

**READING THE METAPHORS IN BAUL SONGS:  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF  
RURAL COLONIAL BENGAL**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis breaks with existing scholarship on the Bauls by moving away from an exclusive interrogation of their esoteric beliefs and practices. Instead, we foreground the socio-historical dimensions of metaphors found in Baul songs. Rather than using these metaphors as keys to unlock the esoteric registers of Baul praxis, we see how the metaphors themselves are drawn from and mediated by the Baul singer-composers' locations in history and society.

In the Introduction of the thesis, we sensitise the reader to the history and politics of the particular frames used by song-collectors through which the songs—our primary material—have become available to us. Thereafter, we develop our enquiry through five specific case-studies. In each case-study, i.e. those of gender, agrarian relations, domestic space, transportation and spatiality, we look at clusters of metaphors around each of these themes and see how the metaphors themselves reveal clues to both the specificities of the Baul singer-composers' socio-historical locations and their experiences of these locations.

Throughout these studies we remain interested in how Baul singer-composers as members of a larger rural society resist and/or negotiate with the structures of domination. In conclusion, we argue that not only is their resistance intimately tied up with their specific socio-historical experiences—which they often also share with non-Baul contemporaries—but also that both their experiences and their modes of resistance are themselves shifting and historically contingent. Thus, just as we find several shifting layers in their resistance to structures of power, similarly we find multiple shifting locations for their experiential body.

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## Prefatory Notes

A preface, it as been pointed out, is neither a part of nor separate from the body of the main text, ‘neither in the marking, nor in the marchings, nor in the margins, of the book’. Moreover, the *prae-fatio*, the ‘saying before-hand’, is always a lie, a retrospective venture that dissembles in the future tense.<sup>1</sup> And yet, doomed to this curious ‘third place’ and an analytical anachronism as it were, a preface offers us the only space wherein we can accommodate the miscellaneous notes that the thesis demands. In this preface then, we propose to clarify the scope of our study, the structuration of the thesis, our usage of certain key terms and deployment of the transliteration system throughout the thesis.

### On the Scope of the Study:

The thesis will focus primarily, though not solely, on the songs of those Baul sects whose doctrinal beliefs and rituals were predominantly, though not exclusively, influenced by Vaishnav Sahajiya elements—sects that the existing scholarship frequently classifies as ‘Hindu’ Bauls. The inherent bias in the focus of most of the scholarship in Baul studies on these ‘Hindu’ Bauls to the exclusion of the ‘Muslim’ Bauls and/or Fokirs has led some scholars to redress it and turn their academic gaze instead onto these latter groups. Within this latter strand in the Baul scholarship, it has been asserted by some Baul scholars that the ‘Muslim’ Bauls and/or Fokirs form a distinct category which, despite its overlaps with the category of ‘Baul’, cannot be entirely subsumed within it.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, while in some studies, the categories ‘Muslim’ Bauls and Fokirs are used interchangeably while distinguishing them from the Hindu Bauls, a distinction is still drawn in some other studies between these Muslim Baul/Fakirs and general Fakirs.<sup>3</sup> Still other scholars have contended that the entire Baul

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, London: Athlone, 1981, p. 15, 7.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Shaktinath Jha, *Bostubadi Baul: Udbhob, Shomaj Shongskriti O Dorshon*, Calcutta: Lok Shongskriti O Adibasi Shongskriti Kendra (Totthyo O Shongskriti Bibhag, Poschim Bongo Shorkar) [Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre, Department of Information and Culture, West Bengal Government], 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, while Upendranath Bhattacharya classifies Muslim Bauls as Fokirs, he goes on to say that this class of Fokirs is distinguished from the general class of Fokirs by their being termed as *nerar fokir*. “Baul Gan”, *Mashik Boshumoti*, Poush 1365 BS, 2:3. See also, Carol Solomon, “The

tradition is largely indebted to Sufi mystic traditions of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Our decision to limit our study to merely to those Bauls influenced by Sahajiya-Vaishnavism is not due to our disagreement with any of these above arguments. Instead, it is informed by the fact that given the current state of the field as well as our own linguistic limitations, we do not feel equipped to include these influences and categories within our study. Within these Sahajiya-Vaishnav influenced Bauls, however, we find personal names which are both 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. We have included in our study songs by authors with either of these names. However, given the lack of biographical detail and statements of faith by these authors, it is impossible for us to determine whether these personal names signified actual religious affiliation to any abstract religious identity such as Hindu or Muslim. It has been pointed that even as late as 1911, more than two hundred thousand people in India declared their religious affiliations in a census as 'Hindu-Muslim'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in present-day West Bengal too, *patuas* or scroll painters are known to have both Muslim and Hindu names.<sup>6</sup>

It was Upendranath Bhattacharya who, in keeping with the philosophical tenor of his research into Baul songs, and arguably for the first time in Baul scholarship, suggested that Baul songs were equally indebted to philosophical traditions in Sufi Islam and Sahajiya-Vaishnavism. Since Bhattacharya, most Baul scholars have accepted this twin genealogy without any significant socio-historical investigation. Contrasting with this line of thought, social historians of Bengali Islam such as Rafiuddin Ahmed have argued that the majority of Bengali Muslim peasants—those from amongst whom the Bauls

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Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalan Fakir” in Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills ed., *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 271: “There are both Hindu Bauls who are usually Vaishnavas, and Muslim Bauls, who are Sufis and are generally termed fakirs or *nerar* fakirs rather than Bauls.”

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Anwarul Karim, *The Bauls of Bangladesh: A Study of an Obscure Religious Cult*, Kushtia: Lalan Academy, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, J.J. Roy Burman, *Hindu Muslim Syncretic Shrines and Communities*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, Kayhan Irani ed., *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 148.

In this context, it is perhaps worth recalling Ashis Nandy's contention that Indians have a plural self in which the multiple religious and cultural influences of the subcontinent can be discerned: 'Many communities see themselves as simultaneously Hindu and Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim and Hindu and Christian. This is neither a case of multiculturalism, or as the properly educated Indians like to call it, syncretism. It seems to be a case of a society where identities are cross-cutting and the others are telescoped into one's own self, where none of the identities can be adequately depicted or defined without taking into account some other.' Ashis Nandy, "Coping with the Politics of Faiths and Cultures: Between Secular State and Ecumenical Traditions in India" in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, Ashis Nandy and Edmund Terence Gomez eds., *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 135.

were drawn—may not have had much access to the symbolic or philosophical and intellectual traditions of Islam until the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Though Ahmed’s contention is still far from being proved and given that the works of authors such as Ahmad Sharif might actually disprove Ahmed’s contention, this debate is far from settled.<sup>8</sup> In view of this, what is clear is that we cannot automatically assume a Sufi influence on the Bauls. While there is every chance that such an influence exists, its extent and proper contours still need to be mapped on the firm ground of social history. After all, mystical traditions are available within a number of major religions including for example Christianity which too through the agency of the Portuguese in the Bay of Bengal has had a long presence in the region. Yet, we do not thereby assume that mystic Catholicism has contributed anything significant to the Baul cosmology. The current avowal of Sufi lineage might have several other possible routes: first, it might be an artefact of the liberal political agendas of the scholarship of researchers like Bhattacharya; second, it might be a much later reconstitution of an earlier Baul tradition; and finally, it might actually be derived from Bengali versions of Sufi mystic traditions which Sharif has pointed out. Given these large gaps and uncertainties which remain in the scholarship, it is impossible for us at this stage to undertake any comprehensive enquiry into the poetics of experience animating Muslim Baul songs.

In this regard, it might also be cogent to add that while we have not been able to undertake a thorough enquiry into Sufi-influenced deployments of metaphors in Baul songs, this has not meant that we have not dealt with the songs of those Bauls who are thought to have been Muslims. The example of Lalon Fokir whose songs we have repeatedly used in this thesis is a good example through which we might also foreground some of the pitfalls in trying to enquire about a specific category of ‘Muslim Bauls’. Lalon has today achieved iconic status in post-colonial Bangladesh and is hence susceptible to many contradictory ideological appropriations. Some suggest that he was clearly a Muslim and wrote within a Sufi tradition designated by the suffix of the word ‘Fokir’ to his name.<sup>9</sup> Others contended that he was a Muslim no doubt, but wrote within

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<sup>7</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed, “The Emergence of the Bengali Muslims” in Ahmed ed., *Understanding the Bengali Muslims: Interpretative Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 1-25. “Despite the cultural ambivalence that has characterised Bengal Muslim history since the medieval period, a self-conscious community defining itself primarily as Muslim did emerge over time by the early twentieth century.” [p. 5-6]

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Sharif, *Banglar Sufi Sahityo*, Dhaka: Samay, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, see S. M. Lutfar Rahman, *Lalon Shah: Jiboni O Gan*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpokola Academy, 1983. Baul scholars such as Shaktinath Jha has contended that Rahman’s claims of an



a Baul rather than Fokiri tradition. Finally some suggest that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, but merely a Baul. Some have also attempted to reconcile these seemingly contradictory appropriations by suggesting that he was a Hindu orphan raised by a Muslim or vice versa. What this example shows us clearly is that the categories of 'Fokir' and 'Muslim Baul' as being distinct from the separate category of (Hindu) Baul is both a contentious and politically loaded issue. Moreover, some scholars such as Shaktinath Jha have also pointed out that the deployments of these categories in the self-fashioning of these heterodox groups also varied from region to region. For instance, while in Murshidabad, many Muslim practitioners (*shadhok*) add the suffix 'Baul' to their names, in Nadia, there are some who think that in attire, food, ritual practices, Bauls and Vaishnavs, Pirs and Bauls are in fact different. Besides, even any understanding of the category of Fokir as comprising Muslims is contentious when one considers the use of the category of 'Hindoo Fakir' in colonial records dating as far back as 1822.<sup>10</sup> Hence, to undertake any enquiry into 'Muslim' Bauls or Fokirs would therefore require a deeper interrogation of the validity of these distinctions. Between the two categories 'Muslim Baul' and 'Fokir' in turn, the latter category is even more complicated through both its diverse deployments in relation to as well as independently of the category 'Baul'. In relation to 'Baul', it was often used amongst earlier authors almost as a synonym, i.e as Baul-Fokir. Amongst later authors however it has become acceptable to treat them as overlapping but separate categories. Yet, there is no reliable history mapping either the validity or the precise chronology of this shift in usage. We do not know when Baul and Fokir ceased to be synonyms and became distinct and neither do we know whether this shift designated merely a shift in academic understanding or a real theological and sociological development that distinguished the two. To make matters worse, we do not have any dependable histories which describe when and how other terms which relate to and to certain extent overlap with the term 'Fokir' such as Dorbesh, Kalandar, etc came to be subsumed by the former.<sup>11</sup> The

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exclusively Muslim status for Lalon has been effected through the latter's deliberate mis-use/abuse of a song of Lalon as well through a forging of a false autobiography of one of Lalon's disciples, Duddu Shah. Jha, *Bostubadi Baul*, Preface, p. 13, n. 21.

<sup>10</sup> "Dr Barclay and Mr Lawrence on the Nature of Life, Spirit, Matter, and Organization", British Review, *The Quarterly Journal of Foreign and British Medicine and Surgery*, vol. IV, London, 1822. Other occurrences of the term in colonial writings could be found, amongst others, in William Ward, Illustration titled "Hindoo Fakir executing his vow", *A View of the Idolatry of the Hindoos, Their History, Religion, Manners and Customs, &c* in Thomas Robbins, William Ward, Thomas Williams, *All Religions and Religious Ceremonies: In Two Parts*, Hartford: Oliver D. Cooke & Sons, 1823, part II, p. 77; William Harrison Ainsworth ed., "Haxthausen's Transcaucasia", *The New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 101, London: Chapman and Hall, 1854, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance, Gautam Bhadra, "Itihasheer Khopper O Banglar Dorbesh" [The Snares of History

settlement of these questions is; in some senses tied up with the conclusion of the debate about the extent to which rural Bengali Muslim peasants had access to Islamic philosophical traditions that we have referred to above. Since none of these debates have presently been concluded and moreover since we ourselves are neither linguistically nor by disciplinary training equipped to undertake to pass judgements on any of these questions, we will have to limit our present study merely to the category of Bauls and including within it both 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' Bauls.

### **On the Structure of the Thesis:**

Over the past few decades, practices of the historical discipline have undergone a sea change that has urged not only for a new definition of the domain of history but also for a new judgement about the persuasiveness of arguments based on individual experience versus those derived from generalisation. This sea change is perhaps most palpably felt in the development of social history that had generated a shift from an over-reliance on statistically measurable manifestations of collective life to various forms of microhistory, history from below, the history of everyday life and oral history, to mention a few. All of these approaches, with their stress on the importance of ordinary individual experience and the historical significance of representations of the past other than those statistically derived elaborations provided by the more traditional, quantitative historical methods, have been dominated by case-studies. Our thesis too will refrain from conducting a quantitative analysis and instead seek to retrieve a socio-historical narrative of the encounter between the Baul realities and the hegemonic social formations in colonial rural Bengal through a series of case studies of certain cluster-metaphors in the songs of these heterodox groups of the time.

To begin with, since our access to our material, i.e. the Baul songs of colonial rural Bengal, is invariably mediated by not merely by the various authors and enthusiasts who have collected and published these songs, but also by the various acts of translations that are implicated in the politics of transmission from orality to textuality,

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and the *Dorbesh* in Bengal] in Sudhir Chakraborty, *Nirbachito Dhrubopod*, Calcutta: Gangchil, 2007, vol. I p. 164: "In the authoritative Urdu dictionary of the nineteenth century, the words '*fokir, goda, somyis, salik gorib, miskin*' have been used as synonyms of *dorbesh*. In the explanation of *dorbeshiana* are [the terms] '*fokoriana, goribiana, dorbeshiana gujran iya mejaj*'. ... The words *fokir, gorib, miskin* also imply a destitute and indigent state. It is nothing spiritual. The common synonym of the impoverished lot is *fokir*."

the Introduction will engage with the politics of the archive by way of a literature review. How and why the Bauls and their songs came to be framed in the archive is, in our view, one of the salient issues that have hitherto been neglected in most of the secondary literature in the field. And hence adopting a critical self-reflexivity in our reading strategy, we believe, will not only enable us to redress this methodological blindspot as it were, but also highlight the very dialogic nature of experience and historical analyses. The Introduction will thus refrain from carrying out a somewhat pedestrian background study of the available scholarship in the field; instead, it will critically revisit these framing imaginations by way of foregrounding the various socio-historical contexts of their production as well as the specific intellectual matrices which shaped the contours of these frames. Apart from a critical study of the politics of the archive that we have at our disposal, the Introduction will also seek to foreground the aims and limitations of the socio-historical project of the thesis: i.e., the problem of locating authorship and the relevance of reading metaphors as a repository of the traces of the encounter/negotiation between the Baul realities and the hegemonic discourses.

With the methodological grounds of our study thus laid out, we then plunge headlong into the individual case-studies of certain cluster-metaphors in the Baul songs. Arguing that the existing scholarly preoccupation with the Bauls' esoteric beliefs and practices in exploring the various articulations of gender identities and relations in Baul songs has distracted us from observing the much more complex understanding of gender-in-society per se that is available in these songs, Chapter I, titled "Victorian Bauls and the Performativity of Gender: Locating Historical Specificities and Sites of Resistance in the Gender-Metaphors of Baul Songs" seeks to socio-historically revisit the various metaphors of gender in Baul songs. Existing studies on gender in relation to the Bauls have mostly been preoccupied with ascertaining the role of women in Bauls' esoteric beliefs and practices. This chapter will revisit those very metaphors of gender identities and relations in Baul songs that the existing scholarship has sought to peel off, as it were, to arrive at deeper esoteric truths. In so doing, we ask: Can we by reading gendered metaphors within their socio-historical contexts arrive at a more pluralised understanding of the issue of gender in Baul song-texts? Can other identities, such as those of occupation, class, race, etc, be seen to crossmark and therefore challenge any homogenised understanding of gender categories? Taking this approach a step further, we will investigate if the gendered metaphors in Baul songs can be seen to resonate

with not only group identities (such as those of class, race, etc) but even with the identities of historically specific men and women. Having thus explored the possibilities of plural understandings of gender in Baul songs, we will seek to locate our answers within contemporary critiques of the relationship between gender and social domination per se. Some scholars have suggested that gender is the primary axis upon which all social hierarchies are transposed and thus validated. If this is indeed so, what can the answers to our previous enquiries into gender-metaphors in Baul songs tell us about the Bauls' attitude to the larger matrix of social domination?

Chapter II, titled, "*Ek Rajye Hole Dujona Raja, Kar Hukume Goto Hoye Proja*: Metaphors of Changing Agrarian Power-Relations and Everyday Peasant Resistance" will involve a close study of the metaphors of agrarian power-relations in the Baul songs primarily of early-colonial rural Bengal. By situating these songs in the context of the changing agrarian systems of production following the implementation of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, our socio-historical study of these metaphors will interrogate the following: What do these metaphors tell us of the socio-economic plight of the peasantry—of which the Bauls were an integral part—of rural Bengal of the day? More crucially, in these metaphors, can we locate clues to forms of peasant resistance against the changing agrarian power-relations? If so, what is the nature of this resistance?

Chapter III, titled "*Amar Ghorer Chabi Porer Hathey*: Criminality, Colonialism and the Home in Early Colonial Rural Bengal", will draw its cue from the previous chapter and attempt to read the group of metaphors that likens the Baul body to the broken/plundered house. Once again, by situating this group of songs in their specific historical context of the various detrimental effects of the Cornwallis police reforms of 1793 on early-colonial rural Bengal, what, we will ask ourselves in this chapter, do these metaphorical deployments tell us about the Bauls' experience of and resistance against both the changes in modalities of control and the increasing number of crimes effected by these police reforms? Furthermore, what does the very metaphorisation of the *ghor* into their esoteric body tell us of the nature of their negotiation with and/or subversion of the existing structures of power and domination in their immediate social world?

In the fourth chapter, “*Hariram Manob-dehey Baniyechhey ek Ajob Kol: A Study of the Transportational Metaphors in Baul Songs*”, we will critically revisit the popular representation of the Bauls as the ignorant, technology-free, idealised figure in the bhodrolok discourses. Through our study of the Bauls’ choice and deployment of a range of transportational mediums in the Baul songs, we will seek to ask if these deployments can be read as standing testimonies to an alternate figure of the Baul. Can the figure of the Baul be read, in contradistinction to that which is variously imagined and ‘framed’ by the bhodrolok, as one who is sensitive to and perceptive of the diverse mechanisms and operations of the novelties of European technologies of transport such as the steamers and the railways? Moreover, what do these metaphorical deployments tell us about the nature of negotiation of the Bauls with these products of colonial modernity?

Finally, in Chapter V, titled “*Brohmo-Onde Ondo-Bahire: A Study of the Spatial Metaphors in Baul Songs*”, we will focus on three intertwined spatial metaphors of the *ultodesh* (the inverted land), *dehobhando* (the body-vessel) and the body-city that recur throughout the Baul songs of colonial rural Bengal. Can a socio-historical reading of the spatial inscriptions imbricated in these metaphorical deployments, we will ask ourselves here, render a narrative of the Bauls’ encounter with the hegemonic spatial practices that were instrumental in marginalising the Bauls in the larger social world? If so, what is the nature of this encounter? Can we locate instantiations of resistance in their highly specific spatial imagination that re-inscribed these spatial metaphors onto their body-space? If so, what is the nature of this resistance?

In the Conclusion, apart from addressing and summing up the aforementioned key concerns raised in the Introduction and the case-studies, we will also revisit two inter-related concepts that underpin our argument throughout the thesis, namely, that of the experiential, esoteric Baul body and resistance. Furthermore, alongside demonstrating the historical specificities of experience in general and of the Baul body in particular, we will also seek to foreground the historical specificity of our methodology by way of highlighting its limitations in the face of the Baul songs of present-day West Bengal.

### **On Terminologies:**

**Baul:**

Throughout the existing historiography, the term 'Baul' has been used by various scholars to denote a sect, a tradition, a community, a cult, an order of singers, a spirit, a class of mystic, a religion, so on and so forth. While being aware of the essential pluralism and fluidity inherent in the term, it will be used in this thesis in its broadest sense that accommodates all or most of the above denotations. Furthermore, although being wholly aware of the subtle internal and external heterogeneities between the various heterodox esoteric traditions such as the Shahebdhoni, Kortabhoja, Boloram Hari, etc, we will, for purposes of lucidity, refer to them collectively as comprising the category of the 'Baul'. The reason we adopt this broad usage is two-fold. First, as will be elaborated in the Introduction, our sources are drawn overwhelmingly from bhodrolok authors/collectors to whom the term 'Baul' in its most general sense was meaningful. Second, without meaning to underplay the differences in belief and practice amongst distinct sects, it is also undeniable that the vast majority of members of these sects do occupy a very similar social position in rural society. It is worth clarifying that we do not use the phrase 'social location' here as being synonymous with 'class'. While the vast majority of Bauls were recruited from the rural peasantry, there are examples of a handful of non-peasant Bauls as well. From our perspective, however, by becoming 'Bauls' these latter developed strong social ties with the former and therefore came to occupy a shared socio-political world. Innumerable examples drawn from both the lives as well as the lyrics of non-peasant Bauls such as Hasan Raja or Kangal Phikirchand prove our point. Since our thesis is more directly interested in the socio-historical positions of the members than their precise esoteric beliefs, for us the term 'Baul' is useful in capturing this shared social location. In line with this, we also believe that over-emphasising sectarian differences might risk glossing over actual examples of shared historical experiences. This extension of the term 'Baul' to these various heterodox groups in the thesis is not meant in any way to either essentialise or reify them, nor do we believe such a grouping of these heterodoxies under the blanket category of the 'Baul' would destabilise our argument in any way. Our usage here is informed by the fact that what we seek to understand is essentially the responses of these groups to the shared social worlds they inhabited and not their unique philosophical tenets.

**Subaltern:**

Originally a term for subordinates in the military service, the term 'subaltern' was used in the 1930s by the imprisoned Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci. It is believed Gramsci had chosen to use the term as a covert reference to the proletariat with a view to avoiding the censorship of his prison-guards. In the 1980s, the term was revived and expanded by the Subaltern Studies collective in whose usage its remit was broadened to include marginalised groups such as tribes who had not traditionally formed part of the Marxist proletariat. The emphasis amongst some early members of the collective was on the self-perception of marginalised groups. Amongst later-day subalternists, the usage was further expanded to understand subalternity itself as a matter of self-perception. Throughout this thesis, we will treat subalternity in this latter sense as a relational concept: that is to say, those who might be perceived as the subordinated/dominated 'subaltern' within a certain axis of power-relation might in turn be perceived as superordinate in yet another axis. Moreover, by extending the term to the Bauls, we do not seek to argue here whether or not they were 'subalterns' in actuality, but merely to take their self-perception of a certain shared sense of marginality in a given social power-relation as a starting point of our discussion with a view not to directly speak for them, but to look at and reorient the available historiography from the vantage point of their self-perception of subalternity.

**Body:**

In light of a wealth of rich scholarship from a variety of disciplines, social scientists have had to radically re-orient their understandings of the 'body'. These multi-disciplinary interventions have fundamentally challenged a single unitary notion of the body. The plurality of bodies, however, is not purely a matter of different discourses; instead, the multiple discursive understandings of the body jostle with the bodies which are available through the realm of experience, as the site of technological interventions, as an object of surveillance and control, etc. In sum, then, we are now forced to recognise that the experiential body, the anatomical body, the political body, the social body, the body of pleasure, to name but a few, all exist distinctly and might not always overlap seamlessly. The various bodies co-exist, entangle with each other and often mutually transform each other as well. In the thesis, we have therefore, concentrated on

‘situations of embodiments’ where we interrogate the actually available, historically specific bodies in all their polyvalent, entangled multiplicity. When we speak of any one particular body, the context of usage clarifies the nature of this body. As a general rule, we use the notion of body in the thesis in its historically actualised form, i.e. as a polyvalent composite of multiple different bodies.

**On Transliteration:**

A final comment is necessary regarding the scheme of transliteration followed. Standard transliteration renders Bengali words and names in terms of their Sanskritic roots. In keeping with the general tenor of this thesis, which aspires to write a historical narrative of an essentially Bengali encounter between the Baul realities and the bhodrolok imaginations, we have tried to avoid this. Since standard Bengali spellings also reflect this Sanskritic bias—a product of some of the intellectual movements of the nineteenth century we have attempted to study here—we follow instead lay Bengali pronunciations as our guide to transliterations. Thus Shahebdhoni is used rather than Sahebdhani, or *shomproday* instead of *sampraday*. We have, however, occasionally retained the Sanskritised spellings when referring to established names in the field—for instance, Rabindranath Tagore instead of Robindronath Thakur—or to certain established religious traditions such as Sahajiya, Shakta and Tantra instead of Shohojiya, Shokti and Tontro, or to widely used names of movements such as Swadeshi instead of Shwodeshi to avoid confusion by way of citations. Apart from that, we have tried to use Bengali pronunciations for all other Bengali words and names.



Introduction:

## **Of the Politics of the Archive and Reading Metaphors as Socio-Historical Clues**

What is a Baul song? Scholars, both academic and non-academic, have over the last couple of centuries variously attempted to define Baul songs. To some, Baul songs were articulations of a heterodox sect of Bengal that observed and practised abominable sexo-yogic rituals; to some others, they were merely an entertaining form of soliciting alms; to another set of people, they came to be distinguished by their decidedly indigenous folk-melody and folk-content of the idyllic Bengali village; to some others, they were songs of Transcendental Humanism; and to yet another section, they were in fact to be distinguished from other folk songs by their highly sophisticated and coded esoteric content. It is the presence of these often mutually incompatible definitions of Baul songs in the available historiography on the field that had first turned our attention to the related question of how, when and why did the Baul songs come to be defined in such and such way. What about the 'original' voice of the Baul in these songs? Is there any 'original' Baul voice in the first place? We, as historically removed researchers writing about the Baul songs of late-eighteenth—early-nineteenth century Bengal, realise that we have no other way of accessing the 'original' voice—if at all it can be accessed—of the Baul without the mediation of the various authors and the texts who collected and published them. In other words, when we today seek to find those Baul songs that were being composed and/or sung in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, we have no way other than to depend upon collections published by their contemporary collectors. And these collectors, as can be amply seen in their texts, were often influenced by the emerging categories of folklore and folk literature or *lokshahityo*. The primary material on which our research today is based has itself been constructed through the dynamics of the relationship between the categories of 'Baul song' and 'folk literature'. Had these two categories not emerged as and when they did and had they not overlapped in the minds of the collectors and in the collections produced, the very materials on which we base our research might have looked very different. A tantalising glimpse to this possibility is afforded to us in the rather curious text known as the *Bhaber Git* (Songs of Ecstasy).<sup>12</sup> This collection, so far as we know,

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<sup>12</sup> *Bhaber Git*, also known as *Sri Juter Pod*, is a collection of songs attributed to Dulal Chand or

is the only published collection of Baul (Kortabhoja) songs to have been published by members of a Baul sect themselves.<sup>13</sup> The language of these songs is unmistakably distinct from those large numbers of songs which were published through the efforts of non-Baul collectors. Given the absence of other self-published texts like the *Bhaber Git*, we cannot wholly understand the extent to which self-published Baul songs differed from collector-published Baul songs. Yet, the fact that this one text alone is indeed so different from the others highlights the importance of the frames of collection through which generations of collectors accessed and published—and hence, mediated our access to—Baul songs. By ‘frames of collection’ we mean both the intellectual or ideational framework which the collector used to define and select Baul songs and the implicit codes through which s/he developed and structured the various strategies, locations, interlocutors and modes of collecting these songs.

### ***At the Looking Glass: Framing Baul Songs***

‘Frames’, as Todd Gitlin has eloquently summarised, ‘are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, frames are those consciously adopted, but more frequently unconsciously used, ‘conceptual scaffolds’<sup>15</sup> that enable individuals/scholars to select, emphasise and present, whether tacitly or overtly, certain aspects of a perceived reality.<sup>16</sup> A frame, then, is a ‘schemata’ of perceiving, interpreting

Lalshoshi (1775-1833), the son of Ramshoron Pal who, as the legend goes, was inspired by one Aul Chand and had formed the sect in the mid-eighteenth century. See Dulal Chand (Rameshchandra Ghosh ed.), *Bhaber Git*, Aurora Press: Goabagan, 1882.

<sup>13</sup> Arguably originating from within the currents of Vaishnavism and Sufism in the eighteenth century, Kortabhoja is a thriving minor heterodox esoteric sect founded by one Aul Chand (1694-1770) and based in Ghoshpara, near Calcutta. It flourished in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was much popular in 24 Parganas, Sylhet, Sunderbans, and most of all in Calcutta where it also drew a certain section of the bhodroloks into its fold. See Sanat Kumar Mitra ed., *Kortabhoja Dhormomot O Itihash* (2 parts), Visva Bharati: Calcutta, 1975 (1382 BS), Hugh Urban, *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 and Hugh Urban and Wendy Doniger ed., *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the Left*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> The term is borrowed from the work of Snow and Benford where they suggest that frames function as the ‘conceptual scaffolding’ which social movements erect to construct new ideologies or to modify existing ones. See David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization” in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (ed) *International Social Movement Research: Volume 1*, London: JAI Press, 1988, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> This understanding of the concept of frame/framing is more in line with the conceptual tool of ‘frame analysis’ proposed by Erving Goffman as an aspect of his socio-semiological methodology for studying visual images and cultural representations. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, London: Harper and Row, 1974.

and re-producing experience, both individual and social, that is premised on the binary of inclusion/exclusion: a frame contains what is included within its boundaries and excludes what is without, and our access to what is included within the frame is only gained by looking through the frame. To address the various frameworks that were deployed to understand and constitute Baul songs as a subject of study in colonial Bengal, we need to remind ourselves that a frame as a conceptual scaffold of making sense and representing a perceived reality does not stand in isolation; it resonates with a plethora of historically available identities, categories and politics. Furthermore, there could be multiple such resonances for every single frame, though within this set of multiple resonances there might again be differences in the degree of resonances depending on the historical period, personal biography of the collector as well as the place of the collection of Baul songs. For instance, as we shall shortly see, while Romantic nationalism resonated most significantly with the framing of Baul song in the imagination of a Bengali *bhrodrolok* collector in say 1905, politics of class became a more important source of resonance for a similar collector by the 1980s.

Though the accent of our present discussion will be on the various framings of Baul songs in the various imaginations, it will, as we shall see, be inextricably intertwined with the various framings of the 'Baul' in the same. It needs to be mentioned at the very outset that given the plethora of available scholarship in the field, in both Bengali and English, we would for the present purpose confine ourselves to only the most conspicuous framing imaginations or orientations wherein we can locate the various understandings of Baul and Baul songs. A want of space prevents us from delving into the relatively less conspicuous, but equally interesting framing resonances. Amongst those that we will discuss are: the frame of Romantic-Nationalism, that of spiritual-idealism, that deriving from the philosophical interest in esoteric religions, as well as those of sexual liberalism and Marxism. While a detailed engagement with these resonances and the frames of meaning is necessary since it is through these that our access to the Baul songs is mediated, it needs to be pointed out here that the classificatory system of frames that we have employed here is not premised on a strict chronology. In other words, it is important to bear in mind that the shifts in the pre-eminence of particular resonances does not mean that Romantic-Nationalism, for instance, ceased to shape understandings of Baul songs after the early decades of the twentieth century; indeed, as we shall see, it re-emerged as the most prominent

resonance which drew heavily upon the emotive power of the lost traditions of Bengali folk literature in the wake of the developments leading up to and culminating in the Liberation War of '71 in Bangladesh. Moreover, in highlighting the specific pre-eminent resonances in these framing imaginations, we need to bear in mind that these resonances could have been both overt and implicit, conscious or latent and that they may or may not have had any direct relation with the particular political or ideological moorings of the Baul scholars. Which is to say that our concern here is not, for instance, with whether Shaktinath Jha or Sudhir Chakraborty were in fact card-carrying Communists, but with how their framing imaginations largely resonated with the socialist register of their times and how their writings engaged in a dialogue with such a register. At the same time as we would foreground the ways in which these frames, often co-existing and overlapping in the available Baul scholarship and resonating with various socio-political-cultural registers are constantly in dialogue with each other, we would also simultaneously attempt to situate these frames in the various intellectual currents, both past and contemporary, within and outside of Bengal, that have significantly contributed in shaping the contours of these frames.

### **Orientalist Framings of Baul Songs:**

#### **The Baul as the Disreputable, Disgusting Other**

In the colonial accounts, not only are Baul songs not mentioned even once, but Bauls too are conspicuous in their absence or glossed over by being clubbed as subordinate categories within the larger 'Hindu' identity—as 'Bairagi' in W.W. Hunter's 1875 volume of *Statistical Account of Bengal* and as 'Vaishnava', but not 'Bairagi' in its 1876 volume;<sup>17</sup> or indeed, when they are mentioned at all as in H.H. Risley's *Tribe and Castes of Bengal*, 1891, 'Baolas' are described as 'separated from the main body of Vaishnavism' constituting the grossly immoral and 'disreputable mendicant orders' who 'never shave or cut their hair, and [whose] filthiness of person ranks as a virtue among them' and 'held in very low estimation by respectable Hindus'<sup>18</sup>. This ethnological framing of the Bauls as sects and castes in the colonial imagination,<sup>19</sup> it needs to be

<sup>17</sup> W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. I: *24 Parganas and Sunderbans*, London: Trubner and Co., 1875, p. 65-6; 1876, vol. VIII: *Rajshahi and Bogra*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. II, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, p. 347.

<sup>19</sup> On the difficulties involved in the deploying of conventional classificatory system to the Bauls in colonial records, see Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 20-1.

mentioned here, was in fact part of the larger ethnographic strand in the Orientalists' quest for the 'real India' that had been gaining ground since the closing years of the eighteenth century.

In fact, as David Ludden has pointed out, alongside the early-Orientalist emphasis on classical textual traditions of India in the production of colonial knowledge, the quest for empirically sound knowledge about the 'real' India also found its way into certain sections of the British Orientalists:

For [James] Rennell and [Thomas] Munro, the real India experts were those scientists and trained administrators who worked and travelled in the countryside and absorbed local information and observed local conditions—those incipient social scientists who created 'hard' objective data in surveys and settlements for policy decisions based on facts and political economy. A stray Sanskrit quote might be relevant here and there, but only to provide color for conclusions based on 'real' data.<sup>20</sup>

From the early 1820s onwards, orientalism as a body of knowledge increasingly came to be divorced epistemologically from colonialism. While the empirical evidence informing orientalist views of India were turned into 'facts' by virtue of its inclusion in administration and law under the Company Raj by the 1850s, from the 1850s onwards the ties between orientalism and social theory and institutions came to be further tightened as the colonial basis of the production of orientalist knowledge now masqueraded as scientific truth. And the Indian village remained the worst casualty in the transformation of colonial knowledge and orientalism. Munro's characterisation of the Indian village as an essentially timeless 'little republic' constituting the basic unit of Indian social life way back in 1803 now in the imperial ideology became institutionalised and theorised as an unquestionable 'fact'—a 'fact' that was time and again validated by the emerging social sciences such as economy, anthropology and ethnology that came to scientifically analyze the data collected about the countryside.<sup>21</sup>

While the village increasingly came to be coded by the ripples generated by this shift of orientalism from its colonial origins to its objectification by the emerging social scientific ideology of the day, the transfer of power to the British crown in the wake of

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<sup>20</sup> David Ludden, "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge" in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer ed., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> For a fuller discussion on the transformation of orientalism, see Ludden, "Orientalist Empiricism".

the 1857 rebellion and the consequent acquisition of direct administrative control over India's interior and rural areas also intensified the coloniser's interest in acquiring local knowledge of 'why particular peoples are mentally what they are found to be'.<sup>22</sup> Allied with this was the political need to make sense of, and therefore control, the native's 'deep-seated, irrational superstitions [that] could break forth in violence' at any time, as the mutiny had testified to.<sup>23</sup> This local knowledge now came to be located within the imperial ideology not in the Brahminical texts, but in the oral narratives or folklores of colonial India. And, in most cases, this knowledge of the localised oral popular 'native' cultures of colonial India was not to be found through a romanticisation of the folk, but through a careful scientific study of their 'ancient superstition[s].' Ethnography now became the preferred prism of imperial understanding. The various collections of Indian folklore by the British administrator-scholars were produced alongside the now increased production of statistical accounts, manuals and gazetteers each of which 'had an ethnological chapter, in which the local castes and tribes were listed and described, with more detail reserved for certain caste and tribe groups specific to the area, under the heading of "manners and customs"'. By making himself invisible behind the scientific gaze and so naturalising cultural differences, the colonial ethnographer-turned-folklore-collector added significantly to the official colonial knowledge of the 'folk' that masked itself as scientific, objective and value-neutral and so constituted the colonial order. This couching of folklore studies as a new science and folklore as 'cultural fossils' by the British administrative-scholars of late-nineteenth century India, however, was not only shaped by the various shifts in the colonial ideology of the Raj, but was also a direct product of a dialogue with the diverse intellectual currents on the nature and function of folklore-scholarship that were played out amongst the 'diffusionists', 'survivalists' and followers of the 'historical method' in the Folk Lore Society (FLS) that was established in London in 1878.

With the coming of age of evolutionary theories of natural histories heralded by the dramatic excavation of Pleistocene flint tools at Brixham Cave in Devon in 1858 and by Darwin's *Origin of Species* that followed shortly, theories of cultural evolution started taking centre stage in carving out a place for folkloristics as a science in Victorian England. Working within the same evolutionary framework as the geologists,

<sup>22</sup> Richard Temple, *Legends of Panjab*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1962-3, vol. 1, p. viii.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1996, p.124.

anthropology emerged as a science that set itself to furnish historical explanations for the prehistory of mankind that contemporary developments in natural sciences and the resultant expansion in human time had opened up. It was in this intellectual milieu of social and cultural evolutionism that folklore shook off its hitherto status as 'trivial pursuits' and 'popular antiquities' and joined in the scientific bandwagon on the coat-tails of anthropology. Not only did the evolutionist-folklorists, notably George Laurence Gomme and Andrew Lang, of the FLS debunk diffusionist-folklorists such as the German indologist Theodore Benfey who held India as the origin of the wave-like diffusion of folk narratives, but they also shredded Max Muller's devolutionary solar mythological theory to pieces by furthering a comparative method wherein all peoples and cultures evolved in a fixed orderly progression of stages. In the context of the colonial framing of Indian folklores of the late-nineteenth—early-twentieth century, what this challenge to diffusionism posed by the theories of evolutionism and survivalism/comparative methodology did,<sup>24</sup> amongst other things, was to decentre the existing romantic fascination with India and push it to the 'primitive' end of the evolutionary chain. The subsequent divorce of folklore from anthropology and its consequent emergence as a historical science in the FLS did anything but redress this framing of Indian folklore as 'ancient' and 'uncivilised'.<sup>25</sup> Viewed in this context of the pre-eminence of the evolutionary gloss in the methodologies of the FLS of late-Victorian England then, it is little surprising that Indian folklore increasingly came to be framed by the British administrator-scholars as the narratives of the 'ancient superstition[s]' of a 'naked and shoeless race'—a framing that, as we have already seen, was hand-in-glove with the imperial ideology of the day.<sup>26</sup> Reaffirming the 'empire theory' of folklore according to which an acquaintance and knowledge of

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<sup>24</sup> Spearheading the survivalist/comparative theory, Andrew Lang wrote thus: 'Our method then, is to compare the seemingly meaningless customs or manners of civilised races with the similar customs and manners which exist among the uncivilised and still retain their meaning. It is not necessary for comparison of this sort that the uncivilised and the civilised should be of the same stock, nor need we prove that they were ever in contact with each other. Similar conditions of mind produce similar practices, apart from identity of race or borrowing of ideas and manners.' Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth*, London, 1904 (1884), p. 21-2.

<sup>25</sup> In his Introduction to the second volume of his *Legends of Panjab* in 1885, Temple, clearly aligning himself to Gomme's championing of folklore research as a historical science, summed up the newly acquired status of folklore studies: 'Just as physiologists are enabled by a minute examination of skulls or teeth or hair and so on to differentiate or connect the various races of mankind, so should Folklorists, as in time I have no doubt they will, be able to provide reliable data towards a true explanation of the reasons why particular peoples are mentally what they are found to be. Folklore then as a scientific study has a specific object and occupies a specific place.' Temple, 1962, vol 1, p. viii.

<sup>26</sup> Attributed to Andrew Lang in Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 307.

native customs and lore would aid an efficient administration of the colonies, E.S. Hartland emphasised in his Presidential Address in 1900 the ‘practical advantages for the governors, district officers and judges of an enlightened mother-country in learning through folklore about the cultures of the native people under their dominions.’<sup>27</sup> Responding to the late-nineteenth century ideals of disciplining through knowledge—as voiced by the FLS journal, *Folklore*—Richard Carnac Temple made no mistake in outlining the reason for compiling his *Legends of Punjab*: ‘[this] will enhance our influence over the natives and render our intercourse with them more easy and interesting.’<sup>28</sup>

It is at this discursive intersection of imperial ideology and the rise of ethnography in studying folklore, both in the metropolitan home and the colony, that we can locate Hunter and Risley’s ethnological Baul—a framing that came to impact on the early bhodrolok projections of Bauls and Baul songs in indigenous scholarship. The Baul in the early bhodrolok framings, particularly in Akshay Kumar Datta’s *Bharotborsher Upashok Shomproday* (1873, 1883) and Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya’s *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896), echoes Risley’s ‘disreputable mendicant orders’. The Bauls came to be imagined in Datta and Bhattacharya’s imaginations as flesh-eating, shroud-wearing, godless, ‘disreputable Chaitanyite sects of Bengal’, marked by ‘their fantastic dress, dirty habits, and the queer philosophy of their songs’ and indulging in ritual sexual practices, practising the ‘extremely abominable’ [*bibhotsho*] four-moon ritual, and so pushed by their own ‘deplorable moral condition’ to the margins of humanity and civilised society.<sup>29</sup> While Bhattacharya’s classification of the Baul under the class ‘disreputable Chaitanyite sects of Bengal’ echoes Risley’s framing of the same, the fact that Datta’s text was consciously modelled on Horace Hayman Wilson’s *Religious Sects of the Hindus* (1828) lends more substance to the echo. In fact, in a 1922 biographical work on the Orientalists titled *Eminent Orientalists, Indian, European and American*, we find the following in the entry on H.H. Wilson:

It is noticeable that Professor Wilson has laid under an immense debt of

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Jobson ed., *History of British Folklore*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 332.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Charles Morrison, ‘Three Systems of Colonial Ethnography: British Officials and Anthropologists in India’, in Heinricha Kuklick and Elizabeth Long eds., *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, Vol. 5, New York: JAI Press, 1984, p.150

<sup>29</sup> Akshay Kumar Datta (Binoy Ghosh ed.), *Bharotborsher Upashok Shomproday*, Calcutta: Pathabhavan, 1969, p.112-3; Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1973, p. 380-2.



gratitude the excellent Bengali writer, Babu Akshay Kumar Datta, who largely drew upon his work in the preparation of his *Upasaka Sampraday*,—a work upon which his fame as a Bengali writer principally rests, and which is justly regarded as a classic of a very high order in the whole range of Bengali literature.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Datta and Bhattacharya's 'disgusting' and Otherised Baul also had precedents within indigenous literature. For instance, in his acerbic song on the Kortabhoja sect—one of the many heterodox sects loosely classified as 'Baul'—in his satirical *Pnachali*, Dasarathi Ray, the famous Bengali poet, projected the Kortabhojas as embodiments of what was wrong with the Hindu society. Not only were Ray's Kortabhojas the foremost of the *Aghorponthis*,<sup>31</sup> sexually licentious, idolatrous, violating caste, overturning traditional laws of purity, chicanery and fraud, 'the "Karta" himself is ... nothing more than a kind of "dog in a rice husking room", a "ringleader among thieves", or an "ugly old slut in a place full of rubbish and dung".'<sup>32</sup> Later, while Kortabhoja is outrightly denounced as a 'degenerate form of Tantra', in Ramkrishna Paramhansa, despite being a valid, rapid and powerful form of devotion, it is simultaneously denounced as seedy and filthy: 'Theirs is a dirty sadhana, like entering the house through a latrine.'<sup>33</sup>

Alongside these derogatory projections of the Bauls in the mid-nineteenth century Hindu-bhodrolok register, Baul songs too came to be framed dismissively as either queer songs of 'rustic philosophy' and 'quaint allegories'<sup>34</sup> or as 'entertainment, often for the purpose of soliciting alms'.<sup>35</sup> While on the one hand we find instances of the Hindu bhodrolok appropriation of the form of the Baul song to suit particular authorial agendas in Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom Pnchar Noksha* where *Hutom*—the author's persona—sings 'Baul' songs that satirises the life and people of contemporary Calcutta, on the other, we have in Bankimchandra's *Bishbriksho* (1873) a classic instance of how both the form and content of Vaishnav (of which Bauls were considered a part in both the colonial and bhodrolok framing imaginations)<sup>36</sup> songs came to be deployed by the

<sup>30</sup> Anon., *Eminent Orientalists, Indian, European and American*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991 (1922), p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Arguably a Hindu sect believed to have split off from the Kapalika order in the fourteenth century, *Aghorponthis* have been known, amongst other things, to consume a wide variety of ritually polluting substances, ranging from human flesh to human faeces.

<sup>32</sup> Urban and Doniger, *The Economics of Ecstasy*, p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 321-2.

<sup>34</sup> Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes*, p. 482-3.

<sup>35</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 22-3.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, in contemporary colonial records, such as Hunter's *Statistical Account of Bengal* of 1875 and 1876 (published two to three years after the publication of *Bishbriksho*), Bauls were classified as a sub-set of Vaishnavs. This classification of the Bauls also occurs in early-bhodrolok accounts of the

bhodrolok imagination to strengthen their projections of the immoral, sexually promiscuous Vaishnavis.<sup>37</sup> In this particular scene, the archetype of the charming seducer, Debendro—arguably representative of the ‘Young Bengalee’ of the day, corrupted rather than elevated by his enlightened education—impersonates as a Horidasi Vaishnavi and sings a Vaishnav song to further his sexual designs on Kundonondini. It is perhaps no wonder then that eight years later Bankim was to be selected by H. H. Risley as his assistant to undertake a detailed research on the castes and tribes of the Howrah district and thus prepare an ethnographic glossary.

### **Romantic-Nationalist Framings of Baul Songs: The *Swadeshi* Baul**

The Romantic-Nationalist perception of Bauls and Baul songs as embodiments and repositories of the eternal Bengali village was, to begin with, shaped in response to these earlier disparaging framings in both colonial and indigenous registers. Alongside the persistence of these negative stereotypes of the Baul as the disreputable, sexually promiscuous, immoral Other and the corresponding dismissal or deployment of Baul song-forms as strategies to further the entertainment value and/or individual authorial agendas in the bhodrolok literature of late-nineteenth century, there was also an almost simultaneous and curious emergence of a degree of fascination with Bauls and Baul songs in certain quarters of the bhodrolok society that were increasingly disillusioned with the abortive nature of the renaissance dream of progressive modernity. Sumit Sarkar, in his fascinating study of the contradictory doubly-inscribed lives of the *keranis* of late-19<sup>th</sup> century-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta, has shown how the twin onslaughts of capitalism and western education brought about a tension in the self-image of the lower middle-class, the city clerks. In a city where the Europeans and subsequently the Marwaris had gained control of the mills, firms and offices, the *keranis* came to inhabit their own city as strangers—their quotidian lives defined by niggardly pay, racist humiliation, restricted mobility, and the still alien clock-work

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Bauls. For instance, in Akshaykumar Datta's work the Bauls have been clearly identified as a branch of the 'Choitonyo Shomproday [tradition]'. Though J.N. Bhattacharya had called this classification into question, it nevertheless betrays its persistence in bhodrolok registers.

<sup>37</sup> As Sudhir Chakraborty has pointed out in his discussion of this episode in *Bishbriksho*, the group of Vaishnavis were often heterogenous in composition and used to range from the Ma-Gosains, often from upper-caste households, to abandoned women, run-aways, widows, co-wives, old prostitutes, and other destitutes, and were viewed by the bhodrolok of the day as embodiments of sexual promiscuity and immorality. Sudhir Chakraborty, *Bangla Ganer Shondhane*, Calcutta: Aruna Prakashani, 1990, p. 38.

routines of office discipline. Consequently, in the *kerani* consciousness, the past was increasingly idealised and came to be equated with ‘tradition’ while their present was seen to be degradingly ‘modern.’ It was this internal oscillation between a lost dignified past and the unbearable ignominious present that resulted in a curious fracture in their consciousness. And this inner tension of the *bhodrolok* sought to be reconciled by expressing itself through, amongst other things, a twin turning back: inwardly to a mood of introspection and nostalgia and outwardly in an attempt to tap folk cultural resources. The weary imagination of the *kerani* thus created a new space of the ‘far-off village life’, the irrational, feminised, atemporal, spiritualised Other of the excessively rational, masculine, progressive, materialist city-space marked not only by colonialism but also by the aggressive militant nationalism of Bankim-early Aurobindo-Vivekananda brand.<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, folk literature or *lok-shahityo* came to be framed in this imagination as the ‘authentic’ and ‘untouched’ repository of the virginal simplicity and innocence of this romanticised rural world—a framing that was made popular in Bengali *bhodrolok* literature by the introspective Romantic lyricism of Biharilal Chakravarti and Rabindranath Tagore.

In what Sarkar has called a ‘series of logically distinct but often intermingled “Others”’—‘past as contrasted to present, country versus city, a deliberate feminisation as opposed to an active masculinity, the attractive playfulness and irresponsibility of the child and the *pagol* as against the goal-oriented instrumental rationality of the adult male’—that came to frame ‘the folk’ and *lok-shahityo* in the romantic-nationalist register, found in the Bauls and their songs just such an embodiment and repository of the ‘uneducated, authentic heart’ of Bengal. It was in this shift in the *bhodrolok* consciousness from scepticism and rationalism to romanticism that the transition in the *bhodrolok* framing of Bauls from its despicable disgusting Other to its alienated Self can be located.<sup>38a</sup> Moreover, the almost Rousseauesque/Reynoldsian framing and valorisation of the child in Hindu *bhodrolok* romantic nationalist discourse of turn of the twentieth-century as the embodiment of a timeless, playful innocence and irresponsible unreason generated a mirror image of the *pagol* as an embodiment of holy folly.<sup>39</sup> Like

<sup>38</sup> Sarkar, *Writing*, p. 186-215.

<sup>39</sup> On a brief discussion on Rousseau’s construction of the ‘natural child’ in his treatise *Emile, or on Education* (1762) and particularly on the Romantic exaltation of Rousseau’s notions of the ‘original innocence’ and ‘natural goodness’ of children, see, for instance, Deborah Thacker, “Imagining the Child” in Deborah Thacker and Jean Webb eds. *Introducing Children’s Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 13-25. For images of the cherry-ripe, innocent child

<sup>38a</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 22, 33.

the idealised (Hindu) child, the *pagol* too had ‘no personal timetable... no rules of hygiene or cleanliness imposed from outside... He seems to live by pure whim...’.<sup>40</sup> Across the register of the devotional religions in Bengal, be it of Vaishnavism or Shaktism, we see the coalescing of the child and the holy/wise madman.<sup>41</sup> It is in this context of the emergence of the Romantic project that we can locate the beginnings of the bhodrolok’s fascination with Bauls and Baul songs and their consequent framings in a positive light. In fact, it was, as we shall soon see, the *kerani* or lower-middle class anxieties and sentiments, rather than through Tagorean intellectual currents, that the original impulse for a positive reorientation of Baul stemmed from.

As Openshaw has noted, even before Tagore’s short review of a collection of Baul songs in *Bharati* in 1883, the stage was already being set in the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century by the emerging phenomenon of ‘amateur Bauls’ (*shokher baul*) for a drastic revision of the negative early-bhodrolok projection of Bauls and Baul songs: a phenomenon popularised by Harinath Majumdar, better known as Kangal or Fikirchand, and his band of amateur Bauls. Commenting on the large-scale popularity of these amateur Bauls in contemporary Bengal, Openshaw further tells us:

He [Harinath] and his group were in demand all over Bengal, and a host of similar groups sprang up in surrounding towns and villages. Such performers dressed up in long robes, strapped anklets to bare feet and at all times wore false beards and long curly hair. Their largely mofussil town audience greatly appreciated their performances, which traversed a spectrum from banter and mimicry, through light sentimental ditties, to idealistic religious songs.<sup>42</sup>

With the bursting of these amateur Bauls—typically urban-educated lower-middle-class literate Hindu males—onto the socio-cultural scene of late-nineteenth century Calcutta, not only did it become ‘hugely fashionable for poets and songsters to compose and perform in a *baul* style’,<sup>43</sup> but the term ‘Baul song’ increasingly came to be metonymically framed vis à vis a certain amorphous, though shared, notion of a Baul melody (*baul-shur*). In other words, the deployment of a *baul shur* to just about any song, irrespective of its subject matter, could render it into a ‘Baul song’. In the closing

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of Joshua Reynolds, see, for instance, his paintings titled *The Age of Innocence* [arguably, the portrait of the artist’s great-niece, Theophilia Gwatkin], 1788 and *Master Hare* [portrait of Francis George Hare as a young child], 1788.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Sarkar, *Writing*, p. 302. On the construction of the child in colonial and nationalist discourses of mid—late colonial Bengal, see Satadru Sen, *Colonial Childhoods: The Juvenile Periphery of India, 1850-1945*, London: Anthem Press, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> See June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> ~~See~~, p. 29-30

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

decades of the nineteenth century, Calcutta witnessed the publications of a spate of such 'amateur Baul songs': such as, Hriday Lal Dutta's collection of Baul songs titled '*Nuton Shokher Baul Shongit O Dehotottwo*' [New Amateur Baul Songs and the Doctrine of Truth within the Body] published in 1881, Nrisinghakumar Das's collection of Baul songs composed by Tinkori Smritirotno (who even signs some of his songs as *dwijo Tinkori*) published in 1882, Nirmalchandra Chattopadhyay's collection titled *Brihot Baul Shongit* [The Vast (Compendium) of Baul Songs] published in 1886, the publication of the first volume of Kanganal-Fikirchand's Baul songs in *Kanganal-Fikirchand Fokirer Gitaboli* in 1886, and Biharilal Chakrabarty's collection of twenty songs entitled *Baul Bingshoti* in 1887, to name a few.<sup>44</sup> In their insistence on the Baul melody as constitutive of Baul songs, a range of musical genres and forms came to be conflated in the musical form of the Baul song. For instance, while in most of these collections Kirton songs (loosely, the genre of songs composed and sung by Vaishnavs) came to be largely synonymous with Baul songs by virtue of their shared registers of Vaishnavism, in Fikirchand's Baul songs grouped under the section '*Prarthona*' (Prayer) we discern striking elements of the distinctly Shakta *rasa* of *protibatsholyo-bhab* (love of the child for its mother) articulated most recognisably in and through the composer's agitated cry of 'Ma, Ma'. In this distinctly Shakta *bhab*, not found among the Vaishnavs,

[t]he devotee's emotion is like that of a child—his pouting and demands are aimed toward the mother. Sometimes he feels pride, sometimes he makes earnest requests, sometimes he feels anger or desire for her grace, sometimes humility and fear, sometimes dependence. Above all, there is the agitated cry of the child, "Ma, Ma." It suppresses all other cries. [The devotee is] a mother-crazy child. At the end of his longest complaint, his final prayer is: "Brush away this dust, take me into your lap, Ma" or "Whatever is good, do that, Ma, I have unloaded my burden at your feet."<sup>45</sup>

This devotional structure of the Shakta *bhab* can clearly be seen in Kanganal Fikirchand's songs of *Prarthona*, so typically framed by the following beginning and end:

*Ogo Ma! Shoda tai daki Ma, Ma ami tomaye*  
*Ma bole. Ma amar, dukkho dure jaye, shitol hoye*  
*Ma; tomaye dakle Ma. (tapito hriday)*

<sup>44</sup> In the introduction to his *Baul Bingshoti*, Biharilal Chakrabarty had himself characterised his songs as those of an 'amateur Baul'. See Sudhir Chakrabarty, *Bratyo Lokayato Lalon*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2007, p. 163-4.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Jahnvikumar Chakravarti, *Saktapadabali O Saktisadhana*, Calcutta: D.M. Library, 1367 BS, p. 228-29 in McDaniel, *Madness*, p. 149-50.

