



RESEARCH CENTRE FOR ISLAMIC HISTORY, ART AND CULTURE

Proceedings of the International Symposium on
Islamic Civilisation in South Asia

Dhaka, 16-18 November 2008

Istanbul 2013



OIC | Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
IRCICA | Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture

Yıldız Sarayı, Seyir Köşkü, Barbaros Bulvarı
Beşiktaş 34349 İstanbul, Türkiye

PHONE | +90 212 259 1742
FAX | +90 212 258 4365

ircica.org
ircica@ircica.org

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON
ISLAMIC CIVILISATION IN SOUTH ASIA: DHAKA, 16-18 NOVEMBER 2008**

SOURCES AND STUDIES ON THE HISTORY OF ISLAMIC CIVILISATION SERIES | 29
© COPYRIGHT | IRCICA 2013
ISBN 978-92-9063-260-3

CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

International Symposium on Islamic civilisation in South Asia (2008: Dhaka, Bangladesh)
Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic civilisation in South Asia: Dhaka, 16-18
November 2008 /edited by Halit Eren.- Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture,
2013.
227 p.: col. ill., plans; 24 cm.- (Sources and studies on the history of Islamic civilisation; no. 29)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-92-9063-260-3
1. South Asia--History--Congresses. 2. Civilisation, Islamic-- South Asia--Congresses. I. Eren, Halit,
1953- II. Title. III. Series.
954--dc22

Orthography, punctuation, methods of emphasis of texts and references were kept as adopted by each auteur.

EDITOR | Dr. Halit Eren

PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION BY | Zeynep Durukal, Cengiz Tomar

BOOK DESIGN | Muhammed Nur Anbarlı muhammednur@gmail.com

PRINTING AND BINDING | BİRMAT MATBAACILIK LTD. ŞTİ.
100 YIL MATBAACILAR SİTESİ 1 CAD NO 131
BAĞCILAR / İSTANBUL
TEL: +90 212 629 05 59 - 60

Syncretization of Spiritual Traditions in India and Bangladesh

Durgadas Mukhopadhyay*

The Bauls are a group of mystic minstrels from West Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Bauls constitute both a syncretic religious sect and a musical tradition used as a vehicle to express Baul thought. Bauls are a very heterogeneous group, with many different streams to the sect, but their membership mainly consists of Vaishnavite Hindus and Sufi Muslims. They can be often identified by their distinctive clothes and musical instruments, like the *ektara*. Bauls are a group of itinerant folk singers from Bengal in Eastern India. They are mendicants with a very complex living style and philosophy. In 2005, the Baul tradition was included in the list of ‘Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’ by UNESCO.

Baul thought has mixed elements of Tantra, Sufi Islam, Vaishnavism and Buddhism. They are thought to have been influenced by the Hindu tantric sect of the Kartabhajas as well as Tantric Buddhist schools like the *Sahajiya*. Some scholars find traces of these thoughts in the ancient practices of Yoga as well as the Charyapadas, which are Buddhist hymns that are the first known example of written Bengali. The complex and extensive socio-religious life of India has produced few more interesting phenomena than the Bauls of Bengal. The Bengali word *Baul* is derived from the Sanskrit word *vatul* meaning “mad”. Though the Baul lives among the peasants, he does not belong to the peasant community. His dance is in a mild trance. His display is an instrument of communication in the simplest and most direct form.

The cult of Baul evolved around 1600 AD Vaishnavism, or the path of devotion to God, is a method of solving the problems of monism and dualism in Hindu philosophy. The eastern variety of Vaishnavism taught the religion of love symbolized by Radha and Krishna. Bauls are followers of the *Sahajiya* form of Vaishnavism. *Sahajiya* is the spirit of spontaneity.

Mahayana Buddhism in its later phases became a composite religious

* Sparta Institute of Social Studies, Department of Sociology, New Delhi, India.

system of heterogeneous faiths and practices saturated with the elements of esotericism, sex rites, gods, demi-gods, demons, ghosts, magic, charms, sorcery etc. Sahajiya Buddhism or Sahajayana was an offshoot of this composite religious system. Other offshoots of later Mahayana Buddhism gave rise to what was known as Tantric Buddhism and its ramifications. There was an obvious link between Sahajayana and various forms of Tantric Buddhism, but while the latter maintained more or less a technical character, confined to esoteric circles and secret societies, the former had wider acceptance among the masses. The Bauls' tradition is eclectic, drawing from tantric (Sahajiya) Buddhism and tantric Hinduism (primarily Vaishnava Sahajiya, but also Saiva-Sakta), Bengal (Gaudiya) Vaishnavism, and Sufi Islam. They are like a tantric yogic sect, and as such share common ground with other tantric yogic traditions. Bauls influenced Hindu bhakti as well as Sufi movements as song mediated by much cultural intermixing, exemplified by the songs of Kabir, for instance. Their music represents a long heritage of preaching mysticism through songs in Bengal.

