

## **Baul Music as Oral Tradition of Bengal**

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*Bengal has glorious tradition of music from time immemorial. Baul songs stand at the apex of indigenous musical hierarchy of Bengal. The presence of Baul songs was marked from around 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This is well known as a specific genre of mystic music. The study is based on secondary data. This is an attempt of analyzing collected documents on this issue. Several researches have done on this subject. Here the present researcher is only concerned about Baul songs in Bengal. The relevant information is collected from the research works completed previously. The objectives of the paper are – 1] to analyse the nature of Baul songs as oral tradition and 2] to discuss the nature of the songs. Baul songs are holistic representation of face to face communication. Some clear aspects are prominently noted in this context like socio- cultural perspective, constructive orientation and deconstructive focus.*

*A perfect classification of oral tradition based on form, content and function is hardly possible. Different scholars have given different categories of oral tradition. E.Bernheim distinguishes between the following categories of oral traditions: narratives, legends, anecdotes, proverbs and historical lays. Baul song is not simply an instrument for the amusement of masses. It should be considered as a subject of serious study. This genre of music bears the most valuable features of folk tradition. The recognized and celebrated component of Baul songs are anonymous and collective creation.*

**Key Words:** BAUL, SONG, ORAL TRADITION, LIFE

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Bengal has glorious tradition of music from time immemorial. Baul songs stand at the apex of indigenous musical hierarchy of Bengal. The presence of Baul songs was marked from around 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This is well known as a specific genre of mystic music. The term Baul is supposedly derived from Vatul or bahura, colloquially known as baule. The concept means dreamer, mystic and so on. They consider human body as the powerful medium to explore the inner self through yogic practice. The role of guru is highly significant for them not only in singing sphere but in philosophical aspect also. Baul community usually lives a solitary life, far away from home. They are refrained from conventional religion. The Baul is engaged in freedom of living entirely in accordance with his own feeling. The community has an understanding as being ‘madly in love with the Divine Self’. The word Baul denotes "mad" or "crazy." Bauls define "Divine Spirit" as "the man of the heart," "the man of the mind," or "the unattainable man." The focal point of Baul song is linked with its identification with mass. This characteristic has made this genre popular in the overall musical field of Bengal. Baul songs have a trend of challenge against the predominant elite culture of the then society. They try to describe their theme through many poetical expressions, as in words such as flower, lamp, moon, fish, or bird, and jewel, treasure or divine light. They use references to well-known objects with the simple language. The absence of well-considered artistic rules is the main strength of this kind of song. Easy understanding is considered as time honoured feature of Baul poetry. This simplicity and easiness of meanings and ideas of Baul songs are completely outward. The genre of songs is deeply connected with serious meanings undoubtedly. The Bauls are constituted as a cultural group rather than an “ethnic” group. Most of them are wandering singers and instrumentalists who once wandered among the villages and towns of India’s Bengal and in neighboring areas of Bangladesh. Now they are more likely to be heard in fairs, festivals and through the media.

Oral tradition refers to the cultural processes and products that though handed overtime are not written. The term ‘oral’ implies unwritten and verbal, something expressed in words. The term tradition can mean variously culture as a whole; all the inherited elements in a society; According to Jan Vansina, oral traditions are verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. David Henige adds that oral tradition should be commonly or universally known in a given culture. For J.C.Miller, an oral tradition is ‘a narrative describing, or purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it.’ Any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in the process of oral development that began with original communication.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data. This is an attempt of analyzing collected documents on this issue. Several researches have done on this subject. Here the present researcher is only concerned about Baul songs in Bengal. The relevant information is collected from the research works completed previously. The objectives of the paper are – 1] to analyse the nature of Baul songs as oral tradition and 2] to discuss the nature of the Baul songs.

## III. DISCUSSION

### BAUL SONG AS ORAL TRADITION

The presence of Baul songs was marked from around 15<sup>th</sup> Century. This is the liveliest genre of unwritten as well as verbal aspect of oral tradition. The evolution occurs in an impersonal and continuous flow. This is associated with transmission of embedded cultural information. The Baul song as expression of oral tradition can be linked with several sources like eye witness, hearsay, dream and even hallucination and so on. Baul songs are holistic representation of face to face communication. Some clear aspects are prominently noted in this context like socio- cultural perspective, constructive orientation and deconstructive focus.

