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Baul: In the Quest of *Moner Manush*

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Abstract:

Tradition bound India's heart is its folk culture. Through the folk culture, we can observe the breath of real India and its people's psychic graph. Multicultural theme and multi-religious philosophy are the bases of this folk tradition. Bengali folk music comprises a long tradition of religious and secular song writing over a period of almost a millennium. There are various forms of folk music in Bengal—Bishnupur Gharana, Baul, Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Geeti, Shyama Sangeet, Atulprasadi, Bhatiali, Bhawaiya, Kavigan, Jatra Pala. My aim, in this paper, is to show Baul's origin and practice 'Sadhana' to achieve *Moner Manush*. Here I would also like to show how Rabindranath Tagore was very much enraptured by this type of cultural expression with distinctive impression of their modality, tune and language.

Keywords: Baul, Sadhana, Moner Manush, Rabindranath Tagore.

“Who then are the Bauls? The word itself means ‘mad’. When Bengalis used the term, they usually mean to indicate a type of mendicant religious singers who, dressed in tattered clothes deliberately made up of the garments of both Hindus and Muslims, wanders from village to village celebrating God in ecstatic songs, existing on whatever his listeners choose to give him. Although today he is possibly a house holder... traditionally he has ‘only the wind as his home’. His hair is long and his beard matted and as he sings he accompanies himself on a one-stringed instrument...”

(Edward C. Dimock Jr. on ‘Bauls’, 1959)

Baul song: “a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”.

(UNESCO on 25th November 2005).

Tradition bound India's heart is its folk culture. Through the folk culture, we can observe the breath of real India and its people's psychic graph. Multicultural theme and multi religious philosophy are the bases of this folk tradition. Bengali folk music comprises a long tradition of religious and secular song writing over a period of almost a millennium. There are various forms of folk music in Bengal—Bishnupur Gharana, Baul, Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Geeti, Shyama Sangeet, Atulprasadi, Bhatiali, Bhawaiya, Kavigan, Jatra Pala. My aim, in this paper, is to show Baul's origin and practice 'Sadhana' to achieve *Moner Manush*.

The Baul is a group of mystic minstrels from Bengal which includes Indian state of West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh. Bauls constitute both a syncretic religious sect and a musical tradition. Bauls are a very heterogeneous group with many sects, but their membership mainly consists of Vaishnava¹ Hindus and Sufi Muslims. Lalon Fakir is regarded as the most important poet-practitioner of the Baul tradition. Baul music had a great influence on Rabindranath Tagore's poetry and on his music, *Rabindra Sageet*.

The word “Baul” has its etymological origin in the Sanskrit word ‘Vatula’ means ‘mad’, or from ‘Vyakula’ indicates impatiently eager. It is used for someone who is possessed or crazy. According to Shashibhusan Das Gupta, ‘Baul’ may be derived either from Sanskrit word ‘Vatula’ which means “enlightened, lashed by the wind to the point of losing one's sanity,

god's madcap, detached from the world and seeker of truth" or from 'Vyakula' which means "restless, agitated" and both of these derivations are consistent with the modern sense of the word, which denotes the inspired people with an ecstatic eagerness for spiritual life where a person can realize his union with the eternal beloved—*The Moner Manush* (The Man of the Heart). Ramkrishana Paramahamsadev opines—

"According to the Sakti cult, the Siddha is called a Koul, and according to the Vedanta, a Paramahamsa. The Bauls call him a Sai. They say, "No one is greater than a Sai". The Sai is a man of supreme perfection. He doesn't see any differentiation in the world..."

(Sri Sri Ramkrishna Kathamrita, p.513)

The word "Baul" has a great antiquity. This particular word has been used many a time in the ancient literatures. It was first used in the *Krishnavijya* by Sri Maladhar Basu. The word 'Baul' was used there to understand the carefree and dishevelled nature of a particular person depicted in the book. In the *Chaitannya Charitamrita*, written by Sri Krishnadas Kaviraj, the word 'Baul' has been used profusely. In this book Lord Gouranga has been depicted as the Great Baul. Some references to the word 'Baul' also occur to the writings of the great poet Chandidas². On close analysis, it is observed that the word 'Baul' has been applied to mean the craziness and madness of the persons concerned. According to the opinion of the scholars, the Bauls might have originated from the *Buddhist Sahajiyas*³ and in course of time, they have been largely influenced by the *Vaishnava Sahajiya* cult. During the Pala Dynasty in Bengal the whole society and culture were highly influenced by the various thoughts and ideas of Buddhist philosophy. A large section of people became converted to Buddhism to get advantages from the rulers of the country (because of Muslim invasion and the negligence of Brahmin oriented society). As a natural consequence, the cultural horizon of the Bengal bore deep imprint of Buddhist thinking. The reflection of this particular feature was largely found amongst the Baul way of life.