The Muslim Bauls were greatly influenced by Sufism, which believes that the sublime glory of the Almighty Allah gets reflected in the Nabi as the symbol of His all-embracing love for mankind and exists in all men in the world He has created. According to their belief, Nabi is the fullest manifestation of the power and glory of the Almighty. He is *Insan-ul-Kamil*, the complete Man. The expression *Al Insan-ul-Kamil*, which literally means "the Perfect Man", occurs for the first time in the writings of Ibn-ul-Arabi (*Fusus-ul-Hikam*) and denotes the highest type of humanity. In other words it represents a Sufi who has realized his essential oneness with God.

Baul philosophy is also influenced by Islam. Legend has it that Birabhadra, the founder guru of the cult, was himself initiated into it by a Muslim woman, Sahdak Bibi. Baul tradition can be interpreted, like other traditions of the *Virashaiva Vachanas* and the Sufi *gazals*, as a form of social protest against class and the caste system.

Sufism and tantrism, both being mystic traditions, have several essential features in common that facilitated their synthesis in Baul ideology. For example; both Sufis and tantrics are opposed to discursive learning and knowledge. The goal of both is to return to the original non-dual state before creation. Both Sufis and tantrics believe that the body is a microcosm of the universe, that God is within the body, and that the creator and the created are one and the same. Both identify the divine with light, although light-theology generally plays a more central role in Sufism than in tantrism. Both revere the spiritual guide, the guru or murshid, on whom all spiritual progress depends.

Bauls closely resemble the Sufis and the Vaishnavas, both orthodox and Sahajiya, in the importance they attach to love in the realization of the divine. Like Sufis and orthodox Vaishnavas, the Bauls conceive of love as the yearning of the individual for the divine. Baul songs about love are often expressed in terms of *viraha*, love in separation. The Bauls are continually searching for the ever-elusive God within, the Man of the Heart (*moner manus*). Perhaps no Baul has used more evocative imagery to describe this frustrating search than Lalan Fakir. "The Lord is near, but seems far away. Don't you see? He's hidden from you like a mountain by the hair in front of your eyes." (*Amar apon khabar apnar hay na*).

The Bauls believe that the truth cannot be found in books and that external rituals are empty, futile acts. They reject the authority of Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas and Puranas as obscuring the way to the divine: "Vedic clouds darken the sky. The jewel of the day doesn't rise" (Lalan Fakir). The Bauls, like the Sufis, assert that the Prophet taught two types of doctrine, one exoteric (*zahir*), recorded in the Qur'an and meant for the general public, and the other esoteric (*batin*), passed down from heart to heart.

The songs of Baul may be grouped under the following headings:

- Preaching of the spiritual teacher and enquiries, into the nature of God
- Metaphysical analysis of the human body and use of spiritual metaphor.
- Value systems and mental disciplines.
- Questions relating to life and death and
- Futility of religious rituals and the caste system.

Although there are many outstanding Baul poets, Lalan Fakir, also known as Lalan Shah, is considered to be the greatest of them all. Lalan was very popular in West Bengal and Bangladesh and he has had a great impact on Bengali literature as well as on Baul tradition. Lalan declared that there was only one true religion and that it was the "religion of man." The songs that he composed, which are numerous, are the believed to be the oldest dated songs. In addition, these songs form the basis of Baul ideology and the basis for scholarly discussion.

In one of the songs of Muslim Baul, Lalan Fakir, the futility of the caste system is analyzed:

Lalan bole ki jat se a samsare..

"To which caste
does the Baul singer Lalan belong?
Lalan feels, he never understood

the caste system!

It is always only men
who use case marks, sacred threads?
But, how do you recognize
a Brahmin woman or a Muslim maiden?

The futility of caste or religion is clear,
and the institution of caste
lost its meaning
among the Bauls".

Amar moner manuseri sane

When will I be united
with the Man of my Heart?
Day and night
like a rainbird
I long for the Dark Moon,
hoping to become his maidservant.
But this is not my fate.
I caught a glimpse
of my Dark Lord in a dream,
and then he was gone
like a flash of lightening
vanishing into the cloud it came from,
leaving no trace.