A perfect classification of oral tradition based on form, content and function is hardly possible. Different scholars have given different categories of oral tradition. E. Bernheim distinguishes between the following categories of oral traditions: narratives, legends, anecdotes, proverbs and historical lays. He further distinguishes between the narrative which is a first hand, witness report, and all other sources consisting of second hand, hearsay reports of events, which must be treated as if they were legends. A. Feder supplies an additional distinction to that established by Bernheim between first hand and second hand traditions: that between anonymous traditions and traditions of which the authorship is known. Under second hand traditions he has one group containing such sources such as rumours, anecdotes, historical proverbs, and pithy sayings, and another group of sources referring to more remote periods of the past, which he calls folk tradition or oral tradition in the strict sense of the term. To this second group belong historical lays and spoken traditions or sagas. W. Bauer divides oral traditions into two groups. The first group comprises all sources-regardless of whether they have survived intact or have become distorted in the process of transmission. For the second group no personal authorship can be discovered, and which have spread more or less of their own accord. This is the group where there is a role of assigned rumours, myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, proverbs, and folksongs. According to Ruth Finnegan, there are three main classes of oral tradition like recognized literary forms, generalized historical knowledge, and personal recollections.

Baul songs represent a conglomeration of these three components as a whole. There are clear presence of recognized literary forms, evidences of generalized historical knowledge and assimilation of personal recollections. It is the product of a continuing reflection about the past, the goal of which was not to find out "what really happened," but to establish what in the past, believed to be real, was relevant to the present. It follows that oral traditions are not just a source about the past, but a historiography of the past, an account of how people have interpreted it. Oral traditions are also sources from the inside. Without oral traditions, very little would be known about the past of large parts of the world from the inside. Vansina (1965) recognized that oral materials could be of potential value to historians, whether proverbs, poetry/songs, lengthy historicized texts, or epics. He urged historians to regard these materials in much the same way as they had traditionally regarded written documents— as capable of being exploited for both direct and indirect historical information. Ethnologists who have attempted to study the past of people 'without writing' have faced some problems and they believe or think that oral tradition are never reliable or it may contain a certain amount of truth. They also believe that it is impossible to assess the amount of truth contained in oral tradition so it should be thoroughly examined (Vansina, 1965).

Sanat Kumar Bose says in his article "Baul songs of Bengal," that "the tunes in eastern districts of Bengal have semblances of Bhitiali of the northern region of Bhiawiya. Those of western parts are slightly different, and usually very lengthy." [As mentioned in Origin and construction of the melodies in Baul songs of Bengal by J. Kuckertz ] In the Samsad Bengali – English Dictionary the definition of Baul is "one of a class of Hindu stoical devotees singing songs in a special mode illustrating their doctrine." Thus it can be said that a great variation is marked in the genre of Baul songs. This is true not only for the presentation of the songs but the stylization of the song also. Baul songs seem to be merely escapism to evade the cosmopolitan complexities. Baul songs speak of knowing one's self. Singers were linked with a regimented lifestyle with spiritual overtone and debate over orthodoxy. The institutional set up linked with Baul music is known as Akhra. Interesting aspect is that cultural diversity appears prominently visualized in Baul songs. Tradition of geographical locations can be regarded as source of variations of rendering songs. Popularly this genre of songs has an earnest, earthy feel, and features a full-throated male vocalist, accompanied by a rather strange-sounding stringed instrument and some jingly percussion. The melody is passionate and full of changes of mood, and exhibits much syncopation, which adds to its excitement. Clearly, this is not a "classical" raga, but something

much more raw and direct, perhaps expressing the feelings of the down-and out. They are composed in colloquial Bengali, using imagery from daily life-activities such as fishing, farming, sailing, trade and even robbery, foreclosure, and litigation-as spiritual metaphors. [Carol Salomon: 1995] 'Baul songs provide no clues as to how far back the tradition goes. They are primarily transmitted orally from guru to disciple and from singer to singer, although they may also occasionally be written down in notebooks. As they are passed down, the language tends to be modernized, thus giving no indication of the date of composition.' [C. Salomon: 1995]

According to Ashutosh Bhattacharjee Bengali Folk music can be divided into two broad categories-rhythmic and arrhythmic. (2007:134) Rhythmic songs are generally group songs, accompanied by group dances or manual work. Songs sung solo and without any dance or musical instruments are mostly arrhythmic in nature. Examples of rhythmic songs are sari while bhatiyali and marriage songs are examples of the arrhythmic variety. In most of the cases baul songs often are limited to certain areas as regional songs. Baul songs as oral tradition are related to several kinds of purposes like functional, ritual, love, calendric, work, devotional, kirtan, dance, poetic, mourning songs and so on.

