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'Ultra-path' and 'Sahaja-path': Reimagining Bauls and their Creative Subversion

Saikat Sarkar

**Assistant Professor
Department of English
Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University**

Abstract

Bauls, a group of bohemians from Bengal consisting of Vaishnava Hindus and Sufis draw the attention of many in their unconventional way of living. What makes Bauls unique is their repudiation of dominant powers in society in a creative way by spurning the religious orthodoxies and social disparities. This oppositional stance of Bauls calls into question the directives given by the major religious groups in Bengal: Hinduism and Islam. Bauls, follow a different course, an alternative 'path'. Vaishnava Sahajiya, Buddhist Sahajiya along with Sufism in Bengal have played an important role in shaping the ideological premise of these wandering minstrels. Bauls, wholeheartedly reject the conservative religious beliefs which breed violence among the masses. They look for the divinization of human love.

This article is a modest attempt to critically examine why Bauls consider the different paths namely, 'Sahaja- Path' and 'Ultra- Path' to be the most natural way to attain salvation.

Keywords: *baul, codes, subversion*

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Disputes and differences over language, culture, religion constitute a common chapter in the annals of Indian history. Very often, we witness that the dominant institutions fuel tussles which deliberately strike at the lives of common people. Nevertheless, we also come across a few unique communities which have reacted to it in creative as well as inventive ways, and Baul is one such school of philosophy which advocates a set of doctrines which above everything else aims at sustaining consonance and peace among people (Ghosh 98). The inherent characteristic of a Baul is to lead a 'self-willed' life which is from top to toe a bohemian manner of living. The aberrant behavior of Bauls draws attention of many educationists, though certain ambiguities have always remained among masses about this particular group. Bauls deny the hierarchical order of a society and the way they repudiate it is very unique, their rebuff is a matter of "creative subversion" (Ghosh 98). It is significant how this form of subversion takes place and what are the ways they adopt to bring it about.

First of all, it is very difficult to properly define the term, 'Baul'. The term 'Baul' can be associated with two different origins: Sanskrit word 'vatula' meaning 'mad' and the Arabic word 'awliya' which denotes a firm believer (Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 184). Whatever confusion these sources steer us to, it is an undeniable fact, the Baul is someone who leads an irregular life with some definite attributes which might appear 'anomalous' to an urban literati. Bauls are popular throughout Bengal and they remain appealing to us because of their melodious songs and their noticeably different outfit and appearance. It is a tough job to categorize Baul songs under

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one umbrella since they have always clung to a fusion of thought-provoking ideas and reticent practices which undergo continual alterations and modifications. Yet, we can locate some crucial aspects of Baul songs. Say for example, Bauls most of the time address the 'Man of the Heart' who they believe to reside in the human body. Tagore in his essay entitled "The Man of My Heart" exclaimed, " what struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism" (96). Baul songs directly or indirectly repudiate the prevalent social parameters and orthodoxies.

The general status of Bauls of Bengal locates them to the lower strata of the society, not only in terms of economy but also as caste-hierarchy. The community they live in presents before us a unique livelihood which breeds harmony among people irrespective of their differences.

According to Asish Ghosh, their emancipatory thought-process works in two ways:

one is that their engagement is with 'self' without any 'other'. The construction of enemy is eliminated. And two, their social position is liminal.... In this liminal zone, a niche is created by the Bauls in both physical and cultural terms- they make the Baul life/word available to anyone, in whatsoever degree. This acceptance cuts across religious or caste citadels. (106)

The oppositional self of Bauls presents before us an alternative platform of ideals which always questions all major orthodox religions of Bengal, namely Hindu and Muslim. A Baul belongs to no particular sect, neither do they have any birth lineage. In order to become a Baul, one has to

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come behind the 'path' actuated by his guru and attain his blessings. The fundamental difference between Baul and any religion lies in the fact that religious doctrines are based on so called holy scriptures, dictums which provoke the ordinary masses to obey some specific rituals. Such directives are said to provide a path to them which helps them achieve salvation. But "Bauls totally deny these as something conjectural or what they call *anuman* ' (Ghosh 107). Instead Bauls shift their focus only on knowledge based on present day observation and experience. Baul criticizes the procedures proposed by dominant religions although they assigned high admiration to their theoretical and spiritual facets. This is why, a Baul not only questions but also nullifies religious credos and confers before his followers an alternative route to fulfill their aspiration: 'ultra path'.