...  
*Kangal koye tritap roge, o Ma, porechhi je  
ghor noroke, Ma amar, roge shoke jibon  
gelo jwole; Amar ar shohena e jatona, tumi  
ekbar koro kole Ma! (shokol jwala jabe  
sthan dao obhoy choron tole.)*<sup>46</sup>

[O mother! Forever do I invoke you mother, I, mother, by calling you 'mother'. O mother of mine, the sorrow surges back and it soothes, mother; when I call you mother. (the afflicted heart). ... Kangal says, afflicted by the three miseries<sup>47</sup>, O mother, I have fallen into sheer hell, O mother of mine, my life has been burnt by these afflictions and sorrows; I cannot bear this pain, now take me in your lap mother! (all troubles and worries will be eased if you place me in your assuring feet.)]

In a period when Shaktism was gaining social acceptability and even respectability in the bhodrolok circles through the considerable influence of Ramkrishna Paramhansa, the melange of the seemingly contrary devotional structures of Shakta and Vaishnav Podaboli in amateur Baul songs became quite a practice. Apart from Fikirchand's songs, it was also to be discerned in the Baul songs composed and sung around the same time by the Shakta devotee Mahendranath Bhattacharya (1844-1909) and his Andul Kali-Kirtan group. Writing under the nom de plume of 'Premik' (The Lover) and alongside composing various Kali-Kirtan songs, Mahendranath—western-educated and born into a family of well-to-do Sanskrit *pundits*—also composed a few Baul songs while his friend Krishnacharan Mallick added the music and rhythms: songs that were to be the basis of the Baul lineage of Shibpur.<sup>48</sup> In fact, as Openshaw has pointed out, even the Baul of Mukundadas Chakrabarti is Shakta and worships an image of the Goddess—a framing that is both telling in view of the Bauls' characteristic rejection of image worship and obvious in Mukundadas's shift from his early **initiation** as a Vaishnav to his subsequent initiation into Shaktism.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, while various musical rhythms and metres (*taal*) such as *khemta*, *ektal*, *tetal*, *gorkhemta*, *kawali-bhoirobi* etc are seen to be deployed in conjunction with the *baul shur* to the Baul songs of Fikirchand and in Nirmmalchandra's collection, in some of Fikirchand's songs, we also have instances where even the melody deployed to the Baul songs is not *baul shur*. For instance, songs no. 47 and 50, Fikirchand tells us, are to be sung to the tunes of '*Shoktipuja kothar*

<sup>46</sup> Satishchandra Majumdar ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand Fokirer Baul Shongit*, Calcutta, Kumarkhali Mathuranath Press, 1903, no. 154, p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> In the Vedic register, *tritap* or the three afflictions are threefold miseries of material existence. The first misery is known as the 'Adhyatmik' i.e., those that are caused by one's self; the second called 'Adhidoibik' are those that arise out of deities or are of supernatural origin; and finally the 'Adhibhoutik' are those that are forced on us by other living entities and natural causes.

<sup>48</sup> Mahendralal Bhattacharya, *Andul Kali-Kirtan O Baul Gitaboli*, Calcutta, published by Manindranath Bhattacharya, 1917, Introduction, n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls*, p. 35, 53.

*kotha noye*' and '*Korbo e rakhali kotokal*'—songs that, one assumes, were popular in his day. Furthermore, in the resultant pot pourri of amateur Baul songs, even the Baul doctrinal belief of *dehotottwo* suffers a similar fate. In the introductory advertisement (*bigyapon*) to his collection of amateur Baul songs, Hridoy Lal Dutta addresses his readers thus:

Dear Readers,

Having compiled the new amateur Baul songs and *dehotottwo* with a lot of effort, I present it, with a lot of care, to the society[.] Because this is the doctrine of God (*ishwortottwo*), I trust the love of compassionate thoughtful/imaginative [readers] will be generated[.]<sup>50</sup>

Once again, we witness the coalescing of the two antithetical doctrines of *dehotottwo* and *ishwortottwo* in Dutta's framing of Baul songs. With their Baul-ness, be it their musical form or melody or their doctrinal belief, so appropriated and even rendered arbitrary and variable, Baul songs came to be rendered by the framing imaginations of the amateur Bauls into what we might call a presence without essence.

In the amateur Baul songs, yet another component of their arbitrary and variable Baul-ness was the deployment of certain images that they felt constituted an 'authentic' Baul song. One of the recurring images of the Baul deployed by the bhodrolok framing imagination in their amateur Baul songs was that of the Baul's experience of, and in certain cases protest against, rural oppression. When we see that irrespective of their politics, most amateur Bauls, ranging from the social radical Fikirchand—who was also the editor of the socially radical local journal *Grambarta Prokashika* which voiced his support for the persecuted against the oppressors, be it British or Indian—to the largely apolitical Premik, have used images of rural oppression while writing their songs within a Baul frame,<sup>51</sup> it leads us to suspect that in the minds of at least some sections of the bhodrolok society of the times, the Baul identity had as one of its crucial elements the voicing of concerns about rural oppression. It is largely this association in the bhodrolok framing imagination forging and forged in the amateur Baul songs by images fashioned by protest against rural oppression, that we can perhaps locate the patriotic projection of Bauls and Baul songs in the romantic-nationalist register, particularly in the imagination of Rabindranath Tagore.

<sup>50</sup> Hridoy Lal Dutta, *Nuton Shokher Baul Shongit O Dehotottwo*, Calcutta, 1881, Introductory advertisement.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, see song no. 54, 64, 71, 73, 76, 80 in *Kali-Kirtan*, p. 51-2, 59-60, 65, 66-7, 70-1, 74.

In its twin turning back, Baul songs came to feature in the romantic-nationalist imagination as the preferred frame through which could be carried the search for an authentic indigenous self as opposed to the urban western-educated modern self that was so troubled by its own splintered reflection. Framed within the romantic-nationalist register of Tagore's impassioned plea in his 1883 review for a renewed appreciation of and identification with the 'uneducated, authentic heart' of Bengal located in the language and literature of its villages, Baul songs came to be projected as the authentic voice and spirit of the Bengali nation as opposed to the 'alien' languages and spirits of Sanskrit and English.<sup>52</sup> What is interesting about this review entitled '*Bauler Gan*' is that not only does the word '*baul*' seldom occur in it or occurs merely as an 'anonymous, disembodied source of indigenous wisdom', but in fact most of the songs he cites are not 'traditional' Baul songs, but of recent origin or village songs of 'alms-gatherers and fishermen' —a point that Tagore himself concedes but nevertheless goes on to ascribe authenticity to them on the grounds of their being 'the simple songs of the unlettered and true heart' (*oshikkhito okritrim hridayer shorol gan*). Lamenting the sway that the foreign words 'Universal Love' has had on the contemporary minds to the extent where one no longer paid any attention to these words in the songs of the Baul mendicant going from door to door, Tagore framed Baul songs with all the features with which, as we have seen, Bengali folk literature came to be framed in the splintered bhodrolok consciousness, alienated from their Bengali roots.<sup>53</sup> In and through these 'authentic' Baul songs as indeed through village songs, Tagore contended, was articulated that 'language of emotion that, suckling from the breasts of the heart/mind and swinging on the heart/mind's joys and sorrows, becomes a human being' (*bhaber bhasha hridayer stonyo pan koriya, hridayer shukh dukkher dolaye duliya manush hoite thake*). However at the turn of the twentieth century, the patriotic and romantic hue that marked the framing of Baul songs in his 1883 review-essay came to acquire a distinctly political streak in the wake of the Swadeshi Movement.

By 1905, in a rhetoric reminiscent of the early-German romantic nationalist *volksgeist*, Tagore had already outlined the goals of the 'Bongiyō Shahityō Porishod and its quarterly *Shahityō Porishod Potrika* founded in 1893 and 1894 respectively to a group

<sup>52</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "Bauler Gan" in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. II, Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1986.

<sup>53</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 32



of students:

In the Shahityo Porishod, we are trying to know our country. The Porishod is searching for the spirit of the country in the epics, songs, rhymes, doggerels, legends, ritual tales, manuscripts, in the village festivals, in the ruins of ancient temples and in the huts of the hamlets ... if you prefer the silent blessings of your mother [land] to the left-overs from the dinner of a queen [Victoria] then please stand beside these volunteers, and fulfil your patriotism by working day after day for this cause, which may not bring you money, reward, or fame.<sup>54</sup>

At the heart of this romantic-nationalist twin framing of the Bengali village and folklore as the repository of the national spirit was, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, ‘a perceived connection between identity and aesthetic activity in the realms of art, music, literature and language’.<sup>55</sup> By the time Dinesh Sen eulogised *lok-shahityo* as the ‘expressions of all the poetry of race’ the shift in the romantic-nationalist gaze from the masculine action-oriented mythologised glorious past to the feminised introspective simplicity of the ‘golden village’ seemed to be complete. In the romantic project of a ‘Bengali nationalist literature’, *lok-shahityo* thus came to be framed as the ‘live umbilical cord’ that would not only tie the educated elites and the uneducated masses of Bengal in a shared spiritual bind, but also collapse the past, present and the future of the Bengalis in its eternal narratives of emotion and imagination<sup>56</sup>—the face of which became Baul songs. With the British attempting to sow communal discord by way of partitioning Bengal in 1905, the figure of the Baul and Baul songs now came to embody Tagore’s swadeshi dream of a unified virginal Golden Bengal where the Hindus and Muslims are tied together by mutual sympathy:

The history of our nation has carried on worshipping harmony not through any need, but through man’s innermost truth. In the Baul literature, in the Baul community I see that worship,—this is both the Hindu’s and the Muslim’s, they have come together, but have never hurt each other. This union has not led to the founding of any hallowed institutions, this union has given birth to songs whose words and melodies are ripe with untutored mellifluousness. In the words and the melodies of these songs, the voices of the Hindu and the Muslim have united; the Koran and the Puran have not fought each other. It is in this unison wherein lies the distinctiveness of Indian civilisation...It is in these Baul songs that we see reflected how in the innermost recesses of the villages of Bangla desh, hidden from the monitors of institutional learning, the muse of an exalted civilisation has worked its way through, how it has striven to create a single harmonious seat for both the Hindus

<sup>54</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Rachanabali*, III, p. 592.

<sup>55</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Romantic Archives: Literature and Politics of Identity in Bengal”, *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 2004, 30:3, p. 658.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 661-2.

and the Muslims.<sup>57</sup>

And in this metaphorisation of the figure of the Baul and Baul songs, the accent firmly laid on the Baul melody which was now deployed by Tagore to his swadeshi songs in his 1905 booklet, entitled '*Baul*'. It is interesting to note here that the deployment of Baul melody to patriotic songs had also figured in Fikirchand's songs. However, whatever little emphasis in whichever form was laid on the Baul *dehotottwo* in the contemporary amateur Baul songs, in Tagore's swadeshi register, it was wholly glossed over in his emphasis on a homogenised notion of Baul *shur* (melody) as constituting the defining feature of Baul songs. As Sudhir Chakraborty tells us, so much was Tagore fascinated by the two songs of Gogon Horkora—namely, '*Ami kothaye pabo tare*' and '*O mon, oshar mayaye bhule robe*'—collected by his niece Sarala Debi and published in *Bharati* (1895), that he composed the songs '*Amar shonar Bangla*' and '*Je tomaye chhare chharuk*' in *Baul* to their melodies.<sup>58</sup> Though this early-Tagorean figure of the swadeshi Baul was to later give way to the decontextualised and spiritualised figure of the *udashin* (disinterested) Baul in Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen, as we shall shortly see, the patriotic Baul of the romantic-nationalist bhodrolok imagination did not altogether disappear. Most noticeably, it found its way into Mukundadas's fervently patriotic folk-drama *Kormokshetro* written at the time and in the spirit of Gandhi's Non-Co-operation Movement of 1920/21. As Openshaw tells us,

In Gandhian fashion he [Mukundadas's Baul] supports aboriginal cottage industries, such as the spinning wheel, while abhorring the British-Indian lifestyle of Calcutta ... as well as foreign medicine and so forth. In short, the Baul is a much revered, charismatic and wise commentator, inspiring all around him to cooperation and self-sacrifice in the nationalist cause.<sup>59</sup>

Though the trope of the 'nationalist' Baul and Baul songs largely died out with Tagore's exit from the nationalist movement, the romanticism that his framing had infused the figure of the Baul and Baul songs with lingered in the Hindu-Bengali memory even after 1947 and, in certain cases, because of it. For instance, in a series of essays written in the aftermath of the Partition, first serialised in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantor* from 1950 onward and later in 1975 collected in a book called *Chhere Asha Gram* [The Abandoned Village] under the editorship of a Calcutta-based journalist Dakshinaranjan Basu, Baul songs formed a significant vector of the reminiscences by Hindu-Bengali

<sup>57</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction in Muhammad Mansuruddin ed., *Haramoni*, vol. I., Calcutta, 1930.

<sup>58</sup> Chakraborty, *Bratyo*, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 35.

refugees of their native villages in East Bengal. Still struggling to reconcile themselves to a new life in the alienating overcrowded Calcutta of troubled times, the authors of these essays present us with sentimental and nostalgic images of their lost native villages that very much bring to mind the romantic construction of the idyllic, eternal Bengali village of Tagore, et al. In his recounting of his native village of Dhamrai, for instance, the author remembers it thus:

On the bank of the *Bongshai* river, lies the vast expanse of grass-land—as far as the eye can see, [it is] green with plentiful corn. The blades of the rice extend their hands towards the sky longing for something—at dusk they swing with the breeze and they play the flute with their continuous wheezing sound, no one knows why .... Most of the years of my life have been spent here in happiness and ease. Never have the frowns of anxiety clouded my forehead for a handful of rice. ... Our village was self-sufficient. The farmer, fisherman, milkman, blacksmith, carpenter, weaver, doctor, kobiraj, and such various people lived there. There was no dearth of things of everyday needs.<sup>60</sup>

And of such a romantic construction of his past and his lost village, the Baul too formed a part as the wandering and wise world-renouncer. Talking of the deceptions that abound in the city of Calcutta, and his resultant loss of faith in the honesty of people—a loss that, he tells us, is shared by refugees at large, the author recalls the Baul's song he had listened to in Dhamrai which had articulated a similar feeling:

... I remember that time in Dhamrai when in the terrace of one of our neighbours' southernmost rooms, a Baul had sung thus strumming his *ektara*:  
 If I do not find the Man of my Heart, I will not speak of that mind;  
 In the hope of finding the Man of my Heart  
 I travel from country to countryside  
 I meet hundreds of men, but I do not mind the mind/heart—  
 O sweetheart Life!  
 Cautioning the worldly man, the world-renouncer further sings—  
 Seeing the colours of the silk-cotton flower, O Brother, do not lose  
 yourself in its colours;  
 O brother, if you see with your mind's eyes,  
 You will see everyday  
 The *sadhu*'s flag on the thief's boat—  
 O sweetheart Life!<sup>61</sup>

However, at the same time as the Bauls and Baul songs came to be framed as distinctively Hindu within the romantic-nationalist discourse of the late-nineteenth—early twentieth century Bengal, the reformist Shariyati alims of the day, not unlike their mid-nineteenth century Hindu reformist counterparts<sup>62</sup>, came to severely

<sup>60</sup> Anon., "Dhamrai" in Dakshinaranjan Basu ed., *Chhere Asha Gram*, Calcutta, 1975, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>62</sup> The Bauls were denounced even by the orthodox Vaishnavists, such as Ramlal Mukhopadhyay, as

denounce the Bauls and Fokirs as *beshara* and *kafers* who were corrupting Bengali Islam with their 'un-Islamic' ways of life and songs. Now made aware of the 'syncretic' beliefs and sexual practices of the Bauls and the Fokirs and increasingly anxious about the large-scale conversion of lower class/caste Bengali Muslims into the Baul and Fokiri orders,<sup>63</sup> the Bengali Muslim reformists set out to strip Bengali Islam of its local characteristics that they suspected were hand-in-glove with Hindu beliefs and practices. In the *fotowas* (legal decisions) that were issued by them to this effect, the Bauls and the Fokirs remained the worst casualty. For instance, in Maulana Reyajuddin Ahmad's now infamous '*Baul Dhongsho Fotowa*' (Mandate for the Destruction of the Bauls) written in 1926, Lalon was singled out as 'the number one foe, a spy for the Arya Samaj [a Hindu revivalist organisation], and a deceiver of six to seven million Muslims.'<sup>64</sup> Alongside this verbal vilification, the Bauls and Fokirs were also made subject to brute physical attacks that were to continue till well after the independence.<sup>65</sup>

However, it needs to be pointed out that this extreme view of the Bauls and Fokirs was not without its criticism even amongst the professed Islamists of the day. For instance, in the annual meeting of the *Muslim Chhatro Shomiti* (Muslim Student Association) held in Faridpur in 1927, Kaji Abdul Wadud, who was one of the pioneers of the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (movement for the awakening of the intellect) that started in 1926 in Dhaka through the progressive Muslim Shahityo Samaj, not only criticised the *alem* society and but even went on to endorse the *Marfot-ponthis*:

How Islam would gain significance/success in Bengali lives, whatever little of this search could be traced in this *marfot-ponthi* of Bengal, even that would not be found in Bengal's *maulana*, since despite his incompleteness, there is within the *marfot-ponthi* few living faiths (*dhormo*), agonies of creation, a birth in the heart of enclosure; and the *maulana* is merely an imitator, a storekeeper of unenjoyed scriptures—unconnected and rhymeless is his life. You all know that it is against this *marfot-ponthi* that our *alem* society is applying force. The biggest necessity of speaking against this application of force by the *alems* is that they have not tried to win austere practices (*shadhona*) over by an

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depraved and corrupted ('*bhroshto*') and villains ('*pashondo*'). See Ramlal Mukhopadhyay, *Pashondodolon*, Calcutta, 1862, vol. ii.

<sup>63</sup> See, Chakraborty, *Bratyo*, p. 106.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Carol Solomon, "The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalon Fakir", in Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills ed., *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 268.

<sup>65</sup> For instance, Solomon tells us, 'In 1947, Maulana Aphasaruddin Ahmed (1887-1959) disrupted the festival at Lalon's *akhra*, then held on the full-moon night in the month of Caitra (March-April), and cut off the topknots of the Bauls who attended. Bauls did not congregate in large numbers again for a festival at the *akhra* or in the surrounding area for as long as Maulana Aphasaruddin was alive.' Ibid.

arduous practice (*shadhona*)<sup>66</sup>, instead they have sought to dominate the relatively weaker ones by the might of their clubs (*lathi*). If our *alems* honestly intended to unify Bengal by an extensive, more inclusive practice instead of the *marfot-ponthis*, then we would not have received merely the *fatwas* decreeing the destruction of Bauls (*baul dhongsho*) and the trampling of Christians (*nasara dolon*).<sup>67</sup>

It is interesting to note in this context that Muhammad Shahidullah, the founding President of the Muslim Shahityo Shomaj, was the founding Secretary of the Bongiyō Musolman Shahityo Shomiti that was formed in 1911 out of an unease of the Bengali Muslim intellectuals with the Hindu bias in the workings of the Bongiyō Shahityo Porishod. Although formed with the express intention of redressing the Hindu hue of the literary canon, the Musolman Shahityo Shomiti under Shahidullah largely operated within the romantic-nationalist register of Tagore and Dinesh Sen—only the accent was on constructing a Golden Islamic intellectual legacy. Predictably too, *lokshahityo* became once again one of the crucial sites of asserting one's distinct nationhood in the search for a Bengali Muslim past:

...numerous songs fill up the banks and fields of the village. The fisherman, boatman, Fokir, boiragi are their composers. Who searches for them? They too, like the wild flowers, spread their sweet fragrance and with time wither and fall into the arid land of oblivion. If they were to be collected and published, it would be seen that there is a beautiful place for them beside the lyrical songs of the Baishnab Padabali, it would be seen that the Marfati songs of the illiterate Muslim poet could dare the songs of Ramprasad.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, the Bengali Muslim intellectuals of the Shomiti were not only borrowing their model from Sen but in fact specifically instructing their fellow enthusiasts to follow Sen's model in their search for a Bengali Muslim folk literature. For instance, in a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> December 1925 to one Muhammad Ashraf Hussain, the editor of *Hiradhōr Baniyar Git*, Shahidullah, while conveying his gratitude for having received the collection of folk songs, is critical of the editorial additions that Hussain had made to his collection and recommends instead Dinesh Sen's *Moimonsingho Gitika* as the model of folklore scholarship to be emulated.<sup>69</sup> When viewed in this light, this

<sup>66</sup> The word '*shadhona*' in Bengali has a range of meanings from 'austere or arduous practice', 'worship of God' to 'meditation'. With the Bauls, this term often acquires an additional sense of ritual practice. Hence, throughout this thesis, depending upon the context of its occurrence, we have shown a preference for one or either of these meanings in translating the term.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Chakraborty, *Bratyo*, p. 80.

<sup>68</sup> Muhammad Shahidullah, "Speech delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> Meeting of East-Mymensingh Shahityo Shomiloni in Kishorgonj on 10 & 11 Ashar (June/July) 1345 (1938)" in Anisuzzaman ed., *Shahidullah Rachanabali*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994, vol. I, p. 570.

<sup>69</sup> Muhammad Shahidullah, "Obibhashon o Chithi-Potro" [Public Speeches and Letters] in Anisuzzaman ed., *Shahidullah Rachanabali*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994, vol. I, Letter-3, p. 631.

sympathetic view of the Bauls and Fokirs in Wadud could then perhaps be attributed, at least partially, to the influence that the ideas of Tagore and Dinesh Sen still had over the Society.

However, it was with the formation of Pakistan, the Pakistan Government's adoption of the policy of Islamicising the language and culture of its eastern half, and the emergence and consequent brutal suppression of the Language Movement that pressed for the inclusion of Bengali, alongside Urdu, in the official language of Pakistan, that signalled a volte face in the way Bengali Muslims viewed Baul and Fokiri songs. The turn-of-the-nineteenth century romantic nationalist framing of folk literature was now called forth once again—a framing that gained in momentum in the Liberation War of 1971. As Carol Solomon tells us,

In their search for an identity rooted in the soil of Bengal, rather than based on Islam as practiced in Arabia, Muslim Bengalis exalted literary figures, whether Hindu or Muslim, who expressed non-sectarian humanistic beliefs. Foremost among them were Tagore, Nazrul Islam, and Lalan, who came to epitomise the Bauls, already symbols of Bengali [Hindu] folk culture.<sup>70</sup>

Predictably efforts were afoot to turn Lalon's *akhra* in Kushtia that was formerly a site of vehement reformist persecution into a repository of Bengali culture. It re-emerged in 1962-3 as a revered mausoleum beside which was also established the *Lalon Lokshahityo Kendro* for the study of folk literature.<sup>71</sup> Not surprisingly then, the poems of Tagore and Jibanananda Das resonated, like never before, with the romantic nationalism leading upto and infusing the Liberation War. As Clinton Seely has observed on the success of Jibanananda Das's *Rupashi Bangla*, 'In 1971, during the Bangladesh liberation war, poems from this collection became viewed in as expressions of the quintessential Bangladesh for which the Mukti Bahini ("freedom army") fought. Twice during the war's nine months, new editions of *Bengal the Bountiful* were published.'<sup>72</sup> And Tagore's song '*Amar Shonar Bangla*'—a song, that we recall was inspired by Gogon Horkora's Baul song '*Kothaye pabo tare*' and composed in 1906 during the Swadeshi movement to rekindle the unified spirit of Bengal—too was revived in the eve of the Liberation War<sup>73</sup> and, after the emergence of East Pakistan as the independent

<sup>70</sup> Solomon, "Cosmogonic", p. 269.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Clinton Seely, *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)*, New Jersey: 1990, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> 'On 3 March 1971, the song was played at a meeting organised at Paltan Maidan by the Students

Bangladesh in December 1971, adopted as its national anthem.

### **Spiritual-Idealist Framings of Baul Songs: The *Udashin Baul***

Though the early-Tagorean figure of the swadeshi Baul later found its way into Mukundadas's fervently patriotic folk-drama *Kormokshetro* written at the time and in the spirit of Gandhi's Non-Co-operation Movement of 1920/21<sup>74</sup>, the demise of the romantic-nationalist framing of the Baul and Baul songs had already begun in Tagore's own thought following his increasing disillusionment with the nationalist movement by the close of the first decade of the twentieth century. With Tagore's increasing distance not merely with the nationalist movement but also with society at large, the trope of the Baul gradually ceased to be the locus classicus of the swadeshi nostalgia, but instead became emblematic of the Upanishadic universal inner spirit, of *Manobdhormo* (the Religion of Man). In Tagore's understanding, this inward turning, this shift from the political to the philosophical, from the social to the spiritual in the accents of conceptualising the figure of the Baul and the Baul songs has been seen as being profoundly influenced by the Vedantic philosophy of the classical scholar Kshitimohan Sen—'primarily interested in the "sects" and "cults" of India in general, rather than Bengali village life'<sup>75</sup>—who first came in contact with the poet when in 1908 he joined the Santiniketan Brahmacharya Ashram on the Tagore's invitation. It was this moment of abstraction and idealisation in the framing of the Baul and Baul songs in Tagore and Sen that marked the birth of its subsequent canonisation.

The year 1915 witnessed the publication of Baul songs of Lalon Fokir, Gogon Horkora and others by Tagore in the journal, *Prabasi*. While this publication itself, as already noted, was not the first of its kind, but its consequences certainly were. The very next

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League and the Sramik League. The Seventh March address of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Racecourse Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in Dhaka was preceded by this song. On 23 March it was played when Swadhin Bangla Kendriya Chhatra Sangram Parishad held ceremonial parade marking independence. The Bangladesh Government in exile adopted this song as the national anthem of Bangladesh, and it was accordingly used by Swadhin Bengal Betar Kendro throughout the period of War of Liberation.' AKM Farooq, "National Anthem", *Banglapedia*, [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/N\\_0078.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/N_0078.htm), accessed on April 18 2009.

<sup>74</sup> 'Mukundadas's Baul advocates education for girls, albeit mainly to train them for their role as housewives. In Gandhian fashion he supports aboriginal cottage industries, such as the spinning wheel, while abhorring the British-Indian lifestyle of Calcutta ... as well as foreign medicine and so forth. In short, the Baul is a much revered, charismatic and wise commentator, inspiring all around him to cooperation and self-sacrifice in the nationalist cause.' Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 35.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

year was marked, amongst his other literary productions, by the publication of his scathing critique of the extremist nationalist movement in his drama *Ghore Baire*, and Tagore's own performance in his own dance-drama *Phalguni* in the role of the *ondho Baul*.<sup>76</sup> It is perhaps not too difficult to see the connection between the two. Disillusioned and distraught by the widespread spirit of an intemperate revolutionary terrorism that nationalist movement was increasingly being informed, the wedge driven between the contradictory pulls of the split consciousness of the Bengali bhadrolok was further deepened. An increasing need to patch up the cracks in their splintered consciousness, to create an alternate identity far removed from the influences of not only the oppressive cultural imperialism of the colonisers and the aggressive nationalist politics, but also from their own immediate identities, necessitated a need to fall back on 'tradition' in a novel way. Tagore's *ondho Baul*, it needs to be borne in mind here, had its precedents in this socio-historical moment when the trope of the wise wandering *pagol* or holy fool was already being deployed in the literary-cultural space of late-nineteenth—early-nineteenth century Calcutta: a space that, as we have already seen, was heavily marked by the Bengali bhadrolok's fractured consciousness. Sumit Sarkar has shown how the advent of Vivekananda's band of young sannyasis and their pronounced social activism had precipitated a clash with Ramkrishna's band of householder devotees and their inward-turning and highly ritualised devotion that excluded social activism—a clash that was soon to be overwhelmed by Vivekananda's soaring national and international fame. It was against this backdrop that the north Calcutta professional stage, especially with Girish Ghosh's plays, witnessed representations of a certain type of holy fool that served as 'a kind of bridge between quietistic, though no longer highly ritualised, bhakti and Vivekananda's new turn towards social service.'<sup>77</sup> 'In *Bilvamangal* (June 1886), *Nasiram* (May 1888) and *Kalpapahar* (September 1896)', Sarkar tells us

Girish introduced the figure of the wandering pagal or 'holy fool', mad to the conventional world but purveyor, really, of divine wisdom, often in words taken straight from Ramkrishna. Wisdom conveyed through wandering folly quickly established itself as a central figure in the Bengali theatre. ... The pagal of Girish Ghosh appears, at first sight, to embody pure responsibility or playfulness, justified on the ground that everything is determined by Hari ... Only 'Harinama' is needed, else one should behave like a five-year-old child. But pagal figures like Nasiram,

<sup>76</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "*Ghore Baire*" in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol 8, Calcutta: Visvabharati, 1941; *Phalguni*, Calcutta: Visvabharati, 1947.

<sup>77</sup> Sarkar, *Writing* p. 344.



or Chintamani in *Kalapahar*; do in fact preside over and inspire substantial moral change ... Inward-turning piety and activism, in other words, do not necessarily remain binaries in the Ramkrishna-Vivekananda tradition. The withdrawal into oneself that Ramkrishna had inspired undercut an activism thought to be based on arrogance, but could serve at times as a prelude, through inner purification, for a higher kind of outgoing action.<sup>78</sup>

Pitted against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising to see figures like Dhononjoy Boiragi and *thakurda* cropping up in Tagore's oeuvre. While occurring first in 1909 in his play *Prayoshchitto* (Atonement) that articulates Tagore's protest against the prevalent tendency to whip up patriotic feelings by the worship of a national hero, the figure of the mendicant-minstrel Dhononjoy Boiragi is sketched as a rebel, a people's leader who strongly opposes, albeit non-violently, the autocratic rule of the petulant power-loving Raja Pratapaditya. Occurring again in *Muktadhara* (Free Current) in 1922, Dhononjoy Boiragi is yet again ascribed with a passively defined authority when he defies the King's authority telling him 'You may have an access to my surplus food but you have no right to touch the food that appeases my hunger'. The figure of the authority-defying wandering hermit Dhononjoy Boiragi also has resonances with the figure of the *Thakurda* which in Tagore's drama *Raja* (1910) came to embody a choric commentary on the state of things, first appearing as a playful old man donned in a festive robe and singing songs in the spring festival, and then changing into battle-dress when the threat to the state occasioned him to do so. But it is perhaps in this figuring of the *thakurda*, tinged with the Tagorean belief in the universal order and eternal symphony of creation, in the highly symbolic *Raja* that the shift from activism to humanism in Tagore's framing of the wandering hermits could be discerned. In *Dakghor* (1912) seen by many Tagore scholars as a spiritual allegory of the yearning of the human soul to unite with God, Tagore's framing of the *Gaffer* (grandfather) disguised as the unattached wandering Fokir, wise in his knowledge of the worlds, both natural and spiritual, finally stripped him of the activist hues of his earlier counterparts and firmly spiritualised him. Before Tagore played the role of the *ondho Baul*—and Kshitimohan Sen that of Chondrohash—in the 1915 production of *Phalguni* in his Santiniketan Ashram, he had already played the roles of the sannyasi of *Sarodotshob* in September 1908, Dhononjoy Boiragi of *Prayoshchitto* in October 1909 and *Thakurda* of *Raja* in May 1911.<sup>79</sup> In fact, even before the *thakurda* of *Raja* or the *Gaffer-Fokir* of *Dakghor* were sketched, the figure of the *udashin* Baul was already a part of Tagore's

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 344-5.

<sup>79</sup> Hemendranath Dasgupta, *The Indian Stage*, Calcutta: Truth Press, 1938, vol. iv, p. 256.

imagination. In the *Bhadro* (August/September) 1907 issue of *Prabasi* in which *Gora* was being serialised, Tagore inserted a scene that strongly betrayed the impact Lalon Fokir's song—though in no occasion of its citation had Tagore consciously attributed the song to Lalon—had on the spiritual-idealist imagination of Tagore:

Garbed in his loose cloak, a Baul stood in the front of a nearby shop and started singing—

*Khnachar bhitor ochin pakhi kemne ashe jaye*

*Dhorte parle mono-beri ditem pakhir paye.*

[How does the unknown bird gets in and out of the cage?

Could I catch it I would put fetters of soul around its feet.]

Binoy wished to call the Baul and copy the *ochin pakhi* song, but subject to the indolence that grips one when despite the chill of the dawn one does not feel like pulling one's clothes tightly around him, [Binoy] could not call the Baul or copy the song, only the tune of the *ochin pakhi* song went on humming in his heart/mind.<sup>80</sup>

This very same couplet, Chakraborty tells us, was once again used by Tagore in his *Jibonsmriti* (1911-12):

I saw that the Baul songs too are speaking of the same thing. Often does the unknown bird come into the cage and speaks of the unfettered unknown; the mind/heart (*mon*) wants to capture it forever, but it fails. What else other than the melody of this song can herald the news of the comings and goings of this unknown bird?<sup>81</sup>

And by the time Tagore delivered his Presidential address at the Indian Philosophical Congress in 1925 on the "The Philosophy of People", he had already, with Kshitimohan Sen, turned back to the Vedas to rid it of its rigid scriptural and ritualistic binds in a bid to translate its principles in the light of the Upanishadic universalism. The Bauls, with their *moromibad* and humanism, have offered them just the affirmation of their ideals that they were looking for. Yet again quoting the same lines from Lalon's song, Tagore says:

The village poet evidently agrees with our sage of Upanishod who says that our mind comes back baffled in its attempt to reach the unknown being, and yet this poet like the ancient sage does not give up adventure of the infinite, thus implying that there is a way to its realisation...It reminds me of Shelley's poem in which he sings of the mystical spirit of Beauty ... That this unknown is the profoundest reality though difficult of comprehension, is equally admitted by the English poet as by the nameless village singer of Bengal, in whose music vibrate the wing beats of the unknown bird...only Shelley's utterance is for the cultured few, while the Baul song is for the tillers of the soil, for the simple folk of our

<sup>80</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 1952, pp. 7-8.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

village households who are never bored by its mystic transcendentalism.<sup>82</sup>

The figure of the *naturally* wise Baul (as opposed to sectarian wisdom gained through textual institutionalised learning) became a legitimisation of Tagore and Sen's ideals of Upanishadic universalism of spirit which, in their imagination, was the only alternative to orthodox divisiveness of class, caste and religion. This framing of the spiritualised 'udashin Baul' was projected as the 'real' Baul—its authenticity constructed both in opposition to the 'fake' amateur Bauls as well as the 'nationalist' Baul. Read in this context, the idealised figure of the *ondho* (blind) *Baul* in *Phalguni*, benevolently wise, unlettered and devoid of any social background whether by way of familial or communitarian ties, can be seen as a consummation of this process of philosophical abstraction and essentialisation of the figure of the Baul that owe its roots in the shared understanding of Tagore and Sen. And like his favourite Baul song of Gogon Horkora—a mofussil postman who was, ironically, perhaps associated with Harinath Majumdar, the 'amateur Baul'—that in Tagore's view expressed 'the longing of the singer to realise the infinite in his own personality', the songs composed by 'Rabindra Baul' came to articulate the *udashin* Baul's search for the 'Man of the Heart' (*moner manush*), that 'supreme truth of all existence ... the revelation of the Infinite in my own humanity':<sup>83</sup> an image that came to be standardised as the image of the 'authentic' Baul through its repeated replications in various artistic registers.<sup>84</sup> The impact that the Tagorean *udashin* Baul had on subsequent Baul scholars has been significantly high. Not only do we see Tagore being lauded as the 'greatest of the Bauls of Bengal' by Edward Dimock and Shashibhushan Dasgupta and his brand of 'perfected Baul' preferred to the 'ordinary' Bauls by June McDaniel,<sup>85</sup> in all these readings, attempts have been made in various

<sup>82</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (Hibbert Lectures of 1930), London: Macmillan, 1931.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted from Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity*, London: Macmillan, 1971, p. 78-9 in Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> To begin with, Tagore's own enactment of the role of the *ondho Baul* and his painting in this role by Abanindranath Tagore went far to popularise and instill this image in the bhadrolok consciousness of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta as a cultural icon. Later on, Openshaw argues, though the visual reproductions of this image of the *udashin Baul* pitted against a blank background got diversely inflected in the paintings of several artists such as the Shantiniketan-based artist Kiron Sinha and Shyamali Khastagir, to name but a few, the essence of the Tagorean Baul continued to linger: 'All these are other-worldly, intoxicated by music or dance, or removed from mundane life through sleep.' Further, taking her cue from Sudhir Chakraborty, she also goes onto mention the existence of 50 such recently reproduced representations, a vast majority of which confirm these trends. This massive replication has been both a participant in as well as the result of the increasing institutionalisation of the Tagorean exemplar, a process that one recalls was set in motion jointly by Tagore and Kshitimohan Sen. See *Ibid.*, p. 41-4.

<sup>85</sup> Edward C. Dimock, "Rabindranath Tagore—the Greatest Baul of the Bauls of Bengal", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Nov., 1959), p. 33-51. Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1962, p. 161f. Here Dasgupta had drawn a distinction in the word 'Baul' between what he terms its 'general' sense, i.e. denotative of the esoteric groups practising secret sexo-

registers to ultimately authenticate the spiritualised Baul of Tagore and Sen as the 'real' Baul. It was the Baul-like yearning of the individual for the Divine and the tropes of the 'Man of the Heart' and 'unknown Bird' that continued to mark the framings of both Bauls and Baul songs in this body of scholarship.

### **Esoteric Framing of Baul songs: The Body-Centric Baul**

It was precisely in response to this decontextualised idealised Baul of Tagore and Sen that we can locate Upendranath Bhattacharya's framing of Bauls and Baul songs on the esoteric register of *dehotottwo*. It is important to note here that Bhattacharya's critique against the essentialised figure of the Baul, a figuration that we recall as being the joint composition of Tagore and Sen, excludes Tagore from its critical appraisal and makes Sen the focus of its attack. The reason for this exclusionist reading, as offered by Bhattacharya, is that while it was Tagore's deep innermost belief in the principles of Universalism and Humanism that informed his reception of the Bauls, it was Sen's second-hand experience of the Bauls and his appropriation of them into his sectarian beliefs that needed to be critiqued. In this very exclusionary politics played out in Bhattacharya's attribution of the responsibility of the subsequent spiritualisation of the Bauls by litterateurs and scholars alike betrays a romantic undercurrent in his own understanding of the Bauls.

What, we might ask ourselves here, had triggered this turn away from the spiritualised Bauls of Sen to a first-hand quest for the 'real' Bauls in the villages of Bengal? The answer to this lies in the braiding of three very distinct strands of available Baul framings in Bhattacharya's work. First, while rejecting Sen's spiritualisation of the Baul, Bhattacharya's interest in and framing of the Bauls is tinged with the romantic-nationalism of early-Tagore and Dinesh Sen, who with all their nostalgia and romanticism for the rural milieu, had located in the Bauls in particular and folk-literature in general the 'soul' of the indigenous harmonious nation. Second, from Akshay Kumar Datta, while rejecting his disgust and absolute Otherisation of the Baul, Bhattacharya once again draws the framing focus on the body-centric practices of the

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yogic rituals, and 'restricted' sense, i.e. denotative of those groups without the esoteric elements of sexo-yogic beliefs and practices. Predictably, Dasgupta's preference laid with the latter that constituted in his view the 'true' Baul. 'Sen and Tagore were interested in the *perfected* Baul, who has attained the state of mad love for Bhagavan.' [emphasis added] McDaniel, *Madness*, p. 161-2. See also, Openshaw, *Seeking*, p. 52.

Bauls. Finally, he draws from that strand of his contemporary intellectual trends which concerned itself with a philosophical enquiry into indigenous esoteric cults. All these three disparate frameworks, as we shall soon see, co-mingle in the work of Bhattacharya.

As Bhattacharya tells us at the very outset of his introduction to the first edition of his book, the sight of Bauls appearing in front of the regular rural Bengali household with *ektara* in hand, *dugi* (small tabor) round their waists, *gubgubi* slung on their shoulders, and sometimes with violin or *sarinda* under their arms, singing devotional and esoteric songs and/or asking for alms, or even to merely exchange a few words of joys and sorrows with the householder comprised a regular feature of everyday life in rural Bengal.<sup>86</sup> Predictably, his primary interest in the Bauls, Bhattacharya says, had its roots in his village Kushtia—which also happened to be the birth place of Lalon Fokir—where Bauls and Fokirs formed an usual part of his everyday rural life.

In Middle Bengal, particularly in the Kushtia region, at one time the number of these Baul Vaishnav and Vaishnavis and Fokirs was very high. In almost all the villages [of this area] was their dwelling-place—they were directly and indirectly intertwined with rural life. In this village of Middle Bengal, surrounded by mango and jackfruit groves and covered by the bamboo shades, have I spent my childhood, youth and early adolescence. Almost everyday have I heard so many songs sung by the Vaishnav mendicants and Fokirs—those famous songs of Lalon—“*ami ekdino na dekhlam tare, amar barir kachhe arshinogor, ek porshi boshot kore*” or “*kotha koye re, dekha dei na*” or “*khnachar bhitor ochin pakhi*”, etc. The passionate and continuous melody of these singers magically touched my young mind—and an ineffable and mysterious emotional world was created. In this way right from my early adolescence did I get attracted to Baul songs.<sup>87</sup>

While in this reconstruction of his childhood village we discern traces of the same romantic gloss of the Bengali village that we met with in the romantic-nationalist framings of the village, in his impassioned account of more politically charged reasons that, he claims, infused his quest for the Bauls and Baul songs post-Partition, we detect a continuity with the swadeshi spirit of 1905 that had so turned the romantic-nationalists to a glorification of folk literature in general and Baul songs in particular. With the partition of Bengal in 1947, Bhattacharya, who had himself hailed from an East Bengali village and whose work since 1937 was centred on the villages of Kushtia, Jessore,

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<sup>86</sup> Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul O Baul Gan*, Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2001 (1957), Introduction to the first edition, p. *chho*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Faridpur, Pabna, Rajshahi and Bikrampur, was catapulted out of his native village into Calcutta with thousands of other such refugees. Bhattacharya tells us in no uncertain terms:

... suddenly was brought about the amputation of Bengal. It is doubtful if such a severe blow has even been inflicted on the Bengali nation [*jati*] and Bengali culture. (All that is characteristic of the Bengali nation, is east and west—built on a harmony of the two, Bengali culture is the culture of both the Bengals—Hindu and Muslim, ‘majority’ and ‘minority’, ‘scheduled’ and non-‘scheduled’ [castes], big and small—a Bengali culture built on the unity of all Bengalis. Bengal’s thoroughly own [and] distinct, as this Baul-theology, in this has mingled the Hindus and Muslims—has mingled the Boudhho, Hindu and Sufi theologies. The cultural unity of the whole of the Bengali nation is established at the eternal altar of the Providence of History, no two-race theory or imperialist conspiracy would—could not—sever it.

After the partition of Bengal, preserving the literature of this peculiar religious sect and introducing their religious practices became the prime aim of my life.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly then, Bhattacharya’s quest for the Bauls and Baul songs constituted his personal romantic-nationalist project wherein the Bauls—perceived as the embodiment of communal and universal harmony and fast dying out<sup>89</sup>—would come to stand at the vortex of an indigenous Bengali nation and culture facing the threat of an artificial ripping apart of its ‘soul’ occasioned by the Partition of 1947. However, at the same time as Bhattacharya locates the ‘national spirit’ in the Bauls, his rhetoric soon after betrays the academic distance that had been created between Dinesh Sen’s romantic nationalist project of Bengali literature and the new wave of social-scientific history since the years following 1910. By 1937, the year when Bhattacharya set out for his fieldwork, we might remind ourselves, the disciplinal divorce between literature (as sentimental, imaginative, fictional, and personal) and history (scientific, dispassionate, factual, objective and analytical) had already shifted the hallmark of ‘authentic’ nationalist political exercise from literature to history. Bhattacharya’s work, predictably, was a product of these times. While his romanticism of the countryside and that of the Bauls is what triggers his motivation, his method, he clearly states, is that of the objective analytical historian; his work is to be seen as that of the dispassionate historian and critic:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. *jo-jho*.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Due to various social and economic factors, this religious sect is speedily on its way to extinction. The huge Fokir-sect of East and West Bengal is growing thinner and thinner and is now at the brink of extinction, the numbers of the Vaishnav-Bauls have decreased very much and they are reducing everyday. From what I have observed of their condition in both the Bengals, I fear there might not be any trace of them in the next twenty five years.’ Ibid, p. *to*.

I have sought to rise beyond personal opinions and have attempted to introduce the Baul-religion and Baul songs from the vantage point of the historian and the critic. Let us not forget that the Baul-religion and Baul songs are a historical document of the religion and culture of Bengal.<sup>90</sup>

Second, although Bhattacharya's framing politics is premised on an explicit rejection of the early-framings of Bauls in Akshay Kumar Datta on the grounds of sensationalism and lack of first-hand engagement with their so-called 'strange' and 'disgusting' sexo-yogic practices, its focus on the physicality and esoterism of the Bauls and their ritual beliefs and practices draws from these early-framings. While Bhattacharya repudiates the multiplicity of categories such as *aul*, *nera*, *sohoji*, *kortabhoja*, *snai*, *dorbesh*, etc described by Datta as 'sects', ironically in his very substantialisation of the Baul as the only *dhormo shomproday* or religious sect Bhattacharya still draws upon Datta's original formulation of this category as primarily a 'sect'. Moreover, even as Bhattacharya severely criticises Datta for having absurdly attributed the Bauls and their sexo-yogic practices with charges of cannibalism, bodily filthiness and prostitution, Bhattacharya's own framing is throughout informed by the need to contest and disprove Datta's accusations.

Finally, Bhattacharya's turn away from the disembodied spiritualised rendering of the Baul and Baul songs to a positive understanding of their esoteric beliefs and rituals can also be explained by the growing intellectual interest and revival of indigenous esoteric traditions in certain sections of his contemporary philosophical milieu—the clue to which is offered to us right at the outset of his book. Bhattacharya's book, self-professedly a genealogical search for the religious tradition of the Bauls of Bengal, is dedicated to Shashibhushan Dasgupta, the then Ramtanu Lahiri Professor in the University of Calcutta. And Bhattacharya not only explicitly acknowledges his debt to Dasgupta's books entitled *Obscure Religious Castes* and *Tantric Buddhism* as having encouraged and even shaped his understanding of the esoteric beliefs and rituals of the Bauls, but also copiously draws on Gopinath Kaviraj's works.<sup>91</sup> Dasgupta's work was in fact responding to the resuscitation of philosophical interest in localised esoteric sects and cults in contemporary philosophical circles. The intellectual network within which

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. *to*. For further discussion on the disciplinal forking out of history and literature and the consequent re-orientation of the Bengali romantic nationalist project, see Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives", p. 671-77.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. *do*; 259, 320, 321, 474.

we can locate the renewed focus on esoterism in Dasgupta and Bhattacharya's esoteric projections of the Bauls and Baul songs can be traced in the dedication of Dasgupta's short treatise entitled *Bharotiyo Shadhonar Oikyo* to Gopinath Kaviraj (1887-1976), a most renowned Sanskrit scholar-philosopher—the title of Dasgupta's work also clearly echoed Kaviraj's *Bharatiyo Shadhonar Dhara*<sup>92</sup>. Although John Woodroffe had earlier attempted to revive Tantrism, in the years to follow, Tantrism was looked down upon by many Indian and European scholars as 'an abomination... because ill-educated charlatans duped their adherents by obscene matters'.<sup>93</sup> It was with Kaviraj, who sought to relegitimise the tradition of the *tantras*, that *tantra* now came to be viewed instead as 'so stupendous and colossal ... that it is not possible in one's life span to study them, not to speak of their esoteric interpretation.'<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Kaviraj, like Woodroffe, viewed Tantra as complementing, not opposing, the traditions of Veda and Vedanta, and eventually as the culmination of the history of Indian philosophy. In 1937 Panchanan Tarkaratna too had expounded the *Brahma Sutra* and *Isha Upanishad* from the Sakta viewpoint. Around the same time, there was a similar revival of interest in Hindi in works such as Pundit Pitambar Dutt Barthwal's (1901-1944) *Hindi Kavya-mein Nirguna Sampradaya* [*Nirgun Sect in Hindu Poetry*] and *Gorakh Bani* (on the preceptor of the Natha *shomproday*, Gorakh Nath).<sup>95</sup> In English too there could be seen a revival in philosophical interest in esoteric cults observable in texts such as George Weston Briggs' *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*.<sup>96</sup> It was not merely this revival of esoterism and *dehototwo* in contemporary philosophical works that profoundly influenced Dasgupta's treatise, but also Kaviraj's synthetic model, his overarching, albeit hierarchical, ontological system that accommodated the six systems of Indian philosophy, i.e. Yoga, Sankhya, Vedanta, Vaisheshika, Nyaya and Mimansa, along with the esoteric traditions of Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism—a model that was shared by contemporary philosopher-scholars such as Shiva Chandra Vidyarnava

<sup>92</sup> Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Bharotiyo Shadhonar Oikyo*, Calcutta: Viswabharati, 1977; Gopinath Kaviraj, *Bharatiyo Shadhonar Dhara*, Calcutta : Sanskrit College, 1965.

<sup>93</sup> Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), *The Serpent Power*, London: Luzacs, 1918. Ramchandra Adhikari, "Shiv, Shakti Yoga", *Life and Philosophy of Gopinath Kaviraj*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1981, p. 92.

<sup>94</sup> Gopinath Kaviraj, "Sakta Philosophy", *Aspects of Indian Thought*, Burdwan: University of Burdwan, 1966, p. 175-6.

<sup>95</sup> "*Hindi Kavya-mein Nirguna Sampradaya*" was the title of Pitambar Datt Barthwal's D.Litt thesis that was published in English as *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, Benares: Indian Book Shop, 1936; Barthwal ed., *Gorakh Bani*, Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1971. See also Mohan Singh, *Gorakhnath and Medieval Hindu Mysticism*, Lahore: Dr. Mohan Singh, 1937.

<sup>96</sup> George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*, Calcutta: Y.M.C.A. Press, 1938.



Bhattacharya and Panchanan Tarkaratna.<sup>97</sup> It is within this new synthetic vision of esoteric traditions that we can locate both Dasgupta and Bhattacharya's genealogical quest of the esoteric beliefs and practises of the Baul *shomproday* in the philosophical and religious traditions ranging from the Upanishads to Sahajiya and Tantra. Though their methodology is shared, Bhattacharya's revision of Dasgupta's framing of Bauls lay in the latter's exclusion of the Bauls as practitioners of the four-moon ritual from the latter's definition of the 'real' Bauls in the 'restricted' sense—a bias that, Bhattacharya claims, was inherited from Datta and Manindramohan Bose's framings of the Baul.<sup>98</sup> Bhattacharya's specific interest in the esoterism of Bauls and Bauls songs was also fuelled by the 1930 publication of Muhammad Mansuruddin's collection of Baul songs in *Haramoni* which included three hundred Baul songs and was followed by five additional volumes in the subsequent years and which, in Bhattacharya's view, constituted 'real' Baul songs. Situated within this intellectual network then, Bhattacharya's framing of Baul songs located esoterism as the most crucial distinguishing mark. Rejecting the framings of Baul songs by both the 'amateur Bauls' and Kshitimohan Sen, Bhattacharya goes on to state his definition of a 'real' Baul song:

...[being] based on devotion to the *Bhogobot* or indicative of renunciation or based on one or two doctrines of the Hindu language written in a simple language like that of the widely circulated Baul songs and being set to a melody of village songs does not qualify a song as a Baul song. These [Baul songs] are songs of a very specific religious tradition on the subject of their ritual worship. A real Baul song is composed by these practitioners and full of their own religious principles, knowledge and experience.<sup>99</sup>

Bhattacharya's esoteric framing of Bauls and Baul songs has had a fairly longstanding impact on subsequent Baul scholarship, whether in the English or Bengali language. Their specific accents notwithstanding, this focus on *dehotottwo* as the distinguishing feature of Bauls and Baul songs marked the various framing imaginations of Edward C. Dimock, Somendranath Bandyopadhyay, Charles Capwell and Rajeshwari Datta, to name a few.<sup>100</sup> Even when scholars such as Ahmad Sharif, David Cashin and Carol

<sup>97</sup> Shiva Chandra Vidyarnava Bhattacharya, (Arthur Avalon ed.), *Principles of Tantra*, Madras: Ganesh, 1952 (1914).

<sup>98</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 57. See also Manindramohan Bose, *The Post-Chaitanya Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1930.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>100</sup> Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1966]; Somendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Banglar Baul: Kabyo O Dorshon* [Bauls of Bengal: Poetry and Philosophy], Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1967; Charles Capwell, "The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1974, 33:2, p. 255-64; Rajeshwari Datta, "The Religious Aspect of the Baul Songs of

Solomon have variously tried to study the Muslim Bauls—who were by and large neglected in the aforementioned studies—through the prisms of Islamic idealism and Sufism, their framings too had their exclusive focus on the Baul *dehotottwo*.<sup>101</sup>

However, it was Jeanne Openshaw's fascinating ethnological research of the Bauls of Rarh and Bagri that, for the first time in the tradition of western scholarly works on Baul, turned critical attention to the danger of essentialisation involved in these framing imaginations, i.e. that of reading the complex category of the 'Baul' as a reified 'essence' or a 'thing':

...many problems in Baul studies derive from uncritical acceptance of the essentialisation and reification of the word *Baul*. This tends to obscure the fact that at issue is not one essence or thing called Baul, but several different phenomena which require separate consideration: a word (*Baul*), a category of person, a kind of esoteric practice, a type of song—and text and music are again not inextricable. Tracing any of these threads in time (through historical research) or space (in contemporary fieldwork) leads to fragmentation and ultimately, dissolution of the category itself.<sup>102</sup>

In an attempt to revise the various available framings of this much-fluid category of the 'Baul' that have hitherto crystallised in Baul literatures, both in Bengali and English, Openshaw's search for the Bauls, or rather the *bortoman-ponthis* (this being a more appropriate and self-ascribed term)<sup>103</sup> in Rarh and Bagri has not only called our attention to the various framing politics by way of emphasising the differences between their projections by historians, critics and common men alike and their own self-projections, but has also fore-grounded the inherent polysemy of their esoteric thought and language. Moreover, in an argument that is carried forth through a detailed analysis, both linguistic and sociological, of the body-centred esoteric practices and the associated terminologies practised by the *bortoman-ponthis*, Openshaw has also, arguably for the first time, staked a claim for the 'positivity' of the radically subversive potential of this indigenous counter-tradition in the face of the Subaltern historians' claim (Partha Chatterjee being notable among them) that subalternity is invariably marked by negativity and the 'failure to construct an alternative universal to the dominant dharma'.<sup>104</sup> Although the Baul *tottwo* and the Baul, rather than Baul songs,

Bengal", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1978, 37: 3, p. 445-55.

<sup>101</sup> Ahmad Sharif, "Baul Tottwo", *Banglar Ekademi Potrika*, Dhaka, 1963 (1370 BS), 7:4; David Cashin, *The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal*, Thesis, Stockholm: Association of Oriental Studies, Stockholm University, 1995; Solomon, "Cosmogonic Riddles".

<sup>102</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls*, p. 111.

<sup>103</sup> Here too the deployment of the terms '*bortoman-ponthis*' and later '*manush*' despite being more popular are themselves highly polysemic and are used in myriad ways by the practitioners themselves.

<sup>104</sup> A similar point about the 'positive' or 'excess' of the Subaltern's consciousness, beyond the negative

continued to be its focus, with the self-reflexivity and pluralism central to her framing imagination and its associated claims for a positive reappraisal of the Bauls' subaltern consciousness, the monolithic esoteric Baul of Bhattacharya et al had come a long way.

