



Reconfiguring Tradition: Baul Performance and the Politics of Folk Authenticity

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Abstract:

Bengal has a glorious and long-standing lineage of folk traditions. Amongst them, Baul tradition stands at the acme of the indigenous hierarchy of Bengal (both East and West Bengal). Baul tradition is exclusively an amalgamation of various distinctive religious traditions including Sufi mysticism, Sahajiya Buddhism, and Tantric philosophies. Baul practices historically resisted the established institutional religions, cast hierarchies and materialist social structures through their embodied spirituality, wandering way of life, and enigmatic songs. Such established pattern of their way of life has been diluted and transformed due to the intervention of globalization, cultural tourism, heritage industries, stage patronage and digital media economies. As a result, a bundle of binaries such as 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'; 'professional baul' and 'practitioner baul'; '*asol baul*' and '*nakol baul*' has come to the fore under critical discourses. The transformation of Baul performance from *akhra* (a community hub and living school where spiritual knowledge and musical wisdom are passed down orally from a master to disciples) to a staged cultural stream poses broader anxieties surrounding folk authenticity in neoliberal modernity. Through analysis of folk festivals, media representations, and the performances of contemporary Baul singers, this study demonstrates how Baul identity is continuously reconstructed through the processes of negotiation, adaptation and resistance. This paper argues that authenticity within Baul culture is not a fixed or recoverable essence but a contested performative category which is solely shaped by institutions, audiences, and market forces.

Keywords: Baul, folk performance, cultural transformation, authenticity, cultural negotiation.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the realm of folk traditions has extended its reach into global networks. They are unprecedentedly moving from localised cultural space into global circuits of performance, media and heritage consumption. Music traditions once sustained through oral transmission and community participation in rural settings are now conspicuously shaped by tourism, state patronage, commercial entertainment and digital dissemination. Within this changing cultural scenario, the Baul tradition occupies a peculiar position. Bauls are basically known for their mystical songs, wandering lifestyle, and rejection of rigid social and religious boundaries. They have historically represented an alternative spiritual worldview which is fundamentally rooted in universal humanism, devotion and experiential knowledge.

Traditionally, Baul practice was closely connected to the *akrah*. It is such a space where disciples gathered for musical practice, philosophical discussions and devotional experience. The songs of the Bauls were not merely artistic expressions but embodied forms of spiritual discipline and esoteric knowledge. Through metaphoric language and symbolic imagery, Baul music explored the themes of the body, the soul, divine love and search for the '*moner manus*' (the Man of the Heart). However, the social and cultural location of Baul performance has changed considerably in the contemporary era. Today, Baul singers perform not only in village gatherings but also on urban stages, television programs, international music festivals and online platforms. As a result of this, Baul identity has significantly become intertwined with questions of representation, visibility and cultural branding.

The day-to-day popularity of Baul music has generated a paradox. It creates both opportunities and tensions simultaneously. On the one hand, institutional recognition and global exposure have paved the way to preservation, circulation of their songs, and visibility of Bauls beyond regional boundaries. On the other hand, the incorporation of Baul culture into

commercial and heritage industries has raised critical concerns regarding the commodification of folk tradition. Performances that were once embedded within spiritual and communal contexts are often reformulated to suit the expectations of urban audiences and global consumers. Costumes, variegated music styles and performance practices are frequently standardised and adapted to produce an image of the “authentic” Baul, exemplifying what MacCannell describes as ‘staged authenticity’ (MacCannell 589). Hence, ‘authenticity’ becomes a contested concept which is shaped by institutions, media representations, and audience expectations.

This proposed study builds upon theoretical frameworks from performance studies, cultural theory and heritage discourse. Key critic Richard Schechner’s ideas on ‘performativity’ explain how traditional practices are reshaped within staged climate (Schechner 123), while Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybridity’ illuminates the fluid and evolving nature of cultural identity (Bhabha 54–56). Pierre Bourdieu’s very notion of ‘cultural capital’ further helps how folk traditions acquire symbolic value within national and global cultural economies (Bourdieu 243–48). Besides, the theories of ‘staged authenticity’ provide insight into the gap between lived spiritual experience and curated cultural representation (MacCannell 589–97).

This paper attempts to focus on contemporary festivals, media performances and institutional engagements within Baul culture. The transformation of Baul tradition should be understood not only as a cultural loss but a process of adaptation and renewal. Today, it reflects an ongoing process of negotiation in which tradition is continuously reinterpreted in response to modern social, economic, and political conditions.

