

ESSAY

Understanding Baul language

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Baul bard Lalon says: *Kiba Ruper Jhalak Diche Dvidale; Ache Adi Makkah Ei Manab Dehe* (What beauty flashes on the two-petaled lotus / the original Mecca is in this human body).

Radharomon, another baul, says: *"Manush tare chinrey vaibey, tor dehey majhe biraj kore ke?"* (Know the man who exists in your body?)

"Deher majhe guru thuiya shishyya hoilait kar?" (Having Guru in the body, who do you become disciple of?)

Hason Raja, a mesmeric mystic, in one of his songs says: *"Tare keu dhoritey na pare; shokol ronger manush ek thake mor ghore."* (No one can catch Him; a person of many colors stays in my room.) *"Ami dhoritey na pari go tare, chinitey na pari go tare; ke re samailo mor ghore."* (I can't catch Him; I can't even recognize Him; who stopped in front of my house?)

Baul songs, stuffed with enigmas and codes, sum up the Baul philosophy of *Dehattaya* (Truth in the Body), probably the central theme of Baulism, outlining the aliorism, "Whatever is in the universe is in the receptacle (the body)".

In many ways, Bauls' body-centric philosophy is connected to the thinking of controversial Iranian Sufi thinker, teacher and writer Monsur Hallaji's *"Anal Huq"* (I am God), to the transcendentalist Emerson, the American poet, who in his poem *Gnothi Seauton* said: "Take this fact unto thy soul, God dwells in thee", to Sufi saint Jalauddin Rumi's "Everything of the universe derives from my body", to *Upanishad's* "Attamanong Bid", and to the monotheistic Vaisnavism of "I am Brahma". Also, Tagore has a number of songs that talk about the Supreme Being, expressed through the physical existence of a human being.

In fact, all of them hold the view that the body is the microcosm of the universe, and since everything is contained in the body, all worship should be centered on the body.

The Bauls, like tantrics, locate cities, mountains, rivers, pilgrimage places, virtually everything on the map, in the human body.

Therefore, to understand the body-centric Baul songs, conscious efforts should be made to decode the songs, filled with language riddles, using imagery from daily life-activities, such as fishing, farming, sailing, trade and even robbery, foreclosure, and litigation as spiritual metaphors. But before demystifying the inscrutability of the songs, we must look into what Bauls think about the body.

Like tantrics, they hold that the body is the only instrument for gaining liberation and conquering death. Moreover, like tantric tradition, the Bauls do not believe in going against man's nature by suppressing sexual instincts; rather, through sexual union involving yogic practices of breath control, they seek to regain the state of cosmic unity

that existed before the creation of the universe.

The Bauls, like other tantric yogic practitioners, conceive of the body as having two forms: the first form is the material or gross body (*sthula sarira*) made up of the skeleton, muscles, organs, etc., which has nine or ten openings or *doors* which are ears (2) nostrils(2), eyes (2), mouth(1) anus(1) and sexual organ(1). In the Baul tradition, the tenth door may refer to the female sexual organ or to the two-petaled lotus located between the eyebrows. The second form is also an invisible subtle body, called *suksma sarfra*. The Baul conception of the subtle body for the most part resembles that of the Hindu tantras and of other yogic texts.

The Bauls adopted from the Hindu tantras the system of chakras (centers) arranged along the spinal column from the perineum to the top of the head. These chakras are visualized as lotuses of varying number of petals and are often referred to in Baul songs by the number of petals.

The seven principal chakras in ascending order are as follows: the *muladhar chakra* at the base of the spinal column, with four petals; the *svadhisthan chakra* in the region of the genitals, with six petals; the *manipur chakra* at the level of the navel, with ten petals; the *anahata chakra* at the level of the heart, with twelve petals; the *visuddha chakra* in the region of the throat, with sixteen petals; the *ajna chakra* between the eyebrows, with two petals; and the *sahasrar chakra* at the top of the head or above the head, with a thousand petals. Muslim Bauls also describe the body in terms of *mokams* (Arabic *maqamat*), "stations" or "stages."