Meditating on his image,
I lose all fear of disgrace.
Poor Lalan says,
He who always loves,
knows.

Ami ekdino na dekhilam tare

I have not seen him even once--
my neighbor
who lives in a city of mirrors
near my house.

His village is surrounded
by deep boundless waters,
and I have no boat
to cross over.

I long to see him,
 but how can I reach
 his village?
 What can I say
 about my neighbor?
 He has no hands, no feet,
 no shoulders, no head.
 Sometimes he floats high up in the sky,
 sometimes in the water.

If my neighbor just touched me,
 I wouldn't feel the pain of death.

He and Lalan are in the same place,
 yet five hundred thousand miles apart.

The Bauls use a number of musical instruments to embellish their compositions. The *ektara* is a one-stringed drone instruments, and by far the most common instrument used by a Baul singer. It is carved from the epicarp of a gourd, and made of bamboo and goatskin. Other commonly used musical instruments include the *dotara*, a multi-stringed instrument made of wood; the *dugi*, a small hand-held earthen drum; percussion instruments like *dhol* and *khol*; small cymbals called *kartal* and *manjira* and the bamboo flute.

Bauls and their lifestyle influenced Bengali culture immensely, but nowhere did it leave its imprint more powerfully than in the work of Rabindranath Tagore, who mentioned the Bauls in a number of talks in Europe, and an essay based on these was included in his English book *Religion of Man*.

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 fulfillment which is reached by love emancipating us from the dominance of self.

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

Tagore's own compositions were powerfully influenced by Baul ideology. His music also bears the stamp of many Baul tunes. Other Bengali poets, such

the caste system!

It is always only men
who use case marks, sacred threads?
But, how do you recognize
a Brahmin woman or a Muslim maiden?

The futility of caste or religion is clear,
and the institution of caste
lost its meaning
among the Bauls*.

Amar moner manuseri sane

When will I be united
with the Man of my Heart?
Day and night
like a rainbird
I long for the Dark Moon,
hoping to become his maidservant.
But this is not my fate.
I caught a glimpse
of my Dark Lord in a dream,
and then he was gone
like a flash of lightening
vanishing into the cloud it came from,
leaving no trace.

Meditating on his image,
I lose all fear of disgrace.
Poor Lalan says,
He who always loves,
knows.

Ami ekdino na dekhilam tare

I have not seen him even once--
my neighbor
who lives in a city of mirrors
near my house.

His village is surrounded
by deep boundless waters,
and I have no boat
to cross over.

I long to see him,
 but how can I reach
 his village?
 What can I say
 about my neighbor?
 He has no hands, no feet,
 no shoulders, no head.
 Sometimes he floats high up in the sky,
 sometimes in the water.

If my neighbor just touched me,
 I wouldn't feel the pain of death.

He and Lalan are in the same place,
 yet five hundred thousand miles apart.

The Bauls use a number of musical instruments to embellish their compositions. The *ektara* is a one-stringed drone instruments, and by far the most common instrument used by a Baul singer. It is carved from the epicarp of a gourd, and made of bamboo and goatskin. Other commonly used musical instruments include the *dotara*, a multi-stringed instrument made of wood; the *dugi*, a small hand-held earthen drum; percussion instruments like *dhol* and *khol*; small cymbals called *kartal* and *manjira* and the bamboo flute.

Bauls and their lifestyle influenced Bengali culture immensely, but nowhere did it leave its imprint more powerfully than in the work of Rabindranath Tagore, who mentioned the Bauls in a number of talks in Europe, and an essay based on these was included in his English book *Religion of Man*.

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 fulfillment which is reached by love emancipating us from the dominance of self.

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

Tagore's own compositions were powerfully influenced by Baul ideology. His music also bears the stamp of many Baul tunes. Other Bengali poets, such

as Kazi Nazrul Islam have also been influenced by Baul music and its message of non-sectarian devotion through love.

Bauls are similar to the Buddhists in their belief in a fulfillment which is reached by love's emancipating us from the dominance of self. The idea of the body as a temple and as a means of attaining perfection and being one with the supreme man is an important aspect of their ideology. That which is visible in a man and woman is *Rup* or representation. This is bounded by sorrows and happiness. The invisible – the spiritual in man and woman is *Arup* or formless. The transcendence from the visible to the spiritual is the eternal quest of the Baul. Baul tradition is a harmonious fusion of Vaishnavism, Tantra, Buddhist nihilism and Sufi mysticism.



Baul mendicants



Lalan Fakir, a Muslim Baul