What is this 'ultra path'? To understand this terminology, we need to take a sneak-peek into the various philosophical schools which have deliberately influenced Bauls throughout the ages. The Baul tradition of Bengal has always been treated as an important component of the living folk. The Baul sect of Bengal incorporates various modes of disciplined and dedicated practices, but it is their intense unconventional spirit, which binds them together. For Bauls, liberation cannot take place by the following principles of any canon, their way of life centers around some peculiar modes and customs where they are bound to incline their minds naturally. Bauls' interpretation of human life is deeply coloured by Sahajiya thought (both Buddhist and

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Vaisnava) and Sufi-istic mysticism. That is why, Baul establishes an iconoclastic counterpoint to existing religious order. Bauls denounce dominant religious order and propose to the commoners to accept the 'ulta path'. Atis Dasgupta has included a song in his essay: "Temple and mosques obstruct they path/ and I fail to hear thy call or to move, / When clerics and priests angrily crowd round me"(72). Neglecting adherence to any specific code or belief-system, Baul decries the possible practices propagated by bigoted fundamentalism. The ideas about 'Sahaja' can be found in *Charyapadas* too, but these age-old convictions underwent multiple transformations by the pioneers of Sufism in Bengal. 'Sufism' represented a kind of revelation of Islam which did not pay heed to the traditional thinking. As a religious school, Sufism influenced each and every sect of Bengal. Bauls of Bengal were not an exception and the impact could be simply detected at Baul's practice of overflowing of heart through songs. So, in the Baul philosophy, we can easily discern a twofold influence: one of Vaisnavism which "had attached much importance to the *Kirtan* form of music as the medium of ecstatic communion, and on the other, the influence of the Sufisitic method of *Sama* which combined song and dance as a mode of syncretistic religious communication with the common people' (qtd. in Dasgupta, *The Bauls* 74).

Baul philosophy redirects the continuation of the Sahajiya thought. The ultimate reality which Bauls opt to achieve is perceived as 'Sahaja' i.e. the refined essence which all the animate and inanimate beings possess through their very existence (Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 187). The Attainment of Sahaja is possible only through a prolonged spiritual longing. But a very vital

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aspect of Sahajiya school in terms of influence is Baul's rejection of all kinds of falsehood and artificiality from life and religion. Like Sahajiyas, they even endorse that 'truth' can only be achievable by accepting the most natural path. A deep scrutiny of the Baul songs would reveal the fact that the doctrines of both Vaisnava Sahajiya and Buddhist Sahajiya have shaped the background. The first and foremost characteristic of Baul philosophy stems from their conviction for heterodox views and critical stance on religion and this indicates a conspicuous link with earlier Sahajiya creed. *Charyapada* and *Dohas*, the earliest obtainable resources of Bengali language also embody these doctrines. Both of these represent the same literary school with genuine vernacular base, which are assumed to be composed during the Pala dynasty of Bengal. Bauls too place a greater importance on 'Guru-vada' like earlier Sahajiyas and 'Murshids' of Bengal (Dasgupta, "The Bauls" 73). The human body for Bauls constitutes the microcosm wherein the ultimate vested. To refer to this idea, one Baul song might be cited below:

The Lord resides in Man;
You have not recognized Him,
O my mind, through limited knowledge.
Chopping and Changing the materials of Veda,
They have taught us a new path;
They have bewildered Man,
Imprisoning him in bundles of Vedas and Puranas,
The Lord roams in constant union with us;
He roams enclosed in our hearts.
Lovers see his Form enclosed in their hearts
By the power of love. (qtd. in Datta 450)