The songs of Bauls and their life style influenced a large swath of Bengali culture, but nowhere did it leave its imprint more powerful than on the works of Rabindranath Tagore who talked on Bauls in number of speeches in Europe—

"The Bauls are an ancient group of wandering minstrels from Bengal, who believe in simplicity in life and love. They are similar to the Buddhists in their belief in a fulfilment which is reached by love's emancipating us from the dominance of self."

(Rabindranath Tagore, Europe Lecture, 1930)

Rabindranath Tagore was very much enraptured by this type of cultural expression and in his songs and poems, there is a distinct impression of their modality, tune and language. In his famous Hibbert Lecture: *The Religion of Man*, there is an appendix called "The Baul Singers of Bengal" and according to him, a 'Baul' meant a madcap.

"...I became a madcap Baul
No master I obey, nor injunctions canons or customs."

In Bengali Folk Literature, Baul songs rhyme holds a place of equal importance to other forms of folk culture. Baul song is not simply an instrument for the amusement of masses but a subjective worthy of serious study, bearing most of the essential characteristics of folk tradition: anonymous and collective creation, dynamism, textual variation and social function. Baul, a sect of folk religion, constitute a small group in numerical strength but they exceed all sorts of limits and bindings in their age-long effort to propagate their philosophical understandings and deep-rooted modes of behaviour through melodious songs and artful

dances. Belonging to the tradition bound community of Bengal, the Bauls bear a rich cultural heritage of the country which has developed through a long process of interactions and harmonisation of different manners, customs and practices pertaining to various socio-religious traditions.

The origin of Baul tradition and the community, at a sense, clearly shows the tensions of their existence, their marginal condition at the society which leads them to their secret 'Sadhana'⁴ (meditation) for 'Moner Manush' (Man of the Heart).

Amar praner manush achhe prane
 Tai heri taye sakol khane
 Achhe she nayontaray, alok-dharay, tai na haraye-
 Ogo tai dekhi taye jethay sethay
 Taka-i ami je dik-pane

(*Rabindra Sangeet* influenced by Baul theme)

(The man of my heart dwells inside me.
 Everywhere I behold, it's Him!
 In my every sight, in the sparkle of light
 Oh I can never lose Him...
 Here, there and everywhere,
 Wherever I turn, right in front is He!)

The Bauls have become the main point of attraction because of their unparalleled mode of thinking. The Baul cult has got certain distinctiveness and is provided by its own peculiar characteristic features. It is to be noted that the social and religious life of the Bauls is not guided by any conventional social customs or religious rituals. The attempt for realization of the Absolute is the basis of their way of life. The human body is the shelter of the Absolute and this body is regarded as the microcosm of the Universe. The Absolute cannot be understood through knowledge and intellect or through the idol worship. The Absolute is the Baul's soul's companion on *Moner Manush* i.e. 'Man of the Heart'. It can be perceived only through subjective understanding. It is very hard to come in line with this mode of understanding. In order to reach this state of perfection one is to pass through a number of ordeals both in the spiritual as well as material levels. Throughout his/her life and activities the Baul is always busy in the eternal quest for the Ultimate Reality. The Ultimate Reality is known as the Supreme Beloved. He is all the time in the search of 'Man'. He believes that the Man of the Heart dwells in the human being but it cannot be understood owing to inadequate knowledge and improper realization. Swami Vivekananda utters the same line —

"Bohurupe sammukhe tomar, chhari kotha khunjichho Ishwar
 Jibe prem kore jai jon, sei jon sebichhe Ishwar."

(Where are you looking for God —when he is in front of you in every living being, in many different forms / Those who serve mankind are serving God)

The attempt for realization of the Ultimate Being is in other words the self-realisation. From time immemorial the Baul has been in the deep search of himself. The very understanding human self gives vent to the realization of the Divine Self. When these two spheres meet, a unique perspective is brought to light which is seen a broad reflection of the total picture of man. It is this Man for whose search the Bauls have started their long-term journey through the ages. One of his songs, Lalou says—

“Dube dekh dekhi mone kirup lillamoy.
Akash-patal khujish jare ai dehe se roy.”

(If we think deeply the existence of the God or the source of eternal bliss, we need not to roam here and there, it resides in our body.)