### **Sexual Liberalist Framings of Baul Songs: The Baul as a Sexual Libertine**

Within a decade of Bhattacharya's critique of the standardised figure of Tagore-Kshitimohan's spiritualised Baul, a curious reception could be discerned to be taking shape in the Western world. It was Purna Das Baul's trip to America in 1967 on the invitation of Albert Grossman—Bob Dylan's ex-manager—to sing at a music festival at San Francisco that triggered on Western interest in Baul music. The reasons were plenty. In the '60s America, rules were broken in every conceivable way from music to fashion, to manners and mores: boundaries were challenged and crossed in literature and art; the government was confronted head-on for its policies in Vietnam; the cause of civil rights was embraced by the young; and mind-expanding drugs were doing just that.<sup>105</sup> Needless to say, as with all cultural co-options, the time was just ripe for Baul music to be stripped of its doctrinal complexities and to stand in instead as yet another affirmation of the counter-culture's belief of human salvation through 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll'; and by extension, the Baul came to be located at this intersection of music, sex and hashish as one of the beatniks, a wandering soul on the road in eternal search for his identity through his body, music and hallucinogens. In one of the reminiscences of his days with Dylan and Mick Jagger—both of whom he had recorded music with—Purna Das, now self-styled as 'Returned from Abroad, Baul Emperor and TV and Radio Artist', recalls thus:

I remember Dylan traversing the countryside on horseback and strumming his guitar seated on a barrel. I fondly recollect all the jamming sessions with him. Before long we recorded albums together. Dylan would call himself the 'baul of America'. He pointed out to me that he wore patchwork jeans very much like my pied guduri and we both sang songs celebrating humanity- so where did the difference lie?<sup>106</sup>

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dimensions is also made by Gautam Bhadra in his study of the ideological matrix of Titu Mir's rebellion: 'The subaltern's Otherness comprises *not merely of an inverted structure of domination, it exceeds such inversion, s/he has his/her own unique mind and world [which] s/he seeks to establish [in the course of rebellion]*'. [emphasis mine] in "Narkelberer Jong" [The War of Narkelberia] in *Iman 0 Nishan: Unish Shotoke Banglar Krishok Choitonyer ek Odhyay, 1800-1850* [The Faith and the Flag: A Chapter in the Consciousness of the Bengali Peasantry in the Nineteenth Century, 1800-1850] Calcutta, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1994, p. 274.

<sup>105</sup> Mike Marquese, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art*, New York, 2003.

<sup>106</sup> Pallavi Bhattacharya, *The Tales of a Minstrel* (Purna Das Baul interviewed by Pallavi Bhattacharya),

Purna Das Baul, however, was far from being the only folk-cultural export to the West. The 'Baul' phenomenon in the West continues to be nourished by the likes of Prahlad Brahmachari, Paban Das Baul, Gour Khyapa and a host of others. And in his review of Bengal Folk Band's "The Sounds of Bengali Baul & Spirituals From the '60s San Francisco, USA" in the *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Donovan Bess wrote on March 19, 1970:

The Bauls are moving in from India again, and they've come at a time when America needs them most; for a good many of our younger natives have hair longer than the average Baul's and are wandering in restless, mystic searching disguised as acid-rock.<sup>107</sup>

The 'Baul' has since then been translated onto the global capitalist register as the 'Child of Transcultural Studies' who 'Sings and dances mad songs of ecstasy.'<sup>108</sup> And implicit in this stereotype was a perception of the Baul as a sexual libertine—a perception that has gained credence in view of the Baul's radical approach to sex as well as by the common Baul practice of having multiple ritual-partners. In most instances, the Bauls' key to the Western world has remained with their Western 'hippie' ritual-partners/associations in whose perception they came to resonate as the music-sex-hashish induced Western Baul. For instance, we are told that the gold watch that Gour Khyepa wears has been gifted to him by his 'foreign girl' (*bideshini meye*) and that Anondo Das's German trip was the heady result of his blind love for a 43 year old German, Karin, and Karin's very practical need of extending her Indian visa through her marriage to an Indian.<sup>109</sup> In fact even the mere presence of Western women and their subsequent interest in and becoming the ritual-partners of the sexually radical, wandering minstrels of rural Bengal aided in shaping the contours of this framing imagination. Commenting on the magnetic impact of these 'white women' on contemporary Bauls, Liyakat Ali, himself a Baul, tells us:

Even though the enchantment presented by the white skin is still around, the city is largely without curiosity. But in the villages, the fair-skinned, healthy, blonde foreign girl is still a rare and strange thing. And when this

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<http://www.beatofindia.com/mainpages/article-purna-1.htm#PurnaDas>, accessed on April 23, 2009.

<sup>107</sup> Donovan Bess, Review of Folk Band's "The Sounds of Bengali Baul & Spirituals From the '60s San Francisco, USA" in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, March 19, 1970, <http://calcuttaglobalchat.net/calcuttablog/2009/04/12/sounds-of-bengali-baul-spirituals-from-the-60s-san-francisco-usa/>, accessed on April 23, 2009.

<sup>108</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty ed., *Banglar Baul Fokir*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1999, p. 79.

<sup>109</sup> Aditya Mukhopadhyay, *Dhormo O Shongskritir Aloke Baul*, Calcutta: Sarat Publishing House, 1988, p. 65, 77.

sensual girl roams around with the downtrodden Baul, [one's] astonishment knows no bounds. Their reckless, unrestrained lives, varying attires, demeanours, bearings, and even the slightest of smiles or words feel like a dream and even the bonus Baul who accompanies her seems as fortunate as the [one] in the film on Doordarshan. No matter how he sings, no matter how incompatible is the saffron colour [of his robe] with the colour of his heart, his glory escalates. From the *sadhu's akhra* to the common household, everywhere is under his paramountcy.<sup>110</sup>

It is this sexualised framing of the 'the fair-skinned, healthy, blonde foreign girl'—a framing that is shared by both the urban and rural imaginations of Bengal even today—that the projection of her Baul partner as a sexual libertine slides into. In fact, such a framing is not just projected by the 'hippie' West, nor merely internalised and so projected by these Bauls alone, even contemporary Bengali representations of Bauls, whether in academic scholarship or literature has sustained this framing imagination. While Leena Chaki's study of contemporary Baulanis has foregrounded the sexual radical-ness of the Bauls in its account of the hazardous impacts of the Bauls' ritual practice of multiple partners (often including 'foreign' women) on the lives of Baulanis, Tilottoma Majumdar's framing of Bauls and Baulanis in her Ananda-Puraskar winning novel *Rajpat* set in the villages of Murshidabad betrays a highly sexualised rhetoric.<sup>111</sup> Despite Majumdar's attempts to define 'Baul' as a radical way of life and a resisting consciousness, rather than a *shomproday* and her championing of their songs as those of 'Universal Love', not only do we discern her framing language steeped in sexualised images, but in the organised rape of Moyna Vaishnavi, we also glimpse the projection of Baulanis in popular consciousness as sexual libertines.

### **Marxist Framings of Baul Songs: The Socio-Historical Baul**

It was with Shaktinath Jha and Sudhir Chakraborty that critical attention had first been drawn to that essentialising strand of the esoteric framings of Baul that continued to view the Baul as an asocial, apolitical, wandering mendicant singing with an *ektara* in hand. While Jha faulted Bhattacharya and Dimock for their serious negligence of Muslim Bauls in their works, what he lamented was the absence in the existing body of Baul scholarship—with the exception of Chakraborty—of any illustration of the socio-

<sup>110</sup> Liyakat Ali, "Baul O Bideshini" [Baul and the Foreign Woman] in Chakraborty ed., *Baul Fokir*, p. 197.

<sup>111</sup> Leena Chaki, *Bauler Chorondasi*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2001; Tilottoma Majumdar, *Rajpat*, Calcutta: Ananda, 2007.

economic realities of these Bauls.<sup>112</sup> Jha's methodology, though largely following the anthropological model pioneered by Bhattacharya, focussed on contemporary Muslim Bauls of Murshidabad and called for an appreciation of these Bauls through a nuanced understanding of their socio-economic-cultural positions in the society. For instance, his social anthropological method involved, amongst other things, an intensive demographic survey of the Muslim Bauls in contemporary Murshidabad that included even their political affiliations—a study that at once redressed the asocial and apolitical framings of the esoteric Baul. It would perhaps not be far-fetched to say that this slant in Jha's methodology resonated with the socialist interest in folk culture of the day. It is interesting to note in this respect the many instances with potentially socialist undertones that are scattered throughout his book *Bostubadi Baul* (1999). For instance, in his survey of the political affiliations of the Muslim Bauls of Murshidabad, Jha's classification of the majority of the Bauls as CPI(M) supporters is quickly followed by the observation 'Bauls are supporters of those who do not discriminate on the grounds of religion and class.'<sup>113</sup> And later on, in his account of the new wave of oppression of the Bauls in Murshidabad by the Muslim League fanatics we discern, not only his faith in the efficacy of the Police in resolving the crisis, but also a cleverly inserted telling statement that confirms our speculation: following the widescale arrests of the fanatics, the fugitives Montu Khan and Kamaluddin joined Congress (I) and BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) respectively.<sup>114</sup> Our speculation gains more credence when we consider the fact that Jha's work was published from the Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre [*Lok-Shongskriti O Adibasi Shongskriti Kendro*]: a centre that was founded within two years of the establishment of a Communist government in Bengal. Since 1979 the centre has been engaged in expanding 'the area of study and development of folk and tribal culture of West Bengal ... not only for its survival and preservation but also for fighting against the menace of invasion by commercial and decadent culture' and has maintained that '[t]he traits of this indigenous culture lie in its naivety, liveliness, social content, life-base, secularity and robustness.'<sup>115</sup> However, it is in the following observation that we discern the most telling evidence of the Marxist resonances in Jha's materialist framing

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<sup>112</sup> Shaktinath Jha, *Bostubadi Baul: Udbhob, Shomaj Shongskriti O Dorshon*, Calcutta: Lok Shongskriti O Adibasi Shongskriti Kendro (Totthyo O Shongskriti Bibhag, Poschim Bongo Shorkar)[Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre, Department of Information and Culture, West Bengal Government], 1999, Preface, p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233, 235.

<sup>115</sup> Home page of *Lok-Shongskriti o Adibasi Shongskriti Kendro*, <http://loksanskriti.org/about.html>, accessed on 21 April 2009.

of the Bauls and Baul songs:

It has been observed in the Communist Manifesto that the have-nots have nothing but their bodies. The Baul practitioner is that have-not to whom his body is everything. Their existence is primarily corporeal. Without their bodies, they have no right over any material ingredient, no constituents of enjoyment, no articles of exchange value. The internally located fundamental material of their body is their ancestral property, the only capital of their lives. It is in fear of losing or having this material robbed that the practitioner is forever watchful. Secretly multiplying this, he stores it in secrecy. The sixteen clubmen (*lathiyal*) of the feudal overlords, the lustful thieves want to steal this material. And this material wealth (*bostudhon*) and its worship is ridiculed by the polite society. Hence, 'do not speak of your own *sadhona* anywhere and everywhere.'<sup>116</sup>

Yet, alongside these Marxist resonances, we detect a tendency—not unlike that in the esoteric framing imaginations—in Jha's framing imagination to project Baul songs as articulations of the Bauls' specific materialistic philosophy wherein the Baul body is not merely a casualty of class oppression, but also esoteric. In fact, as we have seen in the intermingling of Marxist and esoteric rhetorics in the aforementioned quote, esoterism in Jha's Marxist projection of Bauls and Baul songs comes to be located as the Baul's only capital. He thus continues:

The Baul ritual worship [*shadhona*] is primarily in vogue amongst the poor peoples. By the toil of these indigent peoples their bodies erode. In the imprisoning defiled environment, they see decay and destruction. This consciousness of decay and destruction has gained great intensity in Baul songs. The practitioners seek inside their bodies to counteract this decay and gain perfection. Hence a defense of this material is a kind of decay-counteracting resuscitating doctrine of life [*jibonbad*].<sup>117</sup>

It is here in this continuous scholarly preoccupation with decoding the Baul's songs in terms of their esoteric *tottwo* that we can locate Sudhir Chakraborty's work on the Shahebdhonis and Boloram Haris of Bengal.<sup>118</sup> To begin with, it was against Bhattacharya's imputation of the blanket status of '*shomproday*' to Baul which subsumed all other heterodoxies that the voice was raised by Sudhir Chakraborty in 1985. One of the principle charges against Bhattacharya, brought by Sudhir

<sup>116</sup> Jha, *Bostubadi*, p. 256.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni Shomproday O Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1985; *Bolahari Shompodray O Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1986.

Chakraborty in particular, is that the Baul songs collected by him are wrongly attributed—a negligence that could be said to be a product of Bhattacharya’s watertight homogenisation of the category of Bauls. For instance, Chakraborty reveals how Bhattacharya had failed to identify four songs of Kubir Gossain—a Shahebdhoni—which he passed off as being one of the songs collected from ‘the assemblage of the Bauls from Bankura, Medinipur, Manbhum, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bardhaman and several other districts in the Mela at Kneduli.’<sup>119</sup> In Chakraborty, we find an attempt to disaggregate the blanket category of Baul into the various heterodox sects that do not merge into or cancel each other in a bid to construct their identities; instead their identities are fashioned in a process of mutual and dialectical legitimation—not just internally, but also in relation to the external institutionalised religious identities. In what is perhaps the most significant move from the almost exclusively esoteric focus of the framing imaginations of Bhattacharya and other Baul scholars following his lead, Chakraborty’s studies of the Shahebdhoni and Boloram Hari sects and their songs have sought to reinstate the apolitical and asocial ‘esoteric’ Baul back into the symbiotic network of his village.<sup>120</sup> In the framing imagination of Chakraborty, the songs of *dehotottwo* of these various heterodox sects come to stand not merely as repositories of their esoteric beliefs and rituals, but also as articulations, whether overt or subtle, of the singer/composer’s socio-economic-political everyday experience as a village dweller. Outlining the methodology employed in his study of the Shahebdhoni sect and their songs, Chakraborty states

This book [*Shahebdhoni Shomproday O Tader Gan*] has sought to make sense of literature and culture through social, historical and demographical links. It has attempted to understand popular religious sects through the key of their songs. At the other end of writing political histories littered with wars, there is a different rhythm of the common

<sup>119</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 53-54.

<sup>120</sup> The Shahebdhoni sect originated in the village of Dogachia-Shaligram in the district of Nadia, arguably around the beginning of the eighteenth century. Opinions vary on the question of its founder: while Akshay Kumar Datta identifies one Dukhram Pal as its preceptor, Sudhir Chakraborty claims it was one Muliram/ Mulichand Pal. Though the sect’s doctrinal beliefs were mostly influenced by the liberal ideas of Chaitanyite *Boishno bism*, their ritual practices were also impacted by the influence of Sufism and the iconoclastic and sexo-yogic beliefs and practices of the Bauls. They call their spiritual guide *Dindoyal* and *Dinobondhu*. Their annual festival and fair are held during Boishakhi Purnima in the village of Brittihuda on the banks of the river Jalangi. Though the community has largely decreased in number, their traces remain in the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad, Bardhaman and Hughli. The Boloram Hari or Bolahari sect derived its name from its initiator, Boloram Hari, who was born into the Hari or scavenger caste (a stereotypically untouchable class in Bengal) in around 1780 in the village of Meherpur of the district of Nadia. This sect too is comprised of both low-caste/class Hindus and Muslims who call their deity *Hariram* and *Hari-Allah* respectively. Though declining in numbers, the Bolaharis are still to be found at some places like Meherpur and Nishchintapur in Nadia, Daikiari in Purulia, Shalunigram in Bankura, etc.



man's life. Its reflection is manifest in their warm songs, popular *montros*, artistic crafts or garrulous proverbs. Hinting at this, the French historian Eugen Weber has recently stated that village songs [*gramin gan*] constitute one of the ways of accessing the minds of agrarian peoples. Viewed from this vantage point, it will be discerned that in the songs of *Shahebdhonis* subtly lie that concealed stream of a demographic portrait that has been flowing since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their existence and struggles, resistance and escapism, the reverse pattern of religious and class hierarchy, *koboch-tabij* [defensive amulets], *montro-tondro*, and simple procreative philosophy. In viewing and analyzing all these, what has been ventured here is an attempt to write a different history, one that can be called "a history from below". In this attempt, constant exchanges were made with many relevant disciplines. Sociology with history, social anthropology with ethnology, literature with music.<sup>121</sup>

In this lengthy prefatory statement, we can locate the resonances that mark Chakraborty's framing of the *Shahebdhonis*. To begin with, Chakraborty's unequivocal acknowledgement of the methodology employed by Eugen Weber in his study of nineteenth-century rural France is particularly telling. Weber's 1976 classic book *Peasants Into Frenchmen* had for the first time in French historiography not only turned the spotlight away from the dominant culture of Paris to the illiterate French peasants, but had also addressed the inadequacy of archival records such as those produced by the ruling class and typically studied by mainstream historians in exploring the mentalities of the illiterate peasants of rural France. Instead, Weber had relied on the only sources of information available—proverbs, songs and records of court proceedings—to learn about social and family relations, religious practices, and other activities and customs of the townspeople.<sup>122</sup> While it is not difficult to see why Weber's methodology had its appeal to Chakraborty who similarly sought to sketch the socio-economic-cultural-political lives of the *Shahebdhonis* through a nuanced socio-historical reading of their songs, his very next statement wherein he aligns his methodology with that of 'history from below' squarely identifies his methodological orientation with that of the British Marxist historians of the 1960s. Moreover, it is interesting to note that around the same time that Chakraborty's book came out, attempts to recuperate the peasant experience in history through an employment of an interdisciplinary methodological frame that was discerned in the works of Weber and the British Marxists such as E.P. Thompson, Keith Thomas, Christopher Hill et al, had gained in momentum with the rise of the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s.<sup>123</sup> That Chakraborty chooses to not comment on this

<sup>121</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. xi.

<sup>122</sup> Eugen Joseph Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.

<sup>123</sup> For instance, Dipesh Chakraborty draws on Weber's *Peasants into Frenchman* and the works of the British Marxist historians whilst speaking of the methodological legacy of the Subaltern Studies

closer-at-hand influence and cite instead Weber and Thompson, might also be read as a consequence of his Marxist affiliation and the stated distance of the Subaltern Studies from Marxist histories. Thus clearly resonating within the British Marxist register, in Chakrabarty's socio-historical framing of Shahebdhoni songs we discern for the first time the shift of the focus from an exclusive preoccupation with the esoteric *tottwo* of Baul songs to a concern with possible articulations of the Shahebdhoni mentalities in their songs.

### **Aims and Limitations of the Thesis:**

#### **Locating the Aim:**

The point of this lengthy discussion on the various framings and re-framings of Baul songs in the available historiography is as much to generate a greater awareness about the politics of the archive that we have at our disposal as to locate this thesis in the available Baul scholarship. These sections on the various framings of Baul songs throw into relief how the particular economy of the archive, whether produced by the dominant ideological registers of romantic-nationalism, Marxism or sexual liberalism, has enabled and oriented certain ways of seeing and frames of understanding, while obstructing others. Yet in its very exclusionist role of circumscribing both the material and meaning, the archive also has the potential of betraying its own self-imposed limits: the very awareness of its strategies of selection, erasure and concealment is what turns our attention to the excess that evades the frame. Despite the differences in their vectors of perception, what runs through all the aforementioned shapings and re-shapings of Baul songs by the bhodrolok imaginations since the late-nineteenth century to this day is a tacit acknowledgement, whether conscious or unconscious, of two features of the object of their framing imaginations: first, that the Baul songs are constantly shifting, hence the constant need to contain it by framings and re-framings; and second, that of the external reality of these songs that the framing bhodrolok imaginations are in dialogue with. Hence, while being sensitive to the bhodrolok frames, we also ought to recognise that the very impulse to frame is also a testament to the limits of the bhodrolok imaginations. And this limit is accepted by all the bhodrolok collectors and

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school. Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography", *Nepantla*, 1:1, 2000, pp. 22-3.

scholars of Baul songs as being something externally imposed on them through their dialogue with the Baul songs. It is in the residual excesses of this dialogue and the resultant negotiation between the bhodrolok framing imaginations and the Baul realities which produces the archive of both the Baul songs and its scholarship, that we would locate the aim of the present thesis. Our concern in the thesis is not to attempt to hear a 'pure' Baul voice—if indeed it can be heard at all—of late-eighteenth to early-twentieth century rural Bengal, but to locate the Baul songs in their encounter with the various dominant discourses of the day and so retrieve a history of the negotiation between the bhodrolok frames and the Baul realities. The question here is, how do we then access the moment of encounter between the Bauls texts and the frames of meaning imposed upon them? I will contend that the language of the songs in itself bears testimony to this negotiation. Consequently, what we need is a reading strategy by which language itself is mined to retrieve a narrative of that negotiation and the clash that precipitated the need to negotiate; and the key to this lies, I argue, in the metaphors and images present in the songs.

### **Problems of Authorship:**

Before we venture into a careful study of the metaphors and images in the Baul songs to reclaim a history of the conflicts and negotiations between the Baul singer-composers and the bhodrolok imaginations, we need to address the vexed problem of the status of authorship of the Baul songs. Can we indeed hear the voice of the Baul composers in their songs? If so, what is the nature of this authorship? While the various framings through which the Baul songs of late-colonial Bengal are made available to us call into question the claims of authenticity of these songs, the related politics inherent in the transmission of oral literature into the written text further deepens the problem. It will perhaps be worth our while to illustrate the problematic by recalling the much-famous debate that raged around the mid-twentieth century discovery of Lalon Fokir's manuscript amongst the old papers of Rabindranath Tagore. In fact, speculations were already rife since the mid-nineteenth century amongst Lalonshahi Bauls, folklore-collectors and Tagore scholars as to the specific nature of the encounter between Tagore and Lalon, especially so in the face of the silence in Tagore's writings on the subject and the pressing claims of Lalon's disciples, notably of Bholai Shah, which propagated the theory that not only was Tagore a disciple of Lalon, but his *Gitanjali* was in fact based

on the MS Khata of Lalon's songs that Tagore had taken away from the fokir's Chheuriya *akhra* in present-day Kushtia district in Bangladesh. While on one end of the spectrum, we have scholars such as Muhammad Mansuruddin, the mid-twentieth century folklore/Baul song-collector/scholar, who affirmed the actual encounter between the two by claiming to have learnt from Mrs Satyendranath Tagore that Lalon often frequented them on their boat during their stay in Silaidaha, we have the view of latter-day litterateurs like Annadashankar Roy who, while underplaying the significance of the influence of Baul songs on Tagore, strongly contradicted any possibility of it. It was however in Upendranath Bhattacharya's voluminous study of the Bauls and the Baul songs of Bengal, that we are offered an interesting glimpse into the story of the transmission of the 'real manuscript' of Lalon's songs to the 'manuscript' that Tagore came to possess. Recalling how he had had the privilege of seeing the error-ridden 'real manuscript' containing Lalon's songs at the Chheuriya *akhra* on two occasions, once in 1925 and again some 11 or 12 years later, Bhattacharya goes on to recount his momentous Santiniketan experience in 1949. On being informed by the authorities of *Rabindrabhaban* of the discovery of the 'real manuscript' of Lalon's songs from amidst Rabindranath's old papers, he went to Santiniketan in 1949 only to find to his great amazement that the 'manuscript' was merely a copy of the error-ridden so-called 'real manuscript' that he had viewed in Chheuriya. His companion in the discovery, Sachindranath Adhikari, a renowned scholar of Tagore in his own right and a long time employee at the Silaidaha Tagore estate, further added that the copier was none other than one Bamacharan Bhattacharya who happened to be an old employee of the same estate. It therefore, concludes Bhattacharya, would not be presumptuous to suppose that Rabindranath collected the mistake-laden 'real manuscript' of Lalon, had it copied by Bamacharan and then, after a few necessary corrections, published some of the corrected copied version of Lalon's songs in *Prabasi* in 1322 B.S.<sup>124</sup> In fact, in the same breath Bhattacharya expresses his disappointment with the nature of Mansuruddin's collection of Baul songs in *Haramoni*. He regretfully adds that by publishing these songs as they were sung by the 'illiterate singer', Mansuruddin's collection has rendered these songs as 'fragmented, impure and ... meaningless'. Instead, what Bhattacharya sought to do in his collection was to 'correct' the 'corrupted' pronunciation and/or spelling 'errors' in these songs:

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<sup>124</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, pp. 536-7.

It is meaningless to retain those words which have been pronounced or spelt corruptedly due to ignorance. It is perhaps because of this that Rabindranath had rectified the spellings in these songs in accordance with their correct pronunciation and published these songs. I have followed Rabindranath's course.<sup>125</sup>

This whole trajectory of the transmission of the song first, as a possibly mediated oral source and then, as a written text passing from a member of a rural dissenting tradition through a lower middle class semi-literate employee to the cultural icon of the Bengali bhodrolok makes it impossible to hear any one 'pure' voice in Lalon's songs as printed in *Prabasi*. In fact, the inscriptions of such plural voices in the Baul song-texts can be found in the other 'manuscripts' too. For instance, Sudhir Chakrabarty tells us that his access to the songs of Kubir Gossain (1787-1879) of the Shahebdhoni sect has been through the 1893 copy of Kubir's manuscript by one of Kubir's disciples, Ramlal Ghosh. The last footnote in Ghosh's copy, we are told, contains the following lines from the Shahebdhoni scribe:

The aforementioned song has been composed the last: because of this, this last composition is the end. But all the songs that will be found after this will be written afterwards [;] here ends, 1300 B.S. 31 *Ashar* Monday, in place of Sri Kubirchondro Goswamideb's old *khata* written in his own hand, I, the insignificant Ramlal Ghosh, write this *nakal* [imitation/artificial] *khata* and the recipient, by pardoning the copy's failings and errors, should take it to be the essence of the master's [*Probhu*] very own spoken words.<sup>126</sup>

Thus imbricated in the textual politics of transmission, the Baul songs become an echo-chamber of the voices across the socio-economic-cultural hierarchy that have left their imprints on the songs by way of 'errors'/'corrections', transcriber's notes, etc.

While the politics of framing and transmission continually pester the issues of authenticity and attribution in Baul songs, the problem is further complicated when we consider the inherent unreliability of the deployment of colophons in these songs. Within the textual economy of Baul songs, the colophons or *bhonita*, usually the last line or couplet of the song, function as the site on which authorship is stamped. On the notion of authorship articulated in and through the use of colophons in Baul songs, two essential points need to be made. The first is to see the deployment of colophons in Baul songs as an attempt to negotiate the individual and sectarian identities of the composer. Take for example, the typical use of colophon in one of Kubir's songs:

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

<sup>126</sup> Chakrabarty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 16.

*Deho hobe sunirmol  
Dhoribe shuphol  
Kubir koye choroner dhula kheyee.*<sup>127</sup>

[The body will be perfectly pure and will yield good results; so Kubir says, biting the dust of Choron's feet (*choron*).]

While the very use of colophon is a technology of selfhood inasmuch as it bears the name of the composer, the adjoining tribute to his guru, Choron Chand, can be read as an attempt to efface his individual self in his sectarian identity as a Shahebdhoni that is symbolically invoked by the name of his guru—an act that is at once a part of his devotional piety and of the devotional economy wherein claims of originality or selfhood are necessarily erased in that of the Guru's. Furthermore, this negotiation between his individual and sectarian selves in the composer's self-fashioning can perhaps also be read as a complex act of legitimising one's own identity as a Shahebdhoni or Kortabhoja or Lalonshahi Baul singer/composer. The very sequence in which the names of Kubir and Choron appear in the colophon reveals the nature of its legitimising function: at the same time as Kubir asserts his individual self in and through his signature that comes *before* his tribute to his guru, the deferential reference to Choron and the dissolution of his individuality in his guru's that immediately follows it can be read as an attempt at legitimising his Shahebdhoni identity in an act of identification with his guru. In short, the mark of authorship that the colophons bear in Baul songs, is neither individual nor communitarian, but in fact a negotiation between the two that serve to legitimise each other.

Second, and this is crucial to our argument in the thesis, because the colophons function as a legitimising tool in Baul songs, the problem of authorship is further compounded by the fact that anyone could compose a song and use the names of well-known Baul preceptors or famous singer-composers and so ensure a wider acceptance of his song. In fact such instances of deriving legitimation from well-known and reputed poets were not uncommon in the corpus of Bengali devotional poems, as is evident from the critical debates over the claims of authorship in the poems of Chandidas and Ramprasad.<sup>128</sup> The

<sup>127</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, no. 48, p. 189.

<sup>128</sup> For instance, for the 'Chandidas puzzle', see Muhammad Shahidullah, "Chandidas Shamasya", *Bangla Sahityer Katha: Madhyajug*, Dhaka, 1966, vol 2, pp. 40-68; and for similar problems of authorship claims in Ramprasad's poems, see Malcolm McLean, "The Deconstruction of the Tradition", *Devoted to the Goddess: the life and work of Ramprasad*, New York: SUNY Press, 1998, pp. 17-29.

crucial question then is how do we retrieve a *historical* narrative of the encounter between the Baul realities and the bhodrolok imaginations in the hall of echoes that comprise the archive? Our answer to the problem would be to revisit the subject of authorship and attribution in Baul songs from another vantage point that calls into question the signification of the name of the author and the assumed inseparableness between its two signifieds, namely that of the actual historical person and that of the work or ideas associated with the name. By situating the function of author's name within literary-social relations, Michel Foucault, in his celebrated essay "What is an Author?", has offered us just such a theoretical tool. Borrowing the poststructuralist idea of the 'death of the author', Foucault de-centres the humanist view of the author as the source of something original, and replaces the idea of the 'name of the author' with 'author-function', an idea that recognises the 'author' only as the product or function of writing, of the text. In other words, if humanist criticism had set itself to the task of tracing the connections between an author (a real historical person) and the works s/he created by reading the work as an illustration of the author's individual life history, his/her particular concerns, thematics, etc, what a de-centring of this idea by the broader discursive notion of 'author-function' would do is to destabilise this very connection that firmly tied up the author as a real historical person and his/her work together in the first place. To begin with, the name of the author is a proper name, a signifier that designates a specific actual historical individual. But, Foucault contends, the author's name does even more: it also signifies a description, that is, the body of thoughts, modes of thinking, the methodology, objects of contemplation, and/or the writings that are culturally associated with the name. And the relation between the designating and descriptive functions of the author's name is not isomorphous; instead they are arbitrary and separable. For instance, one may say Foucault's works are Foucauldian, but one may also say that the works of another philosopher is Foucauldian. It is in the construction of the latter, in the discursive shaping of the body of work that comes to be socio-culturally attributed to the real historical individual and from which other works derive legitimacy that Foucault locates 'author-function'. And in this sense, it is separate from the authorial individuality and authority inscribed in the designatory function of the 'name of the author'. As a function of discourse itself, the author-function then is not merely single or individual; it is also a 'characteristic of the existence, circulation and functioning of certain discourses within a society'.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Michel Foucault, Donald F. Bouchard, Sherry Simon ed.

It is through a recognition of this separation between the real historical individual 'author' and the discursive 'author-function' and the use of author-function as a legitimising tool that would enable us to address the problem of authorship in Baul songs a bit more sure-footedly. Hence, for instance, due to the absence of any historical record of the 'real' voice of Kubir Gossain, even if we do concede that the songs attributed to Kubir were not actually composed by Kubir, the fact that the archive attributes these songs to Kubir means that, within the logic of the compilation of the archive, the name bears some relation to the socio-historical context it refers back to. In other words, our concern here is not with the actual historical Baul singer-composer, not with whether Kubir or for that matter Lalon or Duddu Shah did indeed compose these songs, but with the author-function ascribed to these song-texts by the discursive logic of the archive's economy. Having said this, we must also reiterate what we have already argued earlier that the logic of the archive itself is not merely a product of an autonomous bhodrolok consciousness. The shape of the archive—its logic—is constituted by a constant negotiation of the bhodrolok consciousness and that which remains outside of that consciousness. At the same time as the author-function constitutes an authorial voice internal to the logic of the archive, that logic is itself mediated and negotiated by the shadowy figure of the actual historical Baul composer. The attributions of authorship within this archive are therefore not of the same order of exactitude which pertains say in contemporary research publications. Its attribution is rather of an anexact<sup>130</sup> nature towards not a historical individual as such, but a possible individual in a specific socio-historical location.

### **Of Metaphors and Meaning:**

The second crucial question that we need to address in the structure of the argument

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*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 113-138.

<sup>130</sup> The term is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari who in turn has borrowed it from Husserl's writings on protogeometry or science that studies vagabond or nomadic morphological essences: 'it [Protogeometry] is neither inexact like sensible things, nor exact like ideal essences, but anexact yet rigorous ("essentially and not accidentally inexact"). The circle is an organic, ideal, fixed essence, but roundness is a vague and fluid essence, distinct both from the circle and things that are round (a vase, a wheel, the sun). ... At the limit, all that counts is the constantly shifting borderline.' The anexact falls outside the binary between exact and inexact since the vagueness of the contours of an anexact object is a requisite condition and cannot be formalised as a clear truth-value. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Brian Massumi trans.), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Continuum Books, 2004, p. 405.



proposed by the thesis is: why read metaphors as a repository of the traces of the encounter/negotiation between the Baul realities and the bhodrolok imaginations? How can we read metaphors to stake a claim for a socio-historical reading of Baul songs?

To begin with, the large-scale prevalence of metaphors in Baul songs is largely due to the deployment of what Baul scholars have variously called *sondhya* (twilight/intentional) *bhasha* (language) as a linguistic strategy in these songs. While Baul scholars are divided on the 'exact' terminology, nature and purpose of the *sondhya bhasha*—a linguistic ploy that the Bauls had possibly borrowed from Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism, secrecy has been seen by most Baul scholars as one of the reasons behind the deployment. The need to conceal and so encode their esoteric beliefs and practices in the language of their songs was, for the Bauls, grounded in the exigencies of their immediate reality. 'For Bauls,' as Openshaw states,

secrecy has a vital role to play in averting verbal, written and even physical attack by established religious groups. Whereas many Tantric texts are confined to initiates, songs of those called Baul are usually directed at both insiders and outsiders, traditionally for the collection of alms, and also, nowadays, for the remuneration from concerts. This acts as a partial determinant of overt content, and tends especially to exclude scandalous surface meanings such as are found in some Tantric contexts.<sup>131</sup>

Driven primarily by the need to conceal and protect their esoteric beliefs and practices from both the persecution of orthodox outsiders as well its potential abuse by the non-initiates, what the layerings of meanings effected by the consequent encoding of their language generates, as Openshaw points out, is not an erasure of the conventional meaning by the intentional meaning, but a seemingly irreducible proliferation of meanings in the songs that resists 'any clear one-to-one equivalence' between the two. It is this polysemic esoteric secret structuring and structured by the twilight or intentional language deployed in the Baul songs that, as we have seen previously, has become a vexed site of the bhodrolok framing imaginations. As the previous sections have shown, in their various attempts to unravel this esoteric secret, what the bhodrolok collector-scholars did was to extrapolate meanings that turned the polysemic Baul songs itself into a composite metaphor of the various vectors of their framing imaginations: in the bhodrolok metaphorisations, the Baul esoterism became the tenor of the various vehicle-discourses of romantic-nationalism, socialism, sexual liberalism, theology and

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<sup>131</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking*, pp. 68-9.

even of religious-anthropology. We need to reiterate here that in their very process of selection, concealment and/or erasure of a set of meanings in their bid to contain the polysemic intentional meanings in the Baul songs, the bhodrolok framing imaginations were in fact limited and/or negotiated by what remained outside of their frames. And the spillovers of this dialogue and negotiation between the bhodrolok imaginations and the Baul realities can be traced in the tenor of the Baul's metaphorical imaginations: i.e. the socio-historical context that generated the conventional meanings that the Baul imaginations were in dialogue with in and through their deployment of the twilight/intentional language. In other words, while the Baul scholar-collectors have been preoccupied with decoding as it were the multiple esoteric meanings in the metaphors of the Baul songs, this thesis will in fact turn its attention to the other end of the metaphorical equations that bears the marks of concealment and negotiation, to the socio-historical backdrop that triggered on the metaphorisation in the first place.

To understand this better, we will engage in a brief discussion of the relation between metaphor and the production of meaning/s. Throughout this section, we have been using the term 'metaphor' in broadly three interrelated senses: first, metaphor as a linguistic strategy; second, category as metaphor; and third, metaphor as a mode of thought and experience. We will, for the purposes of simplicity, see how these usages have figured in our discussion so far.

#### 1) Metaphor as a linguistic strategy:

While on one end of the diverse theorisations of the metaphorical process in language, we have the traditional scholars who had taken the approach of the substitution and comparison views of metaphor wherein metaphors are seen as expendable embellishments to language, at the other we have those subscribing to the 'interaction' view foregrounding the reciprocal action between the two words in the metaphorical equation which produces the similarities in an active system of relationships.<sup>132</sup> Taking this latter view forward, Paul Ricoeur's 'tension theory' of metaphor maintained that in a metaphorical process, meaning is generated by a tension not merely between the inherent polysemy of the two words, but also that of its relation to the sentence, through

<sup>132</sup> On the 'interaction' view of metaphor see I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936 and Max Black, *Models and Metaphors*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.

a violation of established linguistic codes and the consequent creation of semantic innovation.<sup>133</sup> In our usage of the term ‘metaphor’ as a linguistic strategy, it is this foregrounding of the polysemic, referential and transformative capacity of language and the contextual production of the metaphorical meaning through a semantic tension that affects both the tenor and the vehicle that, as we have seen, underscores the use of metaphors by Baul singer-composers in the twilight/intentional language of the Baul songs. In its most extreme deployment, the use of plurally coded metaphors in the intentional language of the songs brings to mind the rhetorical strategy of ‘defamiliarisation’—a phenomenon first named and systematically described by the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky. Poetic language, according to Shklovsky, functions, at least in part, not to promote communication, but to impede it, to ‘de-habitualise’ our processing of language and so make us re-perceive the world as if for the first time, or in ways we have never perceived it before.<sup>134</sup> The twilight semantic world that this linguistic and rhetorical deployment of polysemic metaphors brings about in the Baul songs is, as we would argue in the thesis, a paradoxical world of silencing and speech, a world that bears the marks of the Baul singer-composer’s complex encounter and negotiation with the hegemonic discourses of the time.

## 2) Category as Metaphor:

By the ‘category as metaphor’ usage, we mean the discursive shaping of the categories ‘Baul’ and ‘Baul songs’ as metaphors for the various ideological vectors of the framing bhodrolok imaginations: we have by now seen how this works.

## 3) Metaphor as a mode of thought and experience:

By the 1980s, with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphor came to be understood by cognitive psychologists and linguists not merely as a matter of language or the literary use of language, but as a matter of thought.<sup>135</sup> In locating the metaphorical process in the pre-conceptual structures of the human mind arising from everyday bodily experiences, what Lakoff and Johnson argued for is an understanding of the

<sup>133</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, London: Routledge, 1978.

<sup>134</sup> Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan ed., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Malden: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 15-21.

<sup>135</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

metaphorical process as a mode of thought that structures our actions and social relationships. In other words, metaphors are not merely linguistic embellishments as objectivist accounts had proposed, but the very means by which one thinks, reasons and imagines—cognitive processes that are underscored by the various embodied pre-linguistic structures of experience, i.e. the image schemas, emerging from the interactions between the body and the physical world. The literal *is* the metaphorical that has through time and cultural conventions been converted into a literal understanding of the world, and thereafter frozen into a one- reality, ‘scientific’ knowledge of the world. Not only is the metaphorical process at the root of our perception of the world, for to name something is always an act of ascription of certain properties to it and the perception of certain shared similarities, but it is also crucial to an analysis of the social. Because of the centrality ascribed to bodily experiences and actions in the theorisations of metaphors by both cognitive linguists like Lakoff, et al and phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, metaphors have been particularly useful to social and cultural historians and anthropologists alike in their attempts to study ‘the way in which a mind, with this propensity [to think metaphorically], becomes articulated, through cultural experience, to produce particular kinds of metaphorical links within historically determinant and determined social circumstances.’<sup>136</sup> In other words, because metaphors are systematically linked to the functioning of the *embodied* human mind, and because the structures of bodily experiences informing the metaphorical process are socio-culturally mediated, we would argue that not only are the Baul metaphorical imaginations, like all metaphorical imaginations, directly implicated in their (esoteric) bodily experiences and actions, but that a contextualisation of the metaphors in their songs and their metaphorical imaginations in their socio-historical-cultural circumstances would facilitate ‘an understanding of the manner in which metaphor operates as part and parcel of the structuring of everyday life,’ of how the socio-historical-cultural world is encountered, negotiated and mediated by the Baul singer-composers in and through their metaphorical imaginations.<sup>137</sup>

With the experiential body placed at the heart of all metaphorical processes, the human body and its various ‘techniques’ have long been the starting point of many sociological and anthropological studies of social orders and relationships. Alongside their stress on

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<sup>136</sup> Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 35

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

both the metaphorical intertwining of the human (physical) body and the social body (society) [e.g., the human body is microcosmic as the world is organismic] and the continuous reciprocal ordering of each in terms of the other, their corresponding recognition of anthropomorphism as one of the primary metaphorical processes in small-scale societies has turned our attention to how particular ideas and images of the body have acted as an enormous reference system in producing a certain understanding and structuring of the physical and social world in these societies. In fact, the metaphorical connection between body imageries and socio-cultural orientations has been recognised by even medical historians such as Paul Unschuld and Vivienne Lo who have, in their studies of the early Chinese medical theory of 'systematic correspondence', shown how classical Chinese perceptions of the medical body mirrored the geographical, philosophical, political and religious realities of early China.<sup>138</sup> However, since Rene Devisch's analysis of body metaphors in the healing rituals of the Yaka of southwestern Zaire, body metaphors have been largely understood as enactive, not merely representational.<sup>139</sup> The body is not merely an inchoate medium on which symbolic meaning is inscribed, but it is an enactive source and agent of cultural creativity and innovation. Particularly in cultures where the physical, social, ethical and spiritual are often overlapping, embodied meaning is to be found in modes of action or ways of life. While aligning ourselves to this understanding of the metaphorical equation between the body and the world, we need to briefly remind ourselves at this point of the possible pitfalls of assuming any meta-narrative of a body-world metaphor in our study of the metaphors in Baul songs. Given the present state of research, any assumption of a body-world meta-metaphor informing the Baul metaphorical imagination would be somewhat misplaced, since there is no single coherent discourse of a Baul body that has informed the Bauls' metaphorical imagination. Since there are several imaginations of the body in the various traditions that have influenced the Baul's *dehotottwo*, any attempt to map a homogenous or coherent meta-metaphor of an esoteric body would in fact be misleading. And a close perusal of their songs does not give us any evidence to a possible coalescing of these various esoteric discourses of the body in the Baul's *dehotottwo*; in fact, it does quite the contrary. As we shall see throughout our case-studies of particular metaphor-clusters

<sup>138</sup> Paul Unschuld, *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; Vivienne Lo, "The Influence of Yangsheng Culture on Early Chinese Medical Theory", PhD Thesis, London: SOAS, 1998.

<sup>139</sup> Rene Devisch, *Weaving the Threads of Life: The Khita Gyn-Eco-Logical Healing Cult among the Yaka*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

in the Baul songs, namely, that of agrarian power relations, the home, transportation and of space, the Baul body is as plural and diversified as the socio-historical world it is intertwined with in the metaphorical equations.

### **Conclusion:**

We have so far seen how the various frames of the bhodrolok imaginations had sought to delimit, whether consciously or unconsciously, the range of meanings generated by the metaphorical imagination at work in the Baul songs through a process of selection, erasure and concealment that was in tune with the specific logic of the economy of their frames. Our concern here has been to create an awareness about the inherent pluralism of the meanings generated by metaphorisation, and so to turn our attention to those other sets of meanings that have largely been left out by the framing gaze, be it that of romantic-nationalism, socialism, sexual liberalism, theological or religious-anthropological. The thesis would try to tease out these alternate set of meanings in the Baul songs that resonate with the socio-historical context of which the shadowy figures of the actual historical Bauls were a part of. In this sense, the reading strategy adopted in this thesis is perhaps yet another instance of framing our understanding of Baul songs on the socio-historical register; but it is a framing that has none of the methodological monism that marks the bhodrolok framing imaginations. Instead it seeks to orient our understanding of the Baul songs on the socio-historical register in a way that is both sensitive to and in dialogue with other framing imaginations. What we seek to retrieve through our study of certain clusters of metaphors deployed in the Baul songs is *a* possible history of the moment of encounter and negotiation between the Baul realities and the bhodrolok imaginations in late-eighteenth to early-twentieth century Bengal—a reading that is as valid and tentative as those generated by other framing imaginations.

**Victorian Bauls and the Performativity of Gender:  
Locating Historical Specificities and Sites of Resistance in the Gender-Metaphors  
of Baul Songs**

Studies on the Bauls of Bengal, as we have shown in the Introduction, have hitherto tended to focus on either their esoteric philosophy and/or ritual practices from within a primarily romantic/scriptural/ethnographic prism. However, despite the multiple, often conflicting, readings generated by these frames, one of the rare moments of unanimity amongst the Baul scholars has been on the issue of gender. In investigating the issue of gender, most scholars till date have tended to focus on the status and position of women within these sects. Be it the ascription of the conventional charge of sexual libertinism or the more recent recognition of a refreshingly anti-hegemonic gender-equality of the sexes in the Bauls' ritual practices, scholars have principally interrogated the gender question within the remit of studying women and their roles in Baul sects. Even when their studies have been supplemented by exegesis of Baul theologies, they have been concerned with the role and position of women within the sect. This has also meant that 'men' and 'women' have been understood as relatively homogenous categories within this discussion. Our contention, however, is that Baul songs are also texts which are shaped by their implication within larger socio-historical contexts. On the issue of gender, therefore, we will argue that, Baul songs are not solely concerned with the women within their folds or merely within the ambit of their ritual and esoteric practices. Instead, we will show that, by reading the metaphors in Baul's songs we can discern a much more complicated and nuanced understanding of gender relations within their specific socio-historical contexts. Moreover, the 'gender question', we will argue, need not be limited to merely discussing the role, position and status of women. It might indeed be explored as an axis upon which to interrogate the Baul's response to the larger structures of power. Indeed, the metaphorical deployments of gender in their songs, we will argue, engendered—in a very literal sense—an alternate way of looking at their social world and hence functioned as a mode of resistance to the hegemonic order.

## Section I:

### *Kamar Kumor Tamli Teli Moyra Bene Napit Mali: Disaggregating Gender Identities*<sup>140</sup>

Before attempting to look at the various metaphorisations of gender identities in Baul songs, we would first outline how Baul scholars have hitherto sought to explore both the Bauls' conceptualisation of gender identities and the politics of gender relations in Baul esoteric belief and practices. Broadly speaking, as scholars since Upendranath Bhattacharya have pointed out, the initiation-ritual into the Baul *shadhona* or ritual practice involves four stages, namely, *sthul* (the coarse disciple), *proborto* (the novice, beginner), *shadhok* (the practitioner) and *shiddho* (the perfected disciple). These four stages of Baul *shadhona*, we are told, are carried out under the twin guidance of the *diksha-guru* and the *siksha-guru*. The former administers the first two stages by teaching various initiatory mantras, yogas, specific breathing practices, the benefits of the four-moon practice, etc all aimed at mastering the central practice of coitus reservatus.<sup>141</sup> A proper understanding of these two preliminary conceptual stages leads one to the third stage of the *shadhok*. Herein enters the figure of the *siksha-guru* who now offers the initiated practical lessons of the sexo-yogic ritual of coitus reservatus. It is in this crucial stage of Baul *shadhona* that the need of having a woman as a *shadhonshongini* or ritual partner arises. The woman is required to learn some very basic breathing practices and yogas, and is trained to aid the male Baul in carrying out the act of coitus reservatus which would thus render him complete. This notion of 'completion' of the self entails the recovery of both the male and female essences thought to be present in the Baul. In fact, echoing the identification of the *diksha-guru* with Krishna (male) and the *siksha-guru* with Radha (female) outlined in *Bibarta-Bilas*, Akinchan Das's 17<sup>th</sup> century tantric Sahajiya commentary on *Chaitanya-Charitamrita*, Edward C.

<sup>140</sup> Translates as "Blacksmith, potter, betel-leaves seller, oilman, confectioner, banian, barber, gardener". Sudhir Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni Shomproday O Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1985, p. 213.

<sup>141</sup> The much-maligned four-moon practice of the Bauls pivots around the belief of immortal life achievable through the consumption of body fluids, namely faeces, urine, sperm and menstrual blood. Though the concept is preached in the second stage of *proborto*, the practice is carried out only in the third stage of the *shadhok*. For a detailed discussion, see Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul O Baul Gan*, Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 1981 [1957].



Dimock has summarised the roles of the *diksha-guru* and *siksha-guru* in the initiation rituals of the Bauls thus,

The *dikṣā-guru*, the guru who gives the initiatory mantra, is Kṛṣṇa, and the *sikṣā-guru*, the guru who conducts the worshipper in his search for realisation is Rādhā. All women participate in the qualities of Rādhā, therefore all women are in some sense gurus.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, it is the successful completion of this difficult stage that makes the *shadhok* Baul a *shiddho* or the perfected one. In this stage of ultimate salvation, all binaries of male-female, class-caste-religion, lust-love dissolve in the transcendental harmony of the *shiddho* consciousness.

What almost all of these existing scholarly studies on the nature and position of the woman/female body in Baul esoteric belief and ritual practices have stressed is the radical-ness of the gender politics that informs the Bauls' various eulogistic, often overlapping, metaphorical conceptualisations of the female body as *Prokriti* (Nature/ the primordial female essence), Radha (Krishna's consort/ female ritual partner in Vaishnav-Sahajiya rituals) and Shokti (Siva's consort/ female practitioner in Tantric rituals) as the spiritual vehicle to perfected love, salvation, *mati* (earth), *shohoj* (the innate, inborn, natural), mother and so on. Yet, as Baul scholars such as Sudhir Chakraborty and Jeanne Openshaw have cautioned us, to assume that the Bauls' attitudes to women were unambiguous or consistently eulogistic would be misleading. For instance, in the songs of the Boloram Hari sect we discern a complete inversion of the nurturing female figure of other Baul songs. Here the figure of the woman is associated with *probritti* or activity and change that 'tempts, subjugates and destroys the male body'. Elsewhere too, alongside the veneration of the female feet (also an esoteric euphemism for the female genitalia) and the corresponding exaltation of the woman-partner, we find a curious echo of hegemonic patriarchal anxieties about uncontrollable female sexuality:

*Meyeke na chinte pere*  
*Ghotlo bishom daye*  
*Meye shorbonashi jogot dubaye*  
*Meye bhojte parle pare jaowa jaye.*  
*Meye jake sporsho kore*  
*Pnajra ke jhnajhra kore*

<sup>142</sup> Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 101.

*Knacha bnashe jemon ghun dhore*  
*Meye kotakkho-baan hane jare*  
*Tar mathar moni khoshe jaye.*  
*Shei bhoyete shoyong shonkor*  
*Rakhlen meye buker upor*  
*Joydeb adi noboroshik aar chhoy Goswami*  
*Matlo meyer sadhonaye.*<sup>143</sup>

[O what a problem not being able to recognise the nature of women. The woman is dangerous, ruining the whole world. Worshipping her could lead you to deliverance. The one whom the woman touches, she pulverizes his ribs. Like the termite that destroys the very wood it feeds on, one shot of her coquettish glance can throw off the jewel in the head. Fearing that glance, Shonkor (Shiva) himself prostrated before the woman and Joydeb and the six Goswamis immersed themselves in her worship.]

What is interesting in this image of woman in this song is the simultaneity of gender symbolisms of woman as the lustful destroyer and woman as the path to salvation. Borrowing images from a familiar agrarian repertoire, Gobindo Gossain goes on to state the potential of the threat latent in unruly female sexuality: like the termite that feeds on the wood that it destroys from within, the woman, with one shot of her coquettish glance, would annihilate the very source of life in a man. Here the usage of the coded term ‘*mathar moni*’ or ‘the jewel of the head’ is one of the many sexual symbols of semen, conceived in the esoteric worldview of these sects as the male aspect of life-force.<sup>144</sup> However, he is quick to point out the means of controlling such disruptive female sexuality. He harks back to the available Shakto figuration of Kali, wherein the blood-thirsty rampage of the black-Goddess was brought to a halt by a literal prostration of Lord Shiva beneath her feet. He also cites instances of such control in his Vaishnava forebears, i.e. Jayadeva, the author of *Gita Govinda*, and the six Goswamis who were Sri Chaitanya’s followers.<sup>145</sup> Such instances are deployed to facilitate the understanding that it is through worshipping women that the potential threat of uncontrollable female sexuality can be tamed and made amenable to the project of spiritual salvation.

The available scholarship on the subject, while being extremely illuminating on these

<sup>143</sup> Sudhir Chakrabarty ed., *Bangla Dehotottwer Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2000, p.102.

<sup>144</sup> For a detailed reading on the various esoteric symbols of the Bauls, see Rahul Peter Das, “Problematic Aspects of the Sexual Rituals of the Bauls,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112:3, 1992, pp. 388-432.

<sup>145</sup> According to the Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had requested a select few among his followers, who later came to be known as the Six Goswamis of Brindaban, to systematically present his theology of *bhakti* in their writings. The six saints and theologians were Rup Goswami, Sanatan Goswami, Gopal Bhatta Goswami, Raghunath Bhatta Goswami, Raghunathdas Goswami and Jiv Goswami, a nephew of the brothers Rup and Sanatan.

diverse deployments of the figure of the 'woman' as alternately both destroyer and preserver as well as occasionally the figure which transcended such binaries, has continued to speak, as we have suggested above, of undifferentiated, homogenous categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Whether it is in the esoteric, ethnological or sociological readings of gender-relations in Baul songs and/or Baul esoteric practices, the existing scholarship, while preoccupied with problematising Bauls' attitudes to women and women-ritual partners, remains implicated within an unitary and more-or-less stable understanding of gender categories. As recent feminist scholars have persistently pointed out, gender categories such as 'male' and 'female' are not stable, unmarked categories; but rather are marked variously by differences and instabilities in systems of significations and social practice that produce them in the first place:

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is, the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pre-gendered 'person' transcends the paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.<sup>146</sup>

In other words, to talk of a single, unitary male/female body as the subject of the various metaphorical deployments in Baul songs would be to assume a homogeneity that does not consider these other socio-economic-cultural differences that necessarily mark gendered bodies at the very moment of their production. A closer engagement with the various metaphorical deployments of male/female bodies/voices in Baul songs would reveal how class differences in occupation, rank and status as well as race intersect with gender identities and so come to mark and pluralise the male/female body. Occupational roles, for instance, such as weaving, farming, boat-making, etc are one of the most persistent markings which structure the figurative logic of any gendered figures mentioned in the Baul songs. These songs do not simply speak of 'men', but of men who are either 'weavers' or 'farmers' or 'boat-makers' and so forth. Sudhir Chakraborty has suggested, in his study of the Shahebdhoni sect, that it was the organic nature of pre-capitalist organisation of social relations in rural Bengali society which allowed both the authors to draw on metaphors related to trades other than their own as well as for such metaphors to be meaningful to others.<sup>147</sup> Hence, a Baul who was

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<sup>146</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>147</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 83.

himself a weaver could deploy metaphors drawn from the various other rural occupations such as that of a blacksmith, a carpenter, a farmer, a confectioner, a thatcher etc in his songs and hope to communicate with the entire rural society through them.<sup>148</sup> The consequent frequent deployment of such occupational identities in Baul songs meant that whilst explicit deployments of the image of the unmarked 'male' body remained scarce, there were frequent references to specific men in specific social and occupational roles. Metaphors of the 'farmer' cultivating the 'field' of his body by the 'fertiliser' of devotion, or that of the 'weaver' in a song by the prolific Kubir Gossain, who keeps 'untying the knots' on the way to his salvation, are typical of such deployments. The specific occupational roles that mark the figures of 'men' in such songs can hardly be ignored.

The Baul songs, however, were not limited to merely describing simple rural occupational roles alone. Some songs described a complex vocabulary of social identities where occupational designations were further complicated by religious and sectarian identities—all working together to form a composite social typology that reflected the society of the time. Yet another one of Kubir Gossain's songs, for instance, spoke of 'middle-class Muslims who eat fermented rice (*pantabhat*) and laboured all day long in tiresome salaried jobs to make ends meet and at the end of the day, instead of recalling the Prophet fell fast asleep'. The same song also mentions not only devout Vaishnavs who behaved like householders and ran petty businesses but occasionally also supplemented their income by feigning to beg, but also extremely religious Faraizi Muslims who regularly offered *namaz* and sported conspicuous beards.<sup>149</sup> Each of these figures—that of the newly emergent Muslim middle-class householder caught in a low-paying job, the Hindu-Vaishnav petty trader and the austere and bearded Faraizi—are all characters which clearly resonate with the rural society of mid-nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>150</sup> Another, later song by Kubir's disciple Jadubindu, shows how clearly specific

<sup>148</sup> It is pertinent to add here that while we follow Chakrabarty in taking note of the presence of such occupationally specific roles in the songs, we do not wholly agree with his literal acceptance of such songs as historical descriptions of these trades. To us, the use of such specific social identities and personae are as important as the fact that their deployment is after all as metaphors. For a Baul song detailing a wide variety of occupational and caste designations, see, for instance, Chakrabarty, *Shahebdhoni*, pp. 213-14.; also see, pp. 182-201.

<sup>149</sup> Chakrabarty, *Shahebdhoni*, pp. 166-67.