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Bauls gradually paved a way for some changes in the Sahajiya cult through some digressions and innovations. Atis Dasgupta in his essay "The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition" suggested that "the Buddhist Sahajiyas conceived Sahaja as 'Maha-Sukha' which was the unity of the duality represented by man and woman as 'Upaya' and 'Prajna'" (73). Later on, the concept of 'Maha-sukha' got modified by the addition of love by Vaisnava school. Baul philosophy recommends the divinization of human love which denies the prevalent duality of lover and beloved. Baul has thus interpreted Sahaja in its own terms and defined love and union. According to Baul philosophy, " this love means the love between the human personality and the Divine beloved within and in this love, man realizes his union with the Divine, or in other words he merges his personal existence in the Beloved that resides within this temple of the body"(Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 189-90).

The Sahajiya school of Bengal which underwent various changes with the passing of time has inherently influenced the basic outlook of Bauls in terms of their opposition to orthodox religion. Bauls are the unlettered masses without any formal education and they belong to a minor sect. As a minor sect, they remained at the periphery of the Bengali society, and grew independently of any upper-class standards. As a matter of fact, these minor religious groups grew along with the Indo-Aryan languages and compellingly represented the religious fervour of the common folks. These minor communities have always showcased their disapproval of conservative

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religious system. Any discourse on religion in Indian history would account for the various religious movements. That is why any analytical study of any piece of Bengali literature especially vernacular cannot be possible without a thorough revelation of the religious cults. Sahajiya school advocates the fact that 'truth' can only be 'intuited within in the most unconventional way through initiation in the *Tattva* and the practice of Yoga' (Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 58). The natural path that the Sahajiya school recommends is very much different from that of any contemporary religious institutions. Instead of suppressing the sexual desires, Sahajiyas encourage the masses to transform their sex-passions through yoga to realize the truth. According to Bauls, this attainment of 'self-realization' can occur only if one proceeds through the 'Sahaja- path', i.e. the most natural pathway one can have. That is why, this has been called a 'reverse path'. Thus, 'by turning upside-down and taking along the *ulto path* (reverse path) that which has descended to the lowest psycho/physical state (the muladhar or six petals) and raising it to the highest (the two petals or thousand petals), enlightenment ensues, and desire becomes devotion" (Chapwell 260). In a nutshell, this path defies futile paraphernalia of rites. It was Saraha-pada from the Sahajiya school who severely criticized '*caturvarna*' and proclaimed that it is absolutely irrational to place Brahmins at the top on the basis of certain myths (Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 62). He was of the view that no rituals or ceremonial rites could transform an ordinary human being into a Brahmin. These practices are useless. So, dichotomy which existed between higher and lower sects, according to him, is because of the fact that the entire humankind has been manipulated by an illusion created by religion.

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The Non-Bengali medieval mystic saints of Northern India had also expressed their standpoint by using the vernacular medium. They advocated "secular humanism that negates division on the basis of religion, caste and creed" and it "has the immense strength that has provided a protective shield against violence and hatred to people for ages" (Mukhopadhyay 9). Kabir, Dadu and Nanak were the chief exponents of this school who had subscribed to the unification of Sahajiya tradition with Sufism. These Saint-poets came into prominence earlier than Baul, which means that they belonged to the Buddhist Sahajiya school. Kabir whose poems, couplets and songs consist of his staunch denunciation of orthodox Hindus and Muslims, once exclaimed: "The Hindus have died by worshipping the gods and the Turks have died by going on pilgrimage; the yogins have died by matting hair,- none of them have got at the truth" (qtd. in Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 400). For Kabir, Casteism has only brought in an aura of phantasm which deceive the commoners into believing in the sacred rites. Kabir had never differentiated a Sudra from a Brahmin, because mere birthright can never make anyone a Brahmin. People go through Vedas, scriptures but none bother about finding out truth which must be discovered. The principal requirement is to decontaminate one's mind through heartfelt love of Lord, and salvation is only possible in the name of the saviour (Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 402). The nine Bhaktis which Vedas boasts of are of no use because these are downright falsehood as they cannot unite our mind with God. Kabir wholeheartedly advocated a deviation from this conventional path in order

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to acquire true knowledge. It was primarily Kabir who took the responsibility to cause a dramatic change which is reflected in the early middle period of vernacular literature.