Recently perceptions regarding ‘Baul’ may be broadly divided into two categories: first, Bauls as a class of heterodox mystics in eternal pursuit of the ‘Man of the Heart’ or the ‘unknown bird’ within, Rabindranath Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen being the chief exponents of this approach. Second, Bauls as a ‘sampraday’ (tradition), or even sect, entry to which requires initiation, and which consists of practitioners of arcane ‘sexo-yogic’ rites. To these may be added: Bauls are disreputable, low class entertainers, an image which, at any rate among scholars, has been superseded by the more elevated one of Bauls as performing artists of consummate skill. Related to this is an image derived from the ‘west’, that is, Bauls as Bengali hippies.

A consideration of Muhammad Enamul Haq’s seminal work on Sufis in Bengal only increases the confusion. Haq divides Bauls into many named groups (Pgal Nathi, Khushi Bisvasi etc.), each owing allegiance to various named Hindu or Muslim gurus. In addition he speaks of the Darbesi who became ‘identified’ with the Bauls, the Nera who ‘afterwards affiliated themselves’ to the Bauls and the Kartabhajas of whom two sub sects, Aul and Sai, characterised by independence of thought and freedom from the trammels of sectarian laws and regulations, were in every respect identical with the Bauls.

(Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, 1975)

The ‘Sadhana’ of the Bauls is very complex. This is partly due to the fact that they have dived into all other religions to take what is useful for achieving their ideal Moner Manush. Many of the Baul songs try to tell their philosophy. It is a story of how infinite joy is experienced when the human soul realizes its Moner Manush which they say is the true man of the heart. Moner Manush is the formless absolute and it seems mysterious how they can have a relationship in which they embrace this formless divinity. They want to embrace Moner Manush but we want to emphasize that this something they want to embrace is not considered by them in any manner as a human form. If anything can be said about Moner Manush, it should be said that it is a pure mood of joy.

From Vedanta and Sufism, they have taken the ideal of God as Absolute and out of this have fashioned the formless Moner Manush. They have taken the dance of the Sufis and added the practice of song both for teaching and for developing moods. They have also taken the moods of the Vaishnavas and removed the personality of Krishna. They have taken Pranayam from Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga and applied it to a system of controlling the life force through sex even though the Raja Yogis decry sex as a detriment to spiritual life. They have taken the system of Chakras from both Buddhist Tantra⁵ and Hindu Tantra and have incorporated both Mudras and Mantras of Tantra in their practices whenever it suited their purpose and the function of the Guru is to steer the devotee through these obstacles to the embrace of his beloved.

From *Bangler Baul O Baul Gaan*, Upendranath Bhattacharya presents a song revealing what is necessary in Sadhana:

“Oh mind, do some spiritual Sadhana and start it from the Muladhara. Without Sakti you can’t achieve anything. You must resort to Sakti or the divine Mother’s form of conscious cosmic energy. Unless Mother’s power (Sakti) comes, no one can get anything in the world. Verily no one else can give liberation. (Sri Ramakrishna also said the same thing when he

told how Sri Chaitanya, though a Vaishnava worshipping in the mood of Radha-Krishna sought the grace of Mother Divine). Sakti is a priceless thing which was known through Divine Insight only be Sri Krishna, the son of Nanda.”

(*Bangler Baul O Baul Gaan*, Page 900, Song 508)

The whole Baul system is entirely on Sadhana. Sadhana is the enlightenment of one's self dedicating to the spiritual Absolute. Chandi Das was a son of a Brahman. His fiancée was a washer woman. They both wanted to transcend the physical level to the spiritual level and this way they really did to achieve the highest spiritual realm. In this realm there is a joy of unity which is the relationship and sole basis of what they want to achieve. Thereafter they remained perpetually in Nitya Dham, a stage where there is an eternal life of bliss, may be spending sometimes in the mortal world which by that has been transformed into a Divine World. Vidya Pati, On the other hand, was a great Baul poet. His fiancée also was not of so high a place in the social status. Together both of them through love passed from the physical to the spiritual realm and become a unity in spiritual life. In the case of Mirabai, we find the same notion of Sadhana. She practiced in the same way as a consort but her Beloved was the incarnation of God in the form of Sri Krishna. All of these illustrious persons took the help of Sakti. Without resorting to prayer for the grace of Sakti, no Sadhana will be successful. Bauls say—

“Our Sadhana is like a waterfall; let it fall and spread away indiscriminately. We don't want to turn it into a pool to beget a state of stagnancy. Stagnancy is codification. It decays and becomes filthy; it becomes rigid with no scope of joy, expansion or development. It is better to let the Guru impart his philosophies and Sadhana to the disciple unwritten and let the disciple who is also an individual form of divinity in miniature expand it in his own way. Let him create in his own way. Only in this way the Divine Beloved has the chance of enjoying in multifarious ways.”