<sup>150</sup> The Faraizi which insisted on a strict scriptural version of Islam became popular in rural Bengal, particularly between 1830 and 1857. Significantly, their habit of sporting long beards became a distinguishing feature to the extent that their opponents, the local gentry, sought impose a tax on beards. In fact, this was one of the main reasons that led eventually to the Faraizi rebellion led by Titu Miyan in 1830. For further discussion, see Gautam Bhadra, "Narkelberer Jong", *Iman O Nishan*:

social types could be described in Baul songs. Describing an upper-class, nineteenth-century gentleman, he wrote, ‘You wander hither-thither with stylishly parted hair, a pocket-watch in your pocket and Gajamati’s (possibly, a courtesan) garland on your wrist’.<sup>151</sup> Elsewhere, describing the same social persona in even greater detail, Jadubindu sings

*Gin-brandy cholchhe obisram kabab katlis onupam  
 Ultum beer samkin sherry rosh dheno tamam—  
 Khashi murgir heme hnasher dime tumi bhai ei roshete roile dube.  
 Pentul kamij coat shonar chhata tupi eastkin juto  
 Churut mukhe moner shukhe ingriji kotha.*<sup>152</sup>

[Gin and brandy are flowing ceaselessly, kebabs and cutlets go well with it; beer, champagne, sherry and toddy abound. You remain immersed brother in flesh, fowl and golden duck’s eggs. Pantaloon, shirt, coat, golden parasol, hat, stockings and shoes, a cigar on your lips [you] happily prattle in English.]

The ‘men’ who appeared as metaphors in Baul songs were not marked simply by occupation, class religion and social rank. Some songs also mentioned explicitly racialised or ethnicised bodies. One song mockingly states how contemporaries have learnt to mistake the ‘white Englishman’ (*bilati gora*) as gods; another speaks of the ‘Marwari moneylender’ (*mohajon Marwari*); yet another speaks of an ‘Oriya gardener’ (*ure mali*).<sup>153</sup> Clearly, the Baul songs, when their metaphors are taken seriously, and not merely as keys to understanding their esoteric message, can be seen to cross-mark male bodies and identities by complex codes of occupation, class, religion, social rank and even race or ethnicity.

Such plural and heterogeneous markings are, if anything, even more explicit in the images of the female body in Baul songs. In one song, Baul Nasruddin, for instance, mentions,

*Epar opar korchhe ebar meye kheyani  
 Jar gunete bhobe ele tare chenoni.*<sup>154</sup>

[The boatwoman carries us between the two shores. How can you not

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*Unish Shotoke Banglar Krishok Choitonyer Ek Odhyay, 1800-1850*, Calcutta, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1994.

<sup>151</sup> Chakraborty, *Shaheb dhoni*, p. 180.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 191; Sudhir Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 74.

<sup>154</sup> Ahmad Sharif ed., *Baul Kobi Fulbasuddin O Nasruddiner Podaboli*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1988, p. 177

recognise her by whose grace you have come into this world.]

There are also numerous references to servant-girls or slave-women (*dasis*). One song by Nasruddin, for example, says,

*Agey jodi jantam doyal  
Tui jogoter swami re  
Tobe kul-maner bhoy rakhtam na dasi hotam podey re.*<sup>155</sup>

[Oh, merciful one, if only I had known earlier that you were the lord of the world, I would not have feared for family honour or disgrace and would have been your servant-girl.]

The song clearly speaks also of erotic transgressions between the *dasi* and her *swami* (husband/ employer). The erotic love between a woman of low status and a man of higher standing is not novel to Baul songs. For instance, historians such as Daud Ali has suggested that it is one of the characteristic features of medieval Sanskrit erotica.<sup>156</sup> More directly from the perspective of Baul songs, however, the use of erotic love between a low-status woman and a higher-status man as an organising trope for spiritual quest has direct precedence in the *Charyapadas*. The *Charyapadas* were composed by heterodox Bengali Buddhists in the eighth century and reflected the practices and beliefs of the Sahajiya Buddhists—one of the most putative antecedents from which the Bauls derived. Lee Siegal has shown that one of the most prominent figures in the *Charyapadas* was that of the *dombini*, ‘a woman of the despised, low Dom caste ... [who] earned their living as laundresses, vendors and prostitutes’, were often employed by the ‘Tantric yogins ... for the performance of sexual rituals’, and in whose arms the ‘Sahajiya adept could demonstrate ... his transcendence of caste distinctions and social taboos—[since] for him the lowest was the highest, the most profane was the most sacred.’<sup>157</sup> Thus, Kanha sung in his *pada* (verse):

*nagara bahiri re dombi tuhuri kudia;  
choi choi jasi bamha nadia.*

[Outside the city, O Dom woman, is your hut;  
You go touching the Brahmin, touching the shaven-headed.]<sup>158</sup>

Sexually transgressive low-ranking women had therefore literary precedents in not only

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 243

<sup>156</sup> Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>157</sup> Lee Siegal, “Bengal Blackie and the Sacred Slut”, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 1, 1981, pp. 52-3.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

medieval erotica but also Sahajiya esoterica from which the Bauls had borrowed much. What made the Baul usages significant for us was that this trope was re-imagined within a social context and through specific social identities which reflected the Baul's own historical and social contexts. In one of Jadubindu's songs, therefore, we hear,

*Besh kore bnedhechho khnopa charidikey pushpochnapa  
Ayena dhore dekhchho mukher bahar  
Golar mala chhnire matha nere jabe bhobo-shindhu par  
Bari bari bhat torkari kore berao madhukori  
Tate ki bhai ghuchbe moner bikar.*<sup>159</sup>

[Stylishly have you coiffeured your hair and laced it with fragrant flowers; you admire yourself time and again in a mirror; [someday] you will have tear up the garlands around your neck, shave your head and travel across the ocean of the world; you wander from door to door soliciting alms, [but] will food alone remedy the affliction of your heart/mind.]

Of course, the use to which the image is put in the *Charyapadas* and in Jadubindu's song is different; but, what is noteworthy is that the trope itself has a long pedigree and is being deployed by Jadubindu within a social context which is meaningful for the time in which he is writing. The sexually promiscuous *dombini* has therefore been replaced by the seductive *bostomi*. There is, however, another source of images of transgressive love in Baul songs which is not necessarily based upon the image of a low-ranking, wanton woman. Instead, this other tradition which derives through Bhakti traditions about the extra-marital romance of Radha for Krishna—*parakiya prem*—is usually operationalised through higher-class women and goodwives. Yet, here too this image of *parakiya prem* in all its versatile deployments by Baul authors carries the indelible imprint of the historical context in which the songs were circulated. One of Kubir's songs goes thus:

*Hindur oshonkhyo thakur jeno parar bhashur  
Nengta hoye ghomta taney lojjate prochur  
Era nijopoti chene na ko upopotir gun gaye.*<sup>160</sup>

[The many gods of the Hindus are like the many 'brothers' of your husband amongst your neighbours; publicly you draw your veil in their presence feigning embarrassment whilst they have seen you naked; they [these women] do not recognise their own husbands while they sing the praises of their pseudo-husbands.]

Another song by Jadubindu, who wrote in the late-nineteenth century is even more

<sup>159</sup> Chakraborty, *Shaheb dhoni*, p. 171.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

redolent with its provenance. The song clearly, though metaphorically, describes the erotic love between a Guru and his female disciple. It even evinces an awareness of the social and scriptural injunctions against such love and yet, justifies and upholds such love.

*...deho diye thaktam gurur paye dhori  
Guru-shishyo hoy jodi romon achhe shashtre gnatha sotyo kotha norokey  
gomon  
Ami ek pa egoi teen pa pechhoi bhoyte knepe mori  
Gurupodey deharoti dan, o je korte pare  
Jyantey more mohabhagyoban.<sup>161</sup>*

[...with my body I would have held on to my guru's feet; the scriptures have asserted as a truth that if the guru and his [female] disciple be engaged in erotic love, they are sure to go to hell; so I tremble with fear and for every step forward take three steps backwards; [but] she who can give her body in worship to her guru, she will outlive death and will be the most fortunate.]

As Tanika Sarkar has shown, sexual impropriety between religious Gurus and their female disciples was widely suspected in late-nineteenth century Bengal. Anxieties over this had boiled over when a young husband had murdered his wife whom he suspected as having had a relationship with the Mohunt of the Tarakeswar temple. The incident caused such a public outcry and the public support for the murderer was so high that the government was forced to commute his sentence.<sup>162</sup> The belligerent depiction of erotic love between a Guru and his female disciple, even if only metaphorically, at around the same time, could scarcely be held to be completely unrelated to such popular beliefs and anxieties. Indeed, these anxieties themselves were undoubtedly the products of their (Victorian) age and its moral compass.

Apart from the lowly *dasi* and the middling goodwife, however, Bauls also metaphorised elite women. Frequently we hear of 'princesses'. Both Nasruddin and Jadubindu sing of the 'Kings' daughter' (*rajar meye*).<sup>163</sup> In one song, even Radha is depicted as a 'Queen' who owns a railway company.<sup>164</sup> Hugely popular nineteenth-century women zamindars, often referred to as 'Queens' and known to have extensive business interests, such as Maharani Swarnamayi or Rani Rashmoni, may well have

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>162</sup> Tanika Sarkar, "Talking about Scandals: Religion, Law and Love in Late-Nineteenth Century Bengal", *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, pp. 53-94.

<sup>163</sup> Sharif, *Baul Kobi*, p. 193 & Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 179.

<sup>164</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 194.



been the templates for such an image.<sup>165</sup> Having traversed the entire social spectrum from the lowly *dasi* to the *kulabadhu*, the Baul did not stop at the *rani*. He went further and sung of the Empress herself. Kubir Gossain, amongst others, metaphorised the Empress Victoria herself in one his songs thus:

*Torai ki roshik meye. Doya nai dhormo nai jirno korilo purush khey.*  
*Shyama shoti hoye potir bokkhe nrityo kore nengta hoye.*  
*Adyashoktirupa meye tridebota prosobiye khottango pore boshiye chhilen*  
*rajeshwori*  
*Tate Brohma Bishnu Mohesh Rudro adyo achhen bojha boye.*  
*Maan gourobe chhiley pyari. Paye dhore taye shadhlen Hori. Hoye*  
*chhilen jotadhari kore shinge dumburu loye.*  
*Tobu Rai tare korle na doya pashan kaya kothin hiye.*  
 ...  
*Meye company Victoria rani boshechhe badshai peye.*  
*Meye jogot korta bote. Shobai meyer beggar khate.*  
*Meyer nile muluk lute hote beraye purush bheye.*  
*Khede choron bhebe Kubir bole kaj ki meyer kotha koye.*<sup>166</sup>

[Are you the *roshik* woman? Devoid of compassion and beliefs, you spell ruination by consuming men. Shyama becomes the *shoti* and dances naked on the husband's chest. The tri-Gods gave birth to the woman of the primordial force and had made her the Queen of the world. And in so doing, they are still bearing the brunt of it. The Beloved (Radha) was with all her honour and pride. So Hori (Krishna) begged at her feet and worshipped her. He became the knotted-hair Shiva with the drum in his hands. Still, Rai (Radha) with her stonelike body and cruel heart, showed him no mercy. ...The woman is the Company and Queen Victoria, she presides over us having got the royal power. True, the woman is the ruler of the world. Everyone serves the woman. If you plunder the kingdom of the woman, she drives away all the men. Thus lamenting, thinking of Choron, Kubir says, what is the use of speaking about women?]

What is interesting in this song is the whole range of images that is evoked in the metaphorical rendering of the figure of woman. Borrowing from the available repertoire of Shakto and Vaishnav traditions, Kubir invokes the familiar and eulogistic images of Kali and Radha, but cleverly subverts their nurturing associations to evoke the image of the man-eating, tyrannical woman—a metaphorical cluster that finally culminates in the image of Queen Victoria, the *jogot korta* or Ruler of the World. Here, in the articulation of an awe-inspiring image of the almost cosmic might of the dictatorial, lascivious woman we discern a melding together of the various figurations of woman from different philosophical and esoteric registers. Telescoping all these registers into the image of the Queen Empress herself however opens up yet another register of meanings

<sup>165</sup> For brief biographical notes on both see Subodhchondro Sengupta and Anjali Basu eds, *Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan*, Vol. I, Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2002, p. 610 and p. 492 respectively.

<sup>166</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebhdhoni*, pp. 92-3.

as well, i.e. that of the socio-historical context in which the song was circulated. It also clearly shows how the abstract image of the 'woman' is cross-marked by race, class, occupation and actual historical context. What these metaphorical renderings of the figure of the woman into Kali, Radha and Queen Victoria foreground is the inherent multivalence and fluidity of these figurations *within* their shared associations that liken them in the Baul's metaphorical imagination in the first place. A mere look at these metaphorical renderings of the female body in the Baul songs would thus not only enable us to recognise the plurality of the hitherto unitary and homogenous category of the female body whose gender identity is marked by the interpenetration of other axes of identity such as class and race, but also, more generally speaking, stake a claim for the shifting, fluid, multivalent nature of gender categories themselves.

## **Section II:**

### ***Rajrajeshwori Hoye Thakun Mata Victoria: Baul Scripts for the Imperial Dramatis Personae***

Given the esoteric emphasis in available Baul scholarship and its resultant preoccupation with viewing gender categories as unitary, stable identities, another aspect of the various metaphorical deployments of these categories in Baul songs that has suffered relative neglect has been a closer engagement with the historical specificities of the gendered terms found in Baul songs. Not only have the other markings such as those of class, occupation and race which crosscut the deployments of gendered terms been largely overlooked, but even more crucially no systematic study has been undertaken of the frequent examples of the usage of actually identifiable specific historical characters, both men and women, in Baul songs. While we cannot deny the relevance of gender and gendered terms in Baul songs, it is also clear that many of the gendered terms are either related to specific class or occupational groups or indeed are embodied in specifically identifiable historical characters. In the previous section, we were predominantly concerned with the recovery of the multiple class, occupational and racial cross-markings of gender. In this present section, however, we will narrow the focus further and concentrate on those Baul songs which refer to actual historical men and women.

On the face of it, these songs themselves merely by virtue of the fact that they draw on characters relevant to their contemporary social history would appear to justify our larger contention that Baul songs could reveal details about the Baul's response to his/her contemporary social changes. However, these usages also highlight the fact that Baul references to actual historical events and people cannot simply be taken as literal statements of their views for even the stable identities of well-known historical characters in the songs of the Bauls often assume the eloquent capacities of a metaphor. Moreover, these metaphorical deployments of historical personalities are not always of a form which is unique to the Bauls. Several other social registers seem to deploy some very similar person-metaphors. This, therefore, will also reaffirm another one of our larger contentions that the Baul does not inhabit a social and literary vacuum. Let us consider the following song by Kangal Fikirchand (1833-1896) lamenting the death of Henry Fawcett, the Radical politician and economist in Britain, in 1884:

*Haye re aj eki shuni shrobone; shei je doyar shindhu bharotbondhu,  
Fawcett nai ar bhubone.  
Atharosh chourashi, ki kulckhonete poshi, shatoi nobembor  
Shulkrobar dohe phushphushi; shei pneumonia  
Ek moni ah! Bodhilo tar porane. Haye re,  
Ke ar bharoter hite, parliament shobhate,  
Knapaibe knadaibe bakyo oshrute; theke shindhu  
Pare bharote re, dekhbe sneho noyone. Ke ar  
Hoye krishoker tonoy, wrangler phelo porikkhaye,  
Parliamentar heknori membor podti sheshe paye;  
Ekanno botshore shomon tnare, shomon dilo swomone.  
Kon hriday shohochor, chokkhu hanilo re tar; tobu ekti  
Dine onyo kane na den khobor; jodi chao kono  
Jon adorsho jibon, ei fawcetter jibone achhe.  
Fikir koye chokkher jole, aye aj daki shokole,  
Shei potitopabon onathshoron doyamoy bole; Probhhu  
doya kore fawcettere, sthan dio choron.<sup>167</sup>*

[Alas, what do I hear today, that ocean of compassion, friend of *Bharot*, Fawcett is no longer. What misfortune led 1884 to have the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, [a] Friday when the [great man's] lungs burnt out; it was that single gem [called] pneumonia which pierced his heart. Alas, who now will make the Parliamentary gathering tremble with his speeches and be moved to tears; living across the oceans [who will] still look at *Bharot* with eyes full of loving compassion. Who will now, being a peasant's son, obtain the Hackney seat in Parliament by succeeding in the Wrangler examination; at fifty-one his own heart/mind sent him the summons [of death]. Which friend of his bosom stole his eyes, yet not for even a day did he complain to another; if anyone of you should want an ideal life, look at Fawcett's life. Fikir says amidst his tears, let us all gather around and call out to that friend of the fallen, shelter of the ophaned,

<sup>167</sup> Satishchandra Majumdar ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand Fokirer Baul Shongit*, Calcutta, Kumarkhali Mathuranath Press, 1903, pp. 154-5. See also another song on Fawcett, pp. 155-6.

compassionate one; Oh God, do please make room for Fawcett at your  
[blessed] feet.]

This tribute to Fawcett's life and character in general and his role in Indian politics at the time in particular in a Baul song is interesting in a number of ways. First, the very inclusion of this song that has none of the esoteric contents that are usually expected to be one of the defining features of a 'Baul song' in a collection of his 'Baul songs' is, as we have pointed out in the Introduction, evidence of the ever-shifting, multivalent, socio-historically specific nature of the very category of 'Baul songs'. Second, in its outline of Fawcett's life and his role in Indian politics, the song reveals a fairly perceptive engagement with contemporary politics on the part of the Baul singer/composer. This is perhaps not surprising when we recall that Kangal Fikirchand, also known as Harinath Majumdar, was in fact an English-educated journalist who spent most of his life promoting the cause of oppressed and helpless peasants primarily through the monthly journal *Grambarta Prokashika* that he had founded in 1863. This biographical gloss might explain both his access to information about and nuanced awareness of contemporary political figures. It is however, also cogent to note in this regard that Fikirchand's atypical biographical background should not be taken to militate against his Baul identity. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, as we have stated before, we have accepted 'Baul' as a self-descriptive category and not sought to use any categorical definitions to determine who is or is not a Baul. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Fikirchand shared an intimate relationship with other peasant-Bauls such as the famous Lalan Fakir, who was a life-long friend. In fact, we are also told that it was one of the many performances of Pagla Kanai that had moved Fikir to form his own group of Bauls.<sup>168</sup> Fikir, therefore, shared his social milieu with the peasant-Bauls whom we recognise more easily. However, coming back to his song, given that Fawcett's parliamentary struggles against the increasing taxation of Indian revenue by the colonial Government were well-reported in India, the reasons behind devoting a song to Fawcett and the ascription of sobriquets such 'ocean of compassion', 'friend of India', 'son of peasants' on him become at once easily detectable. Similarly, Lord Ripon, the Governor General and Viceroy of India (1880-1884) was also the subject of Fikirchand's Baul songs. Amongst Fikir's songs which were widely popular throughout Bengal, the following song on Ripon is likely to have been perhaps the most

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<sup>168</sup> Ashraf Siddiqui, "Mir Mosharrif Hossein O Kangal Horinath", in Abul Ahsan Choudhury ed., *Kangal Horinath Majumdar Smarokgrontho*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1998, pp. 125-6.

widely known since, we are told, it had been printed and distributed freely in railway compartments near Fikir's village at the time of Ripon's departure. Indeed, the song had also been sent directly to Ripon on behalf of the entire village of Kumarkhali.<sup>169</sup> Sung as a farewell song in the presence of Lord Ripon, the song lamented the end of his Indian tenure thus:

*Deshe cholile mohamoti Ripon, ramrajyo shomoproja koriye palon.  
Shushashone e bharote chhilo proja nirapode; (tobo nyayporota,  
Shamyoniti) tomar birohe knade noronarigon.  
Amra kangal, kangal beshe, eshechhi tobo uddeshe;  
(hero kripa noyone, shadharon desher dosha)  
Desher dosha prokash beshe, koro nirikkhon.  
Hridoyer kritogyota, janate nahi khomota; (gyan  
Orthohin he, amra pollibashi, dhorochokkherjol  
He, onyoshombolnai) rajbhokti shorolota bharotbashir dhon.*<sup>170</sup>

[You are returning to your land, magnanimous Ripon, having ruled/protected the people like that in the reign of Ram. Under [your] wise rule, the people were safe in this country; (your righteousness, egalitarian principles) men and women cry bereave your absence; we are poor, in the attire of destitutes have we come to you; (look at us with mercy, [at] the general plight of the country) the plight of the country is manifest in [our] attire, do observe. We don't have the strength to express our heart's gratitude; (wisdom is meaningless, we are [merely] villagers, hold our tears, oh, we have no other resources) loyalty to the King/ruler and simplicity are the wealth of the countrymen/dwellers of Bharot.]

Once again, it is worth reminding ourselves here of the two historical circumstances that informed Fikirchand's eulogy of Ripon's rule in India. First, it was Ripon who for the first time had heeded the longstanding peasant unrest in Bengal against the rack-renting Zamindars and Talukdars who were the products of the notorious Permanent Settlement of 1793. In response to these agitations and pleas, Ripon had in 1880 established the Rent Commission whose report in 1882 debated long on the rights and liabilities of tenants and eventually resulted in the enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 under which the Bengal raiyats got back considerable rights in land which they had lost under the Permanent Settlement. Second, Ripon's liberal policy had also been instrumental in repealing the controversial Vernacular Press Act of 1878 that required the editors of Indian newspapers either to give an undertaking not to publish any matter objectionable to government or to submit the proof sheets before publication for scrutiny. Despite being faced with tremendous opposition from the Anglo-Indian press and the community on its revocation, Ripon's principal of granting freedom of press to

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-7.

<sup>170</sup> Majumdar ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand*, p. 153.

all without showing any racial discrimination had prevailed. When read against these historical developments, it becomes clear why the ‘magnanimous’ (*mohamoti*) figure of Ripon appealed to Fikir’s radical imagination. Later in the song, Fikir’s lament acquired greater vigour as he described the socio-economic devastation of the times. Fikir’s plea to Ripon to remember the plight of India after his return was both an occasion to directly indict colonialism for its wrongs as well as implicitly extolling Ripon to carry on the fight for Indian rights in Britain—perhaps in a vein similar to Fawcett. The song concluded thus:

*Victoria mata jokhon, jigyashibe bolo tokhon;  
(Kebol nam royechhe shonar bharot, bharot shokol  
Harayechhe) shonar khoni nai ar ekhon, bharot bhobon.  
Durbhikkho proti bochhor, onyobina prane more; (mayer  
Kachhe bol ei, Victoria) malaria mohajwore nashe projagon.*

...  
*Ar joto otyachar, shokoli tobo gochor; (kiba nibedibo hey,  
tumi shokoli jano) deshe giya gunakor koriyo smoron.  
Bharoter kopal mondo, ostraine hosto bondho; (tader  
Eki dosha haye, moharanir proja hoye) poshu hoste  
Projagon, haraye jibon.  
Rajrajeshwori hoye, thakun mata Victoria;  
(Prarthona kori ei bibhupode) e otyachar doya  
Kore, korun nibaron.<sup>171</sup>*

[When Mother Victoria asks, tell her that; (only the name ‘Golden Bharot’ remains, Bharot has lost all) the gold mine is no longer there in the dwelling house [called] Bharot. Famines [occur] every year, [people] die out of wanting food; (tell Mother Victoria this) malarial fevers kill [her] people. ... All other oppressions are within the remit of your knowledge; (what will I tell you, you already know everything) Oh virtuous one, do remember this once you are back in your country that Bharot’s fate is bad, the Arms Act has tied [its] hands; (Oh, what a sorry plight theirs [despite] being subjects of the Empress) [the] subjects lose their lives at the hands of animals. As as the Monarch of Monarchs may Mother Victoria remain; ([we] pray at the feet of God) please intercede to bring this oppression to an end.]

His list of the disastrous impacts of colonial rule, which, Fikir asserted, had mined the last vestiges of what had once been a ‘gold mine’ and rendered it barren, provides us with a detailed and nuanced understanding of the problems that Fikir’s society felt most poignantly. His complaints against the ravages caused by the disastrous famines and malaria were amply verified by other observers of the day. Such famines and epidemics, in fact, ravaged not only Bengal but most of India:

In the later nineteenth century there was a series of disastrous crop

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-4.

failures in India leading not only to starvation but to epidemics. Most were regional, but the death toll could be huge. Thus, to take only some of the worst famines for which the death rate is known, some 800,000 died in the North West Provinces, Punjab, and Rajasthan in 1837–38; perhaps 2 million in the same region in 1860–61; nearly a million in different areas in 1866–67; 4.3 million in widely spread areas in 1876–78, an additional 1.2 million in the North West Provinces and Kashmir in 1877–78.<sup>172</sup>

Massive famines wracked Bengal and its neighbouring regions in 1873-74. Even in non-famine years, chronic food-scarcity and increase in food prices plagued many areas of rural Bengal.<sup>173</sup> Moreover, from the 1870s and 80s, powerful Bengali prose writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay began to re-awaken memories of the devastating famine of the 1770s which had wiped out a third of the Bengali population.<sup>174</sup> Reference to malaria and the devastation it caused are also manifold. Like chronic-scarcities and famines, endemic malaria continued to haunt Bengal even when there was no epidemic outbreak.<sup>175</sup> Many contemporaries, including some government officials, had come to believe that the incidence of the disease had been exacerbated by the building of railways in the rural countryside (which had led to the formation of low-lying ditches next to the higher railway tracks) and the non-clearance of irrigation canals. Like famines, malaria too had significantly become itself a potent metaphor for the evils that afflicted contemporary Bengal. Similarly too, the social impact of the controversial

<sup>172</sup> David Fieldhouse, "For Richer, for Poorer?" in P.J. Marshall ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 132.

<sup>173</sup> For studies on the famines and food scarcities in colonial Bengal see, for instance, David Arnold, "Hunger in the Garden of Plenty: The Bengal Famine of 1770" in Alessa Johns ed., *Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 81-112, Kali Charan Ghosh, *Famines in Bengal, 1770-1943*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Co., 1944, Arun Mukherjee, "Scarcity and Crime: A Study of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28:6, 1993, pp. 237-243 and Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

<sup>174</sup> Set in Bengal during the disastrous famine of 1776, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* opens with the horrors of the famine thus: 'Not a drop of rain fell during the remaining months of the season. The rice fields dried into heaps of straw. Here and there a few fields yielded poor crops, but government agents bought these up for the army. So people began to starve... At first they lived on one meal a day. Soon even that became scarce, and they began to go without any food at all. ... Farmers sold their cattle and their ploughs and ate up the seed grain. Then they sold their homes and farms. For lack of food they soon took to eating leaves of trees, then grass and when the grass was gone they ate weeds. People of certain castes began to eat cats, dogs and rats.' Bankim Chandra Chatterji (Basanta Koomar Roy trans.), *Anandamath*, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2006, p. 31. Interestingly, the use of famines as a trope for the indictment of colonialism could also be discerned in non-fictional, nationalist texts, such as Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) and R.P. Dutt's *India To-Day* (1940), to mention a few. For an exploration of the symbolic dimensions of these early economic critiques of colonialism, see Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>175</sup> On the epidemic and endemic malarial fevers in colonial Bengal, see Arabinda Samanta, *Malarial Fever in Colonial Bengal, 1820-1939*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 2002, David Arnold, "'An Ancient Race Outworn': Malaria and Race in Colonial India, 1860-1930", in Waltraud Ernst and Bernard Harris eds., *Race, Science and Medicine, 1760-1960*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 123-143.

Indian Arms Act of 1878, which prohibited gun ownership by native Indians. was both symbolic and practical. All of these redolent issues are articulated in Fikir's song, thus clearly attesting to its own implication in the historical context of its birth.

But even in the midst of this long list of grievances, what is remarkable in this song is the figuration of the image of Queen Victoria. The indictment of colonial rule that we discern in Fikirchand's hitherto unequivocal apportioning of blame on the Queen's rule—as manifest in his lament 'alas, what miserable plight is theirs as the subject of the Empress'—, is soon problematised by the volte face in the final few lines. The plea to Ripon to alleviate the country's sufferings now shifts its target to the Queen who is no longer held responsible for all the suffering, but is instead invoked as the rightful redresser of their miserable plight. This curious invocation of the Queen and her simultaneous metaphorisation here, as in other Baul songs, as the 'Mother' could perhaps be traced back to a similar metaphorisation in other contemporary, non-Baul registers, both colonial and indigenous. Commenting on the impact of the image of the Queen on the minds of the colonised and the potency of the myth of the Great White Queen, the Mother Goddess in the imperial discourse, Lord Curzon had said thus: 'The British Government, the monarchy and the Empire were summed up and symbolised in the mind of the Oriental by the personality of the Queen.'<sup>176</sup> This metaphoric Mother Goddess produced thus in the imperial discourse was taken up by the indigenous imagination in various ways. On the one hand, in the nationalist imagination of Bengali *bhdrolok* that was at pains to construct heroic feminine figures as crucial foils to colonial images of frail Bengali masculinity, the perceived resemblance of the Queen with Indian womanhood through her femininity, affection, motherhood and compassion enabled them to assimilate the Queen into a benevolent mother figure which could then be conveniently transposed with that of Durga or the 'Bharat Mata'. Alongside this metaphorical rendition, we discern yet another deployment in the same register that cleverly subverted the nurturing associations of the maternal metaphor and turned it into a tool of caustic anti-colonial satire. One recalls the famous tribute to the Mother Victoria by the noted Bengali satirist, Ishwar Chandra Gupta (1812-59):

*Tumi Ma Kolpotoru,  
Amra shob posha goru,  
Shikhini shing bnakano,*

<sup>176</sup> Michael Edwardes, *High Noon of Empire: India Under Curzon*, London: Eyre and Spottiswood Ltd., 1965, p. 125.



*Kebol khabo khol bichali ghash,  
Jeno ranga amla tule mamla,  
Gamla bhange na.*

(You are a generous mother/ And we are your lame cattle./We haven't even learnt to raise our horns./We'll only eat oil-cakes, straw and grass./We only hope the white boss doesn't take us to the court./And break our pots and pans.)<sup>177</sup>

Or indeed this anonymous song that is informed by the same self-ironical tone:

*Ma ebar mole shaheb hobo,  
Ranga chule hat boshaye,  
Pora native nam ghochabo.  
Shada hate hat diye ma,  
Bagane berate jabo.  
Abar kalo bodon dekhle pore,  
Darkie bole mukh phirabo.*

(Mother! I hope to be born a white man in my next life. Putting on a hat on my blonde hair, I'll get rid of this despicable term 'native'. I'll go for a stroll in the garden [with my white hands locked in another]. And if I set my eyes on a black face, I'll turn away calling him a 'darkie'!)<sup>178</sup>

It is interesting to note in this context that Fikir had begun his journalistic career under the guidance of Ishwar Gupta.<sup>179</sup> However, the persistence of these satirical deployments of the maternal metaphor soon gave way to an effusive deployment by the Bengali poetasters in the 1870s and 1880s:

Where are you, Mother Victoria, I touch your feet  
Mother, what kind of a mother are you, why have you forgotten your  
child?

Or,

Where are you, our mother the Great Queen  
We have no other shelter but you  
Mother, we call out to you and we all look up to you

<sup>177</sup> 'The last lines', Banerjee comments, 'are an unmistakable reference to the oppressive habits of British policemen to raid homes of Indian citizens and haul them up before magistrates on charges of petty offences.' Sumanta Banerjee, "The West Turned 'Upside-Down' in a Bengali Satire" in C. Vijayasree ed., *Writing the West (1750-1947): Representations from Indian Languages*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004, p. 26.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-7.

<sup>179</sup> Satichchandra Majumdar, "Kangaler Jiboni" in Abul Ahsan Choudhury ed., *Kangal Horinath Majumdar Smarokgrontho*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1998, pp. 13-14. Interestingly, just as Fikir's association with Ishwar Gupta might have led to the introduction of a certain satirical image of Queen Victoria from non-Baul registers into Baul songs, on the other hand, it was Fikir's mentorship of the younger literary talent Mir Mosharraf Hossein which allowed the more benign, maternal image of Victoria to move from the Baul vocabulary onto the Bengali stage. Hossein's popular farce, *Jomidar Dorpon*, which criticised the oppression of Bengali zamindars ended with a song pleading for Victoria's intervention on behalf of the oppressed—a song that was clearly modelled on the aforementioned Fikir's song about Ripon. Ashraf Siddiqui, "Mir Mosharraf Hossein O Kangal Horinath", p. 127.

For what sort of pleasure have you abandoned us?<sup>180</sup>

As Tanika Sarkar put it in her study of the various images of women in nineteenth century Bengali literature, '[t]he slightly reproachful tone of the hurt, yet loving child is clearly drawn from the popular devotional songs of the 18th century Shakto poet Ramprasad Sen—songs of pleading for Mother Kali.'<sup>181</sup> Read in the light of this observation and the range of metaphorisations in other vernacular registers, the nuances of Fikirchand's metaphorical deployment of the figure of Queen Victoria in the aforementioned song becomes more comprehensible: not only can we locate in his maternal-imperial metaphor of 'Mother Victoria' traces of the Shakto poetics that infuse his songs, but the contradictions that mark his figurations of the Queen as simultaneously the one who bleeds the country to death and as the Mother who would answer all his prayers now come to reflect the same contradictions that marked other contemporary indigenous imaginations of the Queen. However, these ambivalences soon give way in his oeuvre of Baul songs to a spate of ebullient songs hailing the rule of Mother Victoria over the country that were in tune with the effusive spirit of the specific years of their composition—years that witnessed the rise of lavishly celebratory poems and songs marking the Golden (1887) and Diamond Jubilee (1897) of the Queen's rule in India:<sup>182</sup>

*Britisher nishan tuli shobe mili, koro joy mongol dhwoni.  
Bol re onath, mata potibrota, Victoria moharani;  
Ore jnar rajyer majhe uday achhe, oste jaye na dinomoni.  
Ore aj ponchash bochhor ek chhottor, rajyo korilen jini;  
Tini je rogir pashe onath bashe, dinjoner jononi.<sup>183</sup>*

[Let us all come together and raise the British standard and sing the hymn of victory. Oh orphan, sing of the devoted wife and mother Empress Victoria, in whose realm there is sunrise but never does the sun set. She who has been the unquestioned sovereign for the last fifty years; she is the comfort of the disease-stricken, the shelter of the orphaned, the mother of the downtrodden.]

and,

*Are gao re o bhai, shobe mile gao Moharani  
Victoriar joy; shobe, mohanonde shonkho ghonta knashor*

<sup>180</sup> As quoted in Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Literature", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22: 47, 1987, p. 2011.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> See for instance, Rajnath Guha's *Stabokaboli* (1886), Bhagabatcharan Mitra's *Parardhyo-Utsab* (1887), Shailajananda Ojha's *A short Sanskrit poem on the Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign, with English and Bengali translations* (1887) and Durgadas De's *Jubilijogyo* (1897), to name a few.

<sup>183</sup> Majumdar ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand*, pp. 161-2.

*Bajao.*

...  
*Fikir bole jogodomba go! Ekbar noyon tule chao;  
Make dirgho jibon diye bharot kangale bnachao.*<sup>184</sup>

[Oh brothers, come together and sing the songs of Victoria's victory; together in joy, blow your conchs, ring your bells and beat your cymbals. ... Fikir says, Oh Mother of the World, raise your eyes and look at us once; Bharot, by giving Mother long live, save Kangal from his plight.]

Our advantage here is that a number of Fikirchand's songs can be accurately dated, unlike those of other Baul authors. The point we make through his songs however is a more general one, i.e. that the gendered metaphors that were deployed in Baul songs were regularly replenished by actual historically specific incidents, attitudes and personages.

### **Section III:**

#### ***Nari Hijra, Purush Khoja: Performativity of Gender and Resistance to Hierarchies of Power***

So far in the previous sections we have tried to interrogate the existing understandings of the Bauls' conceptualisations of gender categories and identities not through a study of the same in the Bauls' actual esoteric practices, but a study of the various metaphorisations of these categories in their songs. In section I, we have foregrounded the inherently plural and intersectional nature of the construction of gender identities as well as highlighted the highly specific nature of their various metaphorical deployments in the songs. In section II, we have narrowed our focus to a study of those gendered metaphors that were formed out of actual historical personalities. We have also simultaneously used such examples of the metaphorisations of actual historical characters to locate the songs in their specific historical contexts and show how, while drawing upon shared vocabularies, Baul songs bore the indelible imprint of the time in which they were written and circulated. The issue of shared vocabulary of Baul images also underlines our argument against seeing Baul songs as being completely disconnected and atypical of the larger historical epoch they inhabit. In this present section, we undertake a more intimate critical engagement with the extant Baul scholarship and its position on gender. We will argue that a closer reading of the various

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-3. 'This song was composed in the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of the Goddess of Bharot [*bharoteshwori*] and was sung in the city.'

metaphorisation of gender identities in Baul songs would not only reveal a fundamental methodological problem that has continued to inform these studies, but also simultaneously enable us to read these deployments as an instantiation of certain kind of resistance against hegemonic forms of power-relations.

‘Indeed’, as Thomas Laqueur had put it, ‘if structuralism has taught us anything it is that the humans impose their sense of opposition onto a world of continuous shades of difference and similarity’.<sup>185</sup> Moving beyond the insights of Michel Foucault and other social historians, Laqueur’s provocative study on the history of the body and sexual difference went on to show that it is not just sexuality, but sex itself (i.e., the biological basis of manhood and womanhood) that is subject to cultural and political forces. Positioned against a backdrop of a number of social, economic and cultural developments, ranging from the rise of Evangelicalism and the factories to the French Revolution and the birth of classes, Laqueur’s brilliant analysis concerns itself with how in the late-eighteenth century there occurred a shift in the way human bodies were understood. Drawing, amongst other texts, from popular literature, midwifery manuals and anatomical handbooks in addition to many standard medical and philosophical texts, Laqueur demonstrates how in or around the late-eighteenth century, the prevailing one-sex model gave way to a two-sex model. The one-sex model, as Laqueur calls it, had placed the male and the female body on a single hierarchical axis, where the female body was ‘less than’ the male body. By contrast, the two-sex model saw the two bodies—male and female—as being qualitatively different. This shift from a sexual isomorphism to a sexual dimorphism, and this is significant to our study, was a direct product of the socio-political needs of its times. This rendering of sexual difference as ‘naturally’ distinct and mutually opposed in the scientific and medical domain had in fact served to legitimise the political theorists’ language of natural rights: ‘[N]atural rights could be countered only by proof of natural inequalities.’<sup>186</sup>

While Laqueur’s analysis concerned itself with uncovering the hows and whys of the shifting notions of difference that go on to define ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies in the eighteenth century ‘western’ world, in the context of colonial India, as scholars such as Ashis Nandy and Mrinalini Sinha have so comprehensively shown, difference itself

<sup>185</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, London, 1990, p. 19.

<sup>186</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, p. 143.

came to be regularly gendered resulting in the construction of a complex calculus of difference.<sup>187</sup> As Nandy, for instance, has brilliantly argued, at the heart of mature colonialism—what he calls the second phase of colonisation or that phase of colonisation which ‘colonises minds in addition to bodies’—could be located an essentially ‘psychological contract’ between the ruler and the ruled that reconfigured certain existing systems of values. Nandy asserts that in the new colonial cultural framework of British India, there was a tendency to lump together and devalue ideals of childhood in favour of adulthood, of senile/corrupt infirmity in favour of youth and most crucially all forms of androgyny and femininity as against an undifferentiated masculinity. In this way, the psychological and social hierarchies that had enabled the ‘West’ to harness its own productive capacities were projectively reimposed on India, this time entirely at the service of domination and control. In this new configuration, imperial hegemony came to be structured along these sets of polarities that ensnared both the colonisers and the colonised in their attempts at self-definitions. And these constructions of hierarchised binaries, crucially that between masculinity and femininity and/or androgyny also came to be deployed by the colonised, especially by the Hindu revivalists, as the older balance between the three essences of *purushotwo* (of masculinity), *naritwo* (of femininity) and *klibotwo* (of hermaphroditism) in Hinduism gave way, according to Nandy, to a singular valorisation of the masculine, martial and aggressive elements over the rest in their bid to oppose the ‘virile masculinity’ of the coloniser. By foregrounding gender as a site of power, Mrinalini Sinha too has shown how the logic of colonial masculinity with its resultant binaries of the ‘effeminate Bengali’ and the ‘manly Englishman’ formed one of the dominant axes along which ‘power was exercised in colonial India amongst or within the colonisers and the colonised as well as between the colonisers and the colonised’.<sup>188</sup> Hence, this engendering of difference is articulated in the naturalisation not only of sexual dimorphism, but also of a whole range of other socio-cultural-economic-political differences and power-relations. It is this role of gender as a meta-system which seeks to naturalise and so legitimise all other hegemonic power-relations that we will take as the entry point into our study of the Bauls’ conceptualisations of gender and gender relations in rural colonial Bengal.

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<sup>187</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth-Century*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

As we have hinted in section I, the fairly unanimous recognition in available Baul scholarship of the primacy of women in Baul ritual practices and the frequent, though not consistent or unambiguous, eulogisation of women-partners in the songs have all led existing scholars to locate an inversion and critique of the hegemonic gender-hierarchy in the beliefs and practice of these heterodox groups. Indeed, as scholars since Upendranath Bhattacharya have pointed out, at the heart of the Baul esoteric practice is the *bindu-shadhona* or the worship of the vital essences/aspects of both male (sperm) and female (menstrual fluid) bodies. According to Bhattacharya's account of this practice that locates both the male and female aspects within the female body, the male aspect or *bij* (semen/sperm) situated in the female practitioner's head descends each month to her female aspect (*rojoh*) when in uniting with it, it becomes full, overflows and plays as the *shohoj manush* in the resultant menstrual tide. It is this united male and female essence in the form of the *shohoj manush* that the male practitioner, through his practice of the act of coitus reservatus, isolates and draws within himself up to his head where he experiences the ecstatic union of male and female aspects. Although debates have raged in subsequent Baul scholarship around Bhattacharya's rather ambiguous identification of the *shohoj manush*, what is generally agreed on by most Baul scholars is that the female body is conceptualised in Baul esoteric beliefs and practices as either naturally complete and perfected or relatively more so than the male body which completes and perfects itself through its union with the former.<sup>189</sup> This valorisation of a conscious, autonomous, naturally complete and perfected female body as both the medium and end of salvation and the veneration of her menstrual fluids and her genitalia as the site of creation at once calls into question those hegemonic gender relations in religious, philosophical and social registers that mapped the female body along the patriarchised hierarchies of active/passive, natural/unnatural, complete/incomplete, purity/impurity, to mention a few. Hence, Duddu Shah (1796-1907) sings, celebrating the female body as the site of all creation, nurture and salvation:

*Shadhon koro re mon dhore meyer choron.  
 Jare dhore bhobe eli  
 Tare aj kothaye harali  
 Firibi oligoli bhuliya ekhon.  
 Pita shudhu birjyodata  
 Palon dharon kortri mata  
 Shey bina micche kotha bhojon-shadhon.*

<sup>189</sup> See for instance, Das, "Problematic Aspects", p. 408.

*Age meye raji hobe*  
*Bhojoner raha pabe*  
*Kesh dhore pare nebe Duddur bochon.*<sup>190</sup>

[Worship, O mind, holding the female feet. Where have you lost the one through whom you have come into this world? Having forgotten the paths, you will now walk around listlessly. The father is *only* the donor of sperms, the mother is the bearer and the nurturer. Without her, it is useless to undertake any worship. First, the woman will consent, then will you find the means of worship and only then will she deliver you, thus speaks Duddu.]

What is notable about this typical construction of gender-relation in a Baul song is the curious use of the adverb ‘only’ with respect to the role of the father, the incidental ‘bearer of sperm’ vis à vis the seminally important role of the mother as a nurturer at whose feet Duddu exhorts one to submit oneself—a conceptual frame that, in its attribution of creative agency to the female body, derives its subversive edge in its very reversal of hegemonic gender roles that are stamped on by patriarchy. Incidentally, it is also interesting to note that in this and other Baul songs eulogising the woman/female body, the term ‘female feet’ also stands in as an esoteric symbol of the female genitalia—that ‘door’ through which life is generated and through which salvation from this worldly life could also be achieved, the proper recognition and veneration of which constituted the avowed aim of all Baul *shadhona*.<sup>191</sup>

*Jare bolo jogot-jononi*  
*Mayer Jhi-er ek dorja*  
*Shune nao dhoni*  
*Tare kon ashone ashon dile*  
*Ta amare bol na.*<sup>192</sup>

[The ones you call a woman, who is this woman whose milk you have drunk, who is the one you have married? Do tell me how you have recognised them. ... the one you call the mother of the world, the door to the mother and the wife is the same, hear this. Do tell me where you have placed them.]

Commenting on this frequent conflation of the two female figures of mother (*ma*) and woman-partner (*meye/jhi*) into a composite metaphor of an everywoman, as it were, in most Baul songs, Sudhir Chakraborty has pointed how this metaphorisation stemmed in part from the prevalence of the age-old adherence to fertility cults and the associated worship of mother-goddesses in a primarily agrarian society. In rural Bengal, we find a plethora of folk deities in the form of Shitola, Monosha, Jogotdhatri, Chondi,

<sup>190</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 143-4.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Annapurna, etc—all owing their particular religious significance to specific folk beliefs and practices. For instance, Shitola is the goddess of cholera, Monosha of snakes, Jogoddhatri and Durga of all-round maternal protection and love, Chondi of all evils, and Annapurna of food. The popularity of most of these rural deities in the folk imagination largely owes to the existence of the various Mangal-Kavyas composed as odes to these deities in Bengal between 15th and 18th century. And it is also interesting to note here that certain agricultural rural hinterlands of Bengal still reportedly use menstrual blood to make their lands more fertile. Similar sociological studies in Tantra have also attempted to read its central focus on sexuality and the female principle/body as rooted in primitive fertility rites aimed at enhancing human and natural reproduction and so as an evidence of an ‘archaic class-free society, based on matriarchy and the power of the laboring classes—a system that would eventually be displaced by Brahminical Hinduism and its patriarchal, class-based social order’:

Because of its original association with the simpler peoples, popular cults . . . became an integral part of the Tantric way of life. This brought the cult of the Mother Goddess and the fertility rites . . . into close relationship with Tantra. The magical rites performed to obtain greater fertility of land . . . really underlay elaborate Tantric rituals. . . . To the working people Tantra meant more than a religious system . . . knowledge meant worldly knowledge, which guided them in their . . . productive works.<sup>193</sup>

One could perhaps argue that it was not merely the mutual borrowings and overlaps in the Baul esoteric and Tantric registers, but also their very localised, popular and rather similar rural socio-economic contexts of emergence that shape the contours of their shared veneration of the female principle. Not surprisingly then, in certain Baul songs a distinct Shakto influence can be located in the metaphorical rendering of the female body as the Divine Mother—a metaphorical deployment that has frequently been glossed over in existing Baul scholarship in its emphasis on recovering Vaishnav-Sahajiya and/or Islamic elements in these songs. In fact, as Rachel McDermott has noted while commenting on the porous relationship between Shaktism and Chaitanyite Vaishnavism, the *proti-batsholyo bhab* or the devotional attitude of childish adoration of one’s mother that structures the devotional, textual as well as the emotional economy of Shakto poems and songs has in fact ‘been borrowed [from Chaitanyite Vaishnavism] and refashioned for the relationship between Shakto poet and Mother Kali’.<sup>194</sup> For

<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, London: University of California Press, 2003, p. 196.

<sup>194</sup> Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams*, New York: Oxford University



instance, in the following song by Fikirchand, who we have already noted was initiated into Shaktism, we find the typical figuration of woman into the awe-inspiring yet all-forgiving maternal figure of Shokti/Kali whose saving grace he, as the child-devotee, constantly pines for:

*O Ma! Noi ami she chhele. Jar achhey shadhoner jor;  
She ki Ma tor bhoy kore, tui joy dekhale.*

...  
*Aj Fikirchand bajaye bogol, bole je dhorechhi choron  
Jugol, chharbo na hok gondogol, tui jodi na dish phele;  
Jodi na rakhish ei chheler kotha, tobe khash Ma, O tor  
Bhokter matha, dekhbo aj kemone jash Ma go,  
Dekhbo aj kemone jash kotha thele.<sup>195</sup>*

[Oh Mother, I am not that son. He who has the strength of devotion, will he be coward at the sight of your victory? ... Today, Fikirchand dances with joy; he says that I have got hold of your blessed feet and will not leave not no matter what unless you drive me away; If you do not pay heed to your son's requests, then may you be the cause of your devotee's undoing; let me see how you can ignore your son's pleas any longer.]

The strength of the traditional form derived from Shakto traditions can be glimpsed in a song by Nasruddin. The poet, seeks to deploy a well-known mythic story about the devout boy-wonder Prohlad who is said to have been saved from his murderous demon-king, father by the timely appearance of the lion avatar of Vishnu (Nrisingha). In telling this tale, however, Nasruddin in order to conform to the formal requirements of the Mother-Son format, takes the liberty of recasting god (in this case, the uber-male Nrisingha) as a Mother. He writes:

*Prohlad tomar sishu chhele  
Choron diley tarey  
Na knaditey koley neyo jononi bole tare.<sup>196</sup>*

[Prohlad was your infant son, to him you gave the [solace of] your feet; even before he cries, you pick him to your lap like a mother.]

While such metaphorical renderings of the female body as the primordial creative force, whether as the perfected and complete *Prokriti* or *Radha* or *Shokti* or *Ma* or simply as *meye*, in these eulogistic Baul songs could be read as potentially subverting the patriarchal basis of gender hierarchies, what seems to fully destabilise and pluralise the presumed dimorphic stability of hegemonic gender relations is the figuration of a certain

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Press, 2001, p. 170.

<sup>195</sup> Majumdar ed., *Kangal-Fikirchand*, pp. 129, 130.

<sup>196</sup> Sharif, *Baul Kobi*, p. 243.

male desire of 'becoming' a woman in Baul songs. Frequently in Baul songs we encounter an exhortation to the male practitioners to 'become' a woman:

*Jodi hobi notun nari  
Purushke bana Poteshwori  
Fokir Pnachu Shah koye  
Mon-manush shei ghore.*<sup>197</sup>

[If you will be the new woman, make the man the Queen of the Parlour;  
Fokir Pnachu Shah sings, in that very parlour will you find the *mon-*  
*manush*]

And elsewhere we see an articulation of the desire to be a woman: '*Ebar mole meye hobo mohot shongo cheye lobo*' [After I die this time, I want to be reborn as a girl, I will ask to be put in the company of greatness].<sup>198</sup> Such exhortations to and articulations of the desire/ need to become a woman, as Openshaw has observed, also feature in the songs and aphorisms of the Raj Khyapa peoples of the Rarh and Bagri regions of West Bengal. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point, however, that our exploration of this figuration of an essentially male desire to become a woman will not be carried out in and through the particular esoteric registers of particular Baul sects; rather our study of these figurations will be carried through an engagement with the dynamic interplay of masculine and feminine roles that are played out within the economy of desire manifested in Baul songs. As we have already pointed out at the outset, scholars have long turned our attention to the socio-cultural constructedness of sexual difference and its deployment as a naturalising, legitimising meta-system validating hegemonic forms of social power. Within postmodern feminist studies, the presumption of a mimetic relation between sex and gender was thoroughly destabilised first by Simone De Beauvoir's famous assertion that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.<sup>199</sup> Subsequent authors have given her the credit for putting forth the crucial distinction between sex and gender that reoriented the discourse around the female to focus instead on the feminine and womanhood. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* marked the naissance as well as the nexus of the notion of 'becoming-woman'. Alongside arguing that sex—the (mostly) invariant anatomy—is no longer destiny and that biological necessity no longer absolutely dictates social values and functions, gender is simultaneously conceptualised as the body's variable modes of cultural articulation as well as the site upon which

<sup>197</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 174.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>199</sup> Simone De Beauvoir (H.M. Parshley trans.), *The Second Sex*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 295.

cultural forms are imposed or written. It is a continual modality of bodily interpretation within or partially outside the shifting paradigms of normality. 'With this distinction intact', as Judith Butler notes '...all gender is by definition, unnatural'.<sup>200</sup> Commenting on the ambiguity in Beauvoir's notion of 'becoming' that places gender as both a social construction imposed from without as well as a self-construction articulated from within, Butler proposes that not only does Beauvoir's account of 'becoming' trace the 'internal ambiguity of gender...as a corporal locus of cultural possibilities both received and innovated', but that this 'becoming' is an incessant performative process, continuously reshaping and inventing itself: gender is thus not merely a noun that describes that *is* (an essence), but always a verb referring to a doing, to a 'daily act of reconstitution and interpretation.'<sup>201</sup> By so conceiving gender as a continuous 'becoming', not only do Beauvoir and Butler introduce the idea that gendering is, at least in part, a self-reflexive process, but also insert an emancipatory potential that is located in the rendering of the body—that primary site of gender, that place where received meanings are reproduced—into a place where the received norms of gender can also be varied and reinterpreted in such a way as to organise them anew.

It is this concept of 'gender as becoming' that, we argue, informs the economy of male desire for **feminisation** articulated in Baul songs. This repeated articulation by a presumably male voice in the aforementioned Baul song to 'become' a woman could, we recall, be read as being shaped by the Bauls' esoteric conceptualisation and consequent veneration of the female body as naturally complete and perfect—a conceptualisation that in its being structured as the avowed end of Baul *shadhona* has within it the potential of subverting the patriarchal underpinnings of existing hegemonic gender relations. Significantly, the song by Jadubindu which we have quoted above as defending the erotic transgressions of a Guru with his female disciple is framed by precisely such a male desire. The song amply demonstrates many of the points we are making here. First, in its overt defence of erotic transgressions, it challenges established patriarchal gender roles. This challenge is made more direct by the fact that the song depicts the woman herself as being keen to offer her body to her Guru. Also notably, the song leaves no scope for doubt that the love is anything but erotic, physical love. Most significantly however, this woman is not a woman at all but a man who desires to be a

<sup>200</sup> Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, 72, 1985, p. 35.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 40.

woman. The song commences wistfully with the regret-tinged words ‘if (only) I was a girl’ [*jodi hotam meye*].<sup>202</sup> Songs such as this clearly evidence the way the male voice articulates in certain Baul songs an explicitly sexual desire to enact a feminine role. Following Butler’s understanding of gender as essentially performative and enactive, this active masculine Baul desire for feminisation could also be read as questioning the very heteronormative basis of ‘natural’, dimorphic models of sexual and gender difference that has been constructed by hegemonic power-relations. In other words, this articulation of a male desire for feminisation and its simultaneous valorisation of a resultant androgynous state as its avowed aim in Baul songs—‘*mon-mamush* [the Supreme Being/ *shohoj manush*] *shei ghore*’—can be read as an instantiation of a resistance practice that denaturalises the ordering of those set of relations between sex, gender and desire that underwrites heteronormativity and thereby also exposes the very artificiality and instability that is at the heart of hegemonic productions of gender identities.

Alongside this articulation of a male desire for feminisation, there could also be seen in other Baul songs a distinct affectation of a feminine voice. Consider, for instance, the following song where the male persona assumes the voice of Radha and bursts out in a heightened sensual love for her beloved, Krishna. *Gour*, another name for Krishna, is not only in her heart, but is, literally, inscribed all over her body:

*Noyoner onjon gour. Gour nolok ulki tilok chondrohar: Gour konkon Gour gour chnapakoli. Aami gour goyna pore dhire dhire pa feli.*

*Gour amar shonkho shari. Gour Gour mala pnuiche pola chul bnadha dori. Dui hather churi Gour knachli. Chand Gour amar shorno shnithi muktopati jholmoli.*

...

*Ami apon ongo nirokhiye ghuchai shob moner kali. Shokol onge Gour Hori.*

....

*Amar ontore bahire Gour hridoye Gourmondoli.*<sup>203</sup>

[Gour is my eye-salve. Gour is my nose-ring, tattoo, necklace. Gour is my golden bangle. Gour is the white flower. Wearing Gour as my ornaments, I take the steps carefully. Gour is my conk-shell, my saree. Gour is the golden garland, my hair-ribbon. Gour is the bracelets of my hands, Gour is my blouse. The moonlike Gour is the dazzling pearl-studded golden jewellery on my head. ... Valuing my own body, I dissolve the darkness of my soul. My

<sup>202</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 180.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

whole body is adorned by Gour Hori. ... Inside and outside me is  
Gour, and in my heart is the assembly of Gour.]