The Sufis of Bengal equate the four mokams with the *muladhar, manipur, ajna, and anahata chakras*. In addition, the Bauls include another mokam, the *la mokam*, equivalent to the *sahasrar* or *ajna chakra*. *La mokam*, literally meaning "no place," is so called because it represents transcendent space where all dualities are reintegrated into the Supreme.

The subtle body contains a network of numerous channels or naps that serve as conduits for breath. As in Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, three naps are of prime importance in *sadhana*. The Bauls refer to them by the Hindu tantric terms *ira, pingala, and susumna*: The *ira* is to the left of the spinal column, the *pingala* to the right and the *susumna* is in the middle. These naps are identified with the holy rivers *Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati*. The place where they come together in the *muladhar chakra* is named the *Triveni* which is an important locus in *Sadhana*.

Lalon says:

"In slippery quay of the Triveni waves surge without wind.

The dumb speak, the deaf hear, and a halfpenny tests as gold."

The aim of Baul *Sadhana* is to reverse the cosmic process that is to return to the *Sahaj* state which is the original condition of non-duality that existed before Creation. Male and female principles, *Puruja* and *Prakrti* or *Sakti*, are contained within the microcosmic body of each person, mirroring the macrocosm. The male principle, equated with semen, resides at the top of the head in the highest *chakra*, the *Sahasrar*. Here the Supreme exists in a state of perfect unity without any qualities or form; here he is the *Atal Iswar* (the motionless Lord). Since in the *Sahasrar* everything is integrated into the motionless Lord, there is no duality between the enjoyer and the enjoyed, between God and the devotee.

For *Sadhana* to be successful, it is necessary to bring under control the six enemies (lust, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity and envy) and the ten sense organs (the five organs of perception and the five organs of action). Unbridled lust (*Kama*) personified by the god *Kama* (also called *Madan*) is man's worst enemy. In order to effect the transformation of lust (*Kama*), into true love, *Prema*, the male practitioner, imagines himself as a woman. By "becoming a woman," it is felt his union with a woman will no longer be motivated by desire for physical pleasure.

The active form of the Supreme, called the *Sahaj Manush* or *Adhor Manush* becomes manifest in the lowest *chakra* i.e. the *Muladhar*, during a woman's menstrual period. It is at this time that the Bauls perform their *Sadhana* to "catch" Him.

Baul songs say: "In the *Muladhar* is the mother of the world, and in the *Sahasrar* is the father. If the two are united, you won't die or be born again."

Sexuality plays an important part in the Bauls' search for *Adhor Manush*, the ultimate truth. Like the *Tantrics*, the Bauls believe that the means to experience divine love is through the union of the physical forms of man and woman.

Bauls call divinity by a number of names, reflecting their eclecticism, such as Allah and Ahad ("the One"), Krishna, Man of the Heart. The other names of the divinity are : Uncatchable Moon, Unknown Man, Natural Man (*Sahaj Manus*), Uncatchable Man, Golden Friend, Unknown Bird, or simply Lord (*Shai*).

In quest of *Moner Manush*, Lalon in one of his songs says:

Milon hobe koto dine amar moner manusherei shoney. (When will I be united with the Man of my Heart?)

Searching for the 'Man of the Heart, Radharomon says: *"Moner manush na pailey, moner kotha kooyo na."* (If you don't get *Moner manush*, don't speak your mind.)

Talking about 'Golden Friend', Hason Raja in his song says:

"Shona bondher lagiya mone loy shob teyagiya tar kachhe thaki giya." (I'll give up everything for my Golden Friend and I'll go

and stay with Him."

Whatever ways the divinity has been expressed, the intentional use of enigmatic language, however, poses an impediment to common understanding. To comprehend Baul songs, it is important to decode the technical terminology that are often composed in an ambiguous style, characterized by code words with several layers of meanings, obscure imagery, erotic symbolism, paradoxical statements, and enigmas. At the most basic level of the ambiguous style is code words or phrases that are the building blocks of the esoteric songs.