In sixteenth century, Dadu who took the revolutionary lead propounded by Kabir became an upstanding descendent of it. He too believed that a huge meshwork of illusion has been made available to the masses by the beguilers. What Dadu preached to the general masses is that the best kind of prayer is to "worship by love", and that is " the best kind of prayer; such love involves no activities whatsoever, neither should there be any fixed time and place for it" (Dasgupta *Obscure Religious* 404). Like Kabir, Dadu too dedicated himself in making people understand the fact that no ritualistic act of Hindu or Muslim leads them to the 'real path'. Every religion considers their path to be the actual path while there lies no similarity between them. Dadu reprobated these regulations which grew out of sectarianism. No knowledge is complete without the name of lord and this lord is a formless reality which can inhabit our body. There are many learned mentors who are tired of reading scriptures yet they could not attain salvation. Most of the pundits are self-obsessed, instead of demeaning their self-esteem they assist their avid followers to kill their opponent class to help building their propaganda among the dupes. Since an ideal guru is hard to find, people remain behind the clutches of dogmas. Guru plays a pivotal role in Baul philosophy:

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Guru, put good thought into my mind
So that I do not forget you.
Guru, the person to whom you show no mercy
Is always beset with evil thoughts.
You are the charioteer of my heart's chariot.
I go wherever you drive me. (qtd. in Datta 448)

Non-Bengali Medieval saints proposed an alternative 'path' to attain liberation and that path begins with 'Sahaja'. The notion of 'ultimate reality' was proposed by the Sahajiya school adapted by the Bauls who identified it with the idea of 'supreme beloved' found in Sufi-ism. Santa-poets actually paved the way for Bauls. Regarding Sahaja, Dadu once said that "When the mind reached the Sahaja state all waves of duality vanished away,- hot and cold became the same" (qtd. in Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious* 419). From such an affirmation, conclusion might be drawn that Sahaja stands for love and devotion which actually enables one to be aware of the Lord. All these lead to the fulfillment of 'Sahaja' path.

Thus, to evaluate how Baul performs their subverting efforts, we need to preview their venture with a different outlook. Since, Bauls remain uninvolved in any political movements, their resisting attitude is different. The uniqueness of Baul sect rests on their autonomous living. Such an autonomy not only provides them sustenance to survive but also allow others to join them. Since they represent the marginalized section of our society, and although there are no revolts or riots, it does not necessarily imply that every dominated class meekly yield to a dominant class.

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The culture of 'subversion' is widely contrary to the known modes of protests. Baul as a medium of subversive culture repudiates the supremacy of dominant culture by following an unwonted path. First of all, they rely on a different practicing aspect i.e. 'ulta patha' for attaining liberation and their concern with the 'self' which rules out the existence of the 'other'. The absence of this 'other' does not mean Bauls lacked enemies. During 19th century, when Bengal Renaissance was at its peak, Bauls couldn't get away with the elitist bias of urban literati. They unreservedly debunked the ethics of religious syncretism fostered for so long by Bauls. As an aftermath of this situation, many lower-caste Hindus and Muslims accepted Bauls and adapted their lifestyle to free themselves from the dominant Brahman circle. The growing popularity of Sahajiyas and Bauls lured the powerful Brahmins and Mullahs to suppress them to make people avoid their dedicated and egalitarian approach. Situation became worse after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, when conservative Shariati Islamic union began assaulting Bauls of Bengal at the end of 19th century. In Bengal, sectarian strife has always been intensified by dominant groups and there are numerous examples of such tensions happening during Baul performances. The ruling orthodox Hindu leaders too directed campaigns and composed sarcastic songs to criticize their syncretistic institutions. A very relevant instance of it can be given when Maulana Riyajuddin Ahmad penned down a Bengali tract entitled *Baul Dhangsher Fatwa*, which contained straightforward injunctions to anyhow subdue Baul and other Sahajiya cults throughout Bengal (Dasgupta, "The Bauls" 82). However, the Bauls successfully overcame these onslaughts and kept on propagating their Sahajiya views.

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