

BAUL

BENGALI MYSTIC SONGS FROM ORAL TRADITIONS

Edited and Introduced by

PRITHVINDRA CHAKRAVARTI



PAPUA POCKET POETS

Port Moresby 1970

Translated from the Bengali

by Prithvindra Chakravarti with Ulli Beier

Copyright of these translations Prithvindra Chakravarti

Cover design Georgina Beier

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The word baul (or more correctly bāul) is probably derived from Sanskrit vātula, meaning "lunatic, mad". Vātula also means "one who is disabled by rheumatism". Both meanings taken together, baul stands for what it should be: a baul is he whose presence is felt on the earth only by his disabled body and abnormal mind. In other words, a baul is a living dead.

Though rooted in ancient past and historically traceable in the successive stages of cultural and religious development of Bengal, the cult of baul, like any other mystic cult, is essentially unorthodox, for a baul does not leave behind any mark to lead others, nor would he follow one, if picked up accidentally. There is no scripture to guide him. A baul must rely entirely on himself and find his own path to follow. The only guide is his guru - a teacher - in fact, a very special and personal teacher.

The baul way (or panth, as it is called), as found in the present day Bengali speaking region of South Asia, has inherited three distinct traditions. First one may be traced in the esoteric cult of Bengal which would be documented in the extant texts of caryā songs (9th to 12th centuries). Second one has been directly derived from sufism, which entered this region with Islam (13th century). The last one is founded on the Sahajiya Vaishnav cult, which flourished there in the 15th century.

Baul is, in fact, a generic term, covering a wide range of mendicants and minstrels who deny any formal religious affiliation (to either Hinduism or to Islam: two principal religions of the region). That they do not wear any ochre coloured robe, do not visit any temple or mosque, and do not perform any Hindu or Muslim rites are good evidence of their firm denial. They do not believe

in asceticism. They live a very simple life, almost to the point of poverty, with minimal shelter, clothing and other daily needs. But the simplicity is obviously shadowed by their lively dance and music, accompanied by poetry and riddle, which draw most people's attention.

A baul believes in this simple doctrine: the physical human body which houses a personal soul, is but an instrument, which should be played both visually (= dance) and audibly (= song) by a baul. Worship has no place in the baul panth, as there is none to worship. The ultimate goal of a baul is to get the vision of beautitude or to reach such a supreme state. Almost as a rule, such state is personified as maner manush - the companion of soul which, to many bauls no doubt, is equated with God. Hence many "lanes and bye-lanes" of the baul way. To some the sacred human body is the most important (dehatattwa-vādī); to others, an intimate fellowship between personal and impersonal soul is the chief aim (adhyatma-vādī). First, a baul must find a guru to assist him to the right path. The guru does not lead a baul into any strict order, for initiation (in the technical sense of the term) is not what a baul must undergo. When an intimate talk or conversation takes place between guru and disciple, the latter livens up, sings, dances, plays a monochord (ektōrō) or a two-stringed instrument (dotārā or gopīyantra), accompanied by ankle-bells and cymbals. The guru is the constant companion of a baul. When the guru dies, he still holds the disciple's hand. To a baul, guru is eternally present. So, another "lane" is laid on the baul way for a group of bauls who believe that guru or kartā ("master") alone can take them to the supreme state of beautitude; some even equate (kortā-bhojā) him with such state or God.

Baul cosmology is built upon the notion of time. The whole cosmos is thought to be a big river: past and future are the two shores, while the

flowing stream is the present. Creation is meaningless if a baul does not consider himself floating with the current. The shore, left behind, does not worry him much; the shore, he is looking forward to anxiously may remain out of his reach for ever. So, he reconciles with the present - the shoreless and unfathomable stream flows on. Cāṭila, a composer of caryā songs (referred above), says:

bhava ṇai gahaṇa gambhīra begē bāhī /

duānte cikhīla mājhē nā thāhī //

"The stream of the world, deep and intense, is flowing fast, /
mud on two sides, midstream unfathomable // "

(Text from Sukumar Sen's caryāgītīpadābālī, Song No. 5)

A baul must have strength to put up with pains and sorrows of this world. He must take the task to himself to explore the whole stream and discover his own self: the most treasured possession in his life. He, then, engages himself in singing and dancing, and rests only when his ecstatic heart feels contented. His voice and moving feet will not stop until his self or personal soul, which is the most vital force existing in the creation, meets his maner manush - the supreme beloved. The soul must wander around, until it merges into maner manush, and it must happen in this world. The soul does not return to this world to compensate any unfulfilled obligations, for a baul does not leave behind any obligations, in the first place. A moving boat does not leave any mark in the midstream, it does so only on the muddy banks. The notion of transmigration of soul is evidently alien to the baul way.