Historical Background of the Baul Tradition

There are strong debates among scholars regarding the origin and emergence of the term 'Baul' in Bengal. Many scholars argue that the Baul tradition is embedded in an ancient spiritual consciousness that has evolved over centuries. This particular word has been used many a time in the ancient literature. It was first used in the *Krishnavijay* by Sri Maladar Basu. The word 'Baul' was used there to understand the carefree and dishevelled nature of a particular person. In the *Chaitannya Charitamrita*, written by Sri Krishnadas Kaviraj, the word 'Baul' has been used profusely. In this book, Lord Gauranga has been considered as the Great Baul. Some references relating to the word 'Baul' also occur in the writings of the great poet Chandidas. However, the etymological meaning of the term 'Baul' is mad. It has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Vatula' or from 'Vyakula'. The meaning of the former is mad, whereas the latter one indicates impatiently eager. There is also a Hindi variant of this particular word and it is basically known as 'Baura'. It mainly signifies a person with incoherent behaviour. Some opine that 'Aul' is used to point out a class of Muslim prophets. Scholars trace influences from Sahaja Buddhism, Nath Yogic traditions, Vaishnava Bhakti movements and Sufi mysticism (Sarkar 29).

The Bauls have become focal point of attraction because of their unparalleled mode of thinking. The Baul cult has possessed certain distinctiveness and is provided by its own peculiar, idiosyncratic, ideological, and ethnic attitudes. It has often been noted that the social and religious life of the Bauls is not guided by any conventional social customs or religious rituals. The attempt for the realization and internalization of the 'Absolute' is the foundation of their way of life. The human body is the shelter of the Absolute, and this mundane body is regarded as the microcosm of the Universe. The Absolute is the Baul's soul companion or *Maner Manus*, i.e. 'Man of the Heart'. There are plentiful songs composed, and sung by Bauls that purely evoke the *maner manus* and their soul is always craving for the ultimate union with

that *Manus*. The Bauls engage themselves in the deep meditation or *sadhana* to realize the self. The *sadhana* of the Bauls is highly influenced by the process of sex-yogic practices. In the course of their rigid performances of rites and rituals to reach the sphere of Man, the Bauls are to depend on the preceptors or *Guru*. The *Adhar Manus* or the uncatchable man of Baul philosophy can be recognised through the direct assistance of *Guru*.

The Baul tradition finds its fullest reflection in the melodious and poetry-like songs known as Baul songs. These songs are the part and parcel of Baul philosophy as the outer and inner facets of Bauls way of life are conspicuously expressed through various songs composed and sung by themselves. Instruments used by Bauls such as *ektara* (a one-stringed musical instrument), *duggi* (a small hand-played drum used to provide rhythm and percussion), and *khamak* (a one-stringed folk percussion instrument whose pitch changes by pulling the string) were not merely musical devices but symbolic extensions of Baul cosmology. Performance therefore existed as embodied spirituality rather than entertainment alone. However, colonial modernity and nationalist cultural movements gradually altered the very social perception of Bauls. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the so-called *Bhadralok* (Bengali intellectuals) considerably romanticised the Bauls as a symbol of authentic Bengali spirituality. Rabindranath Tagore became instrumental in introducing Baul philosophy to elite urban and international audiences. While this recognition elevated the visibility of Baul culture, it also initiated the process of aestheticisation and selective representation that, to a great extent, detached Baul identity from its everyday core socio-economic realities.

Theoretical Perspectives on Folk Performance and Authenticity

The discourse of authenticity remains noteworthy within the study of folk traditions and heritage cultures. The word ‘authenticity’ primarily means something original, pure and true to its core roots. In Baul culture, authenticity is closely associated with wandering lifestyle,

simple living, devotional song with the accessory of musical instruments, and deep human love. However, in modern cultural studies scholars argue that authenticity does not confine with the notion of naturalness and fixity. It is often created, cast, and expressed through performance, language, dress and behaviour. The notion of authenticity is very useful in understanding the changing landscape of Baul folk culture in the contemporary climate.

Traditionally, Bauls were spiritual singers who travelled from village to village singing songs about humanity, love and the search for inner man. Their identity was basically manifested through their simplicity, ethnicity, spiritual practices and disregard of established conventional social divisions like caste, class and religion. Bauls usually wore saffron clothes, carried different instruments and performed songs in *akrahs*, village gatherings, lonely streets, religious festivals, and collected *madhukari* or alms by going door-to-door.

According to performance key theorist Richard Schechner, cultural practices are forms of “restored behaviour” (Schechner 35–36). He means to say that performances are repeated actions learned from tradition and performed again in different situations. Baul songs and performances also work in this way. The gestures, singing styles, dress, and body movements are repeated and recognised by spectators as signs of authentic Baul identity. So, authenticity is not simply inherited, it is performed and socially recognised.

