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The Bauls of Bengal.

Abstract I: This essay deals with the philosophy of the *Bauls*, the wandering minstrels of Bengal, whose expression is through song and dance. They believe in a society without caste or creed and are influenced by Hinduism, Tantric philosophy, the Sufi tradition as well as Buddhism. Both Hindu and Muslim *Bauls* acknowledge Sri Caitanya and poet Jayadeva as their preceptors. Their songs provide haunting glimpses of the village life around, images rooted in earthy reality where the *Baul* makes no attempt to deny the sensual and the bodily in the search for the *Supreme*.

Abstract II: Tema del seguente saggio è la filosofia dei *Bauls*, i menestrelli girovaghi del Bengal, la cui espressione avviene attraverso il canto e la danza. I *Bauls* credono in una società priva di caste o credo e vengono influenzati dall'induismo, dalla filosofia tantrica, dalla tradizione Sufi, e dal buddismo. Sia i *Bauls* induisti che quelli musulmani riconoscono Sri Catanya e il poeta Jayadeva come loro maestri. I loro canti offrono squarci ricorrenti sulla vita che si svolge intorno al villaggio, immagini radicate nella realtà della terra, dove i *Baul* non negano la sensualità e la corporeità nella ricerca del *Supremo*.

The Bauls are the wandering minstrels of Bengal, a tradition which probably goes back six hundred years. The word *Baul* is said to have originated from the Sanskrit word, *vatula*, which means 'frenzied', 'intoxicated' or 'afflicted with the wind disease' or the Arabic word *aul* which means 'devoted servant of the Lord'. In other words, it indicates a sect of devotees, who abandon themselves completely to their impulses in the realization of the Supreme. This realization must be achieved through poetry, music, song and dance. These songs are sung to the accompaniment of the *ektara*, a plucked, one string drone in one hand, wooden clappers in the other and bells round their ankles. The Baul sings and dances to the rhythm of his/her song. For the process of realizations he/she

undergoes, must be acutely, exquisitely experienced by drowning himself/herself in it, not consciously or intellectually attained.

To these wandering minstrels, song is not a form of art or entertainment. It is an intrinsic part of their worship. They believe that the Supreme resides within every human being. Elusive as he/she is like *achin pakhi* ('an uncaptured bird') or *adhar chand* ('the moon which is unattained'), he/she who can realize him/her within his/her own body, attains his/her nirvana. That is why the Baul experience, like the Sufi tradition of wandering singers, is so poignant and its expression so soul-stirring. The Baul song is rooted in the world around and at the same time esoteric. Some of the songs are intensely physical, almost sensual, but there is always an underlying spiritual content. Though the songs are usually sung solo, accompanists and members of the village audience join in the refrain and choruses of the verses, thus making the experience a collective and participative one of liberation from social taboos and boundaries.

In his essay, *Visions of the Unseen*, Thomas de Bruijn says of the Sufi poet: "The Sufi poet, like the Bhakti poet, was foremost a mediator who relayed a vision of transcendent truth to his audience. His social and religious position made that this involved the complex communication between Indian and Islamic cultural traditions [...]" (Bruijn, in Offredi 2000: 72).

The same is true of the Baul singers. Thus this oral tradition is propagated without reference to any written text or any particular composer. In so doing it captures the soul of riverine Bengal, the gods that stir in the rumbling of the clouds, the ripple in a limpid pool of water, the undulating fields of paddy, the gently waving coconut fronds, the coming of the monsoon, or simply the first twang of the monochord. The subject of these songs is at once materialistic and spiritual, a criticism of the world around and a quest for the infinite within these images so familiar to a village audience. The imagery and metaphor is both candid and graphic, drawn from everyday objects, the river of life, the marketplace of the world, the crumbling body. The songs contain parables familiar to every villager in Bengal with images drawn from boats and nets, rice fields, fish ponds and the village shop. For instance, in one song, the Baul calls upon his village audience to cut the rice stalks in a bunch, before they decay "like the body without a living heart". In the same song, the image continues to include the shopkeeper of the village store, to sell his goods well in time before the sun sets and the customers depart. In fact, in the more recent Baul songs, there is awareness of technological inroads into village life, humorous references to the spirit of universal love flying like a 'train' on the 'rails' of the heart, 'engineered' by the philosophy of Advaita.