Baul songs are composed in an ambiguous style that resembles the *Shandhya Bhasa* (intentional language) of the Buddhist tantric *Caryagiti* or *Caryapad*, the oldest extant texts in Bengali, as well as the enigmatic language of many other esoteric Indian traditions with a tantric background, such as the Sants, Naths, and Vaisnava Sahajiyas.

Bauls do not like to let others know their words, objectives and works related to their worship. The techniques related to their austere devotion, their regrets, suggestions, beliefs and their appeal and surrender to the Creator are expressed in special terms. Bauls have used these special expressions in their songs. Not only did they use their own terminology, but also they assimilated them from *Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi* and *Vaisnab Sadaks* (people who practise ascetic austerities) communities into their terms.

The language of their songs is intended to veil their ritual significance from the unskilled who would find these esoteric practices objectionable, and at the same time to reveal to the initiated the ineffable truth which defies logic and cannot be communicated directly through ordinary discourse.

Bauls have made the words of their meditation incomprehensible for some definite reasons:

- 1) It is because of the prohibition of the Guru
- 2) It is because they think it to be unwise to express those lingoos to someone who has not been introduced to the secret knowledge
- 3) It is because their meditation is woman-centered
- 4) It is because of the fear of the persons who are versed in scriptural knowledge
- 5) It is because they believe that the efficacy of their practices of ascetic austerities will disappear if they let their secret things be known to all.

Some metaphors in Baul songs are common to the language of *Tantric* texts, such as "sky" for the *Sahasrar Chakra* and "moon" for semen and the Supreme. Others are peculiar to the Bauls; for instance, "new moon night" to signify menstruation, or "full moon on the new moon night" to indicate the appearance of the *Sahaj Manus* in menstrual blood.

Baul poets freely invent code words so that many of them are idiosyncratic, such as Lalon's "city of mirrors" symbolizing the *Ajna*

Chakra. Moreover, the same symbol may have several meanings depending on the context, further complicating the task of interpreting the songs. Thus "moon," in addition to semen and the Supreme, can also designate the female, as in "the moon's new moon night" (that is a woman's menstrual period). Numbers are often used as cipher. For example, the number 16, whether it modifies "guards", "enemies", or "rich men," refers to the 10 senses and the six enemies. Sometimes more than one number can indicate the same concept; nine or 10 modifying doors stand for the nine or 10 openings of the body.

Sometimes an entire song is an extended metaphor. This is often the case with *Dehatattwa* songs. The body may be depicted as a house with two pillars, nine rooms (the *Chakras*; although the standard Hindu *Tantric* system lists seven; they can vary in number depending on the tradition), a basement (*Muladhar*), and an attic (*Sahasrar*) in which a madman, who is the Lord, sits; or a bird cage with nine doors (the body), housing an unknown bird (the soul); or a broken-down boat, constantly leaking water (semen); or a tree of beauty that produces moon fruit (offspring). The city of Mecca has also been used in Baul songs to symbolize the body.

Paradoxes in Baul songs are of two types: those that do not seem to have any esoteric significance other than hinting at the ineffable and paradoxical nature of the non-dual *Sahaj* state, and those that when decoded yield a hidden meaning alluding to secret doctrines. Besides, enigmas are occasionally created by using letters of the Perso-Arabic alphabet. Lalon's "unknown man" who signifies the *Sahaj Manus* is described as "Zer on Aliph", and "Zabar on Mim". "Zer" is the vowel marker "I", and "Aliph" stands for Allah, while "Zabar" is the vowel marker "A", and "Mim" symbolizes Muhammad. The solution to the enigma lies not only in the phonetic values of "Zer" and "Zabar" but also in their positions and literal meanings. "Zer" is placed below a letter and means "inferior," whereas "Zabar" is placed above a letter and means "superior." Thus by referring to the "unknown man" as "Zer on Aliph, Zabar on Mim" Lalon is saying that this figure is "inferior" to or beneath Allah and "superior" to or above the Prophet.

It will be inappropriate if we don't quote some lines of Lalon in this connection:

I've heard telling of a man:
zer on alif, zabar on mim.

Although the meanings of the songs may sometimes be obscure, their simplicity, vigor, and felicity of expression, their humor and dazzling imagery, and their aphoristic statements that apply to a specific religious context as well as to everyday life makes them some of the best poetry in the Bengali language.