Another important scholar, Dean MacCannell’s notion of ‘staged authenticity’ provides a framework for the interpretation of traditional folk performances (MacCannell 589-97). He explains that cultural performances are sometimes arranged specially for tourists and audiences. In many folk festivals, Bauls perform in a way that suits audiences’ desired expectations. Today, many Bauls perform on urban stages, television programs, folk festivals and international cultural events. In these allotted spaces, performances are sometimes adjusted and arranged according to spectators’ cravings. This creates a form of negotiated authenticity

that exists within a dichotomous landscape that is, to say, partly authentic and partly performative. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' helps to designate how Baul culture gains symbolic and economic value within the abode of heritage industries. Folk authenticity becomes consumable, especially in state-sponsored festivals and world music circuits where 'traditional' performance gains institutional legitimacy and financial reward. This commodification, indeed, breeds a logical tension between spiritual authenticity and performative professionalisation.

The rapid hybridization of Baul culture through association with modernity, media and globalization is also becoming a key aspect that makes hindrance on the way of Baul authenticity. Contemporary Baul performances combine traditional spirituality with modern instruments, stage aesthetics and transnational collaborations.

Baul Festivals and Cultural Institutionalization

Baul performances and festivals have gained much recognition and popularity in recent times as performative texts. The Bauls offer themselves in the *mahotsabs* or great festivals that are arranged at different places throughout the year. Most of the *mahotsabs* are particularly associated with fairs which have their own age-old traditions. Newer performance groups of theatre, music, experimental arts (such as Fiddler's Green, Arshinagar Project, Folkpick, Lalon, etc.) are sprouting in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, which are exploring different 'rural' sites as their festival sites. While some of these festivals have gained credibility and validation over time, some others are trying different methods and means to sell themselves to the growing sphere of cosmopolitan audiences. Festivals such as *Kenduli Baul Mela*, *Poush Mela*, and various state-sponsored festivals are often presented as spaces that carry Bengal's spiritual and folk heritage. However, a critical examination reveals that these festivals are not merely neutral cultural spaces, rather, they are deeply connected with heritage politics, commercialization,

and institutional control. The institutionalisation of Baul culture begets a struggle between traditional spiritual practice and cultural performance.

Scholar Carola Erika Lorea beautifully observes that the circulation of Baul culture among intellectuals and the urban elite has contributed to a purified and romanticized representation of the Bauls. At the same time, globalization, cultural tourism, and commercialization have increasingly shaped the ways in which Baul traditions are performed and received. The growing interest of middle-class audiences and folklore tourists in an “authentic” indigenous tradition has also contributed to the commodification of Baul culture (Lorea 60–61). Nevertheless, Lorea cautions against viewing contemporary transformations simply as a corruption of Baul identity. She argues that contemporary Baul songs demonstrate adaptability by incorporating elements of modern life while retaining important traditional structures and practices (Lorea 61–62).

Modern Renditions of the Baul Folk Tradition

The Bauls are no longer circumscribed in the specific landscape of Bengal. Their influences and performances infiltrate the rest of the world. With the increasing number of international Baul concerts, festivals, and the pervasiveness of Western instruments used in such concerts, the Bauls are now identifiable more as global or cosmopolitan minstrels rather than just ‘folk’ performers. The ‘folk’ is reinvented as a global category of performance arts. ‘Folk’ in both Bengals – West and East – has now become a political and performative category rather than a cultural one.

One of the renowned contemporary Baul performers is Parvathy Baul, who has played a pivotal role in disseminating Baul traditions to global audiences. She is practitioner, teacher of Baul tradition from Bengal, India. In addition, she is also an instrumentalist, painter, and storyteller. She has performed in over forty countries, including such prestigious concert halls

and music festivals as the Noh Theatre in Kyoto, the World Music Centre in New York City, Melbourne Arts Centre and the Festival of World Sacred Music in Fez, Morocco (Parvathy Baul). Unlike many commercialized stage performers, Parvathy emphasizes the spiritual discipline of Baul practice and combines music with storytelling, dance, painting and theatre. She has also collaborated with the world's leading theatre director Eugenio Barba. She visits several dance, theatre and music institutions across the globe in the capacity of a teacher. Her performances demonstrate how contemporary Bauls negotiate tradition and innovation simultaneously. However, even in her work, Baul music becomes adapted to global spectatorship through theatrical presentation, subtitles and curated stage aesthetics. She embraces her role as an artist and a performer. She finds not only the similarities between performance methodologies and yogic principles of Bauls, but she even treats her art as what Grotowski would term a 'vehicle', through which she finds her liberation (Grotowski 115-35). James O. Young identifies different kinds of authenticity in his analysis of appropriated artwork. According to him, the 'authentic' can be found in appropriated works, where the artist has completely committed herself/himself to the work, and he terms it the 'existential authenticity' (Young 50). In this sense, Parvathy Baul's work is not only existentially authentic but also socially engaged and, therefore quite crucial in contemporary world.