#### NATURE OF BAUL SONGS:

On the basis of geographical location and differential ritualistic practices, a system of classification OF Baul songs was done by Dr. Upendranath Bhattacharya. Three segments are there among the Bauls. The first group was comprised of Muslim Bauls and fakirs of East and West Bengal. Hindu Bauls of East and West Bengal are parts of second group. Third group includes those who are linked with slightly different practices. Similarly Baul songs can be segmented into three divisions – a) those who are based on tantric worship, b) Muslim fakir Bauls and c) Vaishnava Baul songs of Nabadwip group and radh group. Some other thinkers point out that two classes of Bauls are prominent in this context. One group consists of ascetic Bauls who reject family life and other group of Bauls live with their families. Ascetic Bauls renounce family life and society and survive on alms. They have no fixed dwelling place, but move from one akhra to another. They are treated as outcastes. Women, dedicated to the service of ascetics, are known as sevadasis (seva, service+dasi, and maidservant). A male Baul can have one or more sevadasis, who are associated with him in the act of devotion.

Bauls with family live with their wives, children and relations in a secluded part of a village. They do not mix freely with other members of the community. According to Musicologist Dr. Karunamaya Goswami, 'Baul songs always carry a double meaning, the outward meaning guarding the inner sense, and this double entendre was known as 'sandha vachana' i.e. code language. The outward meaning of the songs has indeed a literary flavor, for the songs really follow a traditional pattern, but the outward sense was intended only to disguise the inner meaning which recorded the mystic practice, experience and emotion of the masters in their process of self realization.' [As mentioned by M. Haque in From Akhara to Fusion – the transformation of Baul music in Bangladesh]

A fusion has taken place in framing of Baul cult because three major streams of thought are involved in this context. These three forms are Saktism of the Puranic religion, Vaisnavism, Buddhist mysticism and Sufism. A ritualistic coexistence is marked here. Presence of cultural assimilation also takes place in the sphere of languages. In the lyrics of the song scriptures of Hindu occur side by side with Islamic scripture. The use of twilight language, 'Sandhya Bhasha', of the song is the powerful resource of attraction. Process of creative assimilation is the corner stone of their melodious songs. In this genre of song Chaitanyadeva's Vaisnavism has a strong and clear influence. This tradition had attached focal importance to the Kirtan form of music. On the other, the influence of the Sufistic method is combined there with the presence of song and dance as a mode of syncretistic religious communication. This form of communication goes beyond the oral tradition of music. But with this new form the communication comes with the common people becomes easier. Upendranath Bhattacharya published his ground-breaking study *The Bauls of Bengal and Baul Songs (Banglar Baul o Baul Gan)*, based on many years of field work. In this book he proved that Bauls, whether Hindu or Muslim, practice more or less the same sexual rites, and that these rites are central to Baul religion and to an understanding of their songs. [As mentioned by C. Salomon in Bauls ]

Baul song is not simply an instrument for the amusement of masses. It should be considered as a subject of serious study. This genre of music bears the most valuable features of folk tradition. The recognized and celebrated component of Baul songs are anonymous and collective creation. This genre put emphasis on dynamism, textual variation, and social function. 'Bauls, a sect of folk religion, constitute a small group in numerical strength but they exceed all sorts of limits and bindings in their age-long effort to propagate their philosophical understandings and deep-rooted modes of behaviour through melodious songs and artful dances. Belonging to the tradition-bound community of Bengal, the Bauls bear a rich cultural heritage of the country which has developed through a long process of interactions and harmonization of different manners, customs and practices pertaining to various socio-religious traditions.' [Mondal: 2013]

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