Song is also the medium of instruction chosen by the guru or *murshid* to teach his/her disciple and prepare him/her for the ultimate truth through the oral tradition. The arrival at this truth through the intervention of the preceptor, is compared by the Baul, Lalan Fakir to the lamp within the dark room, where one

finally becomes unconscious even of the passage of day and night. Like the Sahajiya Buddhists, the Bauls are opposed to the study of the Vedas and the Puranas. For them, the guru is the living manifestation of the truth. This is evident in the song *Guru na bhajile sandhya sakale mono pran diya re*. In this song the devotee says that the central focus of life is the worship of the guru. Material obsessions and desire are illusory, the only reality is the Supreme, envisioned as the *sakha* or *bandhav*, the friend or companion, to whom the worshipper pleads from the bottom of his/ her heart all day and night.

Both Hindu and Muslim Bauls consider Sri Caitanya of Gaudiya (born around 1486 in Srihatta) as their guru, the living epitome of their philosophy, the symbol of the unified image of Sri Radha-Krishna. Here also we have the precedent of rendering the spiritual message through song and dance. As recorded in the *Caitanya Bhagvat*, Sri Caitanya himself initiated the dramatization of the Radha-Krishna story through dance and drama in which he himself participated, along with his disciples as a living experience for 'those who had conquered their senses'. Bozena Sliwezynska, in her essay on Caitanya's performances (Sliwczynska, in Offredi 2000: 185-197) describes how in his enactment of the *Adyasakti*, Caitanya was at once Kamala, Parvati, Daya, Maha-Narayani, Jagat-Janani. He would be so engrossed in motherly emotion at the end of such a performance, that he would allow his disciples to suckle at his breast so as to give them the most complete experience of oneness with the guru, without fear of separation.

The Baul sings of the supremacy of love just as the Sufi does. If Kabir calls for the loss of ego and *aham* as the only path to the realization of the Supreme, the Baul sings of the breaking down of all social barriers through *pirit* or *preet* ('love') as in the song *Golemale, golemale, pirit koro na*. The song tells how *pirit* brings the Brahmin boy to the washerwoman's feet, makes the celestial Govinda/Krishna bow before Padmavati/Radha, converts Shiva into a *smashan* ('burning ghat') dweller and transforms Nimai, a *sanyasi* into Sri Caitanya, the enlightened one. But the Sufi sings of the union of man and God through a love that breaks down all barriers between Jeevatma and Paramatma. His worship is based on Jnana and Anubhuti. The Baul's worship is based on the realization of bliss through the union of Prakriti and Purusha. Like the Tantrics, the Bauls believe that the means to experience divine love, is through human love, through the union of the physical forms of man and woman. Thus sexuality plays an important part in their worship. Bauls indulge in sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual period, with semen-retention, because they believe that the active form of the Supreme Being, the *sahaj-manus* becomes manifest in the lowest *chakra* during this time. Through a realization of the body, one can realize the truth of the universe. The body is a microcosm of the Universe, (*bhanda* into *bramhanda*) and *kayasadhan* is essential to worship. The body must therefore be kept exceedingly pure.

In an address to his disciples, Baul Sri Anirvan had said that the stars, the sun, the moon are never impatient. Silently, they follow the stream of pure Existence as the true Guru does. This pure Existence, lived with a wide-open heart amid all the circumstances of life, is in itself the state of *sahaja* - a state in which the mind is freed from all duality. To accept Prakriti in its totality, is pure *Sahaja*. The disciple must learn to return voluntarily to what is fundamentally primitive in him, carefully hidden and disguised in the realm of instinct, intuition and sex.

