

Baul Kheda (Expulsion) Movement of Rangpur and Kushthia: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

'Baul Community' is one of the non-institutional group in our Society. The word 'Baul' is a generic description given to an ascetic and deeply spiritual people who for centuries have remained at the farthest fringe of Bengal's society. While the word may be unknown elsewhere in the world of Bengal. They are instantly identified as a group of people with a one stringed lute like musical instrument with a gourd bottom called *ektara*. The Bauls of Bengal believe in a religion largely based on ideas from Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. It is the Bauls disregard the social constraints, such as the caste system which leave them free to achieve the liberation through the realization of the Divine. This is because of their attitude they had been humiliated by the so called aristocratic people of the society. However, the present generation has been able to understand their importance in the cultural history of Bengal as well as the World. It must be mentioned that nowadays the researchers are choosing this Baul culture as the subject of their research. Bauls of Bengal have a rich contribution to the Bengali songs, especially to the folk songs. Not only that, their philosophy, practice, outlook, defiance of caste or communal division- all these characteristics have established the Baul sect on a strong foothold in our contemporary Bengali society. They are not now a marginalized section of the nineteenth-twentieth century.

Keywords: *Beggars, Ektara, Kayavaad, Marginalized, Non-institutional, Pagal, Sadhu-Guru*

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1. Introduction

'*Baul Community*' is one of the non-institutional group in our Society. The word '*Baul*' is a generic description given to an ascetic and deeply spiritual people who for centuries have remained at the farthest fringe of Bengal society. While the word may be unknown elsewhere in the world of Bengal. They are instantly identified as a group of people with a one stringed lute like musical instrument with a gourd bottom called *ektara*. They get compliments for their unkempt long hair, disheveled beard and rough and rustic clothes.

The word '*Baul*', derived either from Sanskrit *vyakula*, 'confused' or '*Vatula*', 'Mad' is found in Bengali text dating back to the fifteenth century, where it generally has its literal meaning 'mad'. The Bauls have presumably been so named because they do indeed seem mad in their extreme unconventionality. They reject commonly accepted beliefs and practices such as the Caste system and worship in mosque or temples. To the Bauls, however, 'mad' does not have a pejorative connotation. It has the positive sense of 'mad' with love for 'God'. In fact *pagal* and *khepa* are two Bengali words for 'mad' that Bauls often proudly affix to their names. However, the mostly unlettered yet culturally sophisticated Bauls as a 'class of people' are indeed Bengal's rural intellectual elite who for centuries have looked at villages as their thieving ground. This is because of their social position Bauls are neither a cult nor a community. They can best be described as a 'fraternity' without any formalized power base or a Spiritual or social hierarchy. Bauls have no place in their Spiritual equation. Respect and admiration for elder Bauls such as *Sadhu-guru*, *guru*, *darbesh* and *murshid* who are guides and teachers is emphasized. These men and women of wisdom employ the ancient working institution termed '*guru-shishya*' or '*pir-murshid*' i.e. teacher-students interaction is traditional school of 'lip to ear' esoteric knowledge.

The Bauls of Bengal believe in a religion largely based on ideas from Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. It is the Bauls disregard the social constraints, such as the caste system, which leave them free to achieve liberation through the realization of the Divine. In the Baul religion individual inquiry and emphasize on the importance of a portion physical body is important because it is within the body and the supreme resides and thus it is the only place people need to search for God. The basis of Baul ideology is to achieve the spiritual objective of liberation. Baul songs were invaluable to the maintenance and preservation of their religion. Songs were used for instruction by the guru to teach his disciple and to prepare him for the ultimate truth. The goals of the Baul practitioner are to achieve the realization of the supreme using both *yogic* and *tantric* techniques.

2. The Origin and the Development of the Movement

In 1890, after the demise of Lalan Fakir, hostilities between the followers and orthodox opposition forces began to surface. In North and East Bengal, the songs and activities of Lalan followers infuriated the Baul haters, especially the so called higher caste people. They looked down upon the Bauls as they were low-born. Even scholars like JogendraNath Bhattacharya and Akshay Kumar Dutta were not in exception. Mr. Bhattacharya wrote, "Baul, a mad man, a class of beggars, who pretend to be mad out of religious fervor and try to uphold their pretentious philosophy through songs." According to Akshay Kumar Dutta "They never kill others, but they feed on dead animals." With the support of such intellectuals, the so called upper caste people felt encouraged and started the '*Baul Kheda*' (Expulsion) Movement throughout the countryside of East and North Bengal. They also got the support from the conservative Muslims and clergy. Hazi, Gazi, Maulavi and Muslim elites thought that '*Kayavadi*' Baul cult is nothing but violation of '*Shariat*'. They also thought it as a menace to the existence of Islam. So they wanted to an end to the Baul sect.