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LETTER FROM BOSTON

"Abar Ashibo Phirey": Bengal's soul

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I am not a poet but I love to hang out with poets. Some of Boston's Bengali literary stars with whom I regularly share the first drafts of my literary endeavours also happen to be poets, and I often attend their gatherings. *Lekhoni* and *Bhin Golardho* are two well-known domains in the Bangla writers' community, and they celebrate the National Poetry Month, which falls in April, in an artistic manner every year. April being the first full month of spring in the USA, as well as the month of Bengali New Year, we unleash our creative energy and feelings of love, with expressions of joy and fellowship via various activities during this month.

Ernest Hemingway once said, "But you knew there would always be the spring, as you knew the river would flow again after it had frozen." No sooner that spring arrives in late March than I look forward to three major events: *Apriler Poddoo Paathh*, *Pahela Baisakh* celebrations, and *Baisakhi Mela*. *Apriler Poddoo Paathh* (APP) is the annual poetry reading festival jointly organized by *Lekhoni* and *Bhin Golardho*. The Daily Star readers might remember my account of this event from three years ago where I gave a brief description of this gathering (Literature Section, April 27, 2008). At this event, poetry lovers and poets get together on a Sunday afternoon and read, enjoy and talk about poetry. Most bring their own poetry to read and share, but others like myself, come to breathe and renew our ties with poetry.

I would be remiss if I don't mention the efforts of *Lekhoni* and *Bhin Golardho* in celebrating APP on a regular basis and bringing together poetry lovers of various national origins (including the USA, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the UK) who come together from neighbouring states,

but also from as far away as North Carolina and Pennsylvania. *Lekhoni* has been blessed with the active participation of Gouri Dutta, Manisha Roy, Swapna Roy and Rahul Roy, while *Bhin Golardho* is the brainchild of Badiuzzaman Khan Nasim. Each of these organizations has been active in other capacities in their own community, and *Lekhoni* and its members have always extended a helping hand to struggling writers, including myself.

This year APP was held on April 17 at the elegant meeting room of Jayanti Bandopadhyay's apartment building in Danvers, a city north of Boston. On a bright sunny afternoon, we started at 2 o'clock and for the next five hours we read and listened to poems, written by the participants as well as more recognized poets of the world, and then finally after a short dinner break we transitioned to music. In his opening comments, the master of ceremonies, Sumit Nag, set the tone for the afternoon by providing a brief background to modern Bengali poetry. Sumit very aptly expressed our feelings on this occasion when he said, "We come here to not only show our appreciation and love for the poets who gave voice to our many sentiments, but also to discover them in new ways."

After the introduction, Satyapriyo Sarkar read three poems, one of them by H.M Ershad. Next, it was my turn, and I read from Tagore's moving love song, "Jodi Nai Jeeban Puro Nai Holo" and a modern English poem by Dean Young, "The Rhythms Pronounced Themselves Then Vanish". Young is the William Livingston Chair of Poetry at the University of Texas, Austin.

Next Sajal Banerjee read one of his own compositions, a modern poetry entitled "Ekta Chakurir Shondhaney" followed by

Utpal Sengupta who read two poems, including one by Taslima Nasreen in which she expresses her yearnings for her homeland. Sitting by the Mediterranean Sea, the poet beckons the sea gulls and asks them to carry her on its wings to the shores of the Bay of Bengal!

Khan Farabi was a young poet who died when I was at Dhaka University. I went back thirty years when Jayanta Nag read from Farabi's verses. Next, there were a couple of poems alluding to the foibles of our politicians, both in West Bengal and Bangladesh. It was interesting to note that we heard verses both mocking and saluting the late Jyoti Basu, the latter by Jayanta Nag who read his own composition in which he paid homage to Jyoti Basu after his death. Obviously, beauty is in the eye of the beholder! Nasreen read Kazi Nazrul Islam's "Samyobadi" a selection that was influenced by her shared belief in the message that Kazi Nazrul expounded many years ago.