Another remarkable figure who deserves mention is Purna Das Baul, often called the "Baul Samrat". He was among the earliest Baul singers to popularize Baul music internationally and transformed Baul performance into a more recognized cultural form. His international journey and collaboration opened a vista for later Baul artists to participate in the world music stream.

Many of the contemporary Bauls gain validation and wider recognition from Baul enthusiasts because of their association and collaboration with Western musicians. Paban Das Baul was just another Baul in rural West Bengal until he started performing in concerts in Paris,

where he met his companion Mimlu Sen. Besides the ‘multicultural collaborations’ in music, we see that there are two things going on here. First, the Bauls are dissociated and displaced from their *place* of origin and performance, and the philosophy itself is divorced from the musical aspect. The music becomes the focal point in this case, where the philosophy becomes quite incidental. Second, with the music being separated and presented as independent from the spiritual philosophy and its religious context. While, on the one hand, this implies the loss of unique history and characteristics that each of these ‘folk’ musical genres carries with itself, the de-historicization also lends it a more universal appeal and accessibility. Such collaborations have not been accepted well by the purists and traditional musicians. However, it is an undeniable fact that in many of the situations, their survival depends on such hybridization with their western counterparts. The hybridisation of Baul music, consequently, raises questions related to appropriation and the ethics of it.

Conclusion

Bauls in the twenty-first century have stimulated many debates and discussions on the nature of folk, on authenticity and performance. It is worth noting that cosmopolitan performances play a significant role in creating what Gerard Delanty describes as a “third culture,” a space where people from different communities and cultures can interact, understand one another, and develop greater empathy (Delanty 11-13). The transformation of Baul tradition raises significant concerns. The increasing demand for stage-friendly performances, market-oriented presentations, and global audiences often privileges the aesthetic aspects of Baul music while marginalising and overlooking philosophical, spiritual, and socio-cultural foundations. As a result, the identity of the Baul risks being reduced to a performative image detached from its original worldview. This tension between preservation and adaptation constitutes the central politics of folk authenticity.

A similar pattern can be observed in several other Indian folk traditions. The Manganiyars of Rajasthan have gained international recognition through world music collaborations, yet many hereditary musicians continue to face economic insecurity despite their global visibility. Lavani, a genre of music popular in Maharashtra, has frequently been commercialised in popular cinema, overshadowing its rich literary and performative heritage. Pandavani, another vibrant folk musical storytelling tradition in Chhattisgarh, has evolved through theatrical innovations introduced by performers such as Teejan Bai. It clearly shows that creative reinterpretation can strengthen rather than weaken tradition. Likewise, Theyyam, an ancient and sacred ritual folk dance primarily practiced in Kerala continues to negotiate the demands of tourism. There are many other folk traditions like Bihu in Assam, Chhau Dance in Purulia, Yakshagana in Karnataka have undergone similar cultural negotiation and adaptation. This examples largely suggest that the challenges confronting Baul tradition is indeed not exceptional but representative of a broader dilemma faced by folk traditions across India, where cultural heritage profusely intersects with globalization, media industries, and the cultural economy.

Therefore, the debate should move beyond the binary opposition between “authentic” and “inauthentic” folk culture. The study proposes that the future of Baul tradition depends upon a balanced cultural policy that will embrace preservation and innovation simultaneously. We should not consider the digital platforms as commercial spaces merely, rather as archives for preserving oral histories, philosophical teachings, regional music styles, and performances practices.

The Bauls of the twenty-first century challenge ideas of what it means to be ‘folk’ and question fixed cultural and ethnic identities. At the same time, they have extensively created opportunities for meaningful interaction with cultures beyond their own. As Bauls evolve from being a spiritual esoteric group of performers and ritual practitioners to sociopolitical actors to

cosmopolitan and even eco-cosmopolitan artists-activists, they need to be reevaluated against the backdrop of a changing world. Their survival in the digital and global age has been possible because they have adapted their performances to changing social and cultural realities without deliberately avoiding of their essential beliefs. Their egalitarian messages about humanity, equality, and brotherhood have reached wider audiences through cultural exchange, adaptation and transcultural performances. Moreover, the digital transmission has enabled many previously unheard Baul voices to resonate far beyond the boundaries of their local communities. Going beyond the myopic vision of modernity, Bauls have contributed to an alternative modernity that includes polyvocal voices of an evolving twenty-first century.

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