



The Interpretation of the Baul Songs and Poetry in Bengal

Rakesh Chandra*

ORCID 0000-0002-2049-5106

***Corresponding Author:** Rakesh Chandra, rakeshchandra.81@gmail.com
Freelance Writer, Poet, and Researcher, India

Abstract

Aim: Baul songs have oral traditions, similar to the renderings of the Bhaktikal poets in the Hindi belt. The Baul songs tradition took birth in erstwhile Bengal in particular, in the same period. These songs were sung by ordinary and poor people mainly before the rural public to make ends meet. However, their songs had a strong flavor of mysticism and devotion to God. Their poetry in the form of songs was dedicated to God and in that way, they resembled the Sufi tradition. Since not much work has been done by scholars in this field, it is aimed at deciphering the hidden nuances of these songs by explaining the substance of such Baul songs and poetry as a sample. Baul tradition has influenced great poets like Ravindra Nath Tagore. It deserves timely evaluation.

Methodology and Approach: This study is primarily based on the compilation of these songs in book form by Deben Bhattacharya a few years ago. Only a sample of such songs has been chosen and interpreted to fathom the depth of the inherent poetic fervor in these songs.

Outcome: The study is quite illuminating in the sense that the Baul tradition has strong indigenous roots, similar to other traditions prevalent in different parts of India. Baul songs are metaphysical and call for union with God. They exhort human beings to be in love with God single-mindedly. Their poetry is simple yet filled with metaphors. One has to be conversant with the local idioms and spiritual traditions to better understand their poetry.

Conclusions and Suggestions: Baul songs are simple and melodious, sung on the tunes of single-stringed musical instruments. They provided entertainment to the common public living in rural Bengal. At the same time, the Baul singers conveyed the message of life's transitory nature and the need to be in communion with God. They advised the common man to refrain from materialistic yearnings too. Baul songs represent our strong cultural traditions which need to be explored further by our litterateurs and academics. Very little has been done so far and the time has come to take corrective measures.

Keywords: Baul Songs, One-stringed musical instrument, Metaphysics, Sufi tradition, Singing Minstrels.

Volume: 3 Issue: 1 Winter Edition 2023

Paper Type: Research Article

Article History: Received: October 10, 2022. Revised: November 20, 2022.

Accepted: November 22, 2022.

The paper can be accessed online at: www.literaryherm.org

The Bauls are said to be the "Mystic Minstrels" living mainly in rural Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. Though the Baul movement is about 300 years old, it reached its pinnacle in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their music and way of life made a huge impact on Bengali culture and even impacted the

compositions of Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Bauls hailed from rural areas and they eked out their living by singing on the tunes of Ektaras, the Lute Dotaras, a simple one-stringed instrument, and a drum called Dubki. The tradition of Bauls encompasses Hinduism, Buddhism, Bengali, Vaisnavism, and Sufi Islam. They never associated themselves with any particular religion or caste system, special deities, temples, or sacred places. They emphasized the fact that a person's physical body is the place where God resides. Bauls gained wide admiration for this freedom from convention besides their captivating music and poetry. Their poetry, music, song, and dance are an endeavor to find humankind's relationship with God. They also sought to achieve from these. spiritual salvation. Their devotional songs first appeared in Bengali literature in the fifteenth century. Baul music is a folk song of a particular type, which is influenced by Hindu Bhakti movements as well as the Shuphi, a form of Sufi song. Such songs are also aimed at instructing the disciples in Baul philosophy by the spiritual leaders. Their rendition and transmission were oral. Bauls are a very heterogeneous group, with many sects. But the members largely consist of Vaishnava Hindus and Sufi Muslims. Lalon Shah is considered to be the most celebrated Baul saint in history. Their poetry is simple, terse, and lyrical, yet no serious efforts have been made to recapture these words in print and digital media.

Since the Baul songs were sung in oral tradition, no written version of such songs is available, indicating that no effort was made ever to inscribe the words or lyrics of these songs for posterity. However, this yeoman service has been rendered now by one Deben Bhattacharya in his book, *The Mirror of the Sky: Songs of the Bauls of Bengal* which contains a translation of 205 songs collected by him by tape recording technique. Perhaps, this is the only translation in English of the Baul songs of Bengal. It is worthwhile at this stage to analyze some of the Baul poems from this book. The title is given to many poems by Mr. Bhattacharya himself, as there are no titles in the songs themselves. In

translation, the original charm of Baul poetry might be missing, but at least, the present generation can relish the quality and flavor of Baul poetry. Given below are some of the nuggets of enchanting Baul poetry. The first poem is by the Baul singer, Dwija Kailashchandra which is as such:

1. The river of life

Never plunge
into the river of lust
you will not reach the bank.
It is a boundless river
where typhoons rage.