The next poet, Prithviraj Choudhury, who among other things is a professor, musician, and actor, read two pieces, including "Itee Apu", a fictional letter written by Bibhuti Bhushan's Apu in search of his roots, from his own recently published book entitled "Shikhon Ekhon Wireless". Prithviraj travelled from Philadelphia for this occasion and we were told that his recent book ceremony was attended by poet Joy Goswami in Kolkata. A few others also read their own poems, including Gouri Dutta, Manisha Roy, Kunal Joardar, Paroma Paul, Samrat Chakraborty, Dipankar Mukherjee, Jayanti Bandopadhyay, and Satabhisha Mukherjee. We also heard "Porajito Postman" by Badiuzzaman Nasim, "Jeerno Jama" by Sudipto Biswas, "Nishwobder Shobdo" by Gulshan Ara Kazi, and "Manush Eney Dibey" by Hosne Ara

Begum. Papiya Banerjee read with emotion her own "Ekanto Oboshorey". Piyal and Neera, a couple from Connecticut, played the roles of two ex-lovers who meet after a long absence on a moving train, and recited Tagore's "Hothath Dekha" with heart. Neruda's love poem "Tonight I can write the saddest lines" was read with passion by Nilay Mukherjee. Other participants worth noting are Alope Dey, Shanta Nag, Krishna Dasgupta, and Kazi Tamjidul Huda. As each of these talented Bangalees came to the microphone, we travelled the globe with them and peeked into the realms of new and old poets who wrote on themes as varying as the current economic plight, forlorn love, dirty politics, and beautiful nature. The popularity of this event was evident from the geographical scatter of the attendees, some of whom drove hundreds of miles from their homes, to celebrate this day. *Apriler Poddoo Paathh* was truly a magnet which brought us all together for a few hours.

Postscript: I must add that from a personal angle, the most attractive part of the afternoon was the food and the musical soiree that followed. This year, the food masters (Saema Khan, Manisha Roy and Gouri Dutta) decided to take a break from home cooking and ordered the main course, biryani, from "Darul Kabab" a famous eatery in Cambridge. The dessert, freshly made, *lal mohan*, and the pies were just the icing on the cake, as they say. At the impromptu musical soiree following dinner, we all joined in with the gifted ones, Nasreen Shibli, Shanta Nag, Kazi Belal, Sujata Bhattacharya, Bulbul Chakraborty, Sumit Nag and Jayanti Bandopadhyay.

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NEWS

Jury for DSC Prize 2012

The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature announced the Jury for its 2012 edition in New Delhi on May 3. The five member judging panel comprises eminent names from the international literary fraternity - Dr. Alastair Niven, Dr. Fakrul Alam, Faiza S Khan, Ira Pande (Chair of the jury) and Marie Brenner. The Jury brings in a wide canvas of experience and represents the interests and creative principles of writing pertaining to the South Asian region - an agenda that the DSC Prize is committed to promoting.

This Jury will be responsible for assessing the entries over a period of three and a half months to arrive at a Longlist in September 2011, followed by the Shortlist (5-6 titles) in October 2011 and eventually the winner of the US \$50,000 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2012 in January 2012. The Call for Entries is currently open till May 15, 2011 and submissions can be made through www.dscprize.com.

Speaking on the occasion, Ira Pande, Chair of the Jury said, "I am delighted and honoured to be part of an effort to showcase South Asia whose rich literature draws on several languages and cultures. I am sure that this handsome award will encourage translations that will unveil this extraordinary treasury of imagination to the world outside it."

The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature is guided by an international Advisory Committee comprising MJ Akbar, Urvashi Butalia, Tina Brown, William Dalrymple, Lord Meghnad Desai, David Godwin, Surina Narula, Senath Walter Perera, Nayantara Sehgal and Michael Worton. The DSC Prize is unique since it is not ethnicity driven in terms of the author's origin and is open to any author belonging to any part of the globe as long as the work is based on the South Asian region, its culture and its people.

The first DSC Prize for South Asian Literature was awarded to HM Naqvi for his debut novel *Home Boy* (HarperCollins India) in January 2011. . . (press release).