok dharai tai na harai

Ogo! tai dekhi tare jethai sathai

takai ami jedik pane.

Ami taar mukher kotha sunbo bole gelem kotha

Shon holo na, holo na

Aaj firey esey nijer deshe aei je suni

Suni tahar bani aapon gaaney

Ke tora khujis tarey kangal beshe daarey daarey,

Dekha meley ne, meley na

Tora aai re cheye, dekh re dheye amar bukey

Orey dekh re amar dui noyoney.

The translation goes like this:

MY beloved is ever in my heart

That is why I see him everywhere,

He is in the pupils of my eyes

That is why I see him everywhere.

I went far away to hear his own words,

But, ah, it was vain!

When I came back I heard them

In my own songs.

Who are you who seek him like a beggar

from door to door!

Come to my heart and see his face in tears of my eyes! (Gitabitan.net)

Tagore talked of Bauls in a number of speeches in Europe in the 1930s, an essay based on these was compiled into his English book entitled *The Religion of Man*. Thus the local folk essence travelled across the world and Baul became a known term in Europe as well as in America. A Baul family played on stage in London for The Rolling Stone, Hyde Park concert in 1971, 1972 and 1978. In today's world there are Western Bauls in America and Europe under the spiritual direction of Lee Lezowick, a student of Yogi Ramasurat Kumar; though their music is quite different but the essence of Bengal is well maintained. In making the Bauls gain respect among the Bengali 'Bhadrolok' Tagore did utmost justice by adapting the Baul ideology and philosophy in his prose, poetry as well as in his songs. In the second volume of *Haramoni* Tagore congratulated Mohd. Mansuruddin by saying:

I congratulate Mohd. Mansuriddin Mohasoi for the collection of Baul songs and make books on them not because of its appreciation of excellence but for the identity expressing beauty and truth of the hearts of those neglected people for a long period is now exposed according to my expectation. (qtd. in *Haramoni* Vol. II)

The desire to uplift the Baul culture is further enhanced by Tagore in his contribution to arrange the annual three day 'Poush mela' in Shantiniketan on the seventh day of the month of Poush (December to January). The Poush Mela showcases Bengali folk music where a large number of Bauls enthrall people with their songs. A 'Baul Fakir Utsav' has been added to the list an organized till date. Dusan Zbavitel, a Czeck folklorist wrote that,

It is my firm belief that if Tagore had not stayed in the countryside (Shelidah in Kushtiya), he would not have become what he was as a Man or a poet. (qtd. in *Folklore* Vol. II)

In fact this influence is so deep that Tagore goes on to the extent of calling himself 'Baul Rabindranath'. In the year 2005 Baul tradition was included in the list of 'Master Pieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO and Tagore played an undeniable role in this cultural upliftment of the Bauls not only in Bengali "Bhadrolok" culture but across the borders. Thus riding on the vehicle of transcription and translation the folk culture of the Bauls has spread its essence and spirit around the world. Tagore's songs known as Rabindrasangeet, baul songs in many, are gaining popularity beyond the borders of Bengal and thus reviving the

baul culture among others. That's why we hear people even across Bengal humming the Baul song:

Jodi Tor Dak Soone Keu Na AsseTobe
Ekla Chalo re!
Ekla Chalo! Ekla Chalo! Ekla Chalo re!
Jodi Keu Katha Na Kai
Ore Ore O Abhaga
Jodi Sabai Thake Mukh Firaе Sabai Kare Bhay
Tabe Paran Khule
O Tui Mukh Fute Tor Maner Katha
Ekla Balo re!
Jodi Sabai Phire Jai
Ore Ore O Abhaga
Jodi Gahan Pathe Jabar Kale Keu Feere Na Chay
Tobe Pather Kanta
O Tui Rakta Makha Charan Tale
Ekla Dalo re!
Jodi Alo Na Dhare
Ore Ore O Abhaga
Jodi Jharr Badale Andhar Rate Duar Deay Ghare
Tobe Bajranale
Apan Buker Panjar Jaliey Nieye
Ekla Jalo re!

English Translation:

If they answer not to thy call,
walk alone!
Walk alone! Walk Alone! Walk Alone!
If they are afraid and cower mutely

facing the wall,
 O thou of evil luck,
 open thy mind and
 speak out alone!
 If they turn away,
 and desert you when crossing the wilderness,
 O thou of evil luck,
 trample the thorns under thy tread,
 and along the blood-lined track
 travel alone!
 If they do not hold up the light
 when the night is troubled with storm,
 O thou of evil luck,
 with the thunder flame of pain
 ignite thy own heart
 and let it burn alone!(Priyamsez.blogspot)

Baul songs are still a popular form of folk ballads but somewhere in the mists of modern day crowd Bauls have lost their age old charm. The present generation chances across Bauls in trains or buses in many parts of Bengal and for them it's more of a street amusement. People do not cater to listen to their songs but we must not forget that the Baul mantra once inspired the greatest of the Indian minds and so will it do in future if we can identify with the Baul philosophy.

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