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Bauls: A Different Philosophy of Life

Abstract

Bauls are a group of wandering mystic minstrels of Bengal. This unique community has a rich cultural heritage which developed over a long period of time. Their way of life has been formed through the direct and indirect interactions of ritualistic and cultural folk beliefs and ideas. The etymological meaning of the term 'Baul' is mad. It has been derived from the word 'Vatul' or 'Vyakula'. The meaning of the word 'Vatul' is mad whereas 'Vyakula' means impatiently eagered. Bauls are wandering musicians who are known for their unconventional life-style and a different approach to religion. The true beauties of the Baul lie in their free spirited nature. They do not believe in rules and regulations pertaining to the orthodox religion. Their way of achieving 'moksha' is different from any other orthodox views; they take a fresh look towards seeking the Supreme Power. In Baul's philosophy the human body is given the highest value. According to them the human body is the microcosm of the universe. They considered the human body as a temple where the Lord resides. Human body is composed of Pancha-bhuta (air, water, sky, earth and fire) and dwelling place of God. So in Baul's sadhana the human body deserved the ultimate reality where one can unite with the Supreme Being through their human body.

Bauls are a group of wandering mystic minstrels of Bengal. This unique community has a rich cultural heritage which developed over a long period of time. The Bauls are mostly illiterate and come from the peasant community. Their way of life has been formed through the direct and indirect interactions of ritualistic and cultural folk beliefs and ideas. The word is found in the Chaitanya Bhagavata of Vrindavan Dan Thakura as well as in Chaitanya Charitamrita of Krishnadas Kabiraja. Though the word 'Baul' had appeared in a Bengali text as early as in the 15th century, the word first came into use in the early part of the 17th century. They were greatly influenced by Sahajiya Vaishnavism, Hindu Tantric thoughts, Buddhism and Sufism. Therefore, it was a mixture of different cults, which led them to establish a distinct secular view of their own. In the process, they created/forged their own philosophy – way of life, habits and practices.

The etymological meaning of the term 'Baul' is 'mad'. It is derived from the word 'Vatul' or 'Vyakula'. The meaning of the word 'Vatul' is 'mad' whereas 'Vyakula' means 'impatiently eager'. They are erratic in their behaviour. Some other theories suggest that Bauls are descendants of a branch of Sufism called 'ba'al'. These people from Iran lived in the 8th-9th century, were very fond of music and participated in secret devotional practices. They used to roam about the desert singing songs. Like the ba'al who rejects family life and all ties and sings in search of his beloved, the Bauls too wander about conveying the message of universal truth. Bauls are also known as 'Ayul'. According to a different theory 'Ayul' refers to a class of Muslim prophets. This word 'Ayul' has been derived from 'Akul' which means 'extremely worried/eager/anxious' – extremely worried to meet the beloved – the God. The Muslims who joined the Baul cult came to be known as Ayul. Sometimes their madness is compared to the madness of Sufi 'Diwana'. The word 'Diwana' indicates a particular mode of behaviour. Like the Sufi, the Baul searches for the divine beloved that resides in a human

body. In this context, it may be pointed out that at that time there was a particular trend of religious interactions and assimilations through the age.

Let us now try to understand how the Bauls and their vision/philosophy are interwoven with different cultures. To understand the Baul cult we have to go through the history of Bengal. Baul roots are not only deep, they are also entangled with different cultures. A particular nature of human community is to be found amongst both the Hindu and the Muslim religious groups. We should bear in mind that the cultural and religious forces prevailing in Bengal changed after the Pal dynasty's rule. During the time of the Pal dynasty, Buddhism also flourished in Bengal, it was one of the customary rites of the Buddhists to have their heads shaved, and this practice was shared by the Bauls. Vajra Yana and Sahaja Yana also spread during the same period widely. A large number of lower sections of Hindu society adopted Buddhism and became followers of the Sahaj Yana tradition. But after the Moghul invasion of Bengal the culture of Sufism spread to Bengal. Bauls converted themselves to Islam without leaving their former mode of life. They were named as shaven Fakirs. During the Vaishnava movement in Bengal, Chaitanya-oriented Vaishnavism as well as Sufism influenced the Bauls. Thus according to the opinion of some scholars the Bauls might have originated from the Buddhist Sahajiyas and in course of time they came to be influenced by Vaishnavism as well as Sufism.

Bauls are wandering musicians who are known for their unconventional life-style and a different approach to religion. The true beauty of the Baul lies in their free-spirited nature. They do not believe in rules and regulations pertaining to the orthodox religion. Their way of achieving 'moksha' is different from any other orthodox view; they offer a fresh insight towards seeking the Supreme Power. In Baul philosophy the human body is accorded the highest value. According to them, the human body is the microcosm of the universe. They consider the human body as a temple where the Supreme Lord resides. The human body is

composed of Pancha-bhuta (air, water, sky, earth and fire) and is the dwelling place of God. So in the Baul's sadhana the human body is regarded as the ultimate reality. One can unite with the Supreme Being through their human body.