The message is a simple but valuable one. Lust is like a river that has no banks, and it is impossible to reach at the end. Moreover, its passage is tumultuous and leads to the wastage of precious life. It may be surmised here that the Baul songs called for a union with God, hence by detracting from the flawless path of life, one cannot attain the pre-destined goal. Lust only leads to the destruction of the self.

2. Life is an oil lamp

My life is a little oil lamp
floating on the waters.
But from which landing-pier
did you set me afloat?
With darkness ahead of me
and darkness behind,
darkness overlaps my night,
while the necklace of waves
constantly rings me about.
The storm of the night
relentlessly flows

below the stars,
and the lamp is afloat
with only the shoreless waters
for company.

This poem/song is ascribed to one Ganga Ram who equates life with a little oil lamp floating on the waters of life. He asks God about the stakes through which this lamp has been set to sail on these turbulent waters amidst darkness all around. He has beautifully crafted a metaphor when he described the waves touching the lamp constantly as the "necklace of waves". It is pertinent to note here that the Baul singers were apt to depict things by crafting their metaphors. He rightly points out that only "shoreless waters" is the company of the lamp. The spirit of the poem is a grim reminder of the fact that every human being takes birth all alone, and his vehicle of life is propelled by the Almighty through the thorny paths of life if he is treading gingerly.

3. As the dumb one sings

As the dumb one sings
for the deaf,
the handless plays the lute
and the cripple leads the dance.
The blind watch,
engrossed in the show.
What a strange world is this!

-Gaurchand

The singing bards had an uncanny knack for observing the world from every nook and corner. He visualized such things to happen which, prima facie, looked bizarre and unbelievable. For example, a dumb one sings a song for a deaf person or a cripple person dances in the lead, and so on. For the Baul singer, this world is strange because these things happen here. But he also hints that behind

these happenings, there is some superpower, exercising full control over worldly endeavors.

4. Judge your audience

then choose your words.
If you speak the truth
you will be struck by a stick.
If you lie
you will charm the world.

-Gobinda Das

This outpouring comes from a roaming minstrel's heart as a reflection of what he had seen and observed in day-to-day activities of the people living in this world. This is, perhaps, the worldly wisdom sprayed in poetic form. Truth prevails finally, but it is not advisable to speak the truth always. It is better to observe the audience present there before speaking the truth.

5. God the playwright

God has reversed the acts
of the play:
The land talks in paradox
and the flowers devour
the heads of fruits,
and the gentle vine
roaring,
strangles the tree.
The moon rises in the day
and the sun at night
with shining rays.
Blood is white,
and on a lake of blood

float a pair of swans
copulating continuously
in a jungle of lust and love.
- Gopal

This is a beautiful narration of the eternal truth that God is the ultimate playwright who creates, reverses, and recreates the roles humans are destined to play in their lives on earth. That is why they have to perform certain acts which they had never imagined or thought of before. But that is the power of God who is Almighty.

6. indivisible (Free Impulses)

Free impulses
live together
with the forces of abstinence.
Feminine energy entwined
with the spirit of man
resemble the tuned strings
of the lute,
wholly indivisible.
The heart is the home
where there is
no separation.
-Haude Gosain

In this poem/song, the poet has expressed the fundamental principle of life. He avers that free impulses and the forces of abstinence are altogether different forms of energy but they live in unison in our hearts where no division of any kind exists. This poem carries a metaphysical tone.

7. Agreement (When the life)

When the life,

the mind,
and the eyes
are in agreement,
the target is
within your reach:
You can see
the formless Brahma
with bare eyes.
-Haude Gosain

The poet/singer has uttered a gospel truth in these lines: if at any point in time, a person's life, mind, and eyes are in agreement, he can achieve anything in this world. No target is beyond his reach.