* Most of the songs selected here were collected in the early 50's from Birbhum in West Bengal. Some of these songs may have originated in North and East Bengal (Cf. Hārāmani by Muhammad Mansur Uddin (Calcutta University, 1942)). Titles were supplied by the translators.

The original text of STRANGE ART was collected by Jayasri Chakravarti from a street singer in Asansol around 1948 and the Bengali text is still unpublished. The texts of THE SOUL ALONE CAN MEND IT, YOUR BLACK MOON IS OFF TO MATHURA, THE TRUTH OF JUICE and THE BLACK CAT are the versions sung by Amiya Kumar Bhattacharya of Bolpur, the celebrated singer of folk songs. The last two songs of this volume, viz. UNFOLD THE TRICKY PUZZLE and A FEAST IN THE END, have an obscure origin, which, in our present knowledge, is very difficult to determine. These riddle songs remind us of some nonsense rhymes that abound all over Bengal. The original text is to be found in Hārāmani.

Most songs, perhaps except the two riddles and STRANGE ART, have as many multi-forms as can be imagined, for these are among the most popular baul songs throughout West Bengal and East Pakistan and can be instantly recognised by any Bengali, who has some acquaintance with the bauls.

*

For additional reading:

Hinduism by K. M. Sen (Penguin, 1961): chapter 19, The Bāuls

Obscure Religious Cults by Shashibhushan Dasgupta

(Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1962): chapter VII,

The Bāuls of Bengal

WILD HOPE

I longed to worship the guru's feet.
I spent my life meditating on the banks of hope.
O wild hope.

I planted a tree named hope,
I sat on its roots
Waiting for the fruit,
But before my hope was fulfilled
The tree fell to the ground, its branches crushed.
O wild hope.

The journey needs sixty four years at least,
But I have only moments left.
How far can I row?
I have taken the boat to the shore at the end of the day.
But alas, it can never reach the other shore.
O wild hope.

A DANGEROUS SEA

A dangerous sea lies before you.
How will you cross it?
The task is difficult:
You are penniless
And your feet are registered in the boatman's court.

You cannot cross the sea without paying,
If you don't pay, you must return a failure.
How will you cross it?

There are crocodiles on the banks of Tribeni.
If you swim, they'll catch you and eat you.
How can you escape those creatures?
Their eyes are fixed on you.

Big waves are rising in the water
I fear the river.
Don't go, O mind, even to the shore.
When you see the water, your body will revolt against you
And you will be caught in the whirlwinds.

Gopal says: O forgetful mind
Worship the feet of murshid.
If you give him unreserved devotion,
you'll cross the water easily.
If you receive his kindness
You must nurse it with care.

A WORNOUT BOAT

A wornout boat cannot forget its miseries.

O boat, you cannot subdue waters.

My boat is wornout

Waves run high.

My boat is in the deep sea

It cannot reach the shore.

A wornout boat cannot forget its miseries.

The boat is made from timber of wind.

The oars are made from timber of wind.

Sing God's victory, O mind,

Sail ahead, keep your boat steady.

A wornout boat cannot forget its miseries.

BOAT IN WHIRLPOOL

My boat in a whirlpool.

The other shore can never be reached.

I took a new rudder, it fell in the water

I took another one, it slipped from my hands.

I used my hands as rudder now,

but I lost my grip on the boat.

Waves around me reared their hoods

And bit me with their ugly teeth.

In my blood I felt the venom.

But up I raised my head

The boat reached a vast expanse of water.

The river forks into three.

Gently they flow.

Which arm should I take?

Which one would take me to the other shore?

My mind is puzzled

One stream flowed backwards

Bewildered I was as I had never been.

WHERE THE JEWELS LIE

Where is his abode?

Where is the gate?

How can he enjoy himself and make others happy?