In Baul Sadhana, the human body deserves the highest value, and accordingly, the body is the seat for all Yogi Sadhana. It is believed that the cycle of life in this world is manifested in the body. The human body is the platform for all rituals and practices. For Yogic practice one has to know the two important words in Baul's philosophy – one is *chakra* (wheels), the other is *Padma* (lotus). The lowest chakra of the body is the *Muladhara chakra*, which lies in the abdominal region of the male body. In *Muladhara*, there exists a coiled serpent power, which is known as *Kula Kundalini Shakti*. It is the passive female force and has potential power of creation.

The *Lotus* exists in *Muladhara Chakra*. It is of four red coloured petals. Sometimes it is said to have six or eight such petals. The three nerves *Idea* (left nerve), *Pingala* (Right nerve) and *Susuma* (middle nerve) meet at this place. The confluence of these three nerves known as the *Triveni* is the force of all life. There are two other important chakras - *Manipura chakra* and *Visudhha chakra*. The *Manipura chakra* is located near the navel with a lotus of ten petals whereas the *Visuddha chakra* is placed near the throat. It is represented by a lotus having sixteen petals.

It is to be noted that 'Man of the Heart' plays in the lotus. This perplexity of nerves is supposed to constitute the living channels of life. The Man of the Heart is roaming around according to the situation of the body. In searching for this 'Man of the Heart' there is always a tendency of a downward direction of movement. Through painstaking sadhana the Baul tries his level best to move the 'Man of the Heart' in the upward direction. The Guru helps disciples to control their lust and passion and to increase the inner power and channelize it

with the eternal flow in the circuit of chakra in one's body through the triad of nerves for the sake of knowledge and devotion, which helps them to unite with the Supreme power.

Apart from the body, the Bauls also place importance on the mind because they believe that all spiritual life is deeply rooted in the mind. The mind is considered an important means for achieving liberation. According to the Bauls, *Prana* and *Mana* (mind) are two separate factors which work together in the process of cosmic evolution. Man possesses five sense organs and six inherent vices (*Ripus*) that are obstacles in their way towards Ultimate Reality. So, if one fails to control one's mind from withdrawing the senses from the respective eternal objects then attainment of ultimate reality is impossible. When the senses are effectively controlled by the mind, they follow, not their natural object, but the mind.

The body and mind both, therefore, play a great part in man's journey towards liberation. Liberation of the soul is possible only if knowledge of truth is obtained by a baul during the rapturous moment of the mystic union of the Supreme Being and the self. They attain divine love and bliss and enjoy the non-physical joy at that moment. It leads to the desired good of a total extinction of all misery. So, bauls are interested not with the material/physical world but in the achievement of knowledge, which is beyond the experience of the world, that is, metaphysical knowledge of the universe.

Sadhana is not possible without proper control of body and mind. At the same time, one cannot perform such Sadhana without the technical instruction of a preceptor who train the bauls to control their *indriyas* (senseorgans) and *ripus*. The instruction of the spiritual Guru helps them to find the inner man or the *Moner Manush*. He works as the mediator between the man and the Absolute Being. Throughout their lives, the bauls are directed by Gurus and altered by them to take the right path of life because the sadhana involves a process of sexo-yogic practices, which cannot be attained without proper guidance of a Guru. The bauls

inherit special culture, knowledge, stock of songs and training in dance and music from their preceptors. They also bring forth some tribal traditions from their guru which folk-lore is inherited by the disciples. Therefore, the gurus function as pilots who steer the lives of bauls towards achieving Divine Personality. They are always in search of *Moner Manush* or the 'Man of their Heart'. *Moner Manush* is nothing but the Divine Spirit dwelling within one's body. The Formless Supreme Being is manifested in the human being or the Finite Being. When the Divine Personality is realised, the individual personality is annihilated into the Divine Personality and becomes the one and only soul. Only pure love can help in melting the individual personality in Divine Personality.

In this respect, it can be said that the Baul's Sadhana is influenced by the two aspects which are known as *Rupa* and *Svarupa* respectively. These two aspects *Rupa- Svarupa* is based on a significant principle in the Bauls' way of life. *Rupa* refers to the physical form of the human being whereas *Svarupa* refers to the metaphysical existence of human beings. Baul sadhana is nothing but the realisation of the spiritual existence through physical existence. This spiritual nature resides in the physical form and its inner character is elevated through the realisation of the true knowledge. *Svarupa* is manifested in *Rupa* and it can only be realised through the elevation or the keen analysis of *Rupa*. So Sadhana is nothing but the realisation of *Svarupa* in *Rupa* through purified love and devotion. Here gross love is transformed into Divine Love. Thus, physical existence rises to the metaphysical level. Ultimately, physical existence comes to an end. In this way, there remains no basic difference between these two existences. In many Baul songs these two aspects have been mentioned to explain the nature of Sadhana.