8. On the other shore

On the other shore
of the ocean
of one's own self,
quivers a drop of fluid—
as the origin of all.
But who can cross the seas
to reach it?
The root of all
is based in you.
Explore the base
to reach the essence.
-Haude Gosain

This is once again a poem/song incorporating the basic philosophy of life which mandates that to cross the bar of life's journey, one has to look inwards and explore the solution, instead of delving deep into the farthest boundaries of the

illusiv horizon. One's inner self holds the ultimate key to deliverance from the cycle of life and death.

9. Dangerous currents of life

On the dangerous currents
of the river of life,
wicked is the oarsman
of my heart:
having eaten the whole fare
he refuses to row.

-Jaladhar

The poet/singer cautions in this poem about the pitfalls coming in the way of the journey of life. If the heart's control lies in the hands of negative forces, it would be almost impossible to carry on further.

10. If you fail to recognise

If you fail to recognise
your own heart,
can you ever come to know
the great unknown
The farthest away
will be nearest to you,
and the unknown
within your knowing.
Fill up your home
with the world,
and you will attain
the unattainable man.

-Kalachand

The heart is the key to knowing the unknown and to attaining the status of unattainable man, says the bard in these lines imbued with the deep philosophy of the sages. It looks strange and astonishing as to how come these roaming bards, mainly illiterate people, were so engrossed in metaphysics and spiritualism!

11. A holed boat

This land offered me
only dubious joys.
Where else could I go?
I found a broken boat
and spent my life
bailing out the water.

-Lalan

The poet/singer equates the human body with a boat full of holes through which the harmful water of human life enters profusely, making the journey of life drab and without real joy. He has no other option left. He is bound to live within his boundaries of self.

12. A man unknown to me

A man unknown to me
and I
we live together
but in a void—
a million miles
between us.
My eyes blindfolded
by worldly dreams
cannot recognise him,
or understand.

-Lalan

The poet/singer speaks about the opportunities which life provides equally to all humans, but not everybody takes it seriously. Often, they are lost in wild dreams and lose the golden opportunity to lead a sane and sensible life that God has ordained for all of us to follow. In that case, the imaginary good man goes out of our lives as an unknown person.

13. Love's records

The scriptures will teach you
no prayers for love.

Love's records remain
unsigned by sages.

-Lalan

This is, indeed, a great observation of the poet/singer that our scriptures do not contain any prayer for love, and the records of love do not carry the signatures of sages. That means love records are maintained only in the hearts of the lovers, nowhere else.

14. As the man and the woman in me

As the man and the woman in me
unite in love,
the brilliance of beauty
balanced on the two-petalled lotus
within me
dazzles my eyes.

The rays
outshine the moon
and the jewels
glowing in the hoods of snakes.
My skin and bones
are turned to gold.

I am the reservoir of love,
alive as the waves.
A single drop of water
has grown into a sea,
unnavigable...

-Lalan

This highly metaphysical poem using multiple metaphors is based on the concept of 'ardh narishwar' which implies that every human being is a combination of male and female attributes. This may also be termed as a combination of positive and negative qualities which keeps the self of a man unbalanced. Only right-thinking persons can maintain this balance to steer clear of the seemingly unnavigable courses of life.

15. The key to my home

The key to my home
is in alien hands.
How can I enter
to gaze at my riches?
My home is loaded with gold
but run by a stranger
who is blind from birth.
He would let me in
if I paid my entrance fees.
As I do not know
who he is
I wander the streets
of error.

-Lalan

The poet/singer has beautifully expressed his inability to fathom the intricacies of life without enlightenment from God. Though a lot of riches is hidden inside himself, he is unable to see and explore them without outside help. Only the Almighty can show the right path.

16. Pandemonium

Pandemonium broke loose
 in the guard-room of love,
 my heart was caught
 like a thief
 by the greatest of lovers
 who had set snares
 in the air.

-Lalan

The poem/song talks about godly love in which he is caught and seen by the people around him. The charm of God's love is immeasurable, and it can only be felt by persons who are deeply involved in the affair.

17. Sixteen gangsters

Sixteen gangsters
 of the city
 are running loose,
 looting all.
 The five wealthy ones
 are nearly lost;
 trade is at
 the breaking point.
 The king of kings
 is also king of the thieves.
 To whom can I complain?