Lahore and Delhi, 53 lanes of Dacca, 52 bazaars.

If he makes me walk all these bazaars

My stomach will pain.

I will see the worlds of Europe and China.

I will see the bazaars where ghosts will dance.

In such a land even I, a thief, will contemplate to win love.

I will find out a city called Kuchbihar.

I will see where Burdwan is and Calcutta,

Discover Nator and Baluchar.

I will see the underwater kingdom of Patal

I will see where the jewels lie.

Humble Jahor says: when I see Him,

Only then, the darkness will leave my mind.

SOUL WITHIN, SOUL WITHOUT

I don't have anyone except you in this world.

You are the cause of every action.

You are the light of my body,

Your light illumines the three worlds.

Your very name has miraculous power,

You are the only one I worship.

You are my soul within, my soul without,

You exist everywhere in this world.

You are sky and earth, wind and water,

You reside in us as breath.

You are sin and virtue, all respected,

As righteousness you are the king of this earth.

You are day and night, sun and moon,

You are the final hymn, when life ends.

Baduijjaman says: *nothing exists without him,*

He resides everywhere - why do you wander in this world?

MANER MANUSH

Why do I journey to my maner manush - the brother of my soul?
Why do I keep him in my heart forever?

A light burns in the dark,
There is neither day nor night.
He who has heart crosses the river,
He knows every creek,
But the heartless soul drowns in it
Caught by the deadly cyclone.

O, why do I keep him in my heart forever?

THE SERPENT IS NOT YET TAMED

Why am I not what I like to be?
When shall I tame the root of anger?

Falling into the net of the senses
The mind wanders on branches;
There are but two minds,
One of them wants to avoid death.

A true devotee, who has power of understanding
Has submerged his mind under the guru's;
He, who subdues the three rivers of this world
Has obtained the unobtainable jewel.

When shall I be able to tame the serpent?
When shall I beg for the nectar?
Siraj Shah, my guru says:
O Lalan, you are destroyed by the poison.

A COCK CANNOT CROW LIKE A PEACOCK

The moon cannot become a firefly,
A scholar cannot become a fool;
These are the jokes that everyone must know.
O mind, realise this truth yourself.

The respected one cannot be humiliated,
The ricemill going to heaven will grind up there,
Kabir knew this, O mind,
And he kept anger in his heart.

A harse cannot become a sheep,
A donkey cannot become a horse,
A divine image cannot become a mortar
Lying around on the kitchen floor.

A duck cannot become a blind crane,
A cock cannot crow like a peacock:
My mind is scattered like the minds of five husbands of draupadi
Shot by five arrows of love.

LOVE IS CRUEL

I wanted to build a house,
But it remained a fabrication of my mind.

Wanting you, I came in;
Now look what you have done to me,
O love, you are cruel.

I have come and gone in vain,
Have offered my life to an alien world,
And now I am bankrupt.

O guru, close the account.
Sign the ledger and take me now!
O love, you are cruel.

STRANGE ART

Where did you learn this strange art :
To teach - and take away again?
But I shall not worry.
Most of my knowledge was merely picked up.

I am not worthy even
To want anything from you.
What you have given, it is enough.
It is not right to ask from you.

What you have given me,
You snatched it away bit by bit.
Then why and for what hidden plan
Did you leave one or two things with me?

You have taken away my beauty, you have taken my virtue,
And now your eyes are on my body.
My understanding, sense, happiness, peace
All vanish with my strength.

Kangal, who has lost everything,
Now possesses only mind and heart.
Why dont you take these two as well?
If you do that, I'll be at peace.

WE DIE IN THE MIDST OF LIFE

When I don't see you

Mere words cannot satisfy me.

They only repeat what they heard from others

No one can tell, what he witnessed himself.

Darkness cannot stay in the mind

When the vision of beauty appears.

We cannot move our eyes from it

And look at the appearance while it lasts.

We die in the midst of life, while receiving your love.

And he who has dealt with the originator of vedas and vedanta

Has also died before his actual death.

THE SOUL ALONE CAN MEND IT

Rats have invaded my house of mud,
They have dug up the earth all over.
There is no light. Darkness encircles me.

A snake has been kept in my house.
How is it, brother, you could not subdue it?
The snake has offered himself to the woman in secret.