This structuring of the male body's (here, that of Kubir or his poetic persona) devotional engagement with the modality of Radha as a vehicle of feminine desire cannot be fully understood outside an understanding of these as residual tropes of the Radha-Krishna cult of Bhakti (or emotional service of love and devotion as a means of spiritual realisation) that so infused the theological register of Chaitanyite Vaishnavism of late-fifteenth—sixteenth-century Bengal. As the noted scholar Sushil Kumar De tells us, in 'Vaisnava Bhakti-rasa, as expressed in its literary and religious productions,' Bhakti (loosely translated as emotion) is presented

as a psychological entity, as a literary-erotic emotion transmuted into a deep and ineffable devotional sentiment, which is intensely personal and is yet impersonalised into a mental condition of disinterested joy. But the attitude is a curious mixture of the literary, the erotic and the religious, and the entire scheme as such is an extremely complicated one.<sup>204</sup>

By curiously blending erotico-religious ideas with the older Sanskrit poetics of Rasa (loosely translated as sentiment) in its exposition of the devotional sentiment of Love, the rhetoric of Vaishnav Bhakti-Rasa created specific aesthetic-literary-religious subject-positions that corresponded to detailed classifications of various affective states of the mind in devotional ecstasy, namely *bhabs*. In this classificatory scheme, of the five *Rasas* of *santa* (tranquillity), *dasya* (servitude or humility, also known as *priti*), *sakhya* (friendship or equality, also called *preyas*), *vatsalya* (parental affection) and *madhurya* (fondness or sweetness, also called *ujjwal*) forming the degrees of the realisation of *bhakti*, the *priyata* or *madhura rati* of the last is considered to be the principal *bhakti-rasa*. Also called the *bhakti-rasa-raj*, the dominant feeling or *sthayi bhab* of this *madhura rati* is the love of Krishna by Radha. It is this *bhakti-rasa* and its resultant *radha-bhab* that predominantly informs the poetics of Bhakti in Chaitanyite Vaishnavism within whose logic the *bhokto* (usually male) identifies himself and his devotional sentiments with Radha and her love for Krishna (*Krishno-prem*). Accordingly, even Chaitanya, usually held to be either Krishna or His incarnation, came to be figured as simultaneously Radha-Krishna. It is interesting to note that the recognition of the Radha aspect of Chaitanya is attributed to Ramananda Ray, a *Sahaj-Vaishnav*:

<sup>204</sup> Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal: From Sanskrit and Bengali Sources*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1961, p. 169.

It is to Ramananda that Chaitanya first reveals his true form as Radha-Krsna: “Then, smiling, the Lord [i.e Chaitanya] showed to him his true form [*svarupa*]*—*Rasaraj [i.e, Krsna] and Mahabhava [i.e., Radha], the two in one form [*rupa*].” This is repeated by the Sahajiya text *Vivarta-vilasa*: “First he showed to Ramananda his *samnyasi*-form; then Caitanya revealed his true form as Radha-Krsna.”<sup>205</sup>

In fact, this structuration of the male *bhokto*’s desire for and his consequent assumption of a certain feminised form/voice as Radha can also be located in the beliefs and practices of a large number of other ecstatic Vaishnava sects in Bengal and beyond. As an extreme instance, the example of the Sakhi-bhava sect of Mathura and Brindaban could be cited here. An account of the Sakhi-bhava sect, written behind an eighteenth century painting of one of its members, describes how the male devotees wore red loin-cloth every month to simulate menstruation, and after this period was over,

In the manner of married women, anxious to be physically united with their husbands ... they take to themselves ... a painting of Shri Krishna, and stretch themselves, raising both their legs, utter ‘ahs’ and ‘ohs’, adopt woman-like coy manners, and cry aloud: ‘Ah, Lalji [i.e., Krishna], I die! Oh Lalji, I die!’<sup>206</sup>

It needs to be mentioned here that what is unique about the Vaisnav-Sahajiya Sakhi-bhava and Sakhi-bekhi sects in the context of Bengal is that, unlike the Radha-bhab sects in other parts of India, the members of these sects typically dress themselves and reinforce their identity not as Radha, but as the *asta-sakhis* or the eight principle female confidants of Krishna, to attain the esteemed spiritual emotion known as ‘sakhi-bhava’.<sup>207</sup> However, this theme of presenting the perfected body as one comprised of an union of both the male and female essences is not restricted solely to those songs written in an explicitly Vaishnav vocabulary. We find similar themes expressed in songs deploying a more identifiably Islamic vocabulary as well. For instance, Jalaluddin sings, ‘*ami laili ami mojnu ... / Ami yuchhuf mui jolekha—shiri forhad knede behal*’ [I am

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, p. 149. He also points out, quoting Sushil De, that ‘It must however be noted that the Radha-Bhava of Chaitanya is not an entirely original conception of Krisnadasa Kaviraja, but is also referred to in Prabodhananda’s *Caitanya-candramrta* and in the contemporary padas of Vasu Ghos, Narahari Sarkar ... and others.’ Ibid, p. 148.

<sup>206</sup> Cited in K. Goswamy, “The Cult” in Enrico Isacco and Anna L. Dallapiccola eds., *Krishna the Divine Lover: Myth and Legend in Indian Art*, Delhi: B.I. Publications, 1982, p. 142. See also, Amara Das Wilhelm, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*, Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corporation, 2003 and Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Canada: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999.

<sup>207</sup> Krishna’s *ashta-sakhis* include Lalita, Savisakhika (Visakha), Suchitra, Champakalata, Tungavidhya, Indulekhika, Rangadevi and Sudevi. I am indebted to Gautam Bhadra for bringing this to my attention.

Laila, I am Majnu .... I am Yusuf, I am Zulekha—Sirhi Farhad cry for me].<sup>208</sup> However, while one can readily locate the doctrinal influences of Vaishnav-Sahajiya and its valorisation of the *radha-bhab* in those metaphors of role-playing in Baul songs such as Kubir's where the male authorial voice affects the feminine body, voice and desire, what, once again, stands out in the structuration of this devotional poetics is the way in which it not only renders gender identities fluid and interchangeable, but by being an aesthetic-literary convention, it calls attention to both its own performativity and reveals the performative nature of the production and constitution of gender roles. If gender is, following Butler, an identity that is socio-culturally enacted in time and is instituted through 'a stylised repetition of acts', then in the Baul's active emulation of a feminised body and voice as also his articulation of a desire to 'become' a woman, we can read potential acts of resistance against not only the dimorphic models of sex and gender differences and its heteronormative underpinnings, but also against all those sets of power relations that seek to naturalise and legitimise their own differences and implicit hierarchies by being mapped onto the meta-systemic binary of male/female. A final definitive example of a challenge to the hegemonic gender-constructions can be glimpsed in a Kortabhoja saying: *nari hijra, purush khoja, tobe hobe kortabhoja* (the female [must become] a *hijra*, the male [must become] a eunuch, only then [you] will become Kortabhoja). While the insertion of the verb '*hobe*' (will become) at once reveals gender as a performative process, what is striking about the construction of the figuration of the ideal *kortabhoja* practitioner is that it is neither masculine, nor feminine, nor even androgynous: it is by a symbolic desexing and un-gendering of both the male and the female bodies, by a rendering of these bodies as eunuchs that one becomes a sexless *kortabhoja*—a rendering that can be read as an instantiation of an overt resistance against the hegemonic models of sexual and gender dimorphism.

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up, in this chapter we have sought to re-orient the extant scholarly consensus about the gender relations which permeate Baul beliefs, practices and society. To begin with, we argue that the scholarly preoccupation with the position and roles of women within Baul sects (in ritual and practice) has distracted us from observing the much more complex understanding of gender-in-society per se that is available in Baul songs.

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<sup>208</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 115.

To do this, we have revisited the actual metaphors in Baul songs. Such an investigation of the metaphors has revealed that once we eschew looking ‘behind’ the songs for its esoteric message, we can actually discern many different gendered identities in the song texts. However, these are not always purely or homogenously gendered as simply ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Indeed, gender identities represented in the song texts are seen to be cross-marked by occupation, class, social rank and even at times race. This is as true for male identities as it is for female identities. Moreover, these cross-markings are also seen to give very specifically historical details of particular social identities detailing on occasion the specific dress people wear, the jobs they do, their religious beliefs etc. This is not to suggest that these identities and images do not draw on older traditions and forms. It is merely to underline that the older tropes were being re-imagined within the historical and social contexts within which the songs were being written and circulated.

In the second section, we have observed an even more specific articulation of gendered identities. Not only did Baul songs occasionally articulate very specific gender identities, but indeed at times, the songs even metaphorised historically specific men and women. Once again the usages draw upon older traditions, but re-work them within the context of their times. Moreover, we have seen how some of these usages also bear similarities with the usages in other contemporary registers of the day. Thus the treatment of the metaphor of Queen Victoria is occasionally quite similar in Baul songs and bhodrolok poets such as Ishwar Gupta. In studying Baul literature, the case for their atypicality often leads us to lose sight of the elements which they share with their contemporary non-Bauls. This section serves as a rider against such implications of isolationism.

Finally, in the last section we have followed authors such as Nandy and Sinha in arguing that gender had under colonialism come to play a crucial role in validating and naturalising hierarchies of power and domination both amongst and between colonisers and the colonised. Crucial to this naturalisation was the underlying idea of sexual dimorphism i.e. that male and female bodies were basically different. The Bauls, we have shown, on the contrary de-stabilised the natural-ness of such gender demarcations by articulating a performative notion of gender in their songs. Both by expressing a desire to become a woman as well as by taking on a female voice, Baul authors resisted the natural-ness of sexual dimorphism. As gender formed the meta-system through



reference to which a whole range of colonial binaries and hierarchies were validated, the implications of the Baul's performative approach to gender, go, we argue, much further than merely designating a certain type of gender relations within Baul sects. Instead, their approach holds within it the intimations of a much broader challenge—qua resistance as denaturalising performance—to established power-relations.

*Ek Rajye Hole Dujona Raja, Kar Hukume Goto Hoye Proja:*

**Metaphors of Changing Agrarian Power-Relations and Everyday Peasant Resistance**

Subaltern historians have long since followed the trajectory of negation-deconstruction-hybridity in their attempts to define the rebel peasant consciousness and the forms of its political expression as insurgency and agitation. In other words, the focal shift of south asian historiography from the elites to the subaltern has viewed the rebelling subaltern consciousness as either striving for a pure and authentic subaltern position through a negation, inversion and appropriation of the dominant discourses or a more positive subversion of the dominant discourses from within, or indeed as inhabiting a hybridised realm where both the dominant and the dominated were forever inside each other. At the heart of these definitional debates surrounding the subaltern subject and his relational position vis à vis the dominant, is the much criticised preoccupation with a certain 'privileging of the dramatic and the confrontational' actions of the subalterns alone.<sup>209</sup> It is here, it has been widely argued, that the Subaltern Studies project glides over the historical significance of the less noisy, less violent, more indirect and covert everyday forms of peasant resistance. It is this often-overlooked aspect in the study of the resisting subaltern consciousness that would frame our case study of the various agrarian metaphors and images in Baul songs of colonial Bengal.

In his study of the resistance of the factory workers of Bombay cloth mills during the 1920s and 1930s, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar shows how this resistance takes the form not of agitated strikes or labour unions, but takes the more obtuse forms of everyday resistance through 'foot-dragging, absenteeism, loitering, damaging cloth, or indeed more occasionally arson and sabotage.'<sup>210</sup> Taking their cue from James C Scott's pioneering studies of the moral economy of the peasants and the role of more quotidian forms of peasant resistance that are not triggered off by any specific historic moments of crises, scholars such as Gyan Prakash, Douglas Haynes, Chandavarkar, et al have

<sup>209</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash ed, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

attempted to read the everyday forms of resistance in the context of its changing and interconnected relationship to power. While recognising the implications and effects of those dramatic, confrontational and explosive moments of collective insurgency, what these scholars have highlighted, following Scott, is the need to recognise those other, and more frequent, forms of struggle that are present in the everyday behaviours and cultural practices of the subalterns in the continuum between total subordination and overt revolt.

[T]he struggles of subordinated peoples need not be dramatic or informed by conscious ideologies of opposition to seriously affect relations of domination. To use resistance in its more traditional sense would mean not to consider the very process by which power is often tested and eroded by the actions of the subordinate and by which it reconstitutes itself in response.<sup>211</sup>

So formulated by these scholars, everyday forms of resistance then could range from apparently conscious or overt acts, such as refusing to pay taxes, to more ambivalent forms of resistance, such as foot-dragging, sarcasm, pilfering, rumour, gossip and such like. However, it is this need to move away from a certain privileging of large-scale, violent rebellions in resistance studies to a broader understanding of the term in the everyday contexts of the resisting subordinate consciousnesses that will inform our exploration of the moment of an encounter between the Bauls and the hegemonic social formations—a moment that, we contend, can be located in a socio-historical reading of the Bauls' deployments of certain metaphors of agrarian power relations in their songs.

That the Bauls are not, and never were, asocial or apolitical wandering minstrels—a conception that has informed much of critical studies on the field—has been addressed and redressed by Sudhir Chakraborty in his brilliant sociological study of the Shahebdhoni sect of Bengal, arguably one of the sub-sects that is grouped under the general category of 'Baul'.<sup>212</sup> The Shahebdhonis are an esoteric group based in the village of Brittihuda of the Nadia district, arguably organised by one Mulichand Pal in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently made popular by the songs of Kubir Gossain and Jadubindu. Chakraborty points out that far from being recluses in society, the Shahebdhonis were, on the contrary, much deeply rooted in the social fabric as any other social being. To begin with, the very organic nature of pre-capitalist rural social

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>212</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni Shomproday O Tader Gan* [Hereafter referred to as *Shahebdhoni*], Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1985.

constitution demanded a corresponding symbiotic nature of social relations. To echo Chakraborty, the carpenter who builds a boat has a singular relation with the fisherman who uses the boat to earn his livelihood and both in turn are socially tied to the farmer who cultivates rice to feed all. For instance, Kubir Gossain, the most revered and popular practitioner of the Shahebdhoni sect, Chakraborty tells us, was a weaver by occupation. But interestingly, Kubir's songs borrow terms not only from weaving, but from various other rural livelihoods as well: there are songs imbued with metaphors drawn from intricate technicalities of the occupations of a blacksmith, a carpenter, a thatcher, a farmer, etc. The choice and deployment of these metaphors and images dealing with detailed processes of production central to diverse occupations by a weaver testifies to both the organicity of the community and the nature of the social relations therein.

Developing Chakraborty's argument further, we would argue that the Bauls of colonial Bengal were not only deeply imbricated in their immediate social reality, but also actively responded to the diverse socio-economic-political changes wrought in that rural reality. For instance, Hemanga Biswas in his study of the folk songs of Bengal and Assam, *A Survey of Folk Songs: Bengal and Assam* (1979), has documented an instance of Lalon Shah's armed protest against the coercive practices of the oppressive Zamindar of Kushtia. Citing Kanganal Horinath's unpublished journal, *Dinponji*, as his source Biswas goes on to state:

In Kanganal Horinath's unpublished *Dinponji*, we glimpse the true character of Lalon—if need be, the dreamy Baul could be the most formidable *lathiyal* [club-man]. He could also put his *ektara* aside and wield the clubs against the Zamindar. When the Zamindar sent his *lathiyals* to teach a lesson to Kanganal Horinath who published an article in his journal *Grambartta* detailing the Zamindar's oppression of his subjects, then Lalon himself took up a club and, with the aid of his group, put up a strong fight against the Zamindar's *lathiyals* and rescued his friend Horinath.<sup>213</sup>

In 1825, even the district of Mymensingh is reported to have witnessed the mass uprising of the peasants under a certain 'Fokir Badshah' Tipu Pagol, a Pagolponthi and son of a Dervish, one Karim Shah, the founder of the Pagolponthi sect.<sup>214</sup> In the face of

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<sup>213</sup> Quoted in Sudhir Chakraborty, *Bratyo Lokayoto Lalon*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2007.

<sup>214</sup> For a fuller discussion of this rebellion, see Gautam Bhadra, "Paglai Dhum: Mymensingher Krishok Bidroho", in *Iman O Nishan: Unish Shotoke Banglar Krishok Choitonyer ek Odhyay [1800-1850]* [Hereafter referred to as *Iman*], Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1994, pp. 20-164.

such recorded instances of armed resistances of the Bauls against the coercive practices of the Zamindars, the general scholarly assumption of the Bauls as 'asocial' wandering minstrels then does indeed crumble down.

However, since records of these specific instances of violent peasant unrest are few and far between, we have instead concentrated our efforts on locating and reading those 'hidden transcripts' in the Baul songs that, we argue, the Bauls created in response to their ordeal of domination. Provocatively contending that analyses of power have almost exclusively focussed on those hegemonic 'texts' of dominant discourse, those 'public transcripts' as he terms them and so have unidimensionally viewed social action as the byproduct of a false consciousness, Scott has highlighted the need to shift the analytical focus onto those 'hidden transcripts', that discourse which 'takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by powerholders', often 'assuming a myriad of forms such as 'offstage parody, dreams of violent revenge, millennial visions of a world turned upside down', etc.<sup>215</sup> Insisting on a need to focus on a 'partly sanitised, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript' that is always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups in the form of rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, theatre, gestures, jokes, and other forms of popular culture,<sup>216</sup> Scott rejects both his 'thick' version of false consciousness that casts subordinates as actively believing in the 'values that explain and justify their own subordination', and the 'thin version' of false consciousness that contends that subordinates comply with the social order because they have come to accept it as 'natural and inevitable'.<sup>217</sup> It is this concept of the 'hidden transcripts'—that discourse representing a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant—and the corresponding view of power relations as a dynamic performance between the 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts that will provide the conceptual scaffolding, as it were, of our present case-study. It is, we argue, in the choice and deployment of certain agrarian metaphors and images—those 'hidden transcripts' of subversive discourse—in the Baul songs of colonial rural Bengal that we would locate articulations of their everyday resistance against the changing agrarian systems of production in the years following the implementation of the notorious Permanent Settlement of 1793.

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<sup>215</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. 4.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

## Section 1:

### The Impact of the Land Settlements in the Peasant Consciousness:

*Ek rajye hole dujona raja  
Kar hukume goto hoye proja  
Lalon bole temni gole  
Khataye polo baki.*<sup>218</sup>

[If there are two kings of a single kingdom, on whose order does the subject die? Lalon says, in the midst of this chaos, now there are dues on the copy (rent-rolls).]

Early Baul songs of Lalon (1774-1890), Kubir (1787-1879), Fikirchand (1833-96), Panju Shah (1851-1914), Din Shorot<sup>219</sup> and the like abound with images of everyday agrarian life unlike those in the later songs of Jadubindu (1821-1916), etc. The question we might ask ourselves at the outset is why this singular preoccupation with this particular repertoire of images? It is interesting to note that both Lalon and Kubir belonged to an agrarian system of rural Bengal that underwent a fair amount of transformations and its concomitant anxieties under the Decennial (1791) and Permanent Settlements of the colonial rule. If following Chakraborty, we do see the Bauls as perceptive of and responsive to the changing socio-economic-political realities of their time, then it is not surprising that the disquiet experienced at the change of a pre-existing order of things would be reflected in their songs, their only available means of self-expression. First, a brief visit to the impact of the Permanent Settlement on peasant life in late-18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal seems necessary to understand the various nuances of the agrarian images and metaphors deployed in these songs.

The shift in the focus of economic history of colonial Bengal from an obsessive historical preoccupation with landowning legalities to a more sensitive engagement with the changes wrought in the everyday lives of agricultural communities was heralded by Ratnalekha Roy's brilliant study of the economic re-organisation in the agrarian Bengal of late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>220</sup> In response to the scholarly assumption that the sweeping change in land laws with the implementation of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 brought in its

<sup>218</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty ed., *Bangla Dehotottwer Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2000, p. 236.

<sup>219</sup> Din Shorot's songs were first published in 1934. See, Sarat Chandra Nath (Din Shorot), *Din Shoroter Baul Gan*, Calcutta: Pabitra Sarkar, 1341 BS.

<sup>220</sup> Ratnalekha Roy, *Changes in Bengal Agrarian Society, C. 1760-1850*, [Hereafter referred to as *Agrarian Society*], New Delhi: Manohar, 1979.

wake a corresponding radical change in the socio-economic hierarchy of agrarian Bengal, Roy convincingly demonstrates that the effects of Permanent Settlement were only felt at the peak of the hierarchical pyramid, as it were, and did not sweep away pre-colonial rights to land altogether. What is central to Roy's argument, and this is central to mine as well, is the strengthening of the role of the *jotedars* whom she describes as village landlords or village oligarchs, under the new land law of the colonial masters. Challenging the existing historical notion that the Permanent Settlement granted absolute proprietary rights over the land to the zamindar, Roy argues that not only was it not true in the sense that the zamindar's proprietorial rights lay in revenue-collection and management and not in the actual possession of the land or the labour of the poor villagers. It was, in fact, the *jotedars* who, acting as under-farmers, enjoyed the latter, a right that they have been enjoying since long before the colonial encounter. It was the zamindars who were subject to the notorious Sunset Laws if they failed to turn in the due revenue in time. What the Settlement in fact did was to strengthen the position of the *jotedars* who had already accumulated large holdings of waste land left by the devastating Famine of 1770 and acted as revenue-farmers under the colonial agrarian system. Armed by their capital, these rich peasants continued to lend money, trade in grain and cultivate their lands through sharecroppers and landless labours, in exchange for a certain amount of revenue they paid to the zamindar.

While this complex distribution of land-rights and power-relations vested in the zamindar the hereditary tag of 'raja' and all its associated reverence but no actual power over his lands and subjects, it vested in the *jotedar*, in his combined role of landlord and moneylender, all the control over land and labour, but none of the ritualised social recognition of the royal epithet. It was this dual kingship, as it were, that, as Roy has astutely pointed out, was a principle cause of an ever-increasing oppression of the poor peasants. When in 1799 and 1812 the government passed regulations designed to aid the zamindar in collecting revenue from powerful *jotedars*, the latter entered into a negotiation with the zamindar that granted them preferential rents in return for their support to the zamindar in collecting higher rents from the poor peasants. It is this bleak socio-economic reality that, we contend, underlies Lalou's attribution of the resultant dual oppression of the poor peasants to the dominance of the 'two kings' in the agrarian community. In fact, that this oppression of the peasants by the *talukdar-jotedar* classes continued well into the nineteenth century could be inferred from a mere look at

the numerous mid-nineteenth century peasant petitions to the District Magistrates. For instance, we hear the peasants of Chondipur earnestly appealing to the Magistrate of 25 Parganas against the oppression of their *talukdars*, namely, Radhaballabh Ray and Kenamoni Debi, complaining how the latter have been regularly fleecing them for repairing the breach in the embankment, but have not only not shown any inclination of starting their work, but have also turned a blind eye to their sorry plight caused by the inundation of their fields by the salty water gushing through the breach.<sup>221</sup> Such tales of exploitation by the *talukdar-jotedars* abound in both official and indigenous records of colonial rural Bengal.

However, the Settlement and its much abused Sunset Laws had far greater impact on the zamindars, directly, and on the poor raiyats, indirectly. Regulation 14 of 1793 provided that revenue arrears of zamindars would be recovered by causing the land of the defaulters to be sold in public auction. The whole debate about subinfeudation and the actual transfer of land rights aside,<sup>222</sup> it is interesting to note the progressive dissolution of many large zamindaris in public auction following the inability of the particular zamindars to pay the fixed revenue to the government. A brief look at the gradual destruction of the zamindari of Nadia can serve as an instance here.<sup>223</sup> ‘The rajas of Nadia’, Sirajul Islam tells us, ‘stood fourth in territorial possessions at the time of the decennial settlement.’<sup>224</sup> Nadia, under the reign of Maharaja Krishna Chandra was not only prosperous, but was the seat of high Sanskrit culture. It was with the ascension of Raja Ishwar Chandra to the zamindari in 1789 and his engagement with the decennial settlement that troubles started brewing in Nadia. Marred by droughts and floods at least six times during the ten years of the decennial settlement, the Nadia Raj found himself burdened with an ever-increasing revenue debt to the government, a debt so outstanding that it finally forced the Nadia raj to fall into arrears and the hammer of sale was brought down on his zamindari in 1797 by the Sunset Laws of the Permanent

<sup>221</sup> See, for instance, petition no. 43 dated 22 Chaitro, 1256 BS [1849] in *Collections of Bengali Petitions, &c., made under the orders of the Government of India, for His Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1869, pp. 185-9.

<sup>222</sup> A major concern in Ratnalekha Roy's study of the transfer of land rights in public auctions. In response to Sirajul Islam's contention that the lands were almost always being bought by outsiders, Roy convincingly argues that a process of subinfeudation can be discerned in this transfer wherein the zamindar effectively buys the land under someone else's name. For a fuller discussion, see Roy, *Agrarian Society*.

<sup>223</sup> Our choice of the district of Nadia as a case-study is propelled by the fact that most of the Baul sects that we are looking at hail from Nadia.

<sup>224</sup> Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of its Operation 1790-1819*, Bangla Academy: Dacca, 1979, p. 118. For a detailed discussion of this, see pp. 118-127.



Settlement. By 1816, the dissolution and fragmentation of the Nadia zamindari was more or less complete. A judicial report on Nadia in 1816 states thus:

Almost the whole of this District has been disposed of, either by public or private sale; the landholders are now no more, and the new purchasers are, for the most part, opulent native merchants at the Presidency, who have bought the lands as a mere speculation, and will part with them again after they have thoroughly fleeced them.<sup>225</sup>

It needs to be reiterated at this point that our concern here is not to probe the vexed subject of the transfer of land rights, but to trace its impact in the peasant consciousness that composed and sung the Baul songs. Consider, for instance, the following Baul song:

*Hocche bhabna potit jomi abad holo na.  
Abad hobe kische  
Pai na dishe amar hutashe pran bnache na.  
Jomi jomidarer ghore nilam renge kore tarpore  
Kichhudin pore berai jomir al ghure  
Jomir tin pashe  
Al ek pashe khal dekhe bhabchhi ontore  
Jomir dekhe sheo hal holam behal  
Tate namalam hal ekkhana.  
Jure chhoye boloder hal tathe badi mon-rakhal  
Kete joter dori taratari chute jai juwal dhore  
Nijan knathi chharai mati tathe  
Upor-brishtir karkhana  
Bhugol bole jomir nilam rokha holo na.<sup>226</sup>*

[Worries crowd my mind, the waste land did not become fertile. What will make it fertile? I am at a loss, my anguish is killing me. After a few days on hearing the news of the auction of the land in the Zamindar's house, I walk around the land's embankments on three sides and the water flow on one side, and I despair, yet I put a plough onto it. I fasten six bullocks to it and I fasten my mind-shepherd to it, and I cut off the land's measuring ropes and run with my plough across the land. Even without the blade of the plough the land breaks, it's the result of the rains. Bhugol says the auction could not be warded off.]

The note of desperation in Bhugol Baul's song to save his field from being auctioned off is obvious here. And the attribution of the futility of his efforts to natural calamity, the rains, is specially telling in his perception of the cause of the auction. It is not the zamindar or the *jotedar* that he blames; it is the inexorability of natural disasters thwarting cultivation and by extension affecting revenue collection that figures in his consciousness as the reason for the loss of land. Let us now consider the following song

<sup>225</sup> Home Miscellaneous, Vol 775, Judicial Nuddea, 1816.

<sup>226</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 194-5.

by Din Shorot:

*Mon tor deho banglar jomidari jabe re khoshe*  
*Tor secretary kam-chowdhury*  
*Courtward e dite chaye re.*  
*Later kisti khelap hoye gelo*  
*Oi nilamer notice elo*  
*Tor sthapoty dhon churi gelo*  
*Nilam rod korbe kishe.*  
*Oi shodor kormochari chhoijone chalaki kori*  
*State er joma hote khoroch bhari*  
*Dekhaye tara mashe mashe.*  
*Abar dekhchhi koto shon achhe*  
*Mohajon nalish korechhe*  
*Tui theke kumotir kachhe*  
*Shob khowale shorboneshe.*  
*Shorot bole mon-chowdhury*  
*Chhoyejonke borkhasto kori*  
*Koira gyan-babuke secretary*  
*Kistibondi korge sheshe.*<sup>227</sup>

[Oh mind, your body like Bengal's zamindari will perish. Your secretary Kam (Lust)-Chowdhury wants to pass it on to the Court of Wards. The Lord Sahib's due instalment of revenue payment is up, it is almost time the auction notice came, your landed wealth got stolen, how will you thwart the auction? Those six Sadar-Clerks by their cunning have shown every month that the revenue demands are less than the expenses incurred. And I also see the money-lender complaining about us every year. You being with Kumoti (misfortune) have lost everything. Shorot says, oh mind-Chowdhury suspend all the six clerks, put gyan-babu in their place as the secretary and meet the revenue demands.]

In contrast to the somewhat fatalistic interpretation of Bhugol's miserable socio-economic condition as a landless labour in the context of the auctioning off of lands, Din Shorot's understanding of the same does certainly seem more grounded and probing. He does not blame fate in the form of nature's whims, but has his hall of blame very clearly etched out in his mind: it is the secretary, the *kormochari* (clerk) and the *mohajon* (money-lender) who by their fraudulent concealment of cultivable lands have conspired against the zamindar and sought to pass the lands to the jurisdiction of the Court of Wards. Such a nuanced understanding of the various levels of exploitation and corruption in the agrarian system seems striking when we recall that even Raja Ishwar Chandra confessed after the dissolution of his zamindari in 1817 that he too

had concealed 2,66,493 bighas of land capable of yielding about one lakh of rupees annually, from the decennial settlement. The benefits derived from public concession and fraudulent concealment, must have made the *jama* very moderate. This was also testified to by the very high rate of sales of his lands which were sold on an average at eighteen years of

<sup>227</sup> Emphasis added. Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 130-1.

purchase at the usual rate of 10 p.c. profit on the *sadar jama*.<sup>228</sup>

While the secretaries and the clerks and the money-lenders all reap their profits from such malpractices, it is the poor peasant, Din Shorot says, who is most adversely affected by its results: his condition is made bleaker by the transfer of the lands from the zamindar to the Court of Wards and by its imminent sale.

While at the surface Din Shorot's insight into the socio-economic realities of everyday peasant life in late-18<sup>th</sup> century is striking in its very overt attribution of blame, a closer reading of his song will reveal that his resistance is couched in a language that at once is an appropriation and subversion of the language of the dominant class. In his classic study of the peasant rebellion in Mymensingh in 1825 under the Pagolponthi leadership of Tipu Shah, Gautam Bhadra discusses the political import of the specific historical moment of crisis: a crisis in the peasant consciousness of faith in the efficiency and justness of the reign of a zamindar. In such moments of crises, he argues, the particular socio-economic-political crisis gets deflected in the peasant imagination onto a specifically ethical register wherein the oppressive zamindar gets translated into an evil amoral being and the peasant rebel into the just, righteous ruler setting out to right the wrong.<sup>229</sup> Such a process of the deflection of the political into the ethical/religious register in the peasant consciousness can also be seen as underpinning Hugh Urban's study of the specific politics of the deployment of the recurrent metaphor of the Company in the songs of the Kortabhoja sect of colonial Bengal. His study goes on to demonstrate the ways in which the terminology and language of the colonial master came to be selectively appropriated and adapted in the Kortabhoja songs in a strikingly subversive manner. Critiquing the exploitative trade of the Company, Dulalchand/Lalshoshi (1775-1833) laments thus:

I've quit this business, brother!  
There was no profit in it—I had to give up my earnings too easily!  
Is one more merchant any use in this land?  
I labour in some city;  
I go to the marketplace and toil, breaking my back,  
And as the days pass, do I get even a piece of bread in this  
kingdom?  
....  
See how many imported goods are in the Company's warehouse—  
The Company labels and markets them.

<sup>228</sup> Islam, *Permanant Settlement*, p. 121.

<sup>229</sup> Bhadra, *Iman*, pp. 98-103.

But [on the labels] the weight, whether great or little, is not recorded,  
 For if it were, the [weight] would be known, whether little or great,  
 And then the porters and the laborers and everyone else would  
 know its true value.  
 All the troubles I had have been paid off.  
 I'll no longer engage in all this haggling—I have had enough of it!  
 Now the porters and policemen of the Company  
 No longer deceive me about the weight [of the merchandise].<sup>230</sup>

While the marketplace appear in such songs as a classic metaphor for material illusion in mortal life and the consequent need to transcend it, what is of significance, Urban points out, is the way in which the Kortabhojas turn the image of the Company on its head by transforming it to the 'Poor Company' or 'Mad Company', both being referents to the following of Chaitanya in general and the Kortabhoja sect in particular. The 'wondrous merchandise' of the Company is transformed in the Kortabhoja imagination as the spiritual merchandise of the poor company of four madmen, namely, Caitanya, Nityananda, Advaitacharya and Aulchand.<sup>231</sup>

In Din Shorot's song, too, a similar process of subversion can be discerned. It is important to note that his song, unlike that of Bhugol Baul's, does not end on a note of resignation. The resistance to the combined corrupt practices of the secretary, clerk and the money-lender lay in a literal suspension of these *kam-chowdhurys*, these 'lustful' men from their jobs and the reinstating of '*gyan-secretary*' in their place. In the esoteric cosmology of the Bauls, the six *kormocharis* or clerks stand in for the six *ripu* or the internal enemies, namely lust, greed, anger, drunkenness, confusion and jealousy; the specific singling out of the secretary as the *kam-chowdhury* betokens of the major threat posed by the libidinous drives of the body to the soundness of the mind; and the final reinstatement of *gyan-chowdhury* in the place of *kam-chowdhury* as the just ruler falls neatly in place with the Baul's belief in the transcendence of carnal pleasures through an encounter with the latter into a realisation of a higher spiritual-moral state of being. In an agrarian system of starkly unequal power-relations, defiance and resistance can only be envisaged in a domain that is somewhat autonomous, somewhat free from the oppressive economic logic of the dominant class. In the Baul consciousness this site of resistance and subversion can only be accommodated in their esoteric imagination. Thus Lalon sings:

<sup>230</sup> Translated by author in Hugh B Urban, *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal* [Hereafter referred to as *Songs*], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 58, no. 27.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-9.

*Ain mafik nirikh dite bhabo ki.  
 Kal shomon ele korbe ki?  
 Bhabte din akher holo,  
 Sholo ana baki polo,  
 Ki aloshyo ghire elo  
 Dekhli ne khule ankhi.  
 Nishkami nirbikar hole  
 Jiyonte more jog shadhile,  
 Tobe khataye washil mile  
 Noile upaye ki dekhi?<sup>232</sup>*

[Why are you worrying to provide a lawful survey (of your land)? What will you do if tomorrow the warrant is at your door? Days pass in such thoughts, the whole rent now is due, what a sloth engulfs you, you don't even see. Only by becoming dispassionate about sensual pleasures and indifferent, by practicing a life-in-death yoga, will you find release from the roll-book, else what other means is there?]

It is pertinent to note that the state of indifference to lust and oppression alike that Lalon calls for is not one of passive resignation. It is the only available tool by which to desist and even conquer the warrant of death, both spiritually from the libidinous drives of the body and physically from the zamindar/jotedar's club-men. In this scheme of things, the three stages of their esoteric religion, namely religious initiation, practice and perfection, together go on to make up the peasant's plough with which to reap the soil/mind. In this world of *bhokti-chash* or devotional-cultivation, resistance to oppression is to be overcome by patience. Thus Kubir sings:

*Mon re joro dhormo-hal probortok-fal  
 Shadhok-muraye shiddho-ish lagaiye  
 Joran diye ripur skondher  
 Langol jora shabondhe  
 Beye jaore premanonde.  
 Onurag-pnachuni loye  
 Mon re koro bhokti-chash  
 Uthao bighno-ghash  
 Jomi shoman koro dhoirjyo-moiye.<sup>233</sup>*

[Oh mind join the Dhormo-plough with the Probortok (initiation)-blade, and apply the Shiddho (perfection)-soil to the Shadhok (practice)-tip, join the plough on the shoulder of Ripu (body's internal enemies), and float in joyful love. Take the love-potion, oh mind, and cultivate devotion, reap the obstructing grass, and till the land with the patience-ladder.]

It is in this urgent appeal for achieving a state of *jiyonte mora*, for challenging ultimate physical-spiritual dissolution by attaining a supremely indifferent life-in-death

<sup>232</sup> Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul o Baul Gan*, [Hereafter referred to as *Banglar Baul*], Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2001, p. 602.

<sup>233</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 189.

existence, for the need to inculcate patience to achieve the blissful state of *premanondo* or ecstatic love, that the peasant-rebel's defiant answer to the rent-rolls of the coercive zamindars lies.

## Section II:

### The Language of the Zamindar-Peasant Relation in Peasant Resistance:

In his brilliant case-study of peasant resistance in the aftermath of the green revolution in rice production in Sedaka, a village of mere seventy-four households in the Muda Irrigation District of Malaysia, James Scott documents the pattern of peasant resistance to changes in technology, social relations of production, and social and ritual practices.<sup>234</sup> Of this impressive case-study what seems directly relevant to our argument is Scott's notion of a community ethic of mutual obligation shared by the landlord and the peasants and the role of this ethical principle in instances of class-conflict and the language of peasant resistance. Scott demonstrates how, in Sedaka, in order to assure themselves of the labour of the peasants the village landlords made the villagers adhere to a communitarian ethic that stressed mutual obligation, including the obligation of the well-to-do to help the poor in various ways, and how this very ethical bond was appropriated and subverted by the peasants in their resistance against the landlord's efforts to push them out of the village community, physically, ideologically and symbolically. Gautam Bhadra too, we recall, have argued on similar lines when he spoke of the peculiar deflection of the political onto an ethical register in the rebelling peasant consciousness in which the language of resistance got couched with ethical terminologies like '*insaf*', '*hok*', '*pap-punyo*', '*hukumot*', etc. In the Baul songs we can discern a similar ambivalence informing their response and resistance to oppression and exploitation despite a nuanced understanding of the structures of oppression. But the dramatis persona of this ambivalence is by no means static. In other words, the villainous Other in relation to which the Baul seek to construct its righteous Self is not homogenous and is fraught with shifting perceptions of the oppressor. We have already seen how in Din Shorot's song the fiscal exploiters are personified in the figures of the secretaries, clerks and money-lenders of the agrarian community. Such apportioning of blame to the intermediaries abound in the Baul songs of this period. For instance,

<sup>234</sup> James C. Scott, "Resistance Without Protest and Without Organization: Peasant Opposition to the Islami Zakat and the Christian Tithes", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:3, July 1987, pp. 417-452.

consider the following song by Kubir:

*Jabo re dorkhasto dite dware khod Kompanir kachhe—  
Janabo hujure amar mone joto dukkho ache.  
Choudyo powa jomikhana—joma shikke sholo ana, monmonate amar  
Dena diyechhi tar koboch ache.  
Eshe Deputy Kalektar jorip kolle pore jomar nirikh kore gechhe.  
Mone hoye Kompanir amin jorip korle sorejmin purbo-poschim  
Uttor dokkhin arete beshi korechhe.  
Tahar modhye nodnodi ache jonmabodhi potitjomi shokol uthit niyechhe.  
Prodhan ripu Headmuhuri, noyon holo roshongiri shey rastaye  
Srobon Chowdhury deowangiri bhar peyechhe.  
Era shokole ek oikyo amari bipokhyo najir mohapneche pnech felechhe.  
Kalektarir amla joto tahader guun bolbo koto deowayer haorah'r moto  
mamla pele pore nache.  
Amar e jonomer moto shokol koronete Choron bhebe khede Kubir  
kohichhe.*<sup>235</sup>

[I'll go to make a petition at the door of the Company itself; I'll tell his Highness of all the suffering in my heart! I have fourteen *pozas* of land; the rent is a *sika* and sixteen *anas*; and I've repaid the debt of its cost. When the Deputy Collector came and surveyed the land, the price became great; And when the Company's officer came and surveyed the land, I think, right there on the spot, east and west, north and south, it somehow became even greater in measure! There are rivers and streams upon it; for my whole life it's been fallow land. My foremost enemy is the Head-Man; the Tax Officer appeared, and there on the road, Srabon Choudhuri, the Deowan, received the rent. All of them together are my opponents; the Head-Clerk [of the law court] has entangled me in a terrible mess! Let me tell you about all the qualities of the Collector's Officers; just like the Finance Ministers of Howrah, after they win the lawsuit, they'll all dance about! And Kubir says, carefully consider all the sad events of my life!]<sup>236</sup>

It is interesting to note the roles assigned to the Company and the intermediaries in this drama of agrarian resistance. Kubir's resistance to fiscal exploitation is against the intermediaries, namely, the Deputy Collectors, Company's officer, Head-Man, Tax officer, Head Clerk of the law courts, etc, and never against the Company itself in whose justness and righteousness he seems to retain an almost childish faith and to whom he inevitably appeals in hope of redressal and relief. Moreover, the absence of the figure of the zamindar on the stage of this drama of retribution is telling. In other Baul songs too, we find a loaded silence around the figure of the zamindar. One may hazard to guess that this literal absence mirrors a real physical absence of the zamindars in the system of absentee landlordism that came to prevail after the mass auctioning off of crumbling zamindaris under the Sunset Law of the Permanent Settlement. And when the zamindar does rarely appear in the songs, he appears as the victim per excellence

<sup>235</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p.209.

<sup>236</sup> Urban, *Songs*, trans by Urban, p. 138, no. 27.

whose helplessness in the face of collective exploitation of his own resources by the rich *jotedars* equates him with the peasant:

*Amar ghor shondhani  
Kangal korichhe krondon ghorer chor chhojon,  
Shadhinota roton shob lute khaye—  
Ami ghorer raja hoye shokol khowaiye  
Nijukto hoilam dasher shebaye.  
Ami Probhu hoye.<sup>237</sup>*

[My home-hunting Kangal is now in tears, the six thieves of my house has plundered my freedom-jewel. I am the Raja (King/ruler) of the house and yet having lost everything I have now been appointed as the service of my servant. Despite my being the Lord.]

The tone of injustice that informs the depiction of the hapless Raja /Proja, puts the role of the villain in these songs squarely on the intermediaries, the six thieves who plunders the peasant/king's house.

The world of fraudulent middlemen in the agrarian community replicates itself in the Kortabhoja imagination as the world of thieving brokers and rapacious moneylenders of the corrupt 'marketplace of the world' which deceives and exploits the poor labourers. If the Company came to stand in the agrarian imagination of Kubir Gossain as an embodiment of the righteous sovereign, the same came to stand in the symbolic imagination of the Kortabhoja as the plundering merchants, as exploitative traders or indeed by way of subversion as traders of spiritual merchandise. In this context, it would be interesting to note the logic inherent in the dual figures of the Raja/Ruler and the ascriptions of these epithets by the subversive Kortabhoja consciousness. In one of the songs, Dulalchand/ Lalshoshi states thus:

Look, in this kingdom, if someone's born in the house of the merchant,  
And is completely infatuated with wealth,  
We call that man a "Raja," brother.  
But one who sits with a broken begging bowl in his lap,  
Everyone calls the "Ruler" of the land!  
Those whose bodies are emaciated by famine,  
We consider the Princes and Ministers!

...

He who has a great amount of capital in hand, which instantly grows sevenfold,  
And then goes throughout the seven cities, beating his drum, brother, we call "great".  
But he who at no time has had any riches,

<sup>237</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 183.



Who possesses no wealth at all—he is the Lord of the three worlds.<sup>238</sup>

The Raja or the King then is the capitalist Company servant flaunting all his wealth and physical prowess, and the Lord and Ruler of the three worlds is the one who is denied all material possessions and is, by this very act of denial, granted spiritual superiority over the rest. To be a Raja then is not to be a Ruler. To be a ruler necessitates an ethical spiritual superiority that a raja, ‘infatuated with his wealth’ as it were, is denied. In the drama of the villain-hero played out in the songs of the Kortabhojas, the dramatis personae of the two reflect a clear understanding of the workings of the Company: the ‘porters and the policemen’ are not unrelated to the Company as the secretaries and the Deputy Collectors and the money-lenders in Din Shorot and Kubir’s songs are; rather, they are the Company’s men collectively engaged in their conspiracy to fleece the poor labourers. The absence of any ambivalence in Lalshoshi’s identification of the ‘villain’ as the Company crystallises in the complete collapse of the various Others into the singular metaphor of the Lord of the country as the ‘Prince of Thieves’. Lalon sings thus,

*Rajyeshwor raja jini,  
Chorero she shiromoni,  
Nalish koribo ami  
Konkhane kar nikote?*<sup>239</sup>

[The King, the Lord of the country, he himself is the Prince of the Thieves; I wish to lodge a complaint, but alas! to whom and where shall I do it?]

This articulation presents a radical denunciation of authority that erases any possibility of ambivalence in the understanding of the workings of the Company. The trope of ‘justice’ that, as we have pointed out following Gautam Bhadra, informs both subaltern understanding of and resistance to repression, suffers a surfeit in Lalon’s consciousness. The King is no longer the ultimate embodiment of justice, nor indeed is he the wronged hapless victim at the mercy of the evil *jotedars*, but he is the Prince of Thieves who has indeed overstepped himself by breaching the bond of mutual obligation, of mutual welfare, by being directly responsible for looting and plundering his subjects.

One way in which the pluralities in the Bauls’ perception and representation of colonial domination and oppression can perhaps be partially explained is by factoring in a spatial

<sup>238</sup> Urban, *Songs*, p. 40.

<sup>239</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 583, no. 61.

factor in the nature of their encounter of colonialism, i.e., the actual geographical proximity or distance of their dwelling villages from the workings of the Company. To begin with, one may argue that the remoteness of Brittihuda, the seat of Kubir Gossain and the Shahebdhonis, from the colonial capital and the less likelihood of their any direct dealings with the Company per se, can perhaps explain their conception of the righteous Company/ sinful intermediaries structure in their imagination. Contrarily, with Ghoshpara, the seat of the Kortabhojas, located right at the fringe of the colonial capital, the experience of the forces of colonialism by the Kortabhojas was more direct. Their familiarity with contemporary commercial practices is strongly felt in Dulalchand's choice of the term *tyakshali bol* or the language of the mint (established in Calcutta in 1830) to denote his religious language. In fact, Sumanta Banerjee goes to the extent of hazarding the guess that Dulalchand might have been closely 'associated with some trade or trading agency like many contemporary Bengali banians of 19<sup>th</sup> century.'<sup>240</sup> It was not only the frequent use of commercial terms such as 'merchants', 'agents', 'stockists', 'brokers', 'shares', 'indigo trade with Arab countries' in the songs of *Bhaber Git*, but also the preference for the term 'godī', an epithet for the trading houses in the colonial capital in those days, over other more commonly used terms such as 'ashram' and 'akhra' as a label for their religious headquarters in Ghoshpara that further testify to the specifically commercial nature of their colonial encounter. And Lalon's radically unequivocal condemnation of the colonial masters could perhaps be owing to the spatial proximity of Kushtia, the seat of Lalonshahi sect, to Calcutta, a proximity facilitated by the opening up of the railway line between Calcutta and Kushtia in November 1862.

W.W. Hunter tells us,

The town of Kushtia is the only instance of a large market which has considerably increased owing to the influence of the railway. ... No large centres of industry have sprung up along the railway line in Nadiya District; nor have any small railway stations, except Kushtia, grown into seats of commerce to a sufficient extent to require special notice. But nearly all the railway stations are more or less used as depots for country produce.<sup>241</sup>

This growth of Kushtia from yet another rural pocket of Bengal into a noticeable commercial centre facilitated by the railways meant that the town-dwellers had more

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<sup>240</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, "From Aulchand to Sati-Ma—The Institutionalization of the Karta-Bhaja Sect in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>241</sup> William Wallach Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. II, Districts of Nadia and Jessor*, London: Trubner & Co., 1875, p. 94.

opportunities to interact more closely with their colonial masters, whether by way of their shared commercial interests or by way of direct social contact with the latter. The loss of faith in the justness of the King and the consequent denunciation of the King as the Prince of Thieves emerge from exactly this nature of colonial encounter: one may hazard to say that the greater intrusion of capitalistic commerce redefined the relation between the peasantry and the colonial administration thereby making it at one and the same time both more exploitative and less capable of claiming the hegemonic aura which attaches to pre-capitalistic structures of social domination.

While this trajectory of critical enquiry does seem<sup>to</sup> provide a somewhat tiny glimpse into the logic underlying the heterogeneous figure of the Other, the doubly-inscribed figure of the righteous/evil Company and its potential appropriation and subversion in the Baul imagination, it should by no means be overstressed. An overemphasis on the spatialisation of the various subaltern imaginations runs the risk of attributing a certain geographico-cultural fixity to the songs and the singers alike, which was in fact a far-cry from reality. In other words, to say that the various representations of the colonial encounter in the songs of the Shahebdhonis, Kortabhoja and the Lalonshahi Bauls were mutually exclusive and specific to the particular singer/composer's experience of colonialism is to be guilty of fixing and essentialising an endlessly fluid body of oral literature and the very different nature of mobility in pre- and early-colonial rural Bengal.

The first is a methodological caveat. The Baul songs, like any other oral literature, are characterised by their fluidity, inter-borrowings from other folk or Baul songs and endless modifications as they get passed down from one singer to the other. The question of the authenticity of Baul songs is a vexed one and scholars of the field have long since debated it. For instance, when Sudhir Chakraborty criticises Upendranath Bhattacharya of myopia when the latter classified four of Kubir's songs under the category of 'Collected from the various Bauls of Bankura, Medinipur, Manbhum, Murshidabad, Birbhum and Burdwan, congregated at the Mela in Kneduli' in his voluminous collection of Baul songs,<sup>242</sup> what perhaps is at issue here is not a faulty categorisation per se, but the endlessly fluid nature of the Baul songs (here Kubir's) whose claims of authorship, by virtue of its wide oral circulation, has well passed from

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<sup>242</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 53.

Kubir Gossain to the mass of Baul singers performing at the village fair. Moreover, as Chakraborty himself points out, there was a fair amount of interborrowings and mutual self-fashioning amongst the various Baul sects in their bid to construct their identity along the principles of similarity and difference. Thus Kubir extols Ghoshpara (the seat of Kortabhoja) as the seat of 'truth':

*Ekta brikker duti shakha bedbidhite naiko lekha  
Shadhoke paye dekhe ontohpuri.  
Jongipur Ghoshpara shotyo Kubir bole shotyo shotyo shotyo  
Srichoron dhori.*<sup>243</sup>

[Two stalks of the same tree, written in neither *Bed* nor *bidhi*, the *shadhok* catches the glimpse of the inner chamber. *Jongipur*, *Ghoshpara* is true, Kubir says long live truth at the feet of *Choron(chand)*.]

In the face of this overt acknowledgement of a shared origin, it is perhaps not very hazardous to argue the greater likelihood of the songs themselves to have been produced through inter-borrowings, whether conscious or unconscious. Hence, to fix the songs to a specific spatial-temporal frame in which to read the subaltern imagination would be fallacious.

The second pitfall of this line of enquiry is a historiographical caveat. Since the days of Sir Charles Metcalf's classic formulation of village India in 1830 and since the days of Sir Henry Maine and Karl Marx who, despite their different positions and in hindsight, saw in the Indian Village Community a remnant and survival from what Maine called 'the infancy of society', the equation of the 'traditional village' and its 'closed peasant community' with 'premodern agrarian societies' has affected historiographical literature on colonial India till even a couple of decades back. What emerged in the coloniser's imagination in keeping with contemporary Victorian evolutionary ideas and preoccupations, gradually crystallised in the ultra-romantic notion of the idyllic golden village, typically characterised as self-sufficient, introverted, particularised and encysted, against which to map the ennui of progress and civilisation of the outside world. What this historiographical aporia resulted from was an undermining of, as scholars like Morris E. Opler, Romila Thapar, David Ludden, Cohn and Marriott, and the like have pointed out, the numerous 'horizontal links'<sup>244</sup> to the wider world via local markets and fairs, networks of religious centres playing an economic role too, trade in

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>244</sup> Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 165.

essential items by itinerant herders, artisans and traders and the pull of the market town, village exogamy which established ties to other villages, caste and religious ties with people residing in other villages, etc that 'enmeshed a characteristic South Asian village in 1750 within a web of social relations that was essential to agricultural production.'<sup>245</sup> Surprisingly, in the field of Baul studies, excepting Sudhir Chakraborty's sociological study, the scholarly focus has always been engaged with uncovering the deep religious symbolism of the songs and the Bauls have largely been viewed as an isolated self-contained community pushed to the margins of the society by the dominant ideology. Though Chakraborty has attempted to situate these songs in their socio-economic-political context of production, his focus too has been the insides of the Baul community, not so its interactions with the outside world. Given their vocation as peasants, weavers, blacksmiths, carpenter, thatchers, farmers, etc, it would not be too farfetched to assume that the Baul singers too enjoyed a mobility that was generated both out of the organicity of the village community and the larger backdrop of interdependent social relations, the 'social web', of which they were a part. Hence, to say, for instance, that the specific nature of colonial encounters in Nadia and Burdwan, would generate two specific, autonomous responses in the imaginations of the Bauls of both these regions is to preclude the very intermeshed socio-economic-political-cultural existence that these singers enjoyed by virtue of their 'horizontal links' with other villages.

These caveats aside, through this study of the symbolic poaching and pilfering of the dominant discourse by the resisting subaltern imagination of the Bauls, the final image of everyday resistance against colonial-agrarian exploitation and oppression that lingers on is the following refrain from Kubir's song:

*Mon jeno inglish pati shokoli tar mola mati porale hoye na khnati  
Chote fute beriye jaye. Kebol petapeti durum shobdo chhote shokol  
gnaye.*<sup>246</sup>

[The Mind is like the English Party whose blemishes, despite burning it, do not turn into pure, it still remains tarnished. Only a lot of noise and

<sup>245</sup> David Ludden, "Productive Power in Agriculture: A Survey of Work on the Local History of British India", in Meghnad Desai, Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, and Ashok Rudra ed., *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 58-59. For further discussion, see Bernard S. Cohn and McKim Marriott, "Networks and Centres in the Integration of Indian Civilisation", in Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 78-87.

<sup>246</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 185.

gunshots fill the whole village.]

### Conclusion:

'Events,' says Lacan, 'are engendered in a primary historicisation. In other words, history is always producing itself on the stage where it will be played out, once it has been written down, both within the subject and outside him.' Speaking of the complex **dialectical** role of memory in the history of resistance, Lacan says that as long as there is resistance to dominant discourses, memories of past resistances in the rebelling consciousness almost always shape up its perception of and response to the present crisis, and the experience of the present crisis to shapes up the memory of the past resistance.<sup>247</sup> In locating traces of quotidian resistance to fiscal exploitation in particular, and colonial oppression in general, there can be discerned this Lacanian dialectical memory in the often couching of the tropes of the villainous intermediaries in a specific term that harks back to the memory of the Portuguese plunder of Bengal in the peasant consciousness, a memory that is revived by and is shaping the present crises. One hears the term '*bombete*' frequently deployed in the songs in images of plunder:

*E ghorete boshot kora holo re daye*  
*Dane chalaile mon chole bnaye.*  
*Ei nobodwari ghor dekhite shundor*  
*Purno chhilo bistor monimuktaye.*  
*Chhojon bombete jutiye shey roton bechiye*  
*Gorol kiniye khawaye amaye.*<sup>248</sup>

[Oh how unbearable it is to live in this house, if I steer my mind to the right, it goes to the left. This splendid looking nine-doored house was full of jewels and pearls. Six pirates came along, sold my jewels and now feed me with poison]

and, yet again,

*Shohore sholojon bombete.*  
*Koriye pagol-para*  
*nilo tara*  
*shob lootey.*<sup>249</sup>

[There are sixteen pirates in the city. Having driven us mad, they have looted all there was.]

As W.K. Firminger tells us, the Portuguese who had formed a settlement under the

<sup>247</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, Oxford: Routledge, 2001, p. 57.

<sup>248</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 183.

<sup>249</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 582.

patronage of Emperor Akbar at Hughli and had by 1599 built themselves their Church and a fortress, had in a span of thirty-three years' time sunk in Bengal from being a 'race, so distinguished for its early enterprise and consummate bravery ... into a tribe of thieves closely allied, both by blood and habits, to the aboriginal pirates of Arracan, who infested the " Rogues' River" at the entrance of the Hughli.'<sup>250</sup> Not surprisingly then, do we discern the ready association of Hughli and the Portuguese pirates in the following song:

*Ami jokhon Hughlite gelam,  
Kalnar ghate nao bnadhilam,  
Nongor korlam koshe kinaraye,  
Chhoyjona bombete jute,  
Amar noukar mal shob nilo lute,  
Kachhi-dori kete-kute  
Bhashiye dilo jomuna.<sup>251</sup>*

[When I was in Hughli, I had tied and anchored my boat at the banks of Kalna. The six pirates together plundered all the goods in my boat; they tore the ropes and set my boat afloat in the Jomuna (river).]