The Bauls want to say that they want to aspire to see and explain the Moner Manush, the man of the Heart. Just as the Kathopanishad itself says that He, the Supreme Being or para-Brahman or Moner Manush has the appearance or size of a thumb. It is as if that thumb like formless thing is in the form of a light made of flame without smoke, still it flickers. So really the Moner Manush of the Bauls is nothing but the Brahman Himself dwelling in the human being.

The Baul of Tagore is profoundly unworldly. His search is for the Man of the Heart ('Moner Manush'), for the Unknown Bird ('Achin Pakhi') which enters and departs from the cage of the human body, themes which were already attractive to Tagore and many others by the 1880s. One of the Tagore's favourite Baul Songs (attributed to Gagan Harakara) begins—

Ah, where I am to find him, the Man of my Heart?
Alas, since I lost Him, I wander in search of Him,
Thro' lands near and fear.

(Kshitimohan Sen. *The Bauls of Bengal*. Trans. Sinjita Gupta.2001)

In Tagore's view, this song expresses 'the longing of the singer to realise the infinite in his own personality' and the phrase 'Man of my Heart' means that 'for me, the supreme truth of all existence is in the revelation of the Infinite in my own humanity'. In his 1883 review *Bauler-gan*, Tagore cited a song from the collection concerning the search for the Moner Manush, remarking that this was a popular theme in contemporary English poetry and one moreover which had begun to be adopted by Bengali poets. Conceding that the son he cites

may indeed be of recent origin, Tagore legitimises it as authentic on the grounds of its 'plain Bengali' and 'straightforward spirit' and laments that, while everyone is agog to hear foreign words of 'Universal Love', no one pays any attention when such words are sung by a Bengali mendicant going from door to door where Gagan Harakara's *Moner Manush* song is concerned, Upendranath Bhattacharya is reluctant to call it a Baul song, instead categorising it as a song of devotion to God. Removing from his contemporary village context and human society in general, the lone Baul is once more the perennial outsider, now seeking the *Moner Manush* beyond all confines and barriers.

The phrase, 'Moner Manush', usually rendered 'Man of the Heart', literally means the person of the 'heart and mind'. It also has the following dictionary meaning: 'a favourite, a minion, a lover' (SBED—Samsad Bengali English Dictionary). During field work Openshaw found that it is used in the conventional sense of 'a/the person (suitable) for me' or 'a person one finds particularly attractive'. In all these senses, it refers as often to a woman as a man, as indeed does the word '*Manush*' itself. For example, a woman initiate said that, after the death of the adept with whom she had had a relationship for many years, 'I couldn't find anyone who suited me' (*moner manush pelam na*), a phrase taken from a well-known Baul song. A male initiate remarked in the context of lamenting the difficulty of finding a suitable partner for esoteric practice: 'it is difficult to find the right person' (*moner manush paoya bhar*)—another phrase from a song.

Certainly in contexts, Bartaman-panthis prefer a more relational model than that of *Ishwer* and this final stage is referred to as *Manush* (human being). *Manush* is superior to *Ishwer*. In this connection the well known Bengali Vaishnava verse is oft quoted—

Of all the sports of Krishna
That as a human being (nara) is supreme.
The human Body is the essence of Krishna.

(Sukumar Sen, 1983)

There is also the famous verse ascribed to the poet Chandi Das—

Listen my fellow humans—
The human being is the truth above all truths
There is nothing higher.

(Sune he manus bhai
Sabar upare manus satya
Tahar upare nai)

Notes and References:

1. A follower of the Hindu God Visnu or one of his 'incarnations', especially in the Bengali context, Krishna.
2. A Vaishnava poet of legendary fame. He was famous for composing the book, *Vaishnava Padabali*, depicting the love-based perspective of the Vaishnava religious ideas centering round Radha and Krishna—the Divine Pair.
3. A term used of many so-called 'Bauls', but rarely used by Bartaman-panthis themselves. Its use effects a lineal connection between such Bauls and the so-called 'Buddhist Sahajiya' and 'Vaishnava Sahajiya'. Sahajiya is very largely a scholarly category.

4. Usually this means systematic and austere practice towards a goal. In the Bartaman-panthi context, it refers to more or less systematised esoteric body-centered practices, normally involving a partner of the opposite sex. Elements of 'sexo-yoga', various usages of bodily substances and exudations, including physiological alchemy may be included here.

5. Hindu Tantra professes to originate from the conversation between Siva and Parvati, who is represented as the Sakti. Sakti is the root and Siva is the container. According to this principle, all the facets of life are regarded as natural but they need be transformed through the development of the Chakras. During the later phase of the Gupta period the Sakti worship through Tantra started gaining importance. Right from the 8th century A.D. a new trend of Buddhism started flourishing which was known as Tantrayana or Tantric Buddhism. Bengal was heavily influenced by these Tantric beliefs and practices.

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