These are the basic characteristics of the Baul cult. This culture developed through ages of interactions of diverse thoughts and ideas. The process of assimilation is still going on. This is the unique feature of the cult. They are not bound to any particular religion, rituals, culture. It must be noted that people belonging to any class, caste, communal group can join this

group. These activities resemble that of the Buddhist Tantra which is over and above all distinctions of caste and religion. As they are influenced by Sufism, the main principles of Sufis and Bauls are the same. As Sufis express their love for the Supreme Being through their unique songs and dance, Bauls also express their thoughts in their own style of song and dance. Their songs are famous and are known as Baul songs, which mirror their thoughts and culture. The songs are composed and sung by them. The lyrics of the songs are interwoven with mysticism. The songs are usually sung by a sole performer accompanied by a one-stringed instrument, the *ektara*. This one-stringed instrument is the symbol of unity and peace. Other instruments that are used by Bauls are *Khamak*, *dotara*, *ghungur*, *nupur*, *diggi*. *Ghungur* and *nupur* are anklets with belts that ring melodiously while they dance.

There are two classes of Bauls. One, who refrain from any family bondage and survive on their own living on alms. Known as Ascetic Bauls, they move from one *akhda* to another. But they can have a female baul as a partner for their sadhana. Desertion and acceptance of *sevadasi* (female baul) by the Bauls are very common in their society. This relation is not rigid or permanent. If one of them feels he or she may go away with other male or female partners. The Bauls believe in creation. Bauls also enjoy sexual life. Ascetic Bauls control all sensual matter to reunite with the Lord. Their life is like the Sankhya concept of *Prakriti* and *Purusa*. When these two ultimate Realities come close together, the act of creation begins. For giving shape to the world both are indispensable. Likewise, male and female Bauls come in close contact with each other to complete the essential phase of life. Yet, they stay apart like the two banks of a river.

Men Bauls wear white lungis and a long white tunic whereas women wear white saris. But the Bauls who belong to a family, do not move around freely in a community. They stay apart and devote themselves to sadhana of the Divine Being. Their lives are not too restricted as that of the first ones.

Baul philosophy is, as we see, a mystic philosophy. They accept the concept of the traditional 'Guru'. We find 'Murshid' or 'Shaikh' or 'shaykh' as preceptors in Sufism. This tradition is carried forward in the Baul's Guru who helps them find the way towards realisation of the Ultimate Truth. Again, they are also inspired by the *Sahajiya* path of Vaishnavites. The word *Sahajiya* came from the word *Sahaja* that means 'learn naturally'. In Sanskrit it means, *Sahajayate itisahaja*. As a Sahajiya believes that the human body is the microcosm, the Baul also believes that the human body is the main source of the universe and all truths lie within it. Both advocate that the *Sahaja* or our innate nature helps us to achieve the truth of the universe. Supreme bliss according to Sahajiya Vaishnavites is known as *Mahabhava*. No foreign body is needed to realise the truth. There is another school known as Buddhist Sahajiya. They also talk about the *Mahasukha* (supreme bliss) and they believe that the Supreme Being dwells within us. We have to realise Him with our inner nature. Baul songs are also influenced by the Dohas of Buddhism. The framing of Baul songs is almost like that of the Dohas. The shadow of the *Upanishad* is also seen in the philosophy of the Bauls. According to the *Upanishad* realization of the identity between the self and Brahma results in liberation from bondage. When wrong beliefs are removed and the truth of Brahman is realised, liberation occurs. After liberation the seeker realises that 'thou art Brahman,' i.e., 'I am Brahman'. In keeping with this conception, Bauls also believe that after realising the truth there will be no distinction between the Divine Power and the individual.

It is apparent from the foregoing discussion that the Bauls have a rich philosophy of life. Their mode of life, the distinctive features of their religion, their doctrines, make it different from other philosophical views of life. Though they are influenced by many other philosophical thinking, their social and religious thinking are different from others. They give importance to the sexo-yogic practices and at the same time prioritise the freedom of spirit.

This spirit can be assimilated with the Supreme Power with the help of rigorous sadhana. The most important part of their life is their music. All truth of life is mystically expressed in their songs. In fact, all their religious expressions are confined to their songs. The rhythms, the words of the songs, touch our hearts. Their music and literature continue to play an important role in the enrichment of the folk culture of Bengal. Nowadays these songs have become the branch of Indian folk music.

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