However, the frequent collapse of the 'bombete' or the Portuguese pirate into the figure of the exploitative Company servants in the Baul songs and its deployment as a generic term for wholesale ransackers and looters on the hand revives the memory of dread and vulnerability to the threat posed by the plundering Portuguese pirates in the past, and on the other hand, this revival of the memory of the Portuguese plunder shapes their experiences of the present crisis. The fact that Gaur and Jessore were seats of the Portuguese trade in rice and textiles only makes the historicity of the memory more immediate.<sup>252</sup> Such collapses in terminology in denoting a foreign threat to hitherto peaceful existence can also be discerned in the etymology of the word 'firinghee'. Hobson-Jobson defines the word thus: 'This term for a European is very old in Asia, but when now employed by natives in India is either applied (especially in the South) specifically to the Indian-born Portuguese, or, when used more generally, for "European", implies something of hostility or disparagement.'<sup>253</sup>

<sup>250</sup> W.K. Firminger, *Thacker's Guide to Calcutta*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906, p. 5

<sup>251</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 881, no. 475.

<sup>252</sup> 'While a private Portuguese trader, Martin Lucena, was living at Gaur, capital of Bengal, the first Portuguese merchant to have reached the Ganges was Joao Coelho, who was sent by Giovanni di Empoli, a Florentine merchant, around 1516. ... Although [Domingo] Carvalho could defeat an Arakan invasion, he and his like-minded Portuguese had to leave the island. They found employment, with jaigirs and lucrative trading opportunities, as artillerymen and naval crew in the semi-autonomous coastal kingdoms of Sripur, Bakla and Jessore.' Aniruddha Roy, "The Portuguese", *Banglapedia*, [http://banglapedia.net/HT/P\\_0233.HTM](http://banglapedia.net/HT/P_0233.HTM), viewed on August 21, 2007.

<sup>253</sup> Henry Yule and Arthur C Burnell ed, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, Digital

Everyday resistance in the subaltern consciousness of the Bauls then, we contend, is couched not only by a selective appropriation and subversion of the dominant discourse through a metaphoric rendering of the socio-economic-political reality onto their esoteric imagination, but also by a dialectical process of the memory of past alien invasions which enables the rebelling consciousness to identify its Other which is at once heterogenous and absolute.

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Dictionaries of South Asia, p. 353, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.0:1:892.hobson>, accessed on August 21, 2007.



*Amar Ghorer Chabi Porer Hathe:*

**Criminality, Colonialism and the Home in Early Colonial Rural Bengal**

The domestic space or the *ghor* has long enjoyed a substantial degree of centrality in 19<sup>th</sup> century historiographical studies of colonial Bengal. It was Partha Chatterjee<sup>254</sup> who for the first time sought to locate the domestic space as one of the crucial co-ordinates in understanding the workings of the nationalist discourses in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. His formulation of the binary of the *ghor* (home) and *bahir* (the outside world) situated the domestic space as the repository of all things spiritual and indigenous as against the materialist realm of the outside world increasingly marked with British social-political-cultural interventions into the everyday life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali *bhodrolok* (Hindu and male). Correspondingly, this division of the social space into the *ghor* and *bahir* in nationalist discourse came to be translated in the emergent consciousness of the ‘new patriarchy’ as that between an uncolonised feminine domestic space—where women were the symbol of uncontaminated spirituality, as it were, offering much-craved sovereignty to the Bengali male, who was elsewhere subject to the discipline of the colonial office—and the masculine domain of the treacherous outside world fraught with an increasingly alienating colonial culture. A critique of the inadequacy of this latter strand in Chatterjee’s argument applying the *ghor/bahir* dichotomy in understanding gender politics in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal found its way into Sumit Sarkar’s study of the social history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta.<sup>255</sup> The home was not, Sarkar argued, in all nationalist formulations, the virgin space of *bhodrolok* autonomy beyond the reach of colonial modernisation: in other formulations, it came to stand in as the domain of Kaliyug represented by the selfish, money-grabbing, insubordinate modern woman. Chatterjee’s ascription of a compensatory function to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century *bhodrolok* valorisation of the twin figures of the *griho* (home) and the *grihalakshmi* (the housewife imagined in the divine model of Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic well-being) came to be challenged by Dipesh Chakrabarty<sup>256</sup> whose ‘supplementary explanation’ of this

<sup>254</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>255</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 186-215, pp. 282-357.

<sup>256</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*,

valorisation sought to go beyond Chatterjee's 'reductionist' analysis of the same. Placed at the heart of his larger argument that seeks to investigate the history of the Bengali *bhodrolok* and its very peculiar experience of modernity, Chakrabarty concludes that the figurations of the *griho* and *grihalakshmi* as a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali nationalist thought on new domesticity and women's education, emerged out of a curious combination of the European bourgeois distinction of public and private, domestic and national with the indigenous idea of male lineage. Whatever be the views of Chatterjee, Sarkar and Chakrabarty, the centrality ascribed to the domestic space in the existing historiography of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal proves beyond doubt that iconographies of familial and domestic space are one of the formulations through which nations are frequently articulated and figured. Armed by this broader historical understanding of the domestic space in colonial Bengal, this chapter sets out to read the choice, construction and deployment of the metaphor of the *ghor* in Baul songs as being shaped by the Bauls' specific perceptions of and responses to the changing social-economic-political forces in late 18<sup>th</sup>—mid 19<sup>th</sup> century rural Bengal.

### Section I.1:

#### ***Bhanga Ghor: The Broken House in Baul Songs:***

*Amar bari amar ghor—  
Bola kebol jhokomari shar,  
Poloke hobe shonghar kon dine.*<sup>257</sup>

[My house, my room, to speak of it is in vain, some day it will all be annihilated in no time]

The deployment of the image of the *ghor* as a metaphor of the human body in Baul world-view and imagination has long been understood in terms of a depth-reading that located the Bauls' notion of physical and/or spiritual immortality as the point of similitude. For instance, when read in the light of the plebeian materialism that underscores the beliefs and practices of the Balarami sect of the Meherpur region of Nadia,—the materialism arguably echoed in the very caste name of the sect, i.e., *hadi*, as derived from *had* or bones of the body—the Balaramis' avowed goal of escaping the existing yuga-cycle of Brahmanical orthodoxy and entering the imagined *divya-yuga* (divine age) presided over by the sole and supreme deity of *Hadiram*, comes to stand

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>257</sup> Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul o Baul Gan* [hereafter referred to as *Banglar Baul*], Calcutta: Orient Book Company, 2001 (1957), Lalon's song, p. 554, no. 12.

for their attempt to achieve not spiritual moksha, but an explicitly physical immortality. However, when in yet another Baul song, the body is imagined as a frail *knureghor* or a hut of bones and skin made by the *ghorami / gorondar*, the Supreme Maker of all things living, it comes to stand in as a site on which the forces of physical and spiritual mortality are inscribed through its very ephemeral foundations.

This depth-reading of the metaphor of the house in Baul songs that seeks to decode, as it were, its complex religious symbolism is not the concern of this thesis. Central to the recurrent deployments of the metaphor of the *ghor* to the human body in the Baul songs is, I argue, an acute perception of a primal threat, both natural and social. At an obvious level, this threat can be read as one inflicted by repeated natural disasters. Consider the following song by Nokuleshwor Baul:

*Kon shahoshe bnadhli eshe ghor:  
E je joripchhara shodyo pora—  
bhangon nodi'r notun chor.  
...  
Bhitir mati noy re khnati kore tolmol  
Dudin pore porbe khoshe lagle dheu'er jol.  
E khelaghor kodin robe  
E ghor chhere jete hobe  
Nokul bole ghor bhangibe—  
Uthile boishakhi jhor.<sup>258</sup>*

[How could you risk building your home here? This is the unmeasured newly-formed disintegrating bed of the flooding river! ... Your house's shaky foundations are not genuine; any day they will dwindle down under the flooding waves. This playhouse is not for long; we have to leave this place soon. Nokul says, your house will crumble down at the first hints of the norwester.]

Or this by Pagla Kanai (1824-1889):

*Shei ghorer srishtikorta allah nironjon  
she ghor ek pare korechhe potton  
ghore boshot shukh holo na bole Kanai obhajan  
jedin par bhangibe ghor poribe  
dokani korbe polayon  
Din thakte sharo re bhai je paro jemon.<sup>259</sup>*

[The maker of that house is Allah Nironjon. He is the one who has set up that house on the river bank. Kanai says, life in the house has not been happy. The day the river banks crumble down and the house falls apart, the shopkeeper will flee. O brother, make hay while the sun shines.]

<sup>258</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty, *Bangla Dehotottwer Gan* [hereafter referred to as *Dehotottwer Gan*], Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 2000 (1990), pp. 146-7.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

In riverine Bengal, the threat posed by floods is a regular one, as also is the one posed by the seasonal norwester to the flimsy huts of rural Bengal. A more topical representation of the impact of natural disasters on rural life is discerned in the following song:

*Bhut korechhe goto soner jhore  
Abar ei bahatto sale ghor okale lokkhi gechhe chhere.  
Holo onno bine chhonnochhara dhanyo gechhe pure.*

...  
*Mulluk holo lokkhichhara at ana chauler dhara  
Emni loker kopalpora mela na ta dhmure.  
Holo bicharkortar ulto dnara  
Shoda morar upor dhokaye khnara  
Teksh korechhe bara jomir onko tnere.*

...  
*Ki kori ar din chole na  
Berai dware dware.  
Ar pothe jete shonka kore  
Loke peter jwalaye manush mare  
Dhormobhoy kore na chore  
Putuli nei kere.  
Haye ar shuni dindopor bela  
Nei bhenge mohajoner gola<sup>260</sup>*

[Last year's cyclone made the country as barren as Bhutan; once again, this seventy-second year a severe drought has forced the Goddess of wealth to desert us. Without food, there is chaos as the entire paddy has got scorched. ... Devoid of all wealth, the country turns to chaos even as a measure of rice costs eight annas; thus have people's fates been scorched and their futures lost. Above all this, the Magistrate wields his claws forever ready to add insult to injury; the tax has been increased, the land grossly overvalued. ... What do I do, the day doesn't seem to pass, I wander from door to door. I dread walking on the roads; people kill [each other] out of the pangs of hunger, the thief does not have any religious qualms, he snatches my bag. Alas! I hear too that he plunders the moneylender's warehouse in broad daylight.]

The disaster-struck plight of the cultivators following the twin-onslaughts of the Cyclone of 1864 and the Drought of 1865-6 (1272 BS) in the district of Nadia as well as the many levels of their resultant oppression are borne out by W.W. Hunter's account of the same in his statistical study of the district. While an overwhelming feeling of acute helplessness in the face of natural calamities undoubtedly informs much of the threat that is central to the Bauls' imagination of the human body as the frail hut, a sociological analysis of this threat would reveal faultlines that would enable us to read this threat as not merely that of physical or spiritual dissolution, but a more immediate

<sup>260</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni Shomproday O Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1985, p. 208-9, no. 70.

one inflicted by the changing socio-economic-political forces in the rural social world of early- colonial Bengal.

## Section I. 2:

### **The Thief in the House: The Role of the Village Watchman in Crimes in rural Bengal**

In Chapter II, we have already shown how the Cornwallis reforms of 1793 had, by altering land-revenue obligations and tenant-landlord relations, brought about a crisis not only in the existing agrarian relations of power and authority, but also in the moral economy of the peasants that, despite its many ambivalences, increasingly came to view the King no longer as the feudalistic paternal authority as it was, but as a ruthless impersonal oppressor, as the 'Prince of Thieves'. In this chapter, we seek to take the cue from this strand in the last chapter and read the figuration of the metaphor of the broken house or the *bhanga ghor* in the Baul songs in terms of the social impact of the changes in modalities of control effected by the Cornwallis police reforms (Regulation XXII) of 1793 on the Baul imagination. It is this shift of police powers from the Zamindar to the Company that, we argue, can provide a working frame within which to read the perceived threat to the metaphorical house of the Baul imaginary.

Before analyzing the nature of the threat, let us begin by exploring the location of the threat to the metaphorical house. Consider this song by Lalou:

*Amar ghorer chabi porer hathe.  
Kemone khuliye shey dhon dekhbo chokkhethe.  
Apon ghore bojhai shona,  
Pore kore lena-dena,  
Ami holem jonmo-kana—  
Na pai dekhite.*

*Raji hole dorowani  
Dwar chhariye deben tini,  
Tare ba koi chini-shuni  
Berai kupothe.<sup>261</sup>*

[The keys to my house are in foreign hands; how then will I be able to see the riches [of the house]? My house is loaded with gold; but other people use it for their businesses. I am but born blind, I fail to see any of this. If only the watchman agrees, he will grant me access through the door. But alas! I do not even know him, and hence wander through the wrong

<sup>261</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 594, no. 78.

path.]

Or this by Kangal Fikirchand:

*E ghorete boshot kora holo re daye*

...  
*loke kothaye bole bahirer chor hole*  
*shabdhan koushole taye bnacha jaye*  
*amar ghorer majhe chor shodai kore jor*  
*mon prohori jog diyechhe taye.*<sup>262</sup>

[It has become so difficult to live in this house any more. ... People say, if the thief is from the outside, one can adopt cautionary measures to survive his attacks; [But] the thief lives right in the middle of my house and flexes his muscles at me; on top of that, he is joined by the mind-watchman.]

It needs to be mentioned in passing that in the Baul's peasant consciousness, the otherwise separate criminal groups of thieves (individuals stealing stealthily or without open force) and dacoits (groups of criminals engaged in organised robbery and murder) are often conflated and their acts are collectively perceived as 'churi' or theft. Such a conflation of the categories, both in the Bauls' perception and deployment of the term *churi* can be discerned, for instance, in the following song by Fikirchand:

*Dekhe tor ghumer ghor bhari, koto chor dakate*  
*Ghore dhuke kolle re churi; (bhola mon) joto chhilo*  
*Roton, shonar bhushon, moner moto horilo.*<sup>263</sup>

[Seeing the depth of your sound sleep, so many thieves and dacoits have entered your house to steal; Oh forgetful mind, all the jewels and gold ornaments there were, [they] stole to their heart's content.]

or in this song by one Kangal Gour:

*Bhabcho mon dibanishi, ghore boshi*  
*Kishe hobe shona dana.*  
*Nebe shob chor dakate, achombite,*  
*Ektibar ta bhabile na.*<sup>264</sup>

[You are thinking all day and night, heart/mind, sitting in your house, of how to increase your wealth. You've never for once considered that the thieves and dacoits will take all your wealth all of a sudden.]

However, what is at once striking about the perception of threat to the metaphorical house and its resultant material losses in both the aforementioned songs is the location

<sup>262</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 183.

<sup>263</sup> Satischandra Majumdar ed., *Kangal Fikirchand Fokirer Baul Shongit*, Kumarkhali: Mathuranath Press, 1903, p. 8.

<sup>264</sup> Nirmalchandra Chattopadhyay, *Brihot Baul Shongit*, Calcutta: Bengalroy Press, 1886, p. 50. See also, p. 48.

of the threat, embodied in the figure of the thief, *within* the house. The threat is no longer perceived as an external one. The key to the safekeeping of the house is already in other hands, and the hands that possess and control the domestic space, as it were, are the very ones that are instrumental in its violation, both material and emotional. At a second level, these thieving hands are also perceived to be those that are legally deployed to guard the well-being of the house, i.e., those of the *dorowan* or *prohori* or the village watchman. This choice and deployment of the figure of the village watchman as the thief in the metaphorical house in the Baul songs, we argue, betray an anxiety that was largely shared by the rural poor in a particular phase of Bengal peasant life marked with the many hazardous impacts of the Cornwallis police reforms of 1793.

Even before the Cornwallis reforms, as historians such as Bernard Cohn, John McLane and Basudev Chatterji had shown, the reciprocal and interdependent relationship of the Faujdari and Zamindari establishments existing under the Mughal and Nawabi system of police control had started to dwindle very early in colonial rural Bengal.<sup>265</sup> However, the Faujdars under the Mughal and Nawabi administrative system were always too small to look after the various administrative, financial and judicial matters of Bengal, and hence, to the subjects below in the hierarchy of centralised authorities, the Zamindar was in effect the true, visible locus of police administration in rural Bengal. But the coming of the British East India Company in Bengal in the second half of eighteenth-century and its attempt to establish a complete monopoly over the legitimate instruments of coercion, drastically ruptured the hitherto existing hierarchy of administrative and judicial authorities in rural colonial Bengal. By effecting a policy of what John McLane calls a 'demilitarisation of the Zamindars',<sup>266</sup> the Company disbanded the existing local military forces like the *paiks* and *nagdian* or household troops of the Zamindars and replaced it with a regular police. In the face of these twin forces of an ever-increasing revenue demand<sup>267</sup> of the frequently changing agrarian policies on the one hand, and the systematic demilitarisation of the Zamindars on the

<sup>265</sup> See Bernard S. Cohn, *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilisation*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971, p. 80; John McLane, "Revenue Farming and the Zamindari System in Eighteenth century Bengal" in R.E. Frykenberg ed., *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977; and Basudev Chatterjee, "The Darogah and The Countryside: The Imposition of Police Control in Bengal and Its Impact (1793-1837)" [hereafter referred to as "Darogah"], *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 18: 19, 1981.

<sup>266</sup> John McLane, "Revenue Farming", p. 20.

<sup>267</sup> For instance, the collections of revenue in Bengal increased from £1.3 million in 1765-66 to £2.0 million in 1768-69. See Binay Bhusan Chaudhuri, "Agricultural growth in Bengal and Bihar, 1770-1860" in *Bengal Past and Present*, 95:1, 1976, p. 292.

other, the traditional role of the Zamindar as the lord-protector of his subjects against acts of crime started manifesting the first outlines of a crack that was to increasingly widen in the coming years. Moreover, the rapid resumption of their rent-free service lands owing to the excessive revenue demands and the paltry salaries drastically transformed the rural police from being a land-supported force into impoverished salaried officials. It is in this transformation, as Chatterji argues in his study of the role of the *daroga* in early colonial Bengal, that the roots of the emergence of a peculiar group of police-thieves in early colonial rural Bengal can be discerned.<sup>268</sup>

McLane's classic study of the origin and nature of crime in post-Permanent Settlement rural Bengal, has squarely established the unprecedented rise in banditry in rural Bengal at the turn of the century as a direct consequence of the Cornwallis administrative reforms of the early 1790s.<sup>269</sup> He argues that the transfer of police powers from the Zamindar to the Company effected by the police reform of 1793 not only ripped apart whatever was left of the traditional ideal of rural social order that thrived on a healthy reciprocity between the Zamindar and his subjects, but was also instrumental in creating a group of social bandits out of the village watchmen or *choukidars*. The hierarchy of law and order in rural Bengal imposed by the Cornwallis reform was as follows: at the top of the pyramid was the English District Magistrate who appointed and commanded a *daroga* (local head of police) who in turn, aided by his establishment comprising of four *jomadars* (head constables) and a few *borkondazes* (armed policemen), all paid by the Government, commanded the *choukidars* of the newly created *thana* or police jurisdiction of twenty mile squares. It was in this last rung of the chain of power and authority that the rupture in the traditional symbiotic relationship between the Zamindar and the *choukidar* was best articulated. 'For', McLane argues,

village watchmen were usually appointed by the Zamindars, not by *darogas*, and most were paid with *chakeran* (revenue-free service lands) that were controlled in practice by local landholders. The *choukidars* continued to serve the landholders as rent collectors, coolies, messengers and agricultural laborers. ... The traditional village watchmen came under two kinds of pressure beginning in the 1790s. First, the Company declared that the amount of service land kept off the revenue rolls was in excess of the need, and it therefore resumed some revenue-free lands and dismissed from the police the men who had held them. The second form of pressure

<sup>268</sup> Chatterji, "Darogah", p.24

<sup>269</sup> John R. McLane, "Bengali Bandits, Police and Landlords after the Permanent Settlement" [hereafter referred to as "Bengali Bandits"] in Anand A. Yang ed., *Crime and Criminality in British India*, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1985, pp. 26-47.



came from landholders who illegally ejected village watchmen from their revenue-free lands in order to increase their rent rolls. This process continued well into the nineteenth century. The combination of government resumptions and landholder usurpations of service lands was believed to have generated large numbers of recruits for bandit gangs.<sup>270</sup>

Thus pushed to the margins of subsistence, the *choukidars*, now subject to two masters, became infamous for their wilful failure in both carrying out their protective roles as the village watchmen during the occurrence of gang-robberies and informing their newly appointed superior, the *daroga*, about the same. McLane further adds that the *choukidars* were not merely the passive witnesses of the plundering raids of the dacoits, but in fact were in most cases one of the dacoits themselves or the *sordars* (gang-leaders) of the dacoit-groups: 'Many dacoits were village watchmen who had been, or still were, employed to coerce their fellow villagers at the request of the landholders and their *amla* (agents).'<sup>271</sup> McLane's analysis is borne out by various Government reports on the increasingly prominent role played by the *choukidars* in crimes, ranging from petty thefts to full-fledged dacoity in the households of the poor ryots, in the decades following Cornwallis' police reform. These reports are relevant to my argument inasmuch as they were reports on the very same districts that the various Baul sects hailed from. For instance, in the descriptive list of convicted dacoits in Nadia in 1808 compiled by Secretary G. Dowsdell in his *Report on the General State of the Police of Bengal*, 22 September 1809, out of the 33 convicted dacoits of three different gangs, 7 were *choukidars*, out of which 3 were *sordars* or gang-leaders.<sup>272</sup> Furthermore, the statement of prisoners in the Burdwan district jail showed a number of as many as 95 village watchmen as heading the list of suspected offenders in the jail.<sup>273</sup>

Coming back to the afore-mentioned songs of Lalou and Fikirchand, an interpretation of the metaphorical house and its watchman at the level of religious symbolism would read the ephemerality and the material richness of the house as a symbol of the real lived body with all its transience as a physical creation subject to the whims of its Maker, and the spiritual richness residing within it. Furthermore, the figure of the watchman or *dorowan* guarding the riches of the house comes to cumulatively signify the six *ripus* or

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-9.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>272</sup> Appendix 12 to *The Fifth Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company* [hereafter referred to as the *Fifth Report*], 1812.

<sup>273</sup> *Statement of Prisoners under Requisition of Security in Burdwan*, no. 49 of 24 November 1820, Judicial Proceedings, Criminal, vol. 420.

'enemies' of the spiritual health of the body, i.e., sexual desire, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity and envy, located within the house/body. Only a proper knowledge of these would facilitate control over them and thus enable one to unlock and access, as it were, the ultimate spiritual wealth located within the body, i.e., the path to attaining *mokkho* or spiritual salvation.

However, when viewed in the light of the historical analysis of the peculiar nature of banditry in the early days of colonial rule in rural Bengal, these songs come to acquire a new social dimension. The image of the metaphorical house with its key in other hands, then, comes to betray the many anxieties and concerns of the poor ryots surrounding their very survival in a post-Permanent Settlement agrarian context fraught with multiple levels of fiscal exploitation and oppression. The key to their survival was, as discussed in Chapter II, very literally in other hands, namely, in the exploitative hands of the Zamindars, Jotedars, Deputy Collectors, Tax officers, Head-Clerks of the Law Courts, etc. It is in the peculiar deployment of the figure of the *dorowan* in the second stanza of Lalon's song and the last line of Fikirchand's song that, we contend, a window to yet another level of exploitation can be discerned. While the deployment of the figure of the *dorowan* in Fikirchand's song suggests a rather direct participation of the watchman in the theft of the metaphorical house, the accent in Lalon's deployment of the same lies in the peculiar suggestion of the householder's need to appease the watchman to gain access to his own house: '*raji hole dorowani/ dwar chhariye deben tini/ tare ba koi chini shuni/ berai kupothe.*'<sup>274</sup> This inversion in the normative expectation of the traditional role of the village watchman as the protector of rural households against acts of crime had become, as discussed above, an accepted social reality in early-colonial rural Bengal. As McLane points out, the extreme forms of violence and cruelty that frequently accompanied the increasing gang-robberies following the 1793 reforms, were 'often so overwhelming that, no doubt, it was intended to intimidate villagers into non-resistance, to prove to future targets the futility of fighting, and to suggest what might befall anyone who should be foolish enough to give evidence to police.'<sup>275</sup> He particularly mentions the cruel fate meted out to a paik who had once reported an instance of dacoity: 'the dacoits set fire to the house of a paik ... killed two of his relatives, and left the head of one of the relatives hanging from a

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<sup>274</sup> See above, p. 123.

<sup>275</sup> McLane, "Bengali Bandits", p. 30.

tree.<sup>276</sup> While a livid fear of the dacoits' vengeance prompted the village watchmen into silence, and even complicity with the former, '[n]ot infrequently, a known dacoit was selected as village watchman because of his neighbours' fear and desire to appease him and because of their hope that his presence would protect them from attack.'<sup>277</sup> Read in this light then, Lalou's deployment of the image of the *dorowan* as one on whose appeasement the householder's access and enjoyment of his household rests, comes to betray an anxiety that was largely shared by the rural poor in late-eighteenth—early-nineteenth century colonial Bengal.

### Section I.3:

#### ***Rokkhoki Bhokkhok: Complicity of Zamindars in Crimes in rural Bengal:***

*Deho-ottalika oti monorom  
Tahate boshoti kore ektukhani dom.  
Shotorko thakio tumi khub hmushiyar  
Rokkhoki bhokkhok kintu khobordar khobordar:  
Pahara dio tomar oi nobo-dwar  
chordoshyu sholojona ghure hordom.*<sup>278</sup>

[Lovely is the bodily-palace; in it resides a whiff of breath. Beware, beware, be on your guard always, since the keeper is the plunderer. Always be vigilant on your nine doors, for the thieves and dacoits are always lurking about.]

One of the premises of the shift in the police powers from the Zamindars to the Magistrates effected <sup>by the</sup> 1793 regulations was borne out by the various official reports confirming the increasing Governmental suspicion of the complicity of the Zamindars and *thanadars* in the accelerating instances of theft and dacoity in rural Bengal of the time. 'The Magistrates of eastern Bengal, especially of Dacca and Sylhet,' Chatterji points out, 'confirmed that no dacoits made their depredations without knowledge and support of Zamindars and their men.'<sup>279</sup> What the Cornwallis police reforms did was to further widen the existing rift between the Zamindar and his subjects and thereby create a singular socio-economic-political crisis-situation that brought the landholders and revenue farmers even closer to the dacoit groups—an alliance that was primarily motivated by the Zamindar's desperate pursuit of profit and local power, both of which

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>278</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, Bhoba Pagla's song, p. 193.

<sup>279</sup> Chatterji, "Darogah", p. 25

were now summarily denied to him under the newly-imposed agrarian and police reforms of 1793. The crucial role played by the new Cornwallis system in the rapid increase in banditry in the last decade of the eighteenth century in rural Bengal was acknowledged even by the Government officials. Writing on 15 December 1799, J. Brooke, in his report of Zillah Hooghly, stated thus:

the appointment and removal of these pykes [village militiaman or footman] is continued to the landholders; they are looked up by the pykes as their immediate principals; and they are liable to be removed by them at pleasure; ... Hence the landholders with their agents, whether farmers, undertenants, gomastahs, or Sezawuls preserve entire all their influence, and have the same power of multiplying robberies by collusion of the pykes and of screening every description of offenders as formerly.<sup>280</sup>

The reasons leading to this notorious liaison were quite a few. As McLane has shown, the landholder's participation in acts of theft and dacoity in rural Bengal could be broadly classified into four different ways:

First, a landholder might sponsor a bandit gang on either an occasional or continuing basis. Second, he might harbor dacoits in his villages or *kachahris*. Third, he might simply refuse to report a dacoity when it occurred on his land or to inform the police when he suspected his dependants were members of a gang. Finally, he might act as a fence for stolen goods.<sup>281</sup>

Central to most instances of dacoity, masterminded or aided by the Zamindar, was the Zamindar's overwhelming feelings of discontent and opposition and a corresponding desire to assume the lost socio-political control—a loss, that we recall, resulted from both the rampant dispossession and subsequent auctioning of their lands under the Sunset laws of 1793 for non-payment of revenue, and the transfer of their police powers to an English Magistrate. Be it the plundering raids on their former estates of Midnapur and Raipur incited by Rani Shiromoni and Durjan Singh, or the large-scale despoiling of the villages of the Bishnupur estate instigated by the dispossessed rajas of Pachet, Bishnupur and Birbhum against the auction-purchaser of these villages, the raja of Burdwan, the aim of these raids was, as McLane succinctly puts it, 'to prevent auction purchasers from taking possession and also perhaps to call government attention to their plight and to demonstrate their dependants' support for their return to the forfeited lands.'<sup>282</sup>

<sup>280</sup> Quoted in McLane, "Bengali Bandits", p. 34, Judicial Proceedings, Criminal, 19 June 1807.

<sup>281</sup> McLane, "Bengali Bandits", p. 35.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-6.

At the other end of the spectrum, the reasons leading to the participation of the ryots in much of these Zamindar-sponsored acts of dacoity and plunder have been summed up by W. Paton, Judge and Magistrate of Nadia, in his report on the plight of the ryots following the auction-sale of almost the whole of Nadia by 1817: 'The Estates have consequently been farmed, under-farmed, and rack-rented. The oppression and extortion of these new purchasers is gradually producing a Counterbalancing spirit of opposition and firmness on the part of the Ryots.'<sup>283</sup> It is no surprise then that this increasing feeling of discontent and opposition amongst the ryots against the coercive measures of the alien group of merchant auction-purchasers would join hands with the dispossessed Zamindars and hence effectively give rise to the formation of the landholder-bandit axis.

As both McLane and Chatterji have shown, alongside this desire of assuming and/or displaying control over their dispossessed lands, the Zamindars and taluqdars were also motivated in the organising and sponsoring of gang-robberies by the prospect of procuring a substantial share in the stolen goods. Writing a detailed account of gang robbery on the borders of Birbhum, Murshidabad and Burdwan districts—districts populated by numerous Bauls, Charles Richard Blunt, magistrate of Birbhum, stated in 1810 that in these districts there could be discerned 'a general custom ... among the Landed Proprietors, of trafficking in stolen property' and that acquisition of the stolen property, which changed hands from the dacoits to the receiver (often the village watchman) to the landholder to a distant itinerant merchant, often led to an unprecedented mobilisation in the socio-economic hierarchy of the village:

Many wealthy Proprietors of Estates, now occupy large Pucka [built of brick] Houses, who for a few years back, were employed as Pykars, and Gomasthas, on a salary of five and six Rupees per month. The sole property of others, consisted in a small retail shop in some of the Principal Towns, in this, or the neighbouring Districts, and in one instance, a family has lately purchased an Estate, for which they have paid 10,000 Rupees and Estimate their property at a Lac, who a few years since were no better than Thannadars (Village watchmen).<sup>284</sup>

The returns of the dacoity facilitated the rise of the paiks and gomosthas and village headmen as rent farmers and subsequently as Zamindars—a mobilisation that would

<sup>283</sup> Quoted in McLane, "Bengali Bandits", p. 35, W. Paton, Judge and Mgte., Nadia, to Governor General in Council, 1 June 1817, no. 20 of 12 Aug. 1817, Judicial Proceedings, Civil, vol. 261.

<sup>284</sup> C.R.Blunt, Mgte, Birbhum, to Judicial Department, 15 Aug 1810, no.7 of 9 Oct. 1810, Judicial Proceedings, Criminal, vol. 244.

eventually secure them from further detection and prosecution in instances of future gang robberies. It is this socio-economic mobilisation that gave rise to the notorious group-category of the dacoit-Zamindar. And the worst casualty in all these remained the poor peasant. Writing in 1802, the Magistrates of the Twenty-Four Parganas reported that acts of dacoity were focussed on the 'houses of the lower classes of natives from whence they could expect little or no opposition.'<sup>285</sup>

Hence when Lalon sings,

*Rajyeshwor raja jini  
Chorero she shiromoni,  
Nalish korbo ami  
Konkhane kar nikote.*<sup>286</sup>

[The King, the Lord of the country, he himself is the Prince of the Thieves; I wish to lodge a complaint, but alas! to whom and where shall I do it?]

an alternate reading of the thrust of the grievance against the Zamindar can be discerned. While the epithet 'King of the country' can be read as referring to the exploitative workings of the Company as the 'Prince of Thieves', as is shown in Chapter II,<sup>287</sup> it can also be read as referring to the figure of the dacoit-Zamindar whose active role in either financing or masterminding the plundering raids into the poor peasant household was by and large recognised in Lalon's time. However, any ambivalence that may be discerned in this figuration is cleared away in the following song by Fokir Panju Shah:

*Ghorer modhye maler kuthi  
Bar kore indure kati  
Dushteri karbar  
Kam-debota chor chalcacche khirki dware baram tar.*

*Monraye chorer raja  
Dushto joto tari proja  
Bhanglo sadher ghor.*<sup>288</sup>

[The room of the goods is within this house; the rats gnaw at these goods; all of this are the workings of the vicious people. The God of Lust, residing at the back-door, is guiding the thieves. The Mind is the prince of thieves; all the vile people are his subjects; they destroy my lovely house.]

<sup>285</sup> Magistrates, Twenty-Four Parganas to Judicial Department, 1 July 1802, Appendix 10 to *Fifth Report*.

<sup>286</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 583, no. 61.

<sup>287</sup> See Chapter II, pp. 103-5.

<sup>288</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 176-7.

While the location of the figure of the '*kam-debota*' or the 'God of Lust' at the back-door of the household at once equates him with the figure of the nefarious village watchman providing the thieves access to the household, the following lines squarely identify the raja/Zamindar as the dacoit-Zamindar, the kingpin of the thefts in the household: the Raja is the Prince of Thieves and it is his vicious and wicked subjects that are instrumental in the ruination of the household. The deployment of the metaphors of '*kam-debota*' or the 'God of Lust' as the watchman and '*mon*' or mind as the 'Prince of Thieves' who rules not only Lust, but all the other *ripus* or the basic instinctual drives conceived to be detrimental to the health of the metaphorical house/body is, as we have shown in the previous section, symptomatic of a number of songs that make use of the metaphor of the plundered/broken house. The utter helplessness of the poor peasants in the face of the nefarious practices of the dacoit-zamindar is at once made manifest in the following singularly evocative portrait of the bleak realities of everyday peasant life:

*Emon rajye kemon kore bash kori;  
 Je tar jaye kore jucchuri.  
 Rajar emni obichar,  
 Projar pran bnacha bhar,  
 Shorboshwodhon kore horon puriye mare ghor—  
 Rakhe pore karagaye [sic] hate paye dei beri.  
 Emni shokol ghore hoye,  
 Kareo kore nako bhoy,  
 Lutepute loye jaye, shob hoygo porajoy,—  
 Diba rati hoye dakati rakho tumi shrihori.  
 Emon durbritto raja, shoda shonkito proja,  
 Pitar shommukhe putre ditechhe shaja—  
 Projar koshto koro noshto rajye thaka  
 Jhokomari.<sup>289</sup>*

[How can I live in such a kingdom; whoever travels there commits fraud. The King is so unjust that the subjects' lives are in jeopardy. [He] usurps all the wealth and kills [us] by setting fire to [our] homes—throws [us] in jail and puts us in chains. This happens in every home, [he] does not fear anybody, [he] plunders and loots everything and all are defeated. Day and night are [we] robbed, protect us, O Lord Hori. Such a criminal is the King and so ever-fearful his subjects that [he can] punish the sons in the presence of their fathers. Destroy the sorrows of the subjects (or else) it is difficult to stay in this kingdom.]

#### Section 1.4:

#### *Chintamoni Darogababu Amaye Korle Jwalaton: The Role of the Daroga in Rural Bengal*

<sup>289</sup> Hriday Lal Dutta, *Nuton Shokher Baul Shongit O Dehotottwo*, Calcutta, p. 35.

*At bag, baro thana,  
Maiyar chouldo jelkhana,  
Chor aile korbe greptari,  
O mon bepari.*<sup>290</sup>

[Eight routes, twelve police stations, the mother's fourteen jailhouses;  
When the thieves come, they will arrest us, O merchant-mind.]

Between the Zamindars and the English Magistrates was the *daroga* or the local head of police, officially appointed by the Magistrate to manage the police in the *thanas* or police circles. The role of the *darogas* in law enforcement in general, and keeping in check the notorious Zamindar-choukidar axis in acts of crime in particular, had been, as Chatterji has demonstrated, a ground of much contestation and controversy. The *darogas* in early colonial rural Bengal came to occupy a curiously odd position in the newly imposed hierarchy of police powers, a limbo position that served to alienate them from both ends of the hierarchic chain. At the *daroga*-Magistrate end of the chain, the dependence of the inexperienced Magistrates on the advice of their *amlas* or the chief Indian employees at the Magistrate's court for the selection of the *daroga*, led to the emergence of a highly influential and corrupt *daroga-sadar amla* axis. As Chatterji's case study of the confessional testimony of one Miajahn, the *daroga* of Tezapore thana, has demonstrated, various levels of bribery of the *amlas* by the *darogas* were involved in the process of appointing the *daroga*. Not only did the *daroga* have to bribe the Magistrate's *amlalserishtadar* for recommending him for the post to the Magistrate, his enjoyment of his position too depended on a monthly payment to the *amla* lest the latter suggest his failings to the Magistrate. Chatterji's Miajahn, having had a first hand experience of these corrupt practices of the *amla* in his appointment as a *daroga*, confessed thus:

I then knew for the first time that this was the almost universal practice in all thanas, that the whole monthly pay of the thanah *daroga* was made over to the favourite *amla* of the Magistrate's Court for the time, whoever he might be. The conditions of the bribe were that the head *amla* undertook to protect the *daroga* through thick and thin against laches [sic] of duty, brought to the notice of the court against the *daroga*, and to protect him in particular against any charge of bribery brought before the Magistrate.<sup>291</sup>

The *daroga-amla* axis, however, did not always succeed, and the deployment of

<sup>290</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, Fokir Kala Sha's song, p. 876 of pp. 875-7, no. 468.

<sup>291</sup> Quoted in Chatterji, "Darogah", p. 27. *The Confessions of Miajahn, daroga of Police*, Dictated by him, Translated by a Mofussilite, Calcutta, 1969, p. 10.



*goindas* or spies by the Magistrates to keep a tab on the *daroga*'s corrupt practices of bribery, protection of the dacoits, intimidation, extortion and unjust confinement of innocent villagers, etc., made the matter even worse.<sup>292</sup> For instance, Chatterji's compilation of the figures for the dismissals of the darogas from the Judicial (Criminal) Proceedings of the period between 7 June 1793 and September 1794 tells us that:

... no less than forty seven cases of dismissal were confirmed by the Governor General in Council: twelve from Rajshahee district; six from Dinagepore; five from Nadia; four from Midnapore; four from Jessore; three from Chittagong; three from Murshidabad; two from Burdwan; two from 24-Parganas; two from Dacca-Jelalpoore; and one each from the districts of Beerbhoom, Tippera, Sylhet and Mymensing.<sup>293</sup>

Hence, while at the Magistrate's end of the hierarchy of police power, the *daroga* inhabited a precarious position as both the exploiter and the exploited, at the Zamindar's end of the chain, he, at least in the initial years following the reform (of 1793), came to be increasingly viewed as an alienated figure. Often a Muslim serving in predominantly Hindu districts that were not their native places, earning a meagre monthly salary of Rs 25 and frequently pauperised by the *amlas*' exploitative practices, the *daroga* also found himself loathed by the Zamindars who resented him for enjoying the police powers that they previously shared, and feared by the villagers who grudged his oppressive interference into their ways of life and continued to give greater obeisance to the Zamindar than to him. In his role as a check on the corrupt practices of the Zamindar-*choukidar* axis, the *daroga* found himself facing a hopeless enterprise. Because the Zamindar continued to appoint and share the costs of maintaining the *choukidar* who hence paid his allegiance to the Zamindar, the *darogas* had little or no control over either the cooperation or the intelligence provided by the *choukidars* in instances of crime. The *Fifth Report* summed up the *daroga*'s figure 'as insulated individuals ... viewed with fear by some, with jealousy by other, and neglected by most of the inhabitants ... [lacking] that personal consideration in the public mind, so necessary to aid them.'<sup>294</sup> To redress this lack of control, the *daroga* turned to an arrangement with local dacoit-leaders premised on the understanding that the latter

<sup>292</sup> The official decision to employ spies to counter the inefficiency of the *darogas* in suppressing gang robberies in Bengal was made in 1808. Although the spies proved to be highly effective in combating dacoity, many believed that they had in fact soon become yet another extension of the notorious Zamindar-choukidar-daroga-amla axis. For a brief look at the many debates amongst judicial officials on the role of spies and informers in the official campaign against dacoity, see McLane, "Bengali Bandits", pp. 42-3.

<sup>293</sup> Chatterji, "Darogah", p. 28.

<sup>294</sup> *Fifth Report*, p. 71.

would be spared from arrests only if they refrained from robbing the local people and share the proceeds of their distant raids with the *daroga*. This arrangement not only proved effective to a certain extent, but also highly lucrative to the *darogas*. However, this early confrontational nature of the Zamindar-*daroga* encounter in cases of local dacoity was soon to be replaced by a more mutually convenient liaison between the two: to the Zamindar, an alliance with the *daroga* offered a means of legitimising his own dubious alliance with the dacoits as also his other coercive acts, and to the *daroga*, proximity with the Zamindar meant ready access to local information and a sound financial proposition.

It will perhaps not be hazardous to trace the appalling gaps in official reportages of crime in rural Bengal during this time<sup>295</sup> to this curious twin role of the *daroga*: as a figure initially cut off from information on and access to potential witnesses of acts of crime by the impenetrable Zamindar-*choukidar* axis and subsequently an integral part of the very same notorious axis on the one hand, and, on the other, as a figure actively suppressing reportages of crime to save the culprits from being arrested as per the understanding of his highly profitable liaison with the dacoit-leaders. At another level, the increasing hiatus between the 'reported offences' and 'actual offences' could also be attributed to an overwhelming feeling of dread that the villagers came to associate with the *daroga's* investigation of a local robbery. As both McLane and Chatterji have shown, an investigation into a case of local banditry not only saw the *daroga* demanding expensive refreshments and meals from the poor villagers, but also falsely incriminating innocent villagers and consequently extracting substantial bribes from them to spare themselves, as it were, from being arrested.<sup>296</sup> Moreover, potential witnesses to acts of robbery were often forced into silence by the dreadful prospect of paying hefty bribes to the *daroga* to avoid being summoned to the thana to testify against the culprits—a process both physically and financially exacting. McLane explained it thus:

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<sup>295</sup> For instance, an investigation carried out by the Superintendent of Police into the dacoity committed in the Benupur thana of the Hughli district in 1808-09 led him to believe that 104 houses, instead of the 33 dacoities reported by the *darogas*, were in fact robbed and plundered. See Secretary G. Dowesdell's Report on the General State of the Police of Bengal, 22 Sept. 1809, Appendix 12 to *The Fifth Report*. Another investigation carried out by the Magistrate of Nadia in discussion with the Zamindari amla revealed the gross under-reporting of the dacoity in 1808 wherein out of a minimum of 300 to 400 dacoit murders and an almost daily occurrence of highway robberies in 1808, only 30 dacoit murders and 4 highway robberies were reported. See John Eliot, Magistrate of Nudia to Judicial Department, 9 Feb. 1809, no. 16 of 11 Feb. 1809, *Judicial Proceedings, Criminal*, vol. 56.

<sup>296</sup> McLane, "Bengali Bandits", pp. 40-1 and Chatterji, "Darogah", pp. 34-5.

...an investigation often was a species of robbery. If a villager failed to bribe his way out of being summoned to the thana to give evidence, he faced a burdensome and expensive process. He might be forced to pay a security deposit to guarantee his appearance at the trial at the Court of Sessions. He would be required to give his evidence first to the investigating *darogah*, then to the magistrate and then to the Circuit judge. In the process he risked being caught in humiliating inconsistencies. If the case came to trial, he was required to swear on Ganges water and this was abhorred almost universally as a dishonorable act. Appearance at the biannual Court of Sessions might necessitate a walk of twenty-five or fifty miles, and days or even weeks away from village and fields. And the giving of evidence against dacoits involved the risk of arson or murder by their accomplices.

It was therefore understandable that villagers were willing to pay to escape being called to court. ... Sometimes all the inhabitants of villages would flee on the approach of a darogha and his men. At other times, villagers conspired to conceal gang robberies, believing that the robbery was only the beginning of their losses.<sup>297</sup>

In cases where the *daroga* could not identify the culprits, instances of fining, imprisoning and even torturing innocent villagers for either failing to report a robbery or refusing to comply with the *daroga's* intention of falsely implicating a fellow villager as the culprit, approached something close to a general practice.<sup>298</sup> Writing in 1836, H.M. Pigou, Commissioner of Circuit, 18<sup>th</sup> Division, lamented thus: 'neither the attention of the *darogah* nor of his subordinates nor of village chowkedars is directed to seek out and apprehend the actual Dacoit, but to the fabrication of proof upon poor unfortunates whom it may be determined to sacrifice the scapegoats on the occasion.'<sup>299</sup> For instance, in the collection of petitions made by the peasants of mid-nineteenth century Bengal to their respective District Magistrates, we hear the lamentable case of one Madhob Karikor, age 30, a weaver in the village of Tehotto, who was thus tortured by the daroga and his aides:

Q: What is your complaint?

A: I cannot recall the date, almost one month has passed. In the dacoity case, Ishwor Roy Inspector had arrested and assaulted me and after two days saying "catch me the dacoit else confess", he beat and slapped and

<sup>297</sup> McLane, "Bengali Bandits", p. 41.

<sup>298</sup> Chatterji cites the unfortunate plight of one Kartick Mandal mentioned in Miajahn's testimony: 'Miajahn, in his confessions, narrates the pathetic incident of Kartick Mandal who, after having been robbed was subjected to the second inconvenience of a visit from the darogah with the nuzzur attending thereto. He was then pressurised to name as culprit the person whom the darogah wanted to implicate. When out of sheer apprehension he refused to comply, he was taken to the thana and was tortured by various ingenious methods. Kartick lost his life, but even this death by torture was legalised by obtaining a false certificate from a local doctor. The darogha's promotor at the sudder helped him to despatch the skeleton to the cupboard.' Chatterji, "Darogah", p. 35.

<sup>299</sup> Judicial Proceedings, Criminal, 30 August 1836.

struck me on my head . Later he left me at the mercy of the ministers and head clerks [*ujir mir*]. The minister then told me that I had to give them the whereabouts of the stolen goods. Having stayed there for four days, after Gopal *borkondaj* took me to Ishworbabu's place at Korimpur, there the Inspector and Sub-Inspector Kalikanondo Mukhopadhyay took me to the Shoukmari village where after having searched my house, they took out 1 gunny bag and 1 bowl which, for the fear of further assault, I had claimed as the loot of the dacoity. ... After having searched my house, Ishwor Roy took me with him to the village of Shondhyapur where in a cowshed he tied my hands and dropped mustard oil into my eyes. He kept twisting my hands at the back by a stick. My hinges of the wrists of my two hands have given way.<sup>300</sup>

Moreover, even appeals for investigations into the corrupt practices of the daroga were often made in vain. The pervasiveness of the nefarious practices of the darogas in the whole matrix of the police hierarchy and the utter helplessness of the peasant-victim in its face is made manifest in yet another petition made by one Modhu Pesakor of the village of Kaligonj against the *naib* daroga, one Rukminikanto Roy, to the Joint Magistrate of the district of Jessore. We learn in Modhu's petition that his pleas to the *naib* daroga to investigate into the wrongful plunder of his house, his subsequent unfounded arrest for theft as also the hefty penalty charged by the police and *amlas* of his village was met with Rukminikanto's issuing a *porwana* (letter patent)—without Modhu's knowledge—to his superior *saheb* daroga for the enquiry. Moreover, because Rukminikanto was the protege of the *saheb* daroga, the latter had already forewarned Rukminikanto of Modhu's complaint. Having thus been forewarned, Rukminikanto had ever since inflicted endless tortures on Modhu and made his life in the village unbearable.<sup>301</sup> Read in terms of this social reality of early colonial rural Bengal, the image of the odd figure of the thieving householder-turned-culprit in the following song comes to acquire a new meaning. Lalon sings:

*Apne chora apon bari,*  
*Apne she loye apon beri,*  
*Lalon bole e lachari*  
*Koi na, thaki chupe chape.*<sup>302</sup>

[He is the thief in his own house; he takes on his own fetters; Lalon says, I stay quiet and do not speak of such helplessness.]

The metaphor of the thief-in-the-house suggests not only the existence of the nefarious

<sup>300</sup> *Collections of Bengali Petitions, &c., made under the orders of the Government of India, for His Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1869, petition no. 32, dated 3 March, 1864, pp. 129-135.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, petition no. 36, dated 8 Choitro, 1272 BS [1865], pp. 149-52.

<sup>302</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, pp. 564-5, no.30.

network of the thieving *Zamindars* and *choukidars*, as has been shown in sub-sections 1 and 2, but also their more direct experience of the coercion of the *darogas*: the injustice causing the ‘*lachari*’ or helplessness that Lalon is a mute witness to is the *daroga*’s actual practice of falsely incriminating the very householder who has been robbed. This threat, that in its perverse inversion of justice turns the robbed householder into the culprit and in turn into the fugitive, is located at the very heart of the house, the ‘*ontohpuri*’, and its omnipotence and pervasiveness are felt in the helpless realisation of the fugitive of being so trapped wherever he flees to:

*Chorer daye deshantori,  
She chor je dekhi shongodhari,  
Modon rajar danda bhari,  
Kamjwala dei ontohpuri,  
Ki korbe gunarijona.*<sup>303</sup>

[A migrant on charges of robbery, the thief still accompanies me. The staff is the God of Lust is heavy; there’re lust-vexations in the inner chamber, what ever will the virtuous do?]

But the authority, terror and the might of the new regime that the presence of the *daroga* came to be associated with in the imagination of the villagers of late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, are perhaps nowhere as poignantly articulated as in the following self-explanatory figuration of the *daroga* in Khyapa’s song:

*Chintaram darogababu amaye korle jwalaton;  
Upaye ki kori ekhon.*

*Babu chintaram eshe amar mostoke boshe,  
She shomoye shadhyo kar je nikote ashe.  
Darogababur mejaj bhari, amaye bodh kori,  
Chalan dei jomer bari,  
Na jani bichare ki hoye ekhon.*

*Chintaram nam jar, amaye korle girektar [sic],  
Hath diye bnedhe fele rakhle hajoter majhar.  
Amar dhore chul chor chapor ghushi kile  
Tousile babar nam bhulaye dile.  
Na jani bichare ki hoye ekhon.*

*Dagi ashami ami, chinlam na jogotswami,  
Ei jogote chhute gechhe bodmashi.  
Khyapa bole, pelam na shushitol ranga choron.*<sup>304</sup>

[Mr Anxiety, the darogababu is harassing me, what do I do?  
When Mr Anxiety comes and presides upon my head, does anyone dare

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 657, no. 184.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., pp. 1023-4, no. 637.

come near him? Darogababu's haughty temper slays and bundles me off to the house of death; who knows what will come out of the trial?

The one called Mr Anxiety arrested me and flung me in the dungeons with my hands tied. At the headquarters, he beats me black and blue till I am at pains to remember myself. Who knows what will come out of the trial?

A branded criminal, I have failed to recognise the Lord of the Worlds; I have exhausted all my truanancies in this world. Khyapa says, I have not been graced with the comfort of the Blessed Red Feet.]

What is striking about this song is the specific framing of the notions of crime and punishment in its penultimate couplet. While at an obvious level of interpretation, these may be read as an articulation of a tortured psyche that, under the duress of the *daroga's* bludgeoning attribution of guilt unto him, comes to believe in his own culpability, at another deeper level it may be read as betraying an ambivalent perception of criminality and justice that is symptomatic of the subaltern consciousness. That the 'prose of counter-insurgency' which the resisting subaltern consciousness deploys is, even in the very moment of its resistance, couched in terms of the very structures of domination it questions, has been brilliantly demonstrated by Gautam Bhadra in his study of the peasant rebellions of late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. Bhadra argues that the sense of misgiving and grievance that spurs the subaltern consciousness into an act of revolt is imbricated in a specific perception of ethics and religiosity that never questions the validity or justness of the hierarchic structures of their domination—a perception that was structured by and a part of what James Scott has called the 'moral economy' of the rural society.<sup>305</sup> For instance, when the subject is aroused into rebelling against the oppressive Zamindar, his cry for *insaf* (justice) is directed towards an unlawful transgression of the limits of *pap-punyo* (vice-virtue) by the specific Zamindar, and his consequent attempt to restore the world order premised on a healthy reciprocity of the notions of *rajdhormo* (duties of a king) and *projadhormo* (duties of the subject)—the very justification of the rule of the Zamindar over him. It is the Zamindar's *dhormo* to protect his subjects, just as it is the subject's *dhormo* to be loyal and duty-bound to him. Any overstepping of this symbiotic relationship led to a crisis-situation seeking a restoration of this shared sense of ethics. In fact, the principles of the multiple structures of domination are so fundamentally internalised by the

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<sup>305</sup> Scott views the pattern of interactions between the labourer, the peasant-proprietor, and the landlord, or that between the debtor and the creditor as part of a certain 'moral economy' in the rural society which was structured on a principle of reciprocity that emphasised the patron's moral obligation to protect the client in return for his services, acknowledging in the process his 'right to subsist'. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

subaltern consciousness that there can always be discerned in their rebelling imagination a conviction in the justness of some higher authority that would alleviate their sufferings and restore the lost world of mutual responsibility of the *raja* and the *proja*:

If one authority does something wrong, there always remains an opportunity to appeal to a higher authority. Hence, the Zamindar can be appealed to against the *ijaradars* (revenue farmers), the Company against the Zamindars, or in specific circumstances the Dhormoraj [village God] or Nironjon [Allah] against the Company, King or the Queen.<sup>306</sup>

Following Bhadra, it may be said that in so constructing the menacing composite image of the thief in the figures of the *choukidar*, Zamindar and *daroga* in the songs, and unequivocally equating these representatives of the *rokkhok* (keeper) with the *bhokkhok* (plunderer), the Baul imagination betrays a deep-seated internalisation of the structures of domination wherein the social functions of the keepers in safeguarding the health of the rural society is never called into question. What Lalou objects to in the aforementioned songs is the Zamindar-*choukidar-daroga*'s specific transgression of the ethical definitional limits of their role in rural society, i.e., their metamorphosis from being the just protector of rural life into its unlawful plunderer, and not the basis of those definitional limits that construct the multiple layers of the dominant. Consider the figuration of the Guru in the following song:

O Guru! I forbid thee.  
Tie not an iron chain with my golden feet;  
I live amidst the market of this world.  
Ah me! the six thieves will steal, but I shall be caught in their stead  
Ah me! the six thieves will be released (in the long run),  
but I shall rot in jail forever.<sup>307</sup>

In this song, it is the image of the Guru that is marked with the same inherent contradictions in the subaltern perception of dominant power and authority. The Guru is at once a wielder of absolute, almost tyrannical, control over the subject as well as an embodiment of the means to the subject's ultimate salvation. However, in the face of the Guru's tyranny, one typically appeals to God, the highest authority available to redress the wrongs doled out to him:

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<sup>306</sup> My translation. Gautam Bhadra, *Iman o Nishan: Unish Shotoke Banglar Krishok Choitonyer ek Odhyay [1800-1850]* [hereafter referred to as *Iman*], Calcutta: Subamarekha, 1994, p. 229.

<sup>307</sup> Translated by Hugh Urban in Hugh Urban, "The Marketplace and the Temple: Economic Metaphors and Religious Meanings in the Folk Songs of Colonial Bengal", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60:4, 2001, p. 10.