The riches, all are gone
 leaving only an empty room
 to my credit.
 says Lalan:
 the room is enough-
 it will pay
 the tax claims.
 -Lalan

In this poem by Lalan Fakir, the great poet/singer has ascribed sixteen gangsters as five forces of perception, jnanendriya-ears, skin, eyes, nose, tongue(taste), five forces of action, harmendriya- anus, genital organ, hands, feet, tongue(speech), and six inimical forces, shadaripu- lust, anger, greed, ignorance, pride, envy. Further, the five wealthy ones are conscience, wisdom, restraint, renunciation, and devotion. "Empty Room" is the body. The poem depicts beautifully the ill effects of the 16 gangsters on the human body. If proper restraint is not exercised, the body will have to face disastrous consequences. The language used by the poet is full of common imagery to make it more easily comprehensible to the common man.

18. Temple block the road to you

The road to you is blocked
 by temples and mosques.
 I hear your call, my Lord,
 but I cannot advance.
 prophets and teachers
 bar my way.
 Since I would wish
 to burn the world

with that which cools my limb,
my devotion to unity
dies divided.
The desire of love bear many locks;
scriptures and beads.
Madan, in tears,
dies of regret and pain.

-Madan

In these lines, the poet/singer has expressed his anguish over the fact that despite his Lord's calling, he is unable to move ahead because of the presence of temples, mosques, scriptures, and beads which bars his direct communication with God.

19. All can see

All can see
when a forest is on fire
but none can trace
the fire in my heart.

-Miyajan Fakir

The poet/singer laments here that there's a fire in his heart but nobody can see it, unlike the forest fire which becomes visible to everybody.

20. Writings on the heart

Your heart
is a piece of paper
The figures
you have written there
cannot be known
except by the heart.

-Narahari

In this poem, the poet/singer says that everyone's heart is a piece of paper where he writes something which cannot be deciphered by others. This implies that the heart is the repository of man's ideas, thoughts, and emotions, which cannot be read by others, if not disclosed voluntarily.

21. Lust mingles with love

[...]

Lust mingles with love
like water with milk.

-Nitya Khyepa

The poet/singer has aptly observed that lust is the outcome of love and both are intertwined. They cannot be separated. Generally, the Baul songs and poetry are the manifestations of their undiluted and undiminished love towards God, the supreme creator. They assume that the holy shrines such as temples and mosques and the holy scriptures are a big block in their constant quest for God. Moreover, they believe that the human body is guided by the five senses and other tools which they term as sixteen gangsters. If they are not properly controlled as per the diktats of God, the pathway of destruction is not far away. They don't brook anything happening between them and God. All other worldly affairs involving senses are meaningless to them. However, they are not satisfied with their existing knowledge about the self, and their quest seems to be unending. The overall tenor of their poetry is metaphysical. It is sometimes surprising to know about their amazing awareness of deep philosophical concepts which is only possible with the help of a learned teacher or guru. It appears that what they had propagated or said in oral song form was gained from their own temporal experiences. Maybe, they were the chosen men of God for spreading His messages and teachings.

The great tradition of Baul singing by the roaming mystic minstrels in the eastern part of India, mainly in West Bengal and rural Bangladesh, carries a rich cultural tradition of music, poetry, and the philosophy of life. Their renditions are

in oral form and not recorded yet fully on electronic equipment. Their poetry is very rich in metaphors and is full of insights into human life. This is high time that such a wonderful treasure of poetry was collected, analyzed, and brought in print and digital form so that generation after generation could get a feel of their poetic instincts and strong cultural moorings with the land of their birth and country as a whole. A lot more is needed to be done in this regard on the part of the academia and the government's level without further delay.

Works Cited and Consulted

All these poems have been reproduced from the book *The Mirror of the Sky: Songs of Bengal*, Hohm Press, May 1999, by Deben Bhattacharya, available at <http://www.cse.iitk.ac.in>>books, accessed on 18.10.2022

Rakesh Chandra

Rakesh Chandra is a former Civil Servant. He has got two collections of English poems Titled "Moon is Black", and "Cercle of Life" also one collection of Hindi Poems Titled "Mere Shahar Me" and a Book on Rekha Chitra Titled "Be Chehre Wale Log". His English poems have found a place in different Anthologies, Poetry Journals, and News Papers' literary supplements. He also has authored three books on Law. Namely "Globalization, Environmental Protection, and Social Justice: A Study in Indian Legal Framework", "Right to Privacy in India with Reference to Information Technology Era", "Environmental degradation, water management, and climate justice: A Study In Indian Legal Perspective" and currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Law from Lucknow University.