In those days Lalan songs were very much popular among the masses; it is evident from the columns of the Magazine '*Hitakari*'. '*Hitakari*' published an article just after eighteen days of Lalan's demise, "There are no souls here who do not know the name of Lalan Fakir. And not only in this region, but also Chhattagram in East and Rangpur in North, Jasohar in South and a lot of districts in the West , there are many disciples of Lalan Fakir." Not only in the above-mentioned districts, disciples of Lalan were scattered throughout undivided Bengal. Majority of them were entitled with the surname '*Naya*'. Later they used to call themselves '*Sheikhs*'. Among the followers of Lalan , not only were the Muslims, but also a lot of low-born Hindu *Sahajiyas* and *Sufis* were his disciples or followers. All they used to sing Lalan songs. They were completely snobbery and class biased.

In the pretext of preserving purity of Islam, Sharafa Gandhi and Sheikh Reyazuddin Ahmad of Rangpur launched tremendous attack on Bauls, they warned the people in such violent tone, "The Baul or 'Kayavad' practice is so harmful that it is beyond the knowledge of common people. For a long time, Bauls are crippling the backbone of Islam. Though they beget Muslim names, live in Muslim society, marry Muslim women, follow some social rituals, they are non-Muslims at their heart. As they live an austere life, so they easily deceive uneducated ignorant Muslim families. They are forgers, detesting Koran, infecting Islamic culture at their grass root level. Is this dedication towards the Islamic way of life? Thus infecting the Koran and Islam are not fault in the omnipresence of Allah?"

After the warning from Reyazuddin, severe atrocities came upon the Bauls. They were severely tortured and abandoned by the Muslims. Extreme ignorance, apathy, injustice, inhuman tortured made them survive absolutely impossible. Even scholars like Mosarraf Hossain wrote, "They are devils, barbarians, deceitful. Don't you all know that?". Muslims considered them irreligious, forgers, infiltrators, where Hindus termed them barbaric, criminals and threat towards mankind. Mass of both Hindu and Muslim populace began to crush them. The situation worsened to such extent that Fakirs were even denied proper burial. To mention, in 1889, after the death of a famous Baul poet-cum-singer Pagla Kanai, he was termed as a hermaphrodite and hence was denied a piece of land to bury his corpse. During this mad campaign, famous Bauls like Khejmat Shah, Ezazuddin Muhammad, Kutub Ali, Mohammad Kabiruddin, Naser Ali and others of Rajshahi, Rangpur, Pabna and Dhaka districts were extremely humiliated and harassed by the Muslim fanatics.

3. The extreme stage of the Movement

In the birth place of Lalan Shah in Kushthia, during the first half of the twentieth century, '*BaulKheda*' campaign took an intense and violent form. In 'Baniya' locality of Kushthia, a religious leader MaulanaAfsaruddin Ahmed led the campaign. In 1942 , on the eve of Holi Festival, a large number of Bauls assembled at ChheuriyaAkhara (hermitage) of Lalan. Afsaruddin, with his armed gang, unleashed vigorous attack on the Bauls. They not only beaten and manhandled them, but also destroyed their musical instruments. To the fanatics, Lalan songs were intolerable. According to their view, Lalan songs were inspired by Hindu ideals. They imposed social boycott, implicated the Bauls in fake criminal cases. In spite of severe tortures Baul Fakirs became calm and quite, never they lost their patience, nor retaliated. Even Muslim conservative leaders provoked missionaries to convert them into

Christianity. One noted politician of those days commented : “ The fight between an 'Iktara' (one-stringed musical instrument of the Bauls) and 'Lathi' (cane) never stopped.”

After the partition, the Bauls who came from then East Pakistan were born of Hindu families, though they were direct or indirect disciples of Lalan. Some of them settled in West Dinajpur. One such refugee Baul, Balahari Das witnessed such kind of torture in East Pakistan. He was severely beaten for the offence of singing Baul songs. Another Baul, Kheru Ghosh was so badly beaten at Akkelpur railway station, for that his collar bone was broken.