*Tomar kachhe amar hori dorkhasto.*  
*Boli shuno shomosto.*  
*Tumi Rajar Raja, amra tomari proja,*  
*Majhe hote chor betata ditechhe shaja—*  
*Amar polkko, shokol shakkho, proman korbo shomosto.*  
*Amay michhe okaron, kocche jwalaton,*  
*Bare bare marchhe prane nitechhe shobdhon,—*  
*Korle koto shotobar koto kori bordasto.*  
*Ohe, nirod boron, koro dukkheri domon,*  
*Projagoner shokol bhoy koro nibaron,—*  
*Shrichorone sthan pele ami boro hoi shustho.*<sup>308</sup>

[Please pay heed to this petition of mine which I make to you. You are the King of Kings, and we your subjects, it is the thieves in between who punish us. All evidence is in my favour and I can prove my defence. Falsely and without cause [are they] harassing me and beating me and usurping all my wealth. It has happened hundreds of times, how much longer shall I have to put up with this? Oh the Cloud-Coloured One (Shiv), redress (our) sorrows, allay all the fears of your subjects. If I get a place at your blessed feet, I will regain my health.]

In the Baul songs, this anxiety and the concomitant desire to reinstate the lost world order of a healthy reciprocity of rights and duties inherent in this collision, whether conscious or unconscious, between the hegemonic and popular subaltern notions of crime and punishment is, as I will demonstrate in the following section, most vividly played out on the site of the body's architecture, i.e., in the Bauls' metaphorical structuring of the body as the house.

## Section II:

### *Ke gorechhe emon ghor, dhonyo karikor* : Bodily Architectures

Paul Silverstein's brilliant critique of Pierre Bourdieu's classic study of the "Kabyle House, or the world reversed"<sup>309</sup> sets out to examine the representational politics of the domestic space of the *akham* or the Kabyle house against a backdrop of colonial *déracinement* and the war of national liberation in 1950s-60s Algeria.<sup>310</sup> Silverstein tells us, the *akham* in Bourdieu's sociological analysis stands as an object of what the former calls a 'structural nostalgia', as a synecdoche for a pre-colonial Kabylia with all its lost social and cultural boundedness, purity, rootedness and integrity. Such a reading of the

<sup>308</sup> Hriday Lal Dutta, *Nuton Shokher Baul Songit O Dehotottwo*, Calcutta, 1881, p. 36.

<sup>309</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, Appendix, pp. 271-283.

<sup>310</sup> Paul A. Silverstein, "Of Rooting and Uprooting: Kabyle Habitus, Domesticity and Structural Nostalgia", *Ethnography*, 5:4, 2004, pp. 553-578.



social construction of the domestic space is relevant to my study of the metaphor of the *ghor* in the Baul songs inasmuch as it serves as a theoretical framework within which to read its choice and deployment as a specific response to changing socio-economic-political relations in early colonial rural Bengal. Silverstein located nostalgia in the particular spatial structuring of the Kabyle house at a time when rampant land expropriations and rural-urban migrations resulting from a century-old French colonisation gained urgency with the specific wartime conditions of forced displacement in the war of independence in 1950s-60s Algeria. In the context of existing historiographical readings of domestic space in colonial Bengal, Partha Chatterjee has, as we have seen, sought to deploy a somewhat similar model of structural nostalgia that locates the disruptive impact of colonialism as a structuring force in the construction of the alternate, autonomous domestic space of the male *bhodrolok* world vis à vis the materialist alienating world of colonial rule of the outside. A crucial difference between the aforementioned analyses of the representational politics of the domestic space and mine would lie in the very object of the inquiry. While Bourdieu, Silverstein and Chatterjee speak of a concrete domestic space, i.e. the Kabyle house or the *bhodrolok ghor*, as being culturally and socio-symbolically charged and meaningful, the object of my study is the metaphorical domestic space. That is to say, the domestic space encountered in and through the Baul songs is not a representation of any external lived architectural space of habitation, as it were, but instead operates as a metaphor for the only tangible structure of lived experience available to them, i.e., the body.

In the previous section, I have attempted to locate the Bauls' lived-experience of the colonial threat to rural domestic space and the resulting material losses in their various deployments of the metaphor of the *ghor*. In the face of the changing socio-political-economic forces in late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century rural Bengal, the denial of a certain sense of security and autonomy traditionally associated by the rural householder with his *ghor*, together with a persistent desire to make sense of the Baul's existence in the midst of these forces, led to the internalisation of the ever-threatened domestic space into the relatively autonomous site of the body—the only available medium of comprehending lived experience. In this section, I argue that a close reading of the Bauls' specific structuring of the spatial metaphor of the *ghor* on the site of the body in

these songs would facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which they sought to negotiate with and even subvert the existing structures of power and domination.

If the deployment of the bodily metaphor of the house and the corresponding image of the thief-in-the-house, as discussed in the previous section, can be read as operating along a horizontal internal/external axis of the body, i.e., threats within or outside the house/body, this section would locate the Bauls' specific structuring of the metaphorical house on a vertical axis of the body. However, before venturing into a sociological analysis of the metaphor of the bodily house in the songs, it is necessary to visit the deeper religious symbolism of the same, inasmuch as it would provide us with the Bauls' general conception of the body's vertical alignment in their esoteric belief and practices. Consider the tiered structure of the bodily architecture in the following song:

*Ke gorechhe emon ghor, dhonyo karikor,  
Tar karikurir bolihari,  
Shei Karikorer kothaye ghor,  
Dhonyo karikor:*

*Ghorer mul tinti khnuti,  
Ki poripati,  
Dori-dora, bnadhachhnada share tin koti.  
Ghorer dorja noyekhan,  
Shokoli proman,  
Oshonkhyo janla achhe, ke kore shondhan,  
She ghorer map choudopowa,  
Chouddo bhubon tar bhitor:*

*Ghor besh antashnata, chho-tala kotha,  
Tar upore ar ek tala nam monikotha,  
Shetha dibanishi moni jwole,  
Korta achhen tar bhitor.*

*Ghorer prachir shoptopur, tar modhye ontohpur,  
Je shondhani she jete pare, onyer pokkhye onek dur,  
Shetha lagbe dhnadha, chaka chnada,  
Probesh kora koshtokor.  
(dhonyo karikor)<sup>311</sup>*

[Who has built such a house, prays be to the workman; what wondrous skills the workman has, it is by his words that the house was built, prays be to the workman.

At the foundation of the house are three beams—how well-made! 3,50,00,000 ropes wound tightly around them. The house has nine doors, all of which are immense; there are innumerable windows, who can count them? The house measures fourteen spans, within it abode fourteen worlds.

The house is prim and proper and has six rooms on six floors, on the floor

<sup>311</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, pp. 801-2, no. 369.

above is yet another room named the Jewel-room. Therein day and night shines the gem, therein resides the head of the family. The walls of the house make up seven spaces, and therein is the inner chamber; one who seeks can travel there, for others it remains far removed; there one is dazzled and one's head spins, to enter is not easy. Praise be to the workman.]

The conception of the body as a microcosm is, as Upendranath Bhattacharya has shown, one that is central not merely to Baul sexo-yogic philosophy but to all religious beliefs and practices that use yoga in any form. The body in Hindu and Buddhist Tantras, Siddhamarga and Nath-Pantha has been located at the heart of their various beliefs and rituals. It is this *bhando-bromhandobad* or the idea of the microcosm-macrocosm, crucial to Baul religious beliefs and rituals, that situates not only the world but even salvation and the divine within the body. As in Hindu tantra, the body has been imagined by the Bauls as being composed of seven *chokros* (energy circles) along its vertical axis. Inverting the dominant Hindu anatomical imagination that places superior valuation on the head and the upper body over the lower body and the feet, the Bauls' anatomical imagination concentrates the body's spiritual and psychic energies in the *Muladhar chokro* situated at the tip of the spine in the vicinity of the coccygeal plexus beneath the sacrum. It is within this *chokro* that the *kundolini shokti*, the great dormant energy of consciousness, resides, to be awakened and channelised through the three main psychic channels or *nadis*, namely *ida*, *pingola* and *sushumna* sharing their roots in this *chokro*, up to the ultimate source of spiritual energy, the *Sohosrar*, the thousand-petalled *chokro* of pure consciousness residing above the head. In this vertically structured inverted imagination of the body that valorises an upward movement (*ulto-shadhona*) of the *kundolini* in the actualisation of the union of the all pervading divine, the intermediate *chokros* pierced by the *kundolini shokti* include *Swadhisthan* (realm of unconscious emotion or desire situated in the tailbone), *Monipur* (realm of dynamism, energy and willpower, situated in the navel), *Anahoto* (realm of love and compassion, situated in the heart), *Bishuddho* (realm of discrimination and wisdom, situated in the neck) and *Ajno* (realm of mind, situated in the eyebrow).

Hence, when Ononto Gossain sings of the six-storeyed house (six *chokros*) with the bejewelled seventh storey (*sohosrar chokro*) situated at the top, held together by the three foundational wooden posts (the three primary *nadis* of *ida*, *pingola* and *sushumna*) and their three and a half crore ropes (the *nadis*), the analogy is self-revelatory. This house, Gossain adds, being the size of the human body (*chouddopowa*

denoting the rough approximation of three-and-a half-arm's measure of the human body) and containing the fourteen worlds (*chouddo bhubon*), has nine doors that stand in the esoteric anatomical imagination for the nine orifices of the body, i.e., the two eyes, two ears, two nasal apertures, mouth, anus and the genitalia. It is, however, in the inner secret chamber (*ontohpur*) of the seventh room, circumscribed by the seven walls (*shoptoprachir*) of the seven bodily elements, i.e., mucus, blood, flesh, fat, bones, marrow and sperm, that the Divine dwells, collapsing all binaries into a supramental higher consciousness of the truth that one is all and all is one:

*Ekotha mithya kobhu noye, ghorer mati kotha koye,  
Ghorer bhitor agun-jole ek mishale boye,  
Shetha sadhu-chorey, rakkhosh-norey bishamrite ekottor.  
(dhonyo karikor).<sup>312</sup>*

[Never will it be a lie that the soil of the hearth has a voice; within the house fire and water flow as one stream; therein the saint and the sinner, the beast and the man, the poison and the elixir are all but one. Praise be to the workman.]

This brief discussion of the esoteric conception of the vertical alignment of the body provides, to reiterate my point, the framework within which to study the social ramifications of the Bauls' peculiar structuring of the spatial metaphor of the *ghor*. Din Shorot sings thus:

*Baniya rongmohol ghor  
Oi ghore achhe re mon tor ghorer karigor:  
...  
Dware dware achhe prohori  
Adalot foujdari court shodor kachhari  
Prodhan kormochari gyan-choudhuri bicharer bhar tar upor.<sup>313</sup>*

[Having built a pleasure-house, therein, o heart, resides the workman who built your home. ... At every door guards stand watch—the Adalot, Faujdari, Court, Shodor and Kachhari; the principal official, Wisdom-the landlord, upon him is the responsibility to dispense justice.]

What strikes us at once about the image of the house is the choice of the *rongmohol* or the pleasure-house as a metaphor of the body. While the general associations of splendour, awe and fascination of the kaleidoscopic image of power and sensual gratification evoked by the Zamindari pleasure-houses in the minds of the rural poor may be discerned in the Bauls' deployment of the *rongmohol* as a bodily metaphor, it might have had a more specific socio-cultural connection with the actual existence of

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p.130.

the *Rang Mahal* (later known as the Ahsan Manzil) of Sheikh Enayetullah Khan in Dhaka since the days of the Mughal rule.<sup>314</sup> However, it is with the latter lines that the deployment of the metaphor acquires a socio-symbolic dimension. By a sweeping appropriation, Din Shorot turns the whole gamut of rural police hierarchy into the *rongmohol's* sentinel: the watchman, the law-courts, the Faujdari, the magistrate's court, and the Zamindar's court and office. These, we recall, were the very loci of oppressive power and domination instrumental in the rampant exploitation of the rural poor. And Roshid too sings in a similar vein:

*Jodi dhorbi re odhor ei bela tor  
 Moner manush chine shadhon kor.  
 Boro nigum ghore achhe re manush,  
 O tar shondhan age kor.  
 Sate pnache ghor bnadhiye korichhe kachhari,  
 Tin thanate biraj kore re manush,  
 O tar rup monohor.  
 ....  
 Roshid bole, jyante more, shadhon bhojon kor,  
 Shohoje jaibe dhora re manush,  
 O tui gurur choron dhor.<sup>315</sup>*

[If you must hold the elusive lower lip, then recognise the Man of the Heart now and worship him. The Man abides in a spacious secret room, first search for him. Having built a house of sevens and fives, he has instituted his court; in three police stations resides the Man, O, his beauty is sublime. ... Roshid says, dying in life, worship him and sing his hymns; easily will the Man be in your grasp, oh devote yourself to the preceptor's feet.]

By situating these centres of power and oppression within the body and transforming these back to their traditional social functional role as defenders of the bodily house on the one hand, and by locating the elusive figure of the Divine in one of these loci of power and domination, i.e., the *thana* or police station, what these images once again do is to betray the deep-seated internalisation of the prevailing structures of power and domination in the subaltern consciousness as well as reveal the corresponding desire to reinstate the old world-order. Moreover, by placing Wisdom (*gyan-choudhuri*) at the top of this hierarchy of power and control inscribed on the bodily house, it also attributes a certain degree of autonomy to the body.

However, the appropriation of dominant structures of power and domination in rural

<sup>314</sup> Mohammad Alamgir, "Ahsan Manzil", *Banglapedia*, [banglapedia.net/HT/A\\_0124.HTM](http://banglapedia.net/HT/A_0124.HTM) accessed on Jan 1, 2008.

<sup>315</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 720, no. 259.

society in the structure of the body is manifest in the following anonymous Baul song:

*Shukh-shubila (bilash) shunyopuri*  
*Atmaram kore kachhari*  
*Gyan kore choukidari*  
*Tottwo janaye chair thanaye.*  
*Manush chhara bhojon korbi*  
*Kun jagaye.*<sup>316</sup>

[A mansion devoid of luxury, the man of the soul holds court, wisdom stands watch, conveys the principles to the four police stations. Where will you, without the Man?] **worship**

In this song, the image of the communication network existing amongst the various rungs of the hierarchy of rural social control is at once appropriated and translated onto the body's own spiritual structure of different states of consciousness. In the functional hierarchy of the mansion, the *atma* or the soul/ supreme being/ selfhood is deputed as the law court overseeing the function of *gyan* or the informative level of consciousness/knowledge/wisdom that is in turn likened to the village watchman in its task of disseminating information to the four police stations, arguably signifying the heart with its two arteries and two valves. The subversive potential in the appropriation of these key elements of the dominant discourse is even more clearly manifested in the following song of Lalou:

*Laglo dhum premer thanate,*  
*Mon-chora porechhe dhora roshiker hathe.*  
*O she dhorechhe chorke haowaye phnad petey.*  
*Bhokti-Jomadarer hathe*  
*Dudin chor jimma thake,*  
*Tin diner din dei she chalan*  
*Ashtepishte bnedhe.*  
*Chor achhe otoler ghorey,*  
*Shadhokey tai jante pare,*  
*Lalon bole, erup mile*  
*Dibyogyaner udoyete.*<sup>317</sup>

[Festivities are in the air in the Police Station of Love, the thieving heart has been apprehended by the connoisseur. He has apprehended the thief by laying a trap in the air. The thief has been remanded to a two-day custody in the hands of Devotion-the constable; on the third day he is bundled off well bound up. The thief is in the house of eternity, the worshipper receives intelligence, Lalou says, such intelligence is received at the awakening of the eternal wisdom.]

In the religious symbolism of this image, the police outpost has been transformed into

<sup>316</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 70-1.

<sup>317</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 611, no. 108. See also p. 612, no. 110.

the spiritual Police Station of Love in the body; the *roshik* or the practitioner of esoteric Baul rituals is likened to the arms of the rural police force; the thief is identified as the ever-elusive state of supreme consciousness (*mon*) residing in the unwavering eternal house of seminal retention (*otol*); and the *Jomadar* or the head constable is equated with spiritual devotion. The act of arresting the thief—an act that, we recall, spelt untold misery and multiple levels of exploitation to the poor villagers—is translated on the esoteric register of the body into the Baul practitioner's singular act of coitus reservatus, the act of arresting, as it were, the loss of semen by perfecting one's control over breathing. Similar metaphorical deployments of the key elements and figures of rural police hierarchy can be discerned in a multitude of Baul songs. Lalon sings yet again,

*Manush dhoru nehare re.  
Ore mon, noyone noyon jog kore.  
Neharaye chehara bondi  
Koro re ekanti,  
Share chobbish jelaye pato atoker phondi,  
Palabe she kon shohore.  
Toraye, mon, daroga hoye koro bondi  
Shorup-mondire.<sup>318</sup>*

[Gaze upon the man, o heart, lock your eyes with his. In the glance imprison his features, make it one; Lay your trap in twenty four and a half districts, where then can he escape? Hurry o heart, as a daroga, imprison him in the temple of self.]

Or this by Gyanchondro:

*Boro shadh kore banale rongmohol,  
Dekho, jaye na roshatol,  
Mon amar.  
Ghorer chhoye jonate jukti kore  
Uriye debe motkar khor.  
  
Ghorer noye dorja khola royechhe,  
Tar bhitore rosher mamush biraj kortechhe,  
Ekhon chouldarke shojag rekhe,  
Phnad petey tui manush dhor.<sup>319</sup>*

[You built the pleasure house with great care, now be careful that it does not go to waste, O my heart. The six who live in the house will conspire to squander even the hay on the roofs. The nine doors of the house are open, therein resides the connoisseur; now keeping the guards alert lay a trap to apprehend the Man.]

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p. 648, no. 169.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 862, no. 453.

In sum, the deployment of the snapshot imagery of the plight of the thief in police custody in the first song, like the deployments of the images of the *daroga* and the *choukidar* in the latter songs, serves as a clever double-edged sword. On the one hand, at a socio-political level, it illustrates the general state of torture and misery that is inflicted on the captive—most of whom, as we have seen in the previous section, were poor innocent villagers—in the police station by the head constables, the stooges of the nefarious *daroga*. On the other hand, and more significantly, by appropriating and subverting the dominant discourse by way of offering an esoteric vision of an alternative spiritual centre of power, the ‘Police Station of Love’ of the Baul religious path, within the realm of the body, the image also functions as a form of resistance to the very order that guarantees the body’s subordination.

### **Conclusion:**

Extending the subaltern school’s argument that social agents often appropriate religious myths and rituals to articulate a socio-economic-political motive, Hugh Urban had argued in his study of the religious symbolism of the songs of the Kortabhojas that ‘the religious actors are also capable of appropriating “secular”, economic and political discourse, while transforming it into a profound bearer of deeper religious ideals.’<sup>320</sup> In this chapter, as throughout this thesis, we have shown how in the Baul songs this appropriation of the dominant discourse cannot merely be read in terms of the religious symbolism it offers. A surface reading of the metaphorical construction and deployment of the domestic space in the Baul songs offers an insight into the ways in which the Bauls, as constituting a significant section of the rural population in early colonial Bengal, perceived and sought to negotiate with and even resist the various oppressive socio-economic-political forces of the time. The potential subversion of the dominant discourse of power that we discern in the specific structuration of the metaphorical house, once again stands as a reminder of the fundamental limitation and inadequacy of the subaltern’s idiom of resistance, i.e., in its being couched in the rhetoric of the very discourse that it sets out to oppose. In the metaphorical imagination of the Baul that likens the body to the domestic space, we then see that, even in its moment of translation and subversion, the oppressive hierarchic model of police power that the

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<sup>320</sup> Hugh B. Urban, *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 37.



body is subject to in the outside world replicates itself into yet another hierarchy of spiritual power in the realm of the body, a hierarchy that continues to be presided over by the landlord or *Gyan-Choudhuri*.

***Hariram Manob-dehe Baniyechhe ek Ajob Kol:***

**A Study of the Transportational Metaphors in Baul Songs**

The British confidence in the transforming, modernising power of science and technology was perhaps most summarily echoed in the self-congratulatory statement of Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India, 1848-1856, when he claimed that he had let loose in India the ‘great engines of social improvement, which the sagacity and science of recent times had previously given to Western nations—I mean Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph.’<sup>321</sup> The underlying premise in Dalhousie’s statement echoed a longstanding and widespread strand in the colonial ideal that hinged on a strategic erasure/denial of the existence and worth of pre-colonial scientific/technological achievements in particular and civilisation in general. Be it in the relatively more sympathetic Orientalist reconstruction of Indian civilisation in the tripartite model of the glorious (Hindu) past—degenerate retrogressive Muslim rule—consequent present-day stagnation/backwardness, or in the scathing post-industrialisation dismissal of all things Indian heralded by James Mill’s *History of India* and his corresponding championing of scientific and technological advances as the measure of civilisations, the construction of pre- and early-colonial India as a vast unconnected space of semi-barbaric tribes devoid of any efficient communication and transportation network came to occupy a central position in the legitimising discourses of the colonisers. In this strand of the colonial discourse, the advent of the steam-age in post-1820s India was seen as a direct response to the pressing colonial need to ‘open up’ the interior, ‘bolster up’ the mobility of both people and goods, and thereby effect ‘the moral and material progress’ of the hitherto barbaric land. However, such diffusionist historiographical approaches that sought to study the history of transportation in colonial India in terms of this extreme pre- and post-steam age dichotomy, have long been countered by scholars such as David Arnold, for instance, who demonstrated how steamers and railways in India had in fact emerged through a dialogue with existing non-European modes of transportation, i.e., boats, bullock-carts, horses, donkeys and

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<sup>321</sup> Quoted in Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 161.

camels, etc.<sup>322</sup> C.A. Bayly too, in his study of the changing nature of information-gathering and espionage networks in British India, has shown the existence of efficient and well-integrated system of transportation, trade networks, communication and intelligence networks in Mughal India.<sup>323</sup> Whatever be the 'reality' of pre-colonial modes of transportation in India, what is of relevance to the present study is the way in which the very framing of technological progress and scientific modernity and their corresponding representation in colonial narratives were premised on a strategic forgetting/denial of pre- and early-colonial modes of transportation—a denial that enabled the colonisers to deploy their brand of science and technology as both a tool of colonial dominance and an intellectual justification for their many social engineering projects.

If colonial discourses on modes of transportation in India were marked by acts of strategic forgetting, the Bengali bhodrolok discourse on the same was accented by a curious auto-Orientalist—nationalist act of cultural nostalgia wherein both 'tradition' and 'modernity' were reconstructed to produce a regeneration of the Bengali nation via travel and heightened mobility. While the 'revivalists', such as Dinesh Chandra Sen and Durgachandra Sanyal, sought to articulate this need to travel in an auto-Orientalist fashion by constructing an inspirational model of a glorious tradition of the adventurous, conquering and travelling Bengalis,<sup>324</sup> the 'modernists' registered the same need as a breaking-off from the traditional lackadaisical homesick self-image and embracing travel as one of the significant vectors of a 'modern' Bengali self.

The fondness of the Bengalee for an in-door life is proverbial. He out-Johnsons Johnson in cockneyism. The Calcutta Baboo sees in the Chitpoor Road the same "best highway in the world", as did the great English Lexicographer in the Strand of London. But the long vista, that is opening of one end of the empire to the other, will, in a few years, tempt him out-of-doors to move in a more extended orbit, to enlarge the circle of his terrene acquaintance, to see variety in human nature, and to divert his attention from the species Calcutta-wallah to the genus man.<sup>325</sup>

Mobility and travel, in both these schools of thought, increasingly came to be equated

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<sup>322</sup> David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 105-113.

<sup>323</sup> C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 27:1, 1993, pp. 7-8.

<sup>324</sup> See Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Brihot Bongo*, vols 1 &2, Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2006 [1935] and Durgachandra Sanyal, *Banglar Shamajik Itihas*, Calcutta, 1910.

<sup>325</sup> Bholanauth Chunder, *The Travels of a Hindoo to various parts of Bengal and Upper India*, London : N. Trübner, 1869, vol. 1, p. 140

with acquisition of knowledge with which to reawaken oneself, both materially and spiritually, from the present life of inert isolationism. Recent scholarship on the subject has, however, proved quite the contrary. Apart from the largescale pilgrimages undertaken by the Bengalis and the busy river traffic between Delhi and Bengal during the Mughal rule,<sup>326</sup> accounts of one Dom Antonio de Rozario, a converted Christian missionary and the first writer of Bengali prose, being kidnapped by the Portuguese pirates and taken as slave from Bengal to Arakan as early as 1663 are well-known.<sup>327</sup> A similar contemporary account of a Bengali taken to Arakan as a prisoner by the Portuguese pirates is also recorded in the life of Alaol (c.1607-1680), who initially served as a bodyguard and later went on to teach music and drama and eventually became the poet laureate in the royal court of Arakan. Furthermore, as Michael Fischer has pointed out, Bengali travel narratives of the West in the English language can be traced back to 1794 in the travelogue of Sake Dean Mahomet, a Bengali Muslim who had emigrated to Cork, Ireland in 1786.<sup>328</sup> Krishnakamal Bhattacharya's novel *Durakanksher Britha Bhromon*, originally published in 1858, offers too a fictionalised account of the adventures of a Bengali in the days of Haidar Ali.<sup>329</sup> And by the 1870s at least three illustrious Bengalis, namely, Dwarakanath Tagore, Raja Rammohun Roy and Michael Madhusudan Dutt—all had travelled to the West. Moreover, with the emergence of the *keranis* in nineteenth-century Bengal, internal travel from village homes to the urban centre of Calcutta for work was a frequent phenomenon.<sup>330</sup> In addition to the regular steamer services run by the port commissioner authorities between Calcutta and the districts, numerous public ferries and country boats plied daily to carry office clerks and others at a nominal charge of one or two pice per head.<sup>331</sup> Besides, the extension of the Barasat-Basirhat Light Railway and the Calcutta electric tramway to the suburbs and the adjoining dostricts also fuelled this mobility.<sup>332</sup> When

<sup>326</sup> Bayly, "Knowing", pp. 7-8.

<sup>327</sup> Dom Antonio was 'born [in] c 1643 into the royal family of Bhushana in the Jessore-Faridpur areas. In 1663, he was kidnapped by Portuguese pirates and taken to Arakan to be sold as a slave. Rescued by a Portuguese priest, Manoel de Rozario, he embraced Christianity and took the name Dom Antonio de Rozario. ... Dom Antonio's book, *Brahman-Roman-Catholic Sambah*, consisting of 120 pages, is the first extant example of Bangla prose and of what is known as *sadhu* Bangla, or formal Bangla prose.' Sushanta Sarker, "Dom Antonio de Rozario", *Banglapedia*, [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/A\\_0265.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/A_0265.htm), as accessed on June 6, 2008.

<sup>328</sup> Michael H. Fischer ed., *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India*, California: University of California Press, 1997.

<sup>329</sup> Krishnakamal Bhattacharya, *Durakanksher Britha Bhromon*, Calcutta, 1939.

<sup>330</sup> For a fuller discussion on the social history of the *keranis*, see Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>331</sup> *Sadharani*, Chinsurah, 12 Magh, 1286 BS [1880].

<sup>332</sup> See Anindita Ghosh, 'Literature, Language and Print in Bengal, c 1780-1905', unpublished PhD

read in the light of these evidences of travel amongst Bengalis since at least the seventeenth century, the Bengali bhodrolok's selective cultural amnesia in this regard betrays a key feature of this re-configuration of the Bengali self which was necessarily upper-middle class, Hindu and male: namely, the passing off of a specific classist gendered religious identity as ethnic identity.

However, an analysis of this aspect of the identity politics of the Bengali bhodrolok is outside the ambit of our concern in this chapter. What is of more significance to me is the way in which in both the coloniser's strategic act of forgetting/denial and the bhodrolok's cultural amnesia in their respective narratives of the 'immobile' 'homesick' Bengali, the voice of the subaltern is almost never heard. And when it is heard, it is their mute wonder-eyed silence at the spectacularly modern modes of the transportation, e.g., the railway. In his celebrated travelogue, Bholanauth Chunder, a self-proclaimed representative of the Young Bengals, recorded their presence thus:

All along the road villages still turn out to see the progress of the train, and gaze in ignorant admiration at the little world borne upon its back.<sup>333</sup>

It is in this space of forgotten reality that I would situate the Baul songs of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal, and it is through a study of the various metaphors of transportation deployed in these songs that I shall seek to redress this colonial/bhodrolok cultural amnesia.

## **Section I:**

### **Representations of the Changing Technologies of Transportation in Baul Songs**

As has been discussed in the Introduction, the nineteenth-century bhodrolok project of the idealisation of rural Bengal as the repository of authentic Bengali-ness and its corresponding appropriation of the figure of the Baul had a curious two-pronged politics. While on the one hand, the figure of the Baul came to be constructed by the bhodrolok imagination as the personification of the 'golden Bengal' with all its associations of 'true', 'timeless' and 'unchangeable' indigenous Bengali culture, on the other, the perception/construction of the Baul as a 'wandering minstrel' too had its

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thesis, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1998, chapter 6.

<sup>333</sup> Chunder, *Travels*, p. 141.

particular appeal to the nineteenth-century bhodrolok sensibility that, as we have seen, increasingly came to accent mobility and travel in their fashioning of a modern Bengali self. What is interesting in this figuration of the Baul is that the Baul, in the bhodrolok imagination, stood for both the static, almost ahistorical, rural Bengal and the recently valorised wanderlust of the modern bhodrolok. Moreover, the wanderings of the Bauls were imagined as localised, technology-independent, travel-by-foot over small distances. The Baul himself, however, remains a mere mute site on which these bhodrolok discourses are developed and debated. In stark contrast to this, not only are Baul songs replete with metaphors of travel but indeed the mode of travel and transport is itself also seen to change dramatically over time. The Baul, instead of being an idealised counterpoint to the novelties of nineteenth-century technologies of travel, is rather a highly adaptive figure who actively utilised new travel technologies and therefore came to integrate the same within their vocabularies and imaginations. I will trace this trajectory of the metaphorical deployments of existing and novel technologies of transportation in the Baul songs under the three broad clusters of metaphors, i.e., that of the boat, the steamer and the railways.

## Section I.i

### *Jonmo chhnada nouka tar naiko snada mara: Metaphor of the Boat:*

For centuries, the river systems served as the highways of both intra-provincial and inter-provincial trade and commerce in the deltaic Bengal. In fact, as H.K.Naqvi points out, at the peak of the Mughal rule there were more than 200,000 river boatmen on the route between Delhi and Bengal alone.<sup>334</sup> It is no wonder then, that with the river and the boat at the centre of their rural life and vocation, the metaphors of the same came to dominate the symbolic landscape of the folk imagination all over rural Bengal. Traditional boat songs such as that of *bhatiyali* (sung by boatmen sailing downstreams), *sari gan* (songs performed by boat race teams), *murshidi* (devotional songs influenced by *bhatiyali*), etc not only mimic the flow of the rivers in both their forms and content, but also frequently use the images of the boat and the river as spiritual symbols of mortal life. The renowned rural poet (*Polli Kobi*) and folklorist Jasimuddin summed it thus:

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<sup>334</sup> H. K. Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India*, London, 1968.

Bangladesh is a land of rivers. Ganga, Jamuna, Meghna, Dhaleshwari, Shitalakshya, Gadai—in so many names and such myriad forms these rivers encircle Bangladesh. ... [A]n invisible musician, playing on the silvery strings of these rivers, has with his delicate touch composed the eternal songs of the heart—the *bhatiyali*. Several areas of this land remain submerged in rainwater for almost six months in a year. Then the boat is the only mode of transport. Those who row their boats to distant lands for trade and commerce, or those boatmen who take their passengers to several places, all of them float on the river, separated from their families for months on end. There is only the endless expanse of the river-road in front of them. Never will this road come to an end. And above them are the vast timeless azure skies. Sitting here, the east-Bengali boatman asks several questions unto himself. Where have I come from, where do I go hence, such questions pervade the numerous songs of the boatmen. Like the lyrics of these songs which have taken shape from the waters of these rivers, their tunes too have blended into the lyrics from the lilting waters of these rivers.<sup>335</sup>

It is in this longstanding tradition of this particular spiritual deployment of the metaphor of the boat in Bengali folk songs that we can situate the large body of late-18<sup>th</sup> century—early 19<sup>th</sup> century Baul songs that were replete with images of boats and river which stood in their metaphorical imagination as the fallible human body and the sea of life respectively. For instance, consider this early song of Lalon<sup>336</sup> that is symptomatic of the frequent deployment of the composite metaphors of the boat, the baffled boatman and the tumultuous river in numerous Baul songs:

*Amar thahor nai go mon-bepari.  
Ebar tridharaye bujhi dobe amar tori.  
Jemni dnari-malla beyara  
Temni majhi dishehara,  
Kon dike je baye tahara,  
Amar pari deowa kothin holo bhari.*

*Ekta nodir tinti dhara,—  
She nodite nai kul-kinara;  
Shetha bege tufan boye,  
Dekhe lage bhoy,  
Dingi bnachabar upaye ki kori.*

*Kotha he doyal hori,  
Apni eshe hou kandari;  
Tomaye smoron kori  
Bhashai tori,  
Lalon koy, jeno bipake na pori.<sup>337</sup>*

<sup>335</sup> Jasimuddin, *Murshida Gan*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977, p. 216.

<sup>336</sup> Though Baul songs are notoriously undated, it is usually the use/lack of the sectarian title of the composer in the colophon that approximate indications of the composition date may be culled from. I take this song to be one of the early songs of Lalon (1774-1890) because unlike his later songs where he signs himself as *Lalon Shnail Lalon Fokir*, his signature in this song lacks the sectarian title that is bestowed only at the final stages of *shadhona*.

<sup>337</sup> Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul o Baul Gan*, Calcutta: Orient Book Co., 1957, pp. 615-6.

[I'm without sight, O merchant of the mind, I fear this time my boat will sink in the three streams. Just as the oarsman-boatmen are unruly, so is the helmsman confounded; which direction are they rowing in, my journey has become very difficult.

One river has three streams,—this river is endless; a mighty storm blows there, I'm alarmed at the sight, how do I save my boat?

Where are you merciful Hori, come and be my helmsman; it is in your name I set sail, Lalon pleads, let me not get into trouble.]

Such particular composite metaphors of the sinking boat articulating the Baul's utterly desperate cry for help from his guru-helmsman (*doyal hori/kandari*) in the spiritual struggle (*shadhona*) of the fragile boat of the body tossing about in the stormy three-streamed river (the confluence of the three primary psychic channels of *ira*, *pingola* and *sushumna*), have their roots in similar deployments in many songs of the *Charyapada* stemming from the late period of Tantric Buddhism. Lee Siegel, for instance, has commented on the plurality of meanings generated by the single metaphor of the boat in the *Charyapada*, or what he calls 'Wanderer songs'. Apart from being used in the conventional Buddhist sense of a vehicle with which to cross the ocean of existence, the image of the boat could at once, in a single instance of metaphorical deployment, stand in as 'the Three Refuges of Buddhism; the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of the exoteric tradition and the Body, Mind and Speech of the esoteric tradition' in Kanha's interpretation, as the body according to Saraha, as compassion 'or that ideal personified as the divine male consort of Sunyata-devi, Lady Nothingness' in Kambalambara's interpretation, or indeed as 'the *baja* (< Skt. *vajra*), the thunderbolt-penis-god, moving in a canal which is the *paua* (< Skt. *padma*), the lotus-vagina-goddess' in Bhusuku's register.<sup>338</sup>

Whatever be the multiple connotations of this metaphor in the long tradition of Bengali folk melodies and the *Charyapada*, the sense of unpredictability inherent in most of these deployments can be said to derive its essence from the deeply unstable experience of the boatmen in the mercurial rivers of Bengal. The erratic shifts of the river beds, the unnavigability of the rivers in dry season, the repeated natural calamities in the form of floods or droughts—all lent riverine transport and commerce in Bengal a highly capricious nature. The loss of merchandise and the severe setback experienced due to natural calamities in the rice trade in Midnapur, for instance, is recorded in Government reports as follows: 'This year ... the fleets of rice boats were obliged to descend the

<sup>338</sup> Lee Siegel, "Bengal Blackie and the Sacred Slut", *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 1, 1981, pp. 55-6.



Russulpore and thus enter the Hooghly near its mouth which they ascended to Calcutta. This is a dangerous route and entails the in-convenience of waiting—often for weeks—at the mouth of the Russulpore for favourable weather, while even then, if a sudden squall comes on, heavily laden boats are wrecked.<sup>339</sup> Even W.W. Hunter, commenting in particular on the inefficacy of the Governmental measures undertaken to address the dangers posed to the passage of boats by obstructions in the nature of hundreds of sunken timbers, boats and trees in the bed of the Matabhanga river of Nadia, records the following: ‘in 1818 “the obstructions had become so many and dangerous, as to cause the wreck of innumerable boats, and to entail heavy losses on account of the demurrage paid for detention of ships waiting expected cargoes.”’<sup>340</sup> Read in the light of these accounts of the frequent wreckages of boats, the lament in the following Baul song of the fragility of human life/boat in the all-consuming river of existence comes to stand as a typical testimony to the everyday reality of the boatman in the erratic waters of Bengal:

*Jonmo-chhnada nouka tar naiko shnada mara  
 Jol jhore bane bane nona bane jirnojora.  
 Tate gabkali nai kalapati  
 Srishtidhorer gothon kora.  
 Manob-torir chhidro nota tipne-phnasa modhye phata  
 Haye re jol uthe phata ghoche na.  
 Bhuluk-mara nayer bhogno gnura  
 Dali-poro perek-noro tokta chera.  
 Bnaker goraye chnowaye pani chhneche mori dinrojoni  
 Haye re gnuje dei chhnera kani tobu dobe dohora  
 Jole jaye re bheshey jolui khoshey dekhe holam dishehara.  
 Gorechhilo kathe kathe pilon kete perek ente  
 Haye re jol uthe rasta chhute charidigete boye dhara.  
 Kubir choron bhebe bole tori chhnechte chhnechte holam shara.<sup>341</sup>*

[My boat is perennially leaking and none can plug the leak; with every tide water rushes in, the salty tide has worn the boat to its skeletal frame. There is neither resin nor lacquer (in this boat) created by Him who sustains who all. This human-boat has nine orifices, tied together at the naval and in its midst is a crack-stomach, alas! The water keeps filling up, but the crack-appetites are never satisfied. Struck by the lightning of ignorance, the boat lies in tatters, its roof is shaky, its nails have become loose and the planks have cracked. At the curve of the hull water keeps seeping in, I grow tired trying to drain it night and day; alas! I try to plug the leak with a rag, yet the boat keeps sinking; there is water everywhere,

<sup>339</sup> *Selections from Divisional and District Annual Reports 1872-73*, Report for Burdwan Division, App. IX. Other reports alluding to the loss of goods and people on Ganga and Attraï are to be found in *Special Narratives of the Famine of 1873-74*, No. 15, 8 April-15 April 1874.

<sup>340</sup> W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Volume II: Districts of Nadiya and Jessore*, London: Trubner & Co, 1875, p. 20.

<sup>341</sup> Sudhir Chakraborty, *Shahebkhoni Shomproday o Tader Gan*, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1985, no. 44, p. 186.

the sail falls off, and I'm left directionless. He had built it by joining wood to wood having attached planks with nails; alas! the rising water now runs everywhere on the streets too. Seeking shelter at Choron's feet, Kubir says, I'm tired of draining my boat.]

## Section I.ii:

### *Ei deho isteamer: Metaphor of the Steamer*

It was this unreliability of trade and commerce by country boats that necessitated the adoption of steam navigation in Bengal. Both Satpal Sangwan and David Arnold have illustrated how the impact of the steam revolution of eighteenth-century Britain had since the 1820s systematically erased the hitherto successful shipbuilding industry of the Bombay dockyard. Subject to the twin onslaughts of the deep-seated political and economic British paranoia about the success and self-sufficiency of Indian shipbuilding on the one hand, and the new technologies and skills of the British yards post-steam revolution on the other, the Bombay dockyards gradually surrendered to the might of the British steamships.<sup>342</sup> Bengal too, by 1831, came to witness how steam-power could be 'harnessed to the service of the colonial state, its five imported engines driving rolling-mills, cutting presses, lathes and milling machines, and able to produce more than 300,000 coins a day', not to mention the launch of India's first steam-propelled tug, *Diana*, from the Khidderpore dockyard in 1823 and the arrival of the steam-assisted paddle-steamer, the *Enterprise*, in 1825.<sup>343</sup> By 1828, iron-clad steamers became a regular feature on the Ganga, thus rivalling the country boats both in terms of speed and reliability. But the colonial celebration surrounding the advent of steamers on the rivers of Bengal soon died a premature death owing to its various limitations, both in terms of the huge costs involved in production, freight and passenger traffic and the inability of the steamers to cope with the same dangers posed to country boats, i.e., the highly unpredictable river-currents subject to tides and seasonal changes and the ever-shifting river-beds.

This evanescent life of the steamer in Bengal is reflected in the paucity of the metaphor of the same in the Baul songs of mid-nineteenth century. In the whole corpus of nineteenth-century Baul songs, the metaphor occurs only thrice, once each in the songs

<sup>342</sup> See David Arnold's brief revision of Satpal Sangwan's argument on the role of colonial policy in the decline of Indian shipping in Arnold, *Science*, p. 103.

<sup>343</sup> Arnold, *Science*, p. 104.

of Kubir Gossain, Pagla Kanai and Durbin Shah. To read this scarcity in the deployment of this metaphor in the light of the contemporary bhodrolok discourse as the Bauls' inadequacy in understanding the complex mechanisms of the new technology would be a gross fallacy. For instance, when Pagla Kanai sings

*Ajob ek jahaj gorey  
Dinobondhu pathaichhen bhober porey.*<sup>344</sup>

[Building a wondrous ship, the Friend of the Poor (God) has sent us to this world]

the sense of wonderment (*ajob*) at the new machine is counterbalanced by Durbin Shah's nuanced, though not technically sound, understanding of the same in his use of the metaphor as the human body:

*Ei deho istimer nur nobi passenger  
Nije khoda ticket master jahajer majhar.  
Shumo boli jahajer shonkha dui dharete dui ponkha  
Chouddyopowa onge makha chokkhu durbinsha'r.  
Nachhut mokamer ghore mohajone khela kore  
Kanpure knata ghure ghorir majhar.  
Bina line-e chole gari agun pani shob bhorti  
Dui paye arkati maphe jahajer majhar.  
Upore hawa niche pani majkhane aguner khoni  
Jwolitechhe din rojoni kore hahakar.*<sup>345</sup>

[This body is the steamer and the prophet is its passenger, the God is its ticket master in the middle of the ship. Hark, let me tell you the ship's numbers, on its two sides are two fans, the fourteen *pozas* of its body are smeared with the eyes of Durbin Shah. In the room of the *Nachhut*<sup>346</sup> stage, the moneylenders play; in Kanpur the pointer swings to the middle of the clock. The car moves without any tracks and is full of fire and water; the *arkati*<sup>347</sup> measures the depth of the water in the middle of the

<sup>344</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 162.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>346</sup> 'Muslim Bauls ... describe the body in terms of mokams (Arabic *maqamat*), "stations" or "stages." In Indian Sufism there are generally four stations on the path to God: nasut (human nature), malakut (the nature of angels), jabarut (divine power), and lahut (divine nature). Sometimes a fifth, hahut (divine essence) is added. The Sufis of Bengal equate the first four mokams with the muladhar, manipur, ajna, and anahata cakras, respectively. In addition, the Bauls include another mokam, the la mokam, equivalent to the sahasrar or ajna cakra, giving a total of five or six stations, depending on whether hahut is included. La mokam, literally "no place," is so called because it represents transcendent space where all dualities are reintegrated into the Supreme.' Carol Solomon, "Baul Songs," in Donald Lopez ed., *Religions of India in Practice*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 192.

<sup>347</sup> The term *arkati* referred to the man employed on a boat whose job involved constantly determining the depth of the rivers and inlets, lest the boat gets marooned in any one spot. *Kati* meant the measuring stick and *ar* referred to the effect of refraction of the stick under the surface of the water. Hence, *arkati* literally meant 'bent stick' which pointed the direction of the travel. Subsequently, however, the term also came to denote recruiters of all kinds of labour. For this latter usage, see Samita Sen, "Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890-1990", *Modern Asian Studies*, 42:1, 2008, p. 86-87; Crispin Bates, "Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience", *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, 13, 2000, p. 17, fn 41, 21-2, 25.

ship. With the wind above and the water below, the fire in the middle  
burns day and night wailing loudly.]

What this song reveals is a particular interpretive frame within which the Baul make sense and negotiates with novel transportation technologies epitomised in the steamer. While at the spiritual level of the metaphorical deployment, the steamer is likened to the human body, at a second level, and this is more interesting, its complex mechanical parts are understood within a referential frame of similitudes and analogies that is generated by the lived reality of the Baul's immediate socio-cultural world. For instance, the paddle wheels of the steamer readily get translated in the Baul's perceptual register into '*ponkha*' or circular fans and the compass into the '*ghori*' or clock. The analogical connection made between these two sets of different objects in the Baul's metaphorical imagination is not merely based on physical similitudes; the connection also reveals a surprising understanding of the underlying operational similitudes in both these two analogies. The paddle wheels of the steamer in enabling the movement of the steamer by functioning as wheels on the water has an obvious similarity with circular fans that function as wheels in air; and the compass is not only akin to the clock in terms of the similarity in their appearances, but both are connected in the Baul's imagination by their functional similarity, i.e. as exact markers of space and time respectively. Simultaneous with their sense of awe at the co-existence of the three elements of air, fire and water in the operation of the steamer we have an instance of a rather informed use of the figure of the arkati who perpetually needed to measure the depths of the river lest the steamer get hopelessly stuck in the ditches of a shallow river.<sup>348</sup> And thus Pagla Kanai warns us:

*Jedin jahaj hobe komjori bhai*  
*Bam kheye tori jol nebe*  
*Dnarimalla chhoyjon ripu shob chhere jabe,*  
*Shedin shuknaye tori tol hobe.*<sup>349</sup>

<sup>348</sup> For a brief glimpse of the dismal experience of the passengers on the occasion of the steamer running aground, see Rabindranath Tagore, "On Board a Canal Steamer going to Cuttack", *Glimpses of Bengal Selected from the Letters of Sir Rabindranath Tagore 1885-1895*, London: Macmillan, 1921, pp. 20-21: 'The steamer has been aground in a narrow ditch of a canal ever since last evening, and it is now past nine in the morning. I spent the night in a corner of the crowded deck, more dead than alive. ... Finally, at half-past three in the morning, some fussy busy-bodies began loudly inciting each other to get up. In despair, I also left my bed and dropped into my deck-chair to await the dawn. ... One of the hands tells me that the steamer has stuck so fast that it may take the whole day to get her off. I inquire of another whether any Calcutta-bound steamer will be passing, and get the smiling reply that this is the only boat on this line, and I may come back in her, if I like, after she has reached Cuttack! By a stroke of luck, after a great deal of tugging and hauling, they have just got her afloat at about ten o'clock.'

<sup>349</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 163.

[When the ship will become weak and the water will seep into it, the oarsman and the six *ripus* (six cardinal passions/drives)—all will leave, then the boat will run aground in the dry ditches.]

### Section I.iii:

#### ***Manobdeho Railgari: Metaphor of the Railway***

With the steam vessels proving unsuccessful in countering the many uncertainties of overland communication, the colonial attention was now turned to developing the existing communication and transport by land. And the answer seemed to lay in the introduction of the railways which had, despite the many denunciations of the Romantics in Great Britain, earned a frenzied level of popularity since the **early-nineteenth century.**

As we have seen in the previous sections, in the Gangetic delta of Bengal, where water transport dominated much of trade and commerce, it was not so much the need for effective transportation but 'the risks and uncertainties typically associated with river transport and a competitive railway freightage schedule offering concessional rates for certain staples of trade including foodgrains' that established the railways as the most speedy and cost-effective mode of merchandise traffic in this region.<sup>350</sup> Official discourse on the railways in colonial India had initially rejected the possibility of introducing passenger railways on the grounds that assumed that the superstitious, primitive and stationary nature of the natives would discourage them from travelling and hence, revenue would more surely be generated out of the circulation of goods than that of people. Subsequently however, the many contestations<sup>351</sup> notwithstanding, the highly competitive passenger fares of third and fourth class travel in the newly-introduced passenger railway soon dispelled whatever doubts the railway authorities previously had on the efficacy of its introduction in colonial India.<sup>352</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup>

<sup>350</sup> For a brief but engaging analysis of this, see Mukul Mukherjee, "Railways and their Impact on Bengal's Economy, 1870-1920, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17, 1980, pp. 196-199.

<sup>351</sup> For a fuller discussion of the various arguments both in favour of and against passenger railways in India, see Mahesh Chandra Ashta, "Passenger Fares on the Indian Railways, 1849-1869", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53:4, 1967, pp. 53-89.

<sup>352</sup> For instance, Manu Goswami tells us, 'More than 96 percent of Indian passengers travelled third class, and the bulk of passenger revenues derived from third- and fourth-class fares. The number of annual passengers rose from 80 million in 1880 to 200 million in 1904, and to more than 500 million by 1920-21.' *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, Chicago: University of

century, the railways in Bengal while reinvigorating short-distance inland transportation between remote villages and the nearest railway stations, also succeeded largely, though by no means entirely, to supplant the old river boats and ferries in both the transportation of commodities and people. And this goes on to explain the shift in the predominant metaphorical deployment of boats and steamers in the early/mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Baul songs to that of the railways in the mid to late-19<sup>th</sup> century Baul songs—a transition that is most starkly represented in the shifting preoccupations with the boat and the railways in the metaphorical imaginations of the late-eighteenth—early nineteenth century Kubir and his late-nineteenth—early twentieth century disciple, Jadubindu respectively.

Bholanauth's awe-struck wonder-eyed figure of the villager gazing 'in ignorant admiration' at the progress of the train soon dissolves in the face of the nuanced metaphorical usage of the image of the railway in the Baul songs that clearly evince a detailed understanding of the workings of the same. Jadubindu thus sings of the body-railcar:

*Manobdeho-railgarir khobor kor mon achhe taye rotnodhon.  
 Boshe Habrar bhitor khodkari kore ei manob-railgari toiyar kore  
 Shokole paye nako tar dorshon.  
 O shei karigor paka chokhe jacche kaj dekha  
 Lagiyeche ei garir nichei duikhani chaka  
 Achhe engine pata ghurchhe hata jotha totha hoye gomon.  
 ...  
 Garir bhitor kolkhani achhe ogni ar pani  
 Koler ghore noyon diye royechhen tini—  
 Hoya sthane sthane istatione khalash bojhai bilokkhon.  
 ...  
 Garir kobja kol kora achhey onek thnai jora  
 Iscurup diyechhe ente nai chorapora  
 O tar karikurir bolihari mistiri modhusudon.  
 ...  
 Raile hoye telegraph khoder karjyo emni chhap.<sup>353</sup>*

[O my mind, look for the human body-railcar, therein lies the precious jewel. Sitting in Habra (Howrah), He builds this human-railcar, but not everyone can see Him. For that workman can only be seen with experienced eyes. He has built two wheels underneath this car, therein is the engine that makes it move. ... Inside the car there is a machine fed by fire and water; He remains inside the machine room with vigilant eyes—from place to place, at each station, he loads a considerable number of passengers. ... The hinges of the car are joined in many places by machines; screws have been fitted to it so there is no shaking or

Chicago Press, 2004, p. 108.

<sup>353</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 209-11.

trembling; their workmanship is that of the excellent mechanic Madhusudan (Krishna). ... Upon the rail-line, there is a telegraph that bears the seal of God's own work.]

Not only do we discern in Jadubindu's metaphorical deployment of the body-railcar a fair degree of familiarity with and comprehension of the railway machinery, the workings of the railways and the telegraph, and the coloniser's language as manifest in his remarkable rustic use of English words such as 'engine', 'station', 'screw', etc, we also get a glimpse of the everyday social reality of the rail-passenger and the dangers posed to him by the railway thieves and pickpockets:

*Achhe garir bhitor chor tader emni chhatir jor  
Pocketmare ortho-hore chokkhe lagaye ghor  
Kore dei kupokat mule habhat bidyebuddhi hoye horon.* <sup>354</sup>

[There are thieves inside the railcar, and their physical strength and courage are such that they strike you with fear when they pickpocket and steal your wealth. They knock you down and make you wretched and indigent by stealing your knowledge and intellect.]

That the railcar with its relentless crowds and noises, endless movements in and out of it, and the sheer anonymity of travel would offer itself as the ideal haven of pickpockets was no surprise. Furthermore, acts of petty thefts were often hand-in-glove with those of robbery of train yards and storage sheds of the railways. By the turn of the twentieth century, these railway crimes escalated to such an extent across Bengal, Assam and the United Provinces that a joint commission set up to investigate the extent of the crimes in these provinces declared in their report that these gangs of railway thieves and robbers had 'an extensive system of colonies formed in Bengal for the disposal of stolen property and to act as bases of operation ... . The greatest possible use is made of the railways and full advantage is taken of both the postal and telegraph systems.'<sup>355</sup> Moreover, since the late-nineteenth century, sadhus and fokirs were often the target of oppressive police measures in the form of random searches and general persecution. An official inquiry into the policing of roads and rails for the safety of the pilgrims declared in no uncertain terms that 'There can be no doubt that most of these faqirs are merely a nuisance to, and a burden on, the pilgrim; no one could hold that it is the duty of Government to assist them.'<sup>356</sup> Needless to say then, the measures taken by the Railway Police were far from lenient, and the Bauls, as we have seen in Chapter IV, were no

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., pp. 210-11.

<sup>355</sup> *Report on Inter-Provincial Crime in the United Provinces, Bengal and Assam*, Allahabad, 1904, p. 4.

<sup>356</sup> *Report of the Pilgrim Committee, United Provinces, 1913*, Simla: Government Central Branch Press. 1916, sec. C.

strangers to the horrors of incarceration:

*Achhe pulish motiyan dekhe chomke othe pran  
Kosur pele dhore chule dei kore chalan  
Rakhe bondi kore karagare urdhopa odhobodon.*<sup>357</sup>

[There is a policeman posted there striking fear into the heart; when he sees an offence, he grabs you by the hair and packs you off. He keeps you imprisoned in the jail with your feet above your head and your face hanging down.]

However, what is even more interesting is that much before this relatively positive deployment of the railway as a metaphor of the wonders and mysteries of the human body and the spiritual paths, his guru, Kubir, had in fact deployed the same metaphor in one of his songs as a singular act of resistance against the inescapable and omnipresent rule of the machines in the colonial state. Kubir sings:

*Paka rasta railer upor chole jaye koler gari. Habra ar Hughli jela jete  
Bela hoye na puro ekghori. Shoda hur hur hur shobdo kore hawa bhore  
dei pari.*

...

*Bangali rekhe bosh kore kole lute nilo dhon kori.  
Tar-tangano Bangla jure boshe khobor nicche dhnure haye re onyolok  
bhabchhe Pore har menechhe choupari.  
Tare hat bulaye jane jemon kobiraj dhore nari.  
Koler sutaye kapor bune. Kolete jol tulechhe tene haye re  
Kolete dhanyo bhane gom pishe kole guri.  
Kole taka poisha kagoj toiyar kolete pakaye dori.  
Kole korle jobdojomi. Nodnodi pushkorini bhumi. Haye re rakhle na beshi  
komi Emni ingrajer khori.  
Kole nishanate koyela puti boshe kolye jhanda gari.  
Choddyo powa dhorer majhe bichar kore bujhe bujhe haye re  
Kol korechhe ingraje ghurtechhe botrish nari.  
Kubir bole sotyi koler kirti choron nai chharachhari.*<sup>358</sup>

[The steam-engine travels upon the rails of a solid track. It takes less than an hour to travel to the Habra and Hughli districts. Everytime it makes the *hur hur* sound, fills itself with wind and sets off on its journey. ... Charming and taming the Bengalis, the machine has looted all their wealth. Sitting in the mesh of wires in Bengal, it is receiving all the news; 'alas!' others are wondering, 'what has happened?' The Sanskrit schools have admitted their defeat. It knows by merely caressing the wire, like the physician knows by merely touching the pulse. By a machine is cloth woven by the threads. Alas! even water is raised by the machine. By a machine, rice paddies are husked and wheat is ground. By a machine, *taka, poisha* (Bengali currency) and paper made. By a machine, ropes and cords are twirled. By a machine, lands are confiscated. Rivers and streams, ponds and earth—alas! none can escape the measurements of the English. Inside this machine, coal is planted like a flag and rammed down the throat of the flagship [of the engine car]. Within the fourteen *poyas* of

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>358</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, pp. 186-7, no. 45.



the body—look and see—alas, the Englishmen have built a machine that traverses the thirty-two veins. Kubir says, such are the glorious achievements of the machine, O Choron, there's no way out of it.]