The Baul worship is based on individual inquiry. There is no centralized body which establishes rules of worship, despite the importance of the guru. Similarly in the Veerashaiva movement of Karnataka in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, each poet had a different signature of worship, visualizing god in his or her own way. Thus Basavanna, a social reformer who fought for an egalitarian society, addressed his god as *Kudalasangama* (Lord of the meeting rivers), Akkamahadevi as *Chennamallikarjuna* (my Lord, white as the jasmine), Allama Prabhu, with his Manichaeian obsession with light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, as *Guheshwara* (Lord of the Caves). The Bauls believe in a religion based on an admixture of Hinduism, Islam, the Sufi tradition and Buddhism, yet different from all of these. Largely consisting of socially and economically marginalized groups, they yearn for freedom and liberation from all social bondage. They do not set up images and deities of worship, for they believe that places of worship like *mandir* and *masjid* are obstacles in the path of the realization of the Supreme. Lost in these, the devotee cannot hear the call, for his vision is clouded in religious divisionism. Baul Lalan Fakir, by whom Tagore was inspired, cries out in his song, *shob loke koy Lalan ki jaat*. The sceptic asks to what caste Lalan belongs. Lalan's answer is that he does not know the true definition of caste. The *mala* or *tasbi* (garland or rosary) may tell Hindu from Muslim, the sacred thread may distinguish Brahmin from Shudra, but no sacred thread graces a Brahmani. Is she therefore without identity? Similarly Baul Panja Shah in his song *shudhu ki Allah bole dakle tare pabi ore mon pagla*, speaks of ritualism, places of worship and pilgrimage, texts and testaments as the 'playground of the deaf-mute'. As in the *dohas* (couplets) of Kabir, we find cynical, stinging attacks on religious men and their practices in the Baul songs too. As Thomas de Bruijn says in *Visions of the Unseen*, "With these direct 'attacks' on the existing order of things, the listener should abandon his usual perspective on life, rendering him susceptible for the revelation of another reality. In this state, the listener can respond to the images with which Kabir describes his mystical experience that is induced by the encounter with his 'satguru'." (Offredi 2000: 70)

In the Baul songs, a refrain generally occurs at the end of each stanza and the stanzas are roughly divided into two musical phases, the first of which tends to hover around the lower tetrachord of the basic octave range, while the second reaches up to the higher tonic before descending again to the refrain that cadences on the lower tonic. There is a fluent blending of Bengali and Arabic words. It is believed that Baul songs bear some resemblance to the music of the

caryagaan, a collection of songs thought to contain the earliest significant example of the Bengali language.

Though the Baul tradition dates back several hundred years, it was Rabindranath Tagore, in his trips by boat to the villages of his *zamindari*, who was responsible for exposing the Bengali middle class to the profound meaning and melody of Baul tradition. Deeply inspired by it, Tagore himself composed a body of songs based on this tradition. Today a journey to Shantiniketan remains incomplete for a cultural tourist without Baul music.

Every year, the Bauls gather at the Fair at Kenduli (believed to be the birthplace of poet Jayadeva, author of *Gita Govinda*) on the dark moonless night of Makar Sankranti as they have been doing for the last five hundred years or so. They gather on the banks of the river Ajay, at the Kadambakhandi Ghat near the ancient Radhabinod Temple. In so doing, they re-live Mother Ganga's descent to earth to appease Jayadeva's yearning for ablution in her sacred waters. Her token of descent was to be the lotus floating against the current, thus conferring her sacredness on the Ajay. Every year the Bauls gather to bathe in the sacred water of the Ajay and to sing all night. People of all castes and communities sit down to a meal together, in the true Baul tradition of a society without caste or creed.

For the Baul, the home is the road. As the saying goes, 'No Baul should live under the same tree for more than three nights.' Their only possession is the sun-dried bottle gourd of the *ektara*, as in the song, *Shadher lau banailo more bairagi*, capturing the message of these minstrels and luring them into a life of eternal wandering.

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