The Bauls who came to India after the partition, found themselves this land unfriendly. They started to beg singing. High-born Hindus treated them as adulterers, forgers and beggars, they despised the Bauls. As if the Bauls were seemed to be treated to the local people as the disturbing elements. During those years, Bauls like MotilalSamanta of Kumarganj, KhatishDebnath of Balurghat, JatinMohanta of Bolla, Nityananda Das of Tapan, Balahari Das of Gangarampur, Meeru Ghosh of Dakran, Teenkari Das of Mashpur, RajenDebnath of Kholapara, Kamal Sadhu of Jittor, Surya Kanta Sadhu of Golahar, NarenDebnath of Trimohani and many others were suffering from acute poverty. In 1960-61, Meeru Ghosh and Balahari Das came to sing in the house of sweetmeat seller, Nriya Ghosh at Balurghat. They came to know about Gangapuja festival and a fair at VairaviofBalurghat. They took initiative a show of Baul songs in the fair. In 1962, DigenMohanta, FurfuriMohanti, DinabandhuMohanta, Dharani Sadhu, MotilalSamanta came to the fair at Vairavi. They sang for a whole day. This was the first occasion of Baul performance in the district.

4. The Spread of the Baul Ideology among the Masses

To attract the educated section of the society, Bauls formed a 'Baul Samity'. It was intended not only to popularize Baul songs, but also propagate their ideas, spiritual and cultural traditions among the people. They began to compose songs and even operas. To fulfill these aims, many programmes were arranged. A section of urban educated people came into their contact. In course of time, Bauls songs became so popular.

Baul songs:

1. *BhuleBhule Din KataliBhebeDekhis Na*
Sabai Mile Grahan Kari ParivarParikalpana.
Dine DineHaili Dena, AbhavTomarPuran Hay Na
EktaCheleEktaMeye Tar Beshi Jena Ar Hay Na.
YadiSukhi Hate Chao GururHaspataleJao
BhulerKajitiThikKareNao,Ar Jena Bhul Hay Na.
Binay Krishna Bhebe Bale JanmaNiyantaran Nao Sakale
AbarBhulKariyaBhagabaner Dosh Diyo Na.
 [You have passed the days in futile, have not thought enough
 Now, all We should accept the family planning.
 Day by day debt increasing, your want is never met
 One boy one girl, no more than two.
 If you wish to be happy, go to the hospital
 Rectify your mistake, don't blunder any more.
 Binay Krishna carefully tells, all you adopt family planning
 Don't blame the God after repeating mistake.]

2. *ManMatikeRajiKareBiyerJogarKaro*
EmanSuyogHabe Na BahuBhagye Mile.
Gouranger Bar ChhandnamandapeBasbiJakhan
Thakbe kata Atmiya-swajanPurohiteVastraDiye
Takhan Man PranSamarpan Karo.
PremGovindarSangeBiyeHabeJakhan
AlinganDibiTakhan, Jugalrup Darshan Kare.
BinayMahantaBhebe Bale OloNagariBasarGharHabeTomarSwashurBarhi,
PhulShajjaShayan Kari Atmay-Atmay Milan Kari.
 [Convince your mind and take preparation for marriage
 Such chance may not come, comes by luck.
 Bright bridegroom would sit in the wedding stage

Then, so many relatives would be present and clothes given to priest
 Then dedicates whole heartedly.
 When marriage would be accomplished with PremGovinda
 Then visioning the couple, embrace them.
 BinayMahanta thoughtfully tells, oh beautiful bride
 Your home would be the house of in-laws,
 You would be complete by union of two souls.]

Gradually, audience began to increase to attend the performance of Baul songs. Irrespective of all class, caste and religion, a large number of people came to listen the programmes. Though only listening doesn't make a person good audience. Rather if a listener can grasp the essence of the song, inner meaning or content hidden in the song.

Baul singer's endeavour is meant to be successful, along with the listener would also be benefited. One of the striking features of Baul songs is the understanding of scriptures. Bauls, through their songs, try to interpret in their own way, essence and inner meaning of *Veda*, *Upanishads*, *Quran*, *Bible*, *Gita*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* etc. From these texts, they extract the secret of life and decipher in real life. They also frequently refer to the teachings of *Sufi saints* and *Vaishnava* personalities and interpret these critically on the basis of their own outlook. To give pleasure to the listeners is not the sole aim of the singers. They hold that only rhythm, melody, tune etc. can not make success of a song, rather inner content is more important to influence the audience.