The house is too small for my senses,
Their venom has terribly burned my soul,
The real man in me has moved out.

Kuloda, you failed to patch up your house.
The Northwind destroyed it easily.
Now go and find a carpenter.

Know then, my brother, in your heart :
The soul is the true owner of the house.
The soul alone can mend it.

YOUR BLACK MOON IS OFF TO MATHURA

O Radha! Kalachand, your black moon, is off to Mathura,
He stamps off to the city, neither looks at you nor speaks.

O Radha, you have done everything for him.
You even spoiled your husband's name.
Now you have lost both houses,
Lost in the river you cannot reach either shore.

Every morning you have plucked flowers
And woven them into garlands of your design.
There you stand, holding your garland like prayer beads -
Round whose neck can you put them now?

You called his name again and again.
Your golden body is covered with ashes.
Now you tie a pitcher to your neck,
You go to the Jamuna to drown in its waters.

Humble Biswanath lays this at your lotus feet, O Radha:
Be not angry with anybody. Today, the go-between had bad luck
Remember : bad temper makes us talk nonsense.
Remember : famine makes us eat everything.

Kalachand, your black moon, is off to Mathura, O Radha
Come out and see him.

ARE YOU SLEEPING, MIND

You are wasting your days.

A thief is digging a hole in the back wall of your gorgeous palace,
Are you sleeping, mind?

He enters the palace, he looks around,

He ignores your money and clothes, he picks only one precious jewel,
Are you sleeping, mind?

He is no ordinary thief, he is the grandson of a ferocious dacoit

He will blow out the lamp burning in the palace.

Are you sleeping mind?

Breeze sweeps through the palace of eight chambers and nine doors

But when it stops, your life will end.

Are you sleeping, mind?

THE TRUTH OF JUICE

If you want to drink the sweetest juice

Let me tell you:

Tie a jar to tap the date palm.

Don't leave out the young trees,

For you will see : three drops only will fill your jar

And if you boil it, you'll get the sweetest molasses.

Don't leave out the old trees either,

However little they produce, it's pure and unadulterated,

And if you boil it, you will get crystal sugar.

Puzzled and lost, you use your matchet

everywhere on the tree,

Please listen to me, let the tree have some rest tonight,

Then tomorrow you'll draw the truth with clearer mind.

THE BLACK CAT

Who owns this black cat, my friend,

Please go and find out.

It enters my house, drinks milk from the jar and breaks it,

It wipes its mouth on my embroidered quilt.

I want to invite the owner of the cat

And privately suggest a remedy to him.

Perhaps he can tie it down with a strong rope,

So that it cannot leave its peg at all.

O friend, I bear many troubles with this cat.

Only last night it came and ate a whole bowl of butter.

Not only did it break the bowl, but with soiled feet

It walked all over the house, creating confusion.

Humble Panchanan meekly says: O Rhada,

If you act like a mouse, why expect the cat to leave you?

Rather tie it down and nurse it affectionately in your place,

So it will never return to the owner's house again.

YOU FAILED TO BUY YOUR TICKET

O my soul, you have been sleeping.
The bell rang but you failed to buy your ticket.
The ticket collector won't let you off,
When he will find you in the train.

I pay homage to the inventor of the machine
That moves the train over the earth.
The train has eight compartments and nine doors:
What marvellous craftsmanship.

A man is driving the long train all the way,
The ticket master gets messages across the wire
And a flag falls before the train reaches the station.
All this, the three of us, can see with our own eyes.

No one will tell you, when the terminal is reached.
O my soul, you'll be surprised to know,
That you will have to go alone in your guru's place,
In order to know and understand.

Gosain thinks he wants to ride in the train.
He sets out on the road, handling imaginary levers
And drags himself towards the hole city of Jagannath.
O mad soul, you could not move an inch towards the goal.

IN MY VISION

I went to a mysterious house and saw:
New plants had grown in rows,
Saw wanders and mystery:
Fire was burning in water.
It was extinguished, then burning again,
It was glowing all the time.

Oh, what a beautiful fire has caught me,
I saw the beauty of guru in my vision.

STRINGS

You do not know anything about strings.
In one such string the guru lives.
Like a wishing tree, he fulfils everyone who worships him.

Neurotic, disabled and diseased people
Get treatment from the doctor.
Patients die, if the doctor does not know about strings.

The thinking soul prepares its own medicine.
Thus he cures the troubles of this world.
The growth of your illness will be arrested,
Your meditation will be rewarded.
Like a wishing tree, the guru fulfils everyone who worships him.
The English have brought another string.
The news travels along that string.
But theirs cannot be compared to the string of ultimate knowledge.

Mind, if you want to find him,
Play all the strings,
If you play strings, you will find him through strings
And the guru's feet will reward you.

YOU IGNORED THE JEWELER

You did not go to the jeweler.

You bought only brass and cheap metals of this world.

You made good profit in your trade,

Your business skill was well rewarded.

But you lost your capital, O mind,

And nothing is repaired now by weeping.

You should have planned your life

And followed this simple rule.

But knowing the rule, O mind,

You ignored inevitability, that favoured you.

Being tempted by glamour, O mind,

You lost the most valuable jewel.

Fakir Lalan says;

Your coming and going to this world was useless.

UNFOLD THE TRICKY PUZZLE

The fourteen worlds are far apart, like heaven and earth.
Where do triangles and quadrangles meet heptagons?
Freedom is far away, obstacles are tied up with nuisance,
A mill grinds time: they all wander on light.

I have heard from Darvesh about two corpses,
Their bellies detached from their shoulders:
I wonder how they were born seven times.
Tell me, Darvesh, what it is all about.

I have come to the holy man, anxious in my mind.
Anxiousness alone makes one grasp a lesson properly.
If I grasp it, I will become a fakir,
Leaving all tricks behind.

Labai Chand, the Darvesh says:
Only then shall I sing victory songs to Him.

A FEAST IN THE END

A moon has bloomed in a tree called moon.

Why shall we worry?

A mother is born to a young daughter,

How will you explain it?

There was a girl of only three months old,

When she was nine months, she became pregnant.

In eleven months she delivered three babies:

One of them became a fakir.

He walks on four in the morning,

On two at noon;

Walking on three in the evening

He journeys to an unknown land.

There is a house without a door;

There is a man who does not speak.

Who does supply him with food and water?

Who lights the evening lamp in his house?

Lalan Shah Fakir asks :

What's the meaning of those three phenomena?

Tell me, O Darvesh,

What is this all about.

There is an egg
Which has six yolks.
I am told that there are twelve roads
And that fish live under water.

Who is that unknown fellow
Who supplies us with food?
I am told that the roots of the tree are in the sky
And the branches are in the earth.

The guru has supplied rice and pulse
The murshid has supplied firewood.
Reaching the banks of Tista
We will cook a meal.

P A P U A P O C K E T P O E T S

edited by Ulli Beier

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | TAAROA | Poems from the Pacific |
| 2 | PANTUN | Malay Folk Poetry |
| 3 | IJALA | Yoruba Hunters Poems |
| 4 | LUO ZAHO | Indonesian Poetry |
| 5 | PYTHON | Ibo Poetry |
| 6 | BIRDS PIERCE THE SUN | Poetry by Children |
| 7 | AIA | Mekeo Poetry |
| 8 | LOVE POEMS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA | |
| 9 | JHUMUR | Indian Folk Poetry |
| 10 | ONLY DUST | Three Modern Indonesian Poets |
| 11 | LIM LIBUR | Tolai Poems |
| 12 | AKARU | Buin Songs |
| 13 | BIAFRA | A Requiem by Onwuchekwa Jemie |
| 14 | A HANDFUL OF SUN | Modern Bengali Poetry |
| 15 | KAKAILE KAKAILE | Tolai Songs |
| 16 | BAUL | Mystic Songs from Bengal |

In Preparation

- 17 PIDGIN SONGS

YOU IGNORED THE JEWELER

You did not go to the jeweler.

You bought only brass and cheap metals of this world.

You made good profit in your trade,

Your business skill was well rewarded.

But you lost your capital, O mind,

And nothing is repaired now by weeping.

You should have planned your life

And followed this simple rule.

But knowing the rule, O mind,

You ignored inevitability, that favoured you.

Being tempted by glamour, O mind,

You lost the most valuable jewel.

Fakir Lalan says;

Your coming and going to this world was useless.