During later years, Baul poets started to write dramas to make Baul songs more popular among the people. The dramas were lyrical. Through the question-answer pattern, message of the dramas were intended to spread. Question-answers were mainly focused on scriptural interpretation, fables, general knowledge, reality and aim of life. This form became very popular. To popularize their songs, they also choose the topics from various current issues, which were matter of attraction to commoners, such as dowry, family planning, Caste system, drought, flood, communalism etc. Subject matter of this type of song was so common, language was so simple and lucid and melodious. The listeners eagerly listened to them and tried to understand the inner spirit. Through their songs, Bauls preached for communal harmony, peace and unity. Even educated intelligentsia was surprised to see that, how these half-learned, illiterate Bauls compose promptly a verse on any contemporary issue and enthrall the audience with enchanting the melody! How is it possible? As if, goddess muse bless them and waves of words, rhymes and tune are being surged spontaneously from the deep of their heart. Thus, Bauls carry the rich heritage of Bengali folk songs and folk culture as a whole.

The Namasudra and other depressed classes contributed a lot in the development of Bengali folk culture. About the cultural life of the Namasudras, Wise observes, "..... singing is the favorite amusement and a Chandal crew is rarely without some musical instrument with which to enliven the evening after the toils of the day." The eternal philosophy expressed in simple words of Baul songs always appeal to our inquisitive soul.

Acharya Kshitimohan Sen Sastri in the introduction of his famous book '*Jatibhed*' commented, "Some of the all Bauls of Bengal belonged to the Namasudras, Kapali, Jele, Kaivartya and Bhuimali community. But their profound knowledge and insight are unparalleled." Apart from Baul and '*Bhatiali*' songs, Namasudras also enriched our folk culture by '*Kavi*' recital. Among the '*Kaviwals*', Tarak Sarkar, Vijay Sarkar, Rajen Sarkar, Suren Sarkar, Rashik Sarkar are noteworthy. Through their recital they have successfully generated social awakening and political consciousness about people's rights, land reform and scientific education. In 1937, Rabindranath Tagore graced the occasion of the second '*Kavi*' recital competition between Rajen Sarkar and Vijay Sarkar held in Calcutta University campus. Besides, recital, folk songs like '*Bhatiali*' were also enriched by *Namasudras*, *Jele*, *Kaivartya*, *Malo* and other castes of lower strata.

Since one or two decades Baul song has become so popular and to some extent they have been patronized by some scholars, intellectuals of Bengali cultural world, that Baul songs spread outside Bengal, even in Europe and America. Their enigmatic songs earned fame and drew attraction of American and European singers. On several occasions, renowned Baul singers have toured foreign countries to perform. On some occasions, government and reputed cultural forums sponsored these programs. Thus, as a branch of Bengali folk song and folk culture, Baul song has been acknowledged by all and earned reputation. But behind this acknowledgement, credit must go to Rabindranath Tagore, for the first time he could recognize the inherent treasure of these songs. He collected the songs and at first brought to the notice of Bengali intelligentsia.

Now, in the academic sphere, many scholars have endeavored to take the Baul songs and its philosophy as a subject of their research. Some scholars told that Baul study is important in the wider context of South Asian Studies- *Buddhist*, *Tantric*, *Vaishnava*, *Nath*, *Sufi*, *Siddha* traditions and *Saint* movement (Bhakti Movement) of North India. Though Bauls told that they are clearly different from Buddhist and Tantric. But certainly there are some resemblances among them, particularly in the respect of esoteric practice and the attitude to the material world and female.

5. Conclusion

So, from the above discussion, it can be concluded that, Bauls of Bengal have a rich contribution to the Bengali songs, especially to the folk songs. Not only that, their philosophy, practice, outlook, defiance of caste or communal division- all these characteristics have established the Baul sect on a strong foothold in our contemporary Bengali society. They are not now a marginalized section of the nineteenth-twentieth century, but they are an integral part of our modern civic society. Now, we may see, in Kolkata and other towns Baul festivals or fairs are being organized by the government as well as by the non-government agencies also. A popular Bengali film '*ManerManush*' has been produced on Lalan Fakir's life and got the 'NargisDutt Award' for Best Feature Film on National Integration in 2010. Baul songs are inserted in many films and included in many musical competitions also. Apart from these, nowadays the old baul songs are being remixed by the young rising singers in a beautiful way of musical presentation, based on the recent trends. From these facts we can guess the popularity, importance and consideration of the Bauls in our society.

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