Such an unequivocal indictment of the tyrannical and impoverishing rule of the technology of the British machinery spearheaded by the railway was, we need to remind ourselves, an early response to the technological revolution in India, a part of a spontaneous outrage at the erasure of the much-familiar indigenous landscape and life in rural Bengal. The atypical deployment of the metaphor in this one-off song notwithstanding, it is worth exploring how the figure of the Maker came to be equated with that of the colonisers and how by extension the railways increasingly came to be constructed as a curious divine/English creation in the late nineteenth-century Baul songs.

## Section II:

### ***Wonderful Ei Deho Gari Khudey Khoda Driver: Transportational Machines as the Divine Creation of the Godlike Englishman***

When Kubir sings

*Manob-tori baniyechhe shei hoddo karikor  
Khmujje paine take kothaye thake  
Achhe kon muluke barighor.  
Shokol gorte pare gore je bhangite pare  
Shob pare beta  
Gunokari beta sutturdhor.<sup>359</sup>*

[The human-boat has been built by the Supreme Workman. I cannot find him, where does He reside? Which country is His house in? He who can make and mar everything, he can do everything, he is endowed with countless virtues, he is master carpenter.]

or when Pagla Kanai sings

*Ajob ek jahaj gore  
Dinobondhu pathaichhen bhober pore.<sup>360</sup>*

[Building a wondrous ship, the Friend of the Poor (God) has sent us to this world]

<sup>359</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

or indeed when Mojid Talukdar exclaims ‘*Wonderful ei deho gari khude khoda driver*’ (‘Wonderful is this body-railcar, the little God is its driver’),<sup>361</sup> what strikes us immediately is a process of deification wherein the specific medium of transport in question is invariably represented as the handiwork of the Supreme Maker of all things. This is not surprising since in the spiritual imagination of the Bauls, all things, whether animate or inanimate, extraneous to the Baul body were perceived and made meaningful through the characteristically body-centric Baul consciousness. Therefore, since all things in the external world acquire their significance in and through the Baul body, they accordingly get translated in the Baul consciousness as the myriad manifestations of the Divine Maker. However, this process of attributing god-like qualities to machines in general was not a specifically Baul construction. In fact, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s case-study of the Calcutta jute-mill workers of 1890-1940 has long shown how the nature of the subordination that the workers experienced vis à vis the superior machinery of the jute mill was not the ‘technical subordination’ of Marx’s definition.<sup>362</sup> Rather, he maintained that the subordination of the largely unskilled workforce was more in line with a typically religious and magical outlook on the tools of their labour which crystallised in the ritual worship of the various machinery and tools of the factory. Technical knowledge or skill, or the lack of it, was hardly the measure against which the worker pitted his negotiation with the machines; the knowledge of the machines was largely mediated through their religious consciousness which manifested itself in the ritualised festivities of ‘*Hathyar-Pujo*’ [Worship of Hand-Tools] and ‘*Bishwokorma Pujo*’ [Worship of the God of Craftsmen and Architects] thus:

Bedecked with flowers, the giant cranes and travelling derricks clanked to their appointed tasks; caparisoned with blossoms, the locomotives snorted about on the sidings; streaming garlands, the wheelbarrows squeaked from coalpit to furnace.<sup>363</sup>

But what is curious about the deifying process in the metaphorical realm of the Baul songs is an evolving pattern in which the figure of the Divine Maker increasingly gets metamorphosed into the figure of the coloniser and the transportation mediums, by extension, into the divine handiwork of the God-like English masters. This tripartite

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>362</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940” in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ed., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 179-230.

<sup>363</sup> Quoted in Chakrabarty, “Conditions”, fn 78, p. 206 from Lillian Luker Asherby (with Roger Whatley), *My India*, London, 1938, pp. 205-6.

process of deifying machines in Baul songs wherein the machine is at once a human body, a divine creation as well as an essentially English creation is, we would argue in the following sub-sections, nothing unique to the Baul metaphorical imagination. It not only had its roots in long, multiple and much complex genealogies in British discourses on the various mechanical/technological innovations that exploded onto its nineteenth-century stage, but also had a full life as a shared trope in the bhodrolok imagination of nineteenth-century colonial Bengal.

## **Section II. i:**

### **The Spectacular Machines of the Divine Maker: Symmetries between British Natural Theologists and the Bauls**

Michael Adas has long demonstrated how with the coming of the age of Enlightenment and industrialisation in 18th century Europe, specially in England, the accents of the colonial ideal shifted from a predominantly religious difference with the colonised Other/s to a preoccupation with establishing moral and technological worth and superiority over the irrational and backward masses of Africa, India and China whose very Other-ness increasingly came to be defined on the basis of their 'lack' of scientific and technological accomplishments. Machines, to echo Adas's own words, became a measure of men.<sup>364</sup> Hence, when in 1894 George W. Macgeorge, the chief consulting engineer to the Government of India for railways, commented:

A land where the very names of innovation, progress, energy and the practical arts of life were unknown, or were abhorred, and which appeared sunk in a lethargic sleep...under the guiding direction of Providence it is from the British nation that the vast continent of India has received the leaven of a new moral and material regeneration, which can now never cease to operate until it has raised the country to a high level of power and civilisation. The most potent factor in this truly wonderful resurrection of a whole people, so visibly taking place before the eyes of the present generation, is unquestionably the railway system of the country; and there is little reason to doubt that the powerful onward impetus already imparted by railway communication...will continue to prevail...and will ever remain as a lasting memorial of the influence of Great Britain on the destinies of India.<sup>365</sup>

<sup>364</sup> Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

<sup>365</sup> George Macgeorge, *Ways and Works in India, Being an Account of the Public Works in that Country from the Earliest Times upto the Present Day*, Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1894, p. 220.

This statement can be read as symptomatic of two related strands in the colonial ideal that sought to justify its rule over India. First, it articulates a deep-seated conviction in the superiority of British material achievements that stood as the watermark of the 'high level of power and civilisation' that British rule sought to uplift the ignorant masses of India to. Second, and this is more curious, this technological and moral superiority granted legitimation to the colonial ideal in yet another register: that of 'Providence', of a deified Western power that was to guide and wonderfully resurrect the dying Mughal empire. And it is the steam-age crystallised in the highly successful railway system that bears testimony to both these strands in the colonial ideal. The evolution of this peculiar doubly-inscribed colonial ideal in 19<sup>th</sup> century India needs to be briefly discussed before we start looking at the symmetries between the British natural theologians and the Bauls in their conception of deified machines.

Commenting on the contrast in the images of the European on the steamer on the Ganges and the multitudes of noisy natives offering their prayers and devotion to the river, the exchanges between the protagonist, Oakfield and his fellow voyager, Middleton, in William Arnold's 1850 novel *Oakfield; or Fellowship in the East* summarily articulate <sup>the</sup> 'inconceivable separation there apparently and actually is between us few English, silently making a servant of the Ganges with our steam-engine and paddle-boats and those Asiatics, with shouts and screams worshipping the same river.'<sup>366</sup> And Kipling's *The Day's Work*, a short story that has the construction of a railway bridge as its subject, has Lord Krishna exclaim in a dream sequence: 'Great Kings, the beginning of the end is born already. The fire-carriages shout the names of new Gods that are not the old under new names.'<sup>367</sup> The self-image of the colonisers constructed through their technological inventions of the steamers and the railways in these literary texts of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century betrayed that they were, in more ways than one, playing God.

Such deifications of the colonising self as the torchbearer of scientific and technological advances in superstitious India singularly problematised the nature of the colonial encounter that was premised on a neat binary of Western scientific modernity versus

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<sup>366</sup> Francis G. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 122 as quoted in Michael Adas, *Machines*, p. 173.

<sup>367</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Day's Work*, London: Macmillan and Company, 1946 [1898], p. 41.

native superstition. Gyan Prakash has argued for an exclusively 'colonial' explanation of the compulsions behind the coloniser's staging of Western science as magic in colonial India. The paradoxical construction of the figure of the native as both an ignorant superstitious *object* of knowledge and a knowing *subject* in colonial narratives on 'tropicalising' Western science, Prakash argues, was the central shaping force that compelled the colonisers to 'stage' their brand of rationalistic science in nineteenth-century India in the very 'inappropriate' rhetoric of non-science that it purported to denounce, i.e., as magic. And thus James Esdaile was forced to use the term *belatee muntur* or the European Charm to explain mesmerism to his Indian medical assistants; his Mesmeric Hospital in turn came to be referred to by the lower-class natives as the *jadoo hospital* or House of Magic.<sup>368</sup> So was the museum transformed into the *jadoo ghar*, the Magic or Wonder House and Edgar Thurston's anthropometrical enterprise turned into 'Mujeum gymnastik shparts' [Museum Gymnastic Sports].<sup>369</sup>

However, to argue along Prakash's lines and say that this process of hybridisation of Western science, wherein rational science is made meaningful through spectacle-making and eliciting wonder, is a specific precipitation of the colonial encounter is both to overstate the colonial influence and deny the numerous instances of such hybridisation in contemporary Victorian England. The staging of scientific discoveries and experiments as visually entertaining spectacular images and exhibits in Victorian England was as much a handiwork of the natural theologians (William Paley and his followers) as of the Darwinists of the day.<sup>370</sup> For instance, as early as 1806, England witnessed the spectacle of William and Deane Walker's Eidouranion displaying recent astronomical discoveries on a moving musical planetarium in the Royalty Theatre.<sup>371</sup> Other spectacles such as those of electrical science displayed at the Adelaide Gallery and the Polytechnic Institution in London during the 1830s and 1840s were soon followed by broadsheets advertising public demonstrations of Mesmerism in 1846 and Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins' highly popular reconstructions of impressive fossil

<sup>368</sup> Prakash, *Another Reason*, p. 32.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>370</sup> For a fuller discussion of the natural theology versus Darwinism debates surrounding the spectacle-making of science in Victorian England and the emergence of the particular form of visual theology in the period, see Bernard Lightman, "The Visual Theology of Victorian Popularizers of Science: From Reverent Eye to Chemical Retina", *Isis*, 91:4, 2000, pp. 651-680.

<sup>371</sup> Horace Wellbeloved, *London Lions for Country Cousins and Friends about Town being the New Buildings, Improvements and Amusements in the British Metropolis, exhibited in a series of exquisite wood engravings, and a coloured frontispiece, with letter-press illustrations and comments*, London: William Charlton Wright, 1826.

animals revealed by geological research in the the Crystal Palace in 1854.<sup>372</sup> In short, the spectacular presentation of science, contrary to what Prakash contends, was not unique to the colonial situation. Moreover, while Prakash has argued that science's authority in the colony derived explicitly from its spectacular/ magical presentations, Waltraud Ernst, using the same case of James Esdaile, has shown that it was in fact the proximity of Esdaile's enterprise to the realm of magic and spectacle that eventually led to the final loss of scientific authority and Government support for him and his methods.<sup>373</sup>

Bernard Lightman has recently shown how the growth in the educated middle class and the coming of new printing technologies in mid-Victorian England spawned a new mass visual culture that increasingly turned the human eye as both the medium and the object of knowledge. In the numerous afore-mentioned attempts of popularising science, especially those of the natural theologians such as J.G. Wood, Richard Proctor and Agnes Clerke, this over-emphasis on the spectacular through the widespread use of visual images and the newly developed instruments such as the spectroscope and the camera, Lightman argues, re-shaped the tradition of natural theology into a particular kind of visual theology 'that maintained the credibility of natural theology without relying on a simplistic empiricism based on the primacy of the human eye'.<sup>374</sup> And in the scheme of this new visual theology such a staging of science as spectacle was ultimately geared to 'train the eyes of their readers to see infinite power, wisdom, and benevolence at work in the universe.'<sup>375</sup> However, despite the proliferation of this new visual culture, as we have seen above with the case of mesmerism, it is also true that the scientific establishment increasingly became suspicious of at least some of the more popular 'spectacular' aspects of scientific practice. Nonetheless, the schism between popular science and high science and their differing views on the spectacular need not concern us here. What is of interest to us is that there emerged a new visual context within which the spectacular capabilities of science came to be used as demonstrative

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<sup>372</sup> Iwan Rhys Morus, *Frankenstein's Children: Electricity, Exhibition, and Experiment in Early Nineteenth-Century London*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; Alison Winter, "Mesmerism and the Introduction of Surgical Anaesthesia to Victorian England", *Engineering & Science*, 2, 1998, p. 33; Hawkins, Benjamin Waterhouse. "On Visual Education as Applied to Geology," in *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 2, 1854. On more scientific spectacles in Victorian London, see Iwan Rhys Morus, Simon Schaffer and Jim Secord, "Scientific London," in Celina Fox ed., *London-World City, 1800-1840*, London: Yale University Press, 1992, pp. 129-142.

<sup>373</sup> See for instance, Waltraud Ernst, " 'Under the influence' in British India: James Esdaile's Mesmeric Hospital in Calcutta and its Critics", *Psychological Medicine*, 25, 1995, pp.1113—1123.

<sup>374</sup> Lightman, "Visual Theology", p. 653.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

proofs of the Divine Design.

What William Paley's much-popular and subsequently controversial Watchmaker analogy advocated in 1802 in his classic eponymous treatise on natural theology, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, sought to demonstrate was a teleological argument for the existence of God that equated the intricate and complex design of the watch with that of the natural world and hence the watchmaker with the Supreme Maker. The argument could be found in its germinal form in both Cicero's *De natura deorum* and the Renaissance usage of the concept of *machina mundi* or the world-machine. With the developments of experimental and demonstrative science along with the visual culture of scientific spectacles outlined above, this argument was greatly expanded and made more complex. From simple sundials now more complicated designs that natural science came to discern in nature were attributed to God and also used reflexively as proof of His existence. In fact, this interest in natural theology often came to overlap with a parallel interest in evangelical conversions of the heathens of India to Christianity in the writings of several prominent ideologues and missionaries of the day. William Paley, possibly the most well-known proponent of the Divine Design argument was thus an enthusiastic champion of evangelical conversions in India.

As early as 1794, Paley had appealed to the Christian missionary success in India as supporting Christianity's validity in his book *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*. Paley's ideas, especially his notion of the Divine Design, poured into the thought and vocabulary of the Christian missionaries across all denominations in colonial India. For instance, the impact of Paley's treatise on natural theology could be traced in the evangelical fervour of Mary Sherwood who had set up a series of schools in each of the cities of Calcutta, Danapur, Berhampur, Kanpur and Meerut that her husband was posted in as a regimental paymaster of the East India Company since 1805. Daughter of an Anglican clergyman, a distant relative of Paley and well-versed with his works, Mary's disappointing impression of *Evidences of Christianity* could be regarded as one of the driving forces behind her evangelical zeal in India. It, Mary stated,

had been the first book which had ever suggested a single doubt in my mind of the possibility of the Christian religion being untrue. It was not the fault of the good man that it was not given him to see that human

wisdom and human reasonings never yet brought a soul to the apprehension of those truths which, if taught at all, must be taught by God himself.<sup>376</sup>

It is little wonder then that throughout her life in the Indian colony in the nineteenth century Mary devoted herself to reading Scriptures, writing religious works for and about children, running Bible classes and charitable institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, Paley's concept of the Divine Design was also popular among the Wesleyan Methodists in the colony. In September 1850 *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* published a statement of an Indian boy in a Wesleyan school in India when he was examined orally on the concept by a visiting examiner: 'When we behold a house, we conclude that there must have been a builder: so, when we examine the works of creation, we are convinced that they have proceeded from some cause.'<sup>377</sup>

It is perhaps this widely-circulated argument of the Divine Design in the thoughts and works of the evangelical missionaries in nineteenth-century Bengal that the Bauls drew from when they perceived and represented modern technological devices through the metaphor of the divine machine. Perhaps no other song displays the symmetries between Paley's watchmaker analogy and the Baul metaphorical imagination so conspicuously as the following self-explanatory song by Kangal Fikirchand:

*Cholchhe ajob ghorī, diba rati nai kamai.  
Jar ghorī emon, karikor tar kemon bhai?  
Ek springer jore ghorir ghurchhe je re shokol  
Kol, shei springer jor na thakile, joto kol  
Shobi bikol; buker dupashey dolna, tok totok  
Tok hoye bajna, bedom bhabe cholchhe kintu, dom  
Dibar tar chabi nai.*

...

*Fikir tore fikir boli, jodi mor kotha rakhish  
Tobe prem bhore dinantore, doyamoy nam time dish;  
Jey karigor baniyeche, noshter ki kotha achhe,  
Nijer doshe bhangbe jokhon, tokhon rakhbar upaye  
Nai.<sup>378</sup>*

[The wondrous watch is working without respite. The one whose watch is such, wonder how his workman will be. By the might of this one spring of the watch, all the machines spin around; if there was no force in the spring, all the machines would be out of order. The two swings

<sup>376</sup> F.J. Harvey-Darton ed., *The Life and Times of Mrs Sherwood (1775—1851) from the Diaries of Captain and Mrs Sherwood*, London, 1910, p. 212.

<sup>377</sup> *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, September 1850, p. 996.

<sup>378</sup> Satischandra Majumdar, *Kangal Fikirchand Fokirer Baul Shongit*, Kumarkhali: Mathuranath Press, 1903, pp. 45-6. See also, Nirmalchandra Chattopadhyay, *Brihot Baul Songit*, Calcutta: Bengalroy Press, 1886, p. 71.



flanking the heart pulsate breathlessly, but there is no winding key. ... O Fikir, let me tell you the trick; If you listen to me, then, full of devotional love at the close of the day, set your watch to the name of the Merciful; because of the workman who has made it, there is no question of it going out of order; but when it will break because of your own faults, there is no way you can regain it.]

The historical factors that might have contributed to the fashioning of these symmetries between the natural theological conception of Divine Design and its metaphorical deployment by the Baul imagination of late-nineteenth century Bengal were quite a few. Sudhir Chakraborty, for instance, has shown how the proximity and exposure to the evangelical works of the Catholic Church and the Protestant congregation founded in 1838 and 1840 respectively in the district of Nadia impacted the religious tenets of both the Shahebdhoni and the Kortabhoja sects of Bengal. For instance, the Christian imperatives of the Decalogue not only directly influenced the Shahebdhonis as is evinced in Kubir's song on the subject,<sup>379</sup> but, as Chakraborty tells us, it was also adopted by the Kortabhojas whose body of Ten Commandments forbade the three bodily acts of adultery, stealing and killing together with their three concomitant intentional causes, lying and making acrimonious, fruitless and delirious speeches.<sup>380</sup> Moreover, even the Kortabhoja's ritual practice of *dayik mojlsh* has close symmetries with the Catholic ritual of confession. Chakraborty further elaborates:

Afflicted with the many obligations and responsibilities of the *sansar*, when the individual seeks freedom from his unbearable burden of sins, he joins the *dayik mojlsh*. First, five and a quarter *anna* is collected from the *dayik*, then after his confession and the flushing out of his sins his temples are smeared with earth and a devoted follower toils on his behalf. After this, *srijuter pod* [songs of the respectable man] is sung. It is noteworthy here that the sequence of the two songs that the sect's members sing consecutively in their Friday congregation resembles the Catholic sequence of Confession>Penance>Satisfaction.<sup>381</sup>

These close symmetries between the Christian and Kortabhoja tenets were anything but accidental, since the Kortabhojas in nineteenth-century Bengal constituted the largest number of converts of the Church and Baptist Missions. In his voluminous history of the Church Missionary Society, Eugene Stock, administrator and journal editor of the Society, accounted the first wave of the Kortabhoja conversion in 1833 when 'thirty persons of the sect was [sic] baptised in the face of much [Brahmin] persecution.' This, Stock continues, was followed by the large scale conversion in 1838 'when suddenly the

<sup>379</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 25.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

leading men in ten villages, including with their families of some five hundred souls, simultaneously embraced the Gospel of Christ, and after some months' instruction, were baptised.' However, it was not until the flood of the Jalangi river in the Krishnanagar district in 1838-39 and the relief measures undertaken by the Christian missionaries under one W.J.Deerr that almost 3,000 Kortabhojas embraced Christianity including 'the Gurus of the sect themselves, who would be losers and not gainers by becoming Christians.'<sup>382</sup>

Hence, for instance, when Dinu sings

*Garir koler ghore boler koto karkhana srishti korlen  
srishtikorta  
Boshailen moha atma jogotkorta ki jogete gothechhe.  
Garir hostopod chaka adi diyechhe gari  
Thikthak gorechhe thike  
Rongkhile serechhe likhe cholechhe shukhe bolchhe shukhe  
Hariram nam ghorì ghorì.  
Garir shorodol podmete jokhon hoye sthiti ni-akare  
Nirakarey goren nityo karikore ondhokare koren  
Garir akriti gothon.  
Ar dosh mash doshdin kup shohore boshoti.<sup>383</sup>*

[In the machine room (engine) of the railcar there are so many factories of power that the Creator has established. Therein did the Creator place the Great Soul, what a wonderful conjunction. In the car he has attached the hands and the legs—the wheels of the car. He has built it well and played with colours, now it runs with great joy and takes the name of Hariram at every step. When the car in its most rudimentary form is lodged in the sixteen-petalled lotus, it is then that the Formless One begins his artisanship to create the mortal/quotidian frame of the car in utter darkness. Another ten months and ten days shall be spent living in the city of gloom.]

the symmetries between the Christian notion of Divine Design and his metaphorical perception and representation of the body-railcar are at once made manifest. In Kanai's metaphorical deployment of the body-railcar, the factory (*karkhana*) producing railcars is first likened to the divine factory creating human bodies, and the power of steam (*bol*) likened to the human life-force. Moreover, Kanai goes a step further to demonstrate the functional similitudes between human limbs and the railway wheels inasmuch as both are mechanisms for mobility. In a final stroke of his metaphorical imagination, the machine is transfigured into the ultimate manifestation of the divine design, i.e. the shapeless human embryo that the divine Maker designs in the creative darkness of the

<sup>382</sup> Eugene Stock, *The History Of The Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men And Its Work*, 1899.

<sup>383</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 134.

womb. As the intricate mechanisms of the railcar become intelligible through the human body, the intelligent design of the railway, much like that of Paley's watch, at once becomes yet another manifestation of the Divine design, the *poromartho tottvo* of human existence:

*Trijogote swami gorondar.  
Bol bine ki chole re manob gari  
Bolhin shob ochol hobe cholbe na--  
Bol thakile chole druto bol gele buddhi-hoto  
Poromartho tottvo jene bujho na.<sup>384</sup>*

[The builder of the three worlds is the *swami*. Can the human-car move without power/energy? Without power, everything will be immobile; if there is power (it) will move fast, without it the intellect will die. Comprehend through your understanding of the spiritual truths.]

## Section II. ii:

### ***Oshthatur Machinekhani Ogni Chalaye Khud Company: Machines as the Handiwork of the English God***

It was not until mid-nineteenth century that we discern a marked shift in the metaphorical deployment of the various transportation vehicles in the Baul songs. While, as we have seen in the previous section, the various transportational metaphors of late-eighteenth—early-nineteenth century Baul songs were spiritually accented inasmuch as they stood in the Baul imaginary as deified machines, in the songs of the latter half of the nineteenth century these metaphors came to be doubly inscribed by a distinctive colonial hue. And in this imagination that perceived and represented the hitherto deified transportational machines as exclusively the divine handiwork of the coloniser, the railways came to occupy a central place, not merely because the impact of the boats and the steamers were both fading out and short-lived in the Baul consciousness at this time, but also because the railways acquired the singular symbolic status in both colonial and indigenous discourses of the time as the most visible emblem of colonial modernity. In this section, I would seek to trace the genealogical roots of this doubly inscribed Baul metaphor of the railway as the deified machines of the English in contemporary bhodrolok discourses on the subject.

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid. pp. 133-4.

When Kipling deployed the native mythical figure of Lord Krishna to simultaneously articulate the magical spectacular agency of the 'fire-carriages' and deify the technologically superior colonial self as a fitting rival to the Hindu God, what he inadvertently referred to was a similar deification of machines in general and the railways in particular in the indigenous imagination of colonial India.<sup>385</sup> And in 1869, Bholanauth Chunder wrote in his memoir of railway travel across India thus:

The first sight of a steamer no less amazed than alarmed the Burmese, who had a tradition that the capital of their empire would be safe, until a vessel should advance up the Irrawady without *oars* and *sails*! Similarly does the Hindu look upon the Railway as a marvel and miracle—a novel incarnation of the regeneration of the Bharat-versh.

...

The iron-horse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may be said to have realised the Pegasus of the Greeks, or the Pukaraj of the Hindoos. It has given tangibility and a type to an airy nothing, and has reduced fancy to a matter-of-fact. The introduction of this great novelty has silenced Burke's reproach, 'that if the English were to quit India, they would leave behind them no memorial of art or science worthy of a great and enlightened nation.'<sup>386</sup>

and later,

In it [the train], a Hindoo is apt to feel the prophecies of the sage verified in the Rail—riding upon which has arrived the Kulkee Avatar of his Shasters, for the regeneration of the world.<sup>387</sup>

There can be discerned here two inter-related strands in Chunder's perception and representation of the railways that became symptomatic of the English-educated bhodrolok<sup>388</sup> response to Western science and technology in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. First, the marvellous and miraculous presence of the railways came to stand in Chunder's imagination as a visual testimony to the 'regeneration of Bharat-versh'. And second, the railways, much like the steamer to the Burmese, came to acquire simultaneously a mythic and deified status wherein it is transfigured by Chunder's literary imagination into both the Hindu winged-horse, 'Pukaraj' [*Pokkhiraj*], and the Hindu messianic God, Kolki.

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<sup>385</sup> And elsewhere in *Kim*, the Kamboh, the Punjabi farmer from Jullander says 'Then, in the name of the Gods, let us take the fire-carriage. ... The Government has brought on us many taxes, but it gives us one good thing—the *te-rain* that joins friends and unites the anxious. A wonderful matter is the *te-rain*.' Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 2003 [1901], p. 193.

<sup>386</sup> Chunder, *Travels*, vol. I, pp. 140-1.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>388</sup> Not only did Bholanauth Chunder, writing in the 1860s, describe himself as 'Young Bengal', but even Talboys Wheeler whose introduction frames Chunder's travel memoir, used this term to describe the author. Bholanauth, in Wheeler's words, was 'a fair type of the enlightened class of English educated Bengali gentleman'. Chunder, *Travels*, vol. I, p. xii.

David Arnold has demonstrated how the rise of the validity and undisputed superiority of Western science and medicine over its indigenous rivals was coterminous with the emergence of a strong resurgence of indigenous and a specifically 'Hindu' science in late-nineteenth century India. Framed within an essentially nationalist quest for selfhood and modernity, this revival of Hindu science, Arnold argues, owed its origins not so much to its alleged direct defiance of Western scientific hegemony, but to its being 'a complementary cultural and political activity, a means of establishing Indian antecedents and contexts for modern science and securing the self-esteem and autonomy of Indians in the contemporary scientific world.'<sup>389</sup> In its bid to negotiate indigenous science with Western science, the past, specifically Hindu antiquity, became the lynch pin of the particular nationalist discourse that sought to establish a scientific modernity of its own. Operating largely under the influence, whether conscious or unconscious, of the tripartite Orientalist model of India's civilisational history—of ancient Hindu greatness, destruction and degeneration in Muslim Middle Ages and the modern, enlightened, scientifically advanced and colonial present—, the nationalist project of appropriating Western science and technology in specifically Hindu terms often involved a blurring of the boundaries between religion and science.

In this project of the indigenous translation of colonial science, Hindu classical past and scriptures were repeatedly invoked by the Western-educated elite Indians to serve multiple functional roles. At one level, by locating the Hindu past as anteriority rather than an evolutionary origin, nationalist discourses on the subject sought to historicise indigenous science in ways that would strengthen their claims to a uniquely Indian scientific modernity and thereby enable them to subvert the hitherto unassailable superiority of colonial science. At its most extreme, we have for instance Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj in 1875, claiming that all modern scientific discoveries had in fact originated in the Vedas. At another level however, this resurgence provided the colonised elites with a recognisable interpretive frame of comprehending, translating and appropriating Western science wherein they could denounce the mythical elements as supersititious and 'false' and fashion their self-image as scientific, rational and critically objective.

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<sup>389</sup> Arnold, *Science*, p. 170.

While this revival of the Hindu past in the nationalist-scientific discourses of late-nineteenth century Bengal repeatedly sought to extricate the rationalistic, factually verifiable, 'true' science from the irrational, mythical, 'false' science of ancient Hindu scriptures in the scientific lineage of Hindu history, what this historicisation of indigenous science produced in general was an undisputed valorisation of the 'scientific' eye in almost all nationalist discourses of the time. For instance, travel narratives of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth centuries were, as Kumkum Chatterjee has argued, fraught with such anxieties that came to mark the national-historical consciousness of the time. However, the attempts and their associated anxieties notwithstanding, the demarcations between 'real' or empirically verifiable history and mythical or 'false' history in the popular middle-class perception of contemporary Bengal were far from being neatly etched out. More often than not, the two spilled into each other and created a singular perceptual consciousness within which the Hindu past was both scientific and mythical—a consciousness that in its nationalist-historical-literary function spawned the highly inspirational and popular 'fictionalised'/ 'imaginary' histories of the historical novels and plays of the day. As Chatterjee points out, the faultlines discerned in the simultaneity of Bholanauth Chunder's dismissal of the image of Govindji at Brindavan as God—an act in line with his self-proclaimed rational, scientific identity as a true representative of Young Bengal — and his immediate recognition of the same as a 'historical warrior and statesman' at once betrays these anxieties that marked the bhodrolok consciousness in their attempts to avoid the very rhetoric of myth-making and 'false' history that they set out to debunk.<sup>390</sup> Even Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo champion of anti-scriptural religion, saw evolution not as Darwin would have liked, but 'as an affirmation of the idea of a progression, represented by the avatars of Vishnu, from primordial to higher states of being.'<sup>391</sup>

It is in this perceptual frame where the mythical fuses with scientific rationality that we can situate Chunder's figuration of the railway as *Pukaraj* and *Kalki*. The mythologisation and deification of the railways continue in Chunder's narrative:

Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 1860, was the day appointed for our departure.

<sup>390</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, "Discovering India: Travel, History and Identity in Late Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth Century India", in Daud Ali ed., *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>391</sup> Arnold, *Science*, p. 170.

Crossing over to Howrah, we engaged passage for Burdwan. The train started at 10 a.m., and we fairly proceeded on our journey. Surely, our ancient Bhagiruth, who brought the Ganges from heaven, is not more entitled to the grateful remembrance of posterity, than is the author of the Railway in India.<sup>392</sup>

What is interesting in this narrative is the mythic frame within which Chunder locates the railway, that singular symbol of scientific/technological progress of colonial India, and the equation of the mythic hero Bhagiruth with 'the author of the Railway in India.' The appeal of the mythic tale of Bhagirath's singular act of bringing Ganga down from the heavens to the earth to Chunder resides not only in the inspirational model of the dedicated, hard-working, virtuous hero it offers in the figure of Bhagirath, but also in the context of Bhagirath's commendable act of penance. According to the tale, as accounted for in the epic poem *Ramayana*, Bhagirath's act was carried out to restore peace and prosperity in his kingdom of Kosala in ancient India which was destroyed through the accumulated sins of his predecessors since Kapilamuni's curse to King Sagar's sons following the search for the lost sacrificial horse in the Aswamedh yajna. The point of similitude in Chunder's equation of the 'paternal Government of the British in India'<sup>393</sup> that produced the railways with Bhagirath lay in Chunder's self-image of a Western-educated, rational and modern Bengali intellectual that so internalised the Orientalist model of India's civilisational history. In other words, the model of the golden age of King Sagar—the dark ages of escalating degeneration caused by the wicked deeds of his sons and the consequent curse of Kapilamuni—restoration of peace and harmony through Bhagirath's act of penance offered Chunder the near exact frame of reference to explain and justify the colonial civilising mission. What once again remains problematic here is the very choice and deployment of the mythic frame of reference by a self-proclaimed representative of the 'Young Bengal' that so championed the rationalistic scientific mind.

It is in this cultural practice of the mythification of European machines by the colonised elites of Bengal in their bid to indigenise Western science that we would situate the Bauls' perception and representation of the railway as manifestations of a divinity that progressively became synonymous with the figure of the coloniser. However, this representation of the railways as the vehicles of the God-like English was not unique to the Baul metaphorical imagination. In his study of the various representations of the

<sup>392</sup> Chunder, *Travels*, vol I, p. 139.

<sup>393</sup> Chunder, *Travels*, dedication.

railways in colonial and indigenous (both elite and subaltern) imaginations, Ian Kerr has passingly mentioned how the railways came to be naturalised in North Indian folk imagination in and through the medium of their songs.<sup>394</sup> In William Crooke's collection of folk songs of Northern India, while one song from late-nineteenth century Agra began and ended with the refrain 'The lordly English have started the train; it comes and goes in the twinkle of the eye' and had lines like 'Eating no corn, drinking water, by the force of steam it goes. It goes on no plain road, on rods of iron it goes. In front of the engines, behind the cars: bhak bhak they go', another song from 1880s Muzaffarnagar district titled "Song of the British" [*Git Phirangiyon Ka*] included lines like 'Thou has made the railway so! / Grain can come in a moment!'<sup>395</sup> Hence, Roshiuddin sings

*Line-er upor cholchhe gari kemon ajob kol.  
Shokol shomoy shoman chole purano hoile hoye durbol.  
Oshto dhatur machinekhani ogni chalaye khud Company.*<sup>396</sup>

[How wondrous is this machine that travels on these rail-lines! It moves at the same speed at all times, weakens only when it gets old. The fire of this machine made of the precious eight metals is fed into it by the Master-Company.]

And Jadubindu sings

*Ei je khoder karkhana mone bujhe dekh na  
Ingrajer oi rail-er gari hoye na tulona.*<sup>397</sup>

[Comprehend this factory of God in your mind; there is no equal to this railcar of the Englishman]

In these figurations, the railcar is unequivocally identified as the wondrous[*ajob*], unparalleled handiwork of the God-like English.

It is however necessary to situate this specific metaphorical deployment of the railways as the divine apparatus of the coloniser in the context of their many shifting chronological accents in the Baul songs that spanned from the late-eighteenth to late-nineteenth century Bengal. As we recall, Kubir's almost atypical overt resistance to the railways as a synecdoche of the machine-rule of the colonial state came in at the turn of

<sup>394</sup> Ian Kerr, "Representation and Representations of the Railways of Colonial and Post-Colonial South Asia", *Modern Asian Studies* 37: 2, 2003, pp. 315-6.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 221.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., p. 212.



the nineteenth century when European tools and machineries not only steadily erased familiar indigenous landscape and lifestyle but increasingly impoverished rural Bengal. By mid-nineteenth century, Kubir's one-off song of resistance soon gave way to the afore-mentioned large body of Baul songs which not only hailed British machinery but even deified both the machines and the maker. But, with the first wave of the nationalist movement hitting Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the consequent 'discovery' of the figure of the Baul and Baul songs on the bhodrolok cultural stage, there is discerned a renewed resistance to British machinery in the Baul songs of late-nineteenth century Bengal. For instance, in Nirmal Chandra Chattopadhyay's collection of Baul songs in 1883, we encounter a certain Gossain Gobin Chand lashing out against the English locomotive of the railway:

*Chore ingrajer garite tor ki proyojon  
Ore obodh mon, boli shon.  
Gurur padpodmo garir age,  
Tuccho koler gari kothaye lage,  
Shighro chol onurage, pabe nityo brindabon.*<sup>398</sup>

[What is your need to ride the (rail) car of the Englishman, O ignorant mind, hear what I have to say. The guru's blessed feet precede the car; the trivial machine-car is far from being its equal. Travel this instance by the power of devotional love, you will find the everlasting kingdom of love.]

What is interesting is to mark the accents of the shift in the metaphorical deployment of the body-railcar. While the body and the railcar, as we have seen above, were fused into a single metaphor of the deified English machine in the mid-nineteenth century Baul songs, what we see here is a rather nationalistic deployment of the body-railcar wherein the body is not only segregated from the railcar but is represented as spiritually superior to the English railcar. The wheels of the railcar are no longer perceived as divinely created human limbs; rather, the guru's feet, Gobin tells us, precedes that of the English railcar. This uncoupling of the metaphor of the body-railcar into the Baul and the colonial in this song stands symptomatic of the way in which nationalism came to infuse the Baul's perceptual consciousness—an infusion that in its hay-day in early-twentieth century Bengal came to fully manifest itself in the propagandist 'swadeshi Baul' of Mukundadas's folk-drama *Karmaksetra* written at the time of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>398</sup> Nirmalchandra Chattopadhyay, *Brihot Baul Shongit*, Calcutta: Bengalroy Press, 1886, p. 12. See Gopal's use of the metaphor *onurager kol-gari* or the machine-car of devotional love in his song in Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, no. 552, p. 943.

<sup>399</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls*, pp. 33, 35.

**Conclusion:**

In this chapter, we have argued how the metaphorical deployments of a range of transportational mediums in the Baul songs of late-eighteenth—early-nineteenth century colonial Bengal stand testimony to not only the highly mobile figure of the Baul as opposed to the idealised, ignorant, localised, technology-free figure in the bhodrolok discourse, but also how a historiographical preoccupation with the religious consciousness of the subaltern has in fact lost sight of the Baul's nuanced understanding of the mechanisms and operations of the novelties of European technologies of transport such as the steamers and the railways. Moreover, by tracing the multiple genealogical roots of the Baul's figuration of the deified English machine, I have shown how the Baul metaphorical imaginary was not, as it were, an isolated, asocial or ahistorical construct, but one that was highly perceptive of and responsive to the various contemporary discourses of both the coloniser and the colonised elites whose thoughts and vocabularies often influenced the Baul's perceptual and representational consciousness.

***Brohmo-Onde Ondo-Bahire: A Study of the Spatial Metaphors in Baul Songs***

Theoretical debates on the issues of space and spatiality have long since reoriented the ways in which space/spatiality has been viewed. Space, like Time, was no longer seen as a dead, fixed, value-free, objective and a pre-constituted entity. Since at least the 1980s, many scholars have challenged these conventional understandings of space and spatiality proposing instead a much nuanced understanding of these categories as being constituted by and constitutive of a specific set of social relations and imaginations constructed through a lived-body's dialectic with the material world in a specific point in time.<sup>400</sup> This recent understanding of the socio-historically specific production and consumption of spatiality that manifests itself in the multiple trajectories of diverse (often conflicting) social experiences and contexts is at the heart of my argument in this chapter. However, within the many theoretical debates on the socio-historical-material understandings of the production of space, what is of essence, and hence is relevant to my present argument, is the attention that is given to the embodied nature of the diverse lived experiences, social practices and imaginations. Put simply, in these strands of the debates on spatiality, the production of space through lived experiences has its starting point in the body. Following Henry Lefebvre, it can be said that the body both *is* and *has* its space: it is through an active engagement with the surrounding world and the consequent, almost simultaneous, production of meaning that the lived body not only produces itself in space as a biosocial body but also produces that social-material space.<sup>401</sup> It is within this dialectical understanding of spatiality as constructing and constructed by the lived experience of the human body that we would situate our reading of the Bauls' highly specific conceptualisations of their bodyspace as articulated in their songs in and through the three intertwined spatial metaphors of the *ultodesh* or the inverted land, the *deho-bhando* or the microcosmic body, and of the body-city.

**Section I:**

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<sup>400</sup> See, for instance, Derek Gregory and John Urry ed., *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1985 and Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, New York: Verso, 1989.

<sup>401</sup> Henry Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991.

## Spatialising the Body: The *Ultodesh* of the Womb

Let us begin by considering the following song by Din Shorot:

*Emon ultodesh go guru kon jayegaye achhe  
Jetha hnetmundu urddhopode she deshe lok bash kortechhe.  
She desher joto nodnodi  
Urddhodike jolosrote bohe nirobodhi—  
Abar joler niche akash batash  
Tate manush bash kortechhe.  
Mon re shei deshete joto loker bash  
Mukhey ahar korey na keu naker nai nishwash  
Tara molmutro tyag kore na  
Abar ahar kore bnachtechhe.  
Mon re din shorot bole hoilam chomotkar  
Chondro shurjer prokash nai shei deshta ondhokar  
Abar shei desher lok obiroto ei deshete astechhe.<sup>402</sup>*

[Such an inverted place, O guru, where is this located? Here people live with their heads down and feet up. All the rivers of this place perpetually flow upstream; beneath the waters are the sky and the air, and therein lives all the people. O mind, all the people who live in this place, they do not eat with their mouths nor breathe through their nostrils; neither do they defecate or urinate and yet they eat to live. O mind, Din Shorot says, I am amazed; the sun and the moon do not appear in this dark place; and again the people of that land are continually coming into this land.]

In this realm of the *ultodesh* [literally, the ‘inverted place’], Din Shorot tells us, everything is, in a very literal and visually graphic sense, upside down: rivers flow upstream, the sky is beneath the water, people walk on their heads, eat not with their mouths nor breathe through their nostrils nor indeed excrete, and the sun and the moon are absent in this ‘dark land’. Clearly, not only are familiar cosmological and geographical ordering of the world and the universe inverted in this spatial imagination of the *ultodesh*, but even bodily notions and expectations are turned upside down. But what is interesting in this imagination of the *ultodesh* is its spatio-temporal location in the maternal womb. Read in this light then, the hitherto unfamiliar inversions at once recall the familiar spatial and temporal ordering of the foetus in the mother’s womb. In this realm of darkness, the people walking upside down stand for the inverted position of the foetus that eats, breathes and survives through the umbilical cord, the upward-flowing river stands for the inverted blood circulation. And elsewhere, such a spatial-temporal ordering of the *ultodesh* is elaborated upon thus:

*Shei desher kotha re mon bhuile giyechho  
Urddhopode hnetmunde je deshete bash korechho.*

<sup>402</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 126-7.

*Bindurupe pitar mostoke chhile*  
*Kamboshe matrigorbhe probeshile*  
*Shukro ar shonite mishe bortulakar dhorechho.*  
*Kshiti-op-tej-morut-byomete*  
*Poncho mashe ponchopran bhoutik dehete*  
*Shoptom mashe gurur kachhe mohamontro labh korechho.*  
*Tokhon chondro shurjo na chhilo prokash*  
*Ondhokar joler niche chhile dosh mash*  
*Chhilo nabhipodme matrinari tai diye ahar korechho.*  
*Din Shorot bole shadhonar phole*  
*Gorbhoghor karagar hoite ei deshe ele*  
*Michhe mayaye bhuile roile jabar upaye ki korechho?*<sup>403</sup>

[You have forgotten the tales of that place, o mind, where you have lived with your feet down and head down. In the form of the *bindu*, you were in the head of the father, urged by lust entered the mother's womb, blending with semen and blood have acquired a spherical form. With the Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky, in the five months the five life forces are generated in the physical body; in the seventh month, you have obtained the sacred words of initiation from the Guru. Then there was no sun or the moon; beneath the dark waters you lived for ten months; there was the mother's umbilical cord in the lotus-like navel through which you ate. Din Shorot says, as a result of the *shadhona* from the prison-like womb you came into this place; enticed by the false illusion, what ways have you devised for your return?]

This temporal understanding of the subtle body is, as Sudhir Chakraborty points out, endlessly plural and varies according to the specific beliefs and rituals of particular sects and the particular predispositions of their religious preceptors. However, according to the Baul's understanding of the physical and subtle bodies of the foetus, entry to the *ultodesh* happens when, urged by lust, the father's sperm enters the mother's womb and thence, fused with the mother's blood, acquires a circular shape in the first five months in the womb. Thereafter, its corporeality and particular characteristic is lent through the manifestations of the qualities [*gunas*] of the five fundamental elements, i.e., earth, water, fire, air and sky respectively in the foetus. In the sixth month, the six instinctual drives of the body [*shororipu*], i.e., lust, anger, greed, intoxication, confusion and envy manifest themselves. In the seventh month, the seven *dhatu*s, i.e., chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow and semen, take shape in the foetus.<sup>404</sup> The eighth month sees the manifestation of constitutional essences such as tenuity/subtlety [*anima*], grace [*mohima*], pride [*gorima*], etc. The nine apertures of the body, namely, the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, anus and genital, take shape

<sup>403</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 132-33.

<sup>404</sup> For the various meanings of the term *dhatu*, see Projit B. Mukharji, "Dhatu Dourbolyo: Diagnosing the Rhizoid Pathologies of Racial Weakness" in *Nationalizing the Body: The Market, Print and Healing in Colonial Bengal, 1860-1930*, London: Anthem Press, 2009. We use the term here in the sense of the constituting fluids of the body.

in the foetus.<sup>405</sup> In the tenth month, the foetus is endowed with the ten sensory perceptions constituting the five sense organs [*gyanendriyo*] of the eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin and the five working organs of speech, hands, feet, anus and genital.

What is interesting in this specific esoteric interpretation of the spatio-temporal embryological development as also that of the womb-space is two-fold. First, the narrative structure and contents of the embryological descriptions found in Baul song-texts are not unique. Very similar narratives describing the development of the embryo are found in a number of distinct textual corpuses of both modern and pre-modern provenance. The more significant of these would include early Sanskrit Upanishads from where it also entered into classical Sanskrit medical treatises as well as into heterodox yogic traditions, ancient Greek medical treatises whence it again entered into the major Abrahamic religious traditions as well as into Perso-Arabic medical texts. During the medieval period, these various traditions became available in Bengal through a range of texts including both those with Sufi-yogic resonances and those with Tantric influences. In the modern period again, these various influences intertwined in a variety of ways in several popular printed texts dealing with human reproduction. As a consequence therefore, embryological descriptions organised in a strikingly familiar narrative format crop up in an immensely varied corpus of texts of varying intellectual affiliations and age. Given the immense variety of texts as well as the multiplicity of intellectual overlaps, it would be difficult to state with absolute accuracy the precise causal relationship between each of these individual corpuses and indeed with the Baul texts. However, the strong resemblance of the narrative structure and the contents of the description cannot be missed even upon a cursory perusal of these texts. For instance, in the classical Ayurvedic accounts of Susruta (late-6<sup>th</sup>—early-5<sup>th</sup> century BC), the description of the embryological development is thus stated:

In the first month, the foetus has a jelly-like form (*kalala*). In the second month, owing to a chemical change that the material constituents of the body has undergone due to the effect of cold, heat and air, the foetus becomes firm. ... In the third month, a pair of hands, a pair of legs and the head—these five conglomerated masses (*pinda*) are produced and the chest and the back along with the subsidiary parts of the nose and the chin are subtly produced. In the fourth month, the differentiation of the limbs is much more pronounced; and owing to the manifestation of the heart of the foetus, the entity of consciousness becomes also manifested.

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<sup>405</sup> Sometimes, in the Baul songs of *dehototto*, there are references to a tenth aperture that stands in their anatomical imagination as the vagina. See Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 26.

Because the heart is the seat of consciousness. For this reason, the foetus, in the fourth month, manifests a desire for the objects of the senses. ... In the fifth month, the perceptive powers of the mind are even more heightened. In the sixth month, intelligence begins to develop. In the seventh month, the differentiation of the limbs are even more well-manifested and definite. In the eighth month, the vital elements (ojas) still remains unstable and so a child born in this month would be short-lived. ... Any of the ninth, tenth, eleventh and the twelfth months is the right time for birth.<sup>406</sup>

In Galen's embryological narratives of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC too one finds structural symmetries with that of the Baul song-texts. Dividing the 'genesis' of the foetus in four different temporal stages, Galen went on to describe the four stages thus: in the first stage, the foetus is in the unformed seminal stage; in the second stage, with the 'tria principia' of the heart, liver and brain engendered, the foetus, now filled with blood, acquires a certain fleshly solidarity and size and hence is designated as 'foetus'; in the third, the shape of the three ruling parts of the heart, brain and liver along with that of the limbs come to be outlined more clearly; and in the fourth and final stage, the foetus, now having visibly and clearly manifested its limbs and organs more distinctly, is called a 'child'.<sup>407</sup> In fact, even in the late-nineteenth century Bengali treatises on midwifery, such a month-by-month chronology of the development of the foetus can be discerned. For instance, in Surendranath Goswami's *Arya-Dhatribidya*, the accent on reproductive health notwithstanding, the similarities between the overall structures of the embryological development in this representative text and the Baul song-texts can hardly be ignored. According to Goswami, 'in the first month there is only a diluted mass of translucent fluid; in the second it gives rise to either *Pindo* (usually ball of flesh), *Peshi* (usually muscles) or *Orbbud* (usually a tumour); in the third month limbs develop; in the fourth consciousness; fifth it acquires greater nourishment; in the sixth develops veins, arteries, skin, body hair and nails.'<sup>408</sup> It is thus crucial that we remember that the Bauls in introducing this element into their texts were working within a hugely influential and largely shared narrative tradition which was being used by a vast variety of authors and texts. Once again then, as we have noted repeatedly before, this aspect underlines the need to see the Bauls within a larger shared intellectual milieu and not in intellectual isolation.

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<sup>406</sup> Susruta, *Sustrutasamhita*, trans. Jashodanandan Sarkar, Calcutta: Kebabram Chattopadhyay, 1303 BS, pp. 210-11.

<sup>407</sup> See Galen, *On Semen*, trans, ed. and commentary by Phillip de Lacy, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992, Section I:9:1-10, pp. 92-95, 101.

<sup>408</sup> Projit B Mukharji, *Medicine and Modernity*, Unpublished Thesis, London: SOAS, 2006, pp. 226-7.

In fact, taking this argument further we will see that this embryological narrative was shared by both the orthodox and the heterodox. For instance, when the Koran described the four-stage development of the embryo as

And certainly We created man of an extract of clay,  
Then We made him a small seed in a firm resting-place,  
Then We made the seed a clot, then We made the clot a lump of flesh,  
then We made (in) the lump of flesh bones, then We clothed the bones  
with flesh, then We caused it to grow into another creation, so blessed be  
Allah, the best of the creators.<sup>409</sup>

its symmetries with the four-stage Galenic embryological narrative becomes all too clear. In fact, its accent on the much-vexed question of when the foetus became conscious notwithstanding, Garbha Upanishad too described the embryological development thus:

On a perfect day and on the uniting of the male and female reproductive fluids, after the lapse of one night, the embryo is in a mixed (semi-fluid) state. After seven nights from thereon, it takes the shape of a bubble formed out of water. At the end of a fortnight, it takes the shape of a solid lump. It gets solidified and hardened at the end of one month. In two months, the head takes form. At the end of three months, the legs and foot are formed. And by the fourth month, the wrist, stomach and the hip, waist etc are formed. During the fifth month, the spine and the adjoining bones get shaped. The Mouth, Nose, Eyes and the Ears are all formed during the sixth month. In the seventh month, life or the jivan enters the body shaped so far. By the eighth month, it attains full shape and gets fulfilled with all other remaining parts. ... It is during the ninth month that all the sense organs and intellect organs attain completeness. And during this time, the jivan is reminded of its previous birth and it realises all the good and bad deeds it committed during such previous birth.<sup>410</sup>

Similar structurations of the embryological narrative are also notably found in the texts of the various heterodox cults in medieval Bengal. For instance, in *Goraksha-Bijay* by Sheikh Faizullah, the popular sixteenth-century Bengali poem about the Natha yogi Gorakshanath and his heroic rescue of his master Minanath, the mystery of the birth (*jonmorohosyo*) is narrated thus:

*Prothom masher shomoy jane ba na jane*

<sup>409</sup> Online text of *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. M.H. Shakir, Tabrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 1983, "The Believers", 23: 12-14, available at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/koran/koran-idx?type=DIV0&byte=527949> accessed on December 1, 2008.

<sup>410</sup> Based on the edition by Ramamaya Tarkaratna, "Garbha-Upanisad" in *The Atharvana-Upanishads*, Calcutta: Ganesha Press, 1872, 76: 4: 'rtukāle samprayogād ekarātroṣitaṃ kalalaṃ bhavati saptarātroṣitaṃ budbudam ardhmāsābhyantere piṇḍaṃ māsābhyantere kathinaṃ māsadvayena śiraḥ māsatrāyena pādapradeśaḥ caturthe gulphajātharakātipradeśāḥ pañcame pṛṣṭhavaṃśaḥ ṣaṣṭhe mukhanāsikākṣīśrotrāṇi saptame jīvena saṃyuktaḥ aṣṭame sarvalakṣaṇasampūrṇaḥ/...atha navame māsi sarvalakṣaṇajñānasampūrṇo bhavati pūrva-jātiṃ smarati śubhāśubhaṃ ca karma vindati"



*Dui masher shomoy lokachare shune.  
 Tinmasher shomoyet rokto dola dola  
 Char masher kale hoye hare mashe jora.  
 Ponchomasher shomoyet ponchophool phote.  
 Chhoyemasher shomoyet ejug palte.  
 Shatmasher shomoyete shateshwori khaye  
 Oshtomashete mon pobone chiyaye.  
 Noyemasher shomoyete noboghono sthiti.  
 Doshmashe dosh dine pindarun goti.<sup>411</sup>*

[The time of the first month, one may not know; that of the second month, one hears from popular customs and rituals. On the third month, the blood clots; on the fourth month, the bones and the muscles are joined; during the fifth month, the five flowers (of life-force) bloom; during the sixth, it reverses this yuga. During the seventh month, shateshwori eats; in the eighth month, the mind floats on the air; during the ninth month, the nine-fluids thicken and acquires a fixity. On the tenth day of the tenth month, it acquires the motion of the conglomerated mass of five elements (*pinda*).]

While the individual accents in the structures and contents of the various embryological narratives of the aforementioned traditions—both pre-modern and modern, orthodox and heterodox—are different, the structural symmetries discerned between these and that of the embryological narratives in the Baul song-texts are hard to ignore and perhaps best evinced in the following Baul song by Gopal Das:

*Prothom mashe mangsho shonitmoye  
 Dui mashe noro nabhi kora osthir uday  
 Tin mashe tin gune mostok jonmaye.  
 Choturthete netro korno osthi chormo lom gune.  
 Ponchomete hosto podakar  
 Ponchotottwo eshe korlo atmate shonchar  
 Shei din holo jib lok akar prokar—  
 Chhoye mashete shoro-ripu boshilo sthane sthane.  
 Shoptomete shoptodhatu je med-mojja-shonit-shukro  
 Roktomangsho har hoilo she.  
 Oshtomete oshtosiddhi elo bhoger karone.  
 Noyemashete nobodwar prokash  
 ...  
 Dosh mashete dosh indriyo  
 Na thake gorbho dhame.<sup>412</sup>*

[In the first month, the flesh is full of blood; in the second month, the human-navel, hardness, bones appear; in the third month, from the three qualities, the head arises; in the fourth, the eyes, ears, bones, skin and body hairs appear. In the fifth, the hands and the feet acquire (their) shapes; the five basic elements now come and infuse the soul (*atma*); that day the creature (*jib*) acquires the form of a human being;— in the sixth month, the six instinctual drives sit in their respective places; in the

<sup>411</sup> Ahmad Sharif, *Modhyojuger Shahitye Shomaj O Shongoshkritir Rup*, Dhaka: Samay Prakashan, 2000, pp. 229-30.

<sup>412</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 101-2.

seventh, it gets infused with the seven *dhatu*s of fat-bone-blood-semen-chyle-muscle-bone; in the eighth month, the eight qualities (attainable by austere practice) come as a result of suffering. In the ninth month, the nine doors reveal themselves. ... In the tenth month, the ten sense organs leave its womb-like abode.]

This once again, therefore, accents the need not only to re-insert the Baul texts within their intellectual environment but also the need to resist the temptation to see their heterodoxy as standing diametrically and isolatedly in opposition to the traditions of orthodoxy.

Second, even the articulation of the womb-space ambiguously as both a space of confinement and a space of salvation to be aspired to is not unique to the Baul texts. We find echoes of both these framings of the womb-space in earlier traditions. The womb or the Cosmic Egg, the *Brohmando*, has long been at the centre of the creation myth of Buddhist Tantrism—arguably the root of various Baul traditions.<sup>413</sup> In Buddhist Tantric cosmogenic iconography, the Cosmic Egg is seen floating among the waters and is equated with the zero point of the creation of the universe. In fact, this strand of the Buddhist Tantric creation myth, as scholars of comparative religion have pointed out, has also largely borrowed from the Brahmanic creation myth of the Golden Womb or *Hiranyagarbha* as postulated in the Vedas and Upanishads, whence emerged Brahma, the primordial God of creation, in whose body the universe manifested itself.<sup>414</sup> The various borrowings and impacts of several creation myths on the Baul world-view aside, what can be discerned in the framing of the womb in the aforementioned songs, as also in other Baul songs, notably those of Lalon, is a shared notion of the womb as the Cosmic Egg, as the site of cosmic creation, a site that owes its being to the union of the primordial male and the female, the *purush* and *prakriti*, of *Shib* and *Shokti*. We recall that in the second song of Din Shorot, the union leading to the formation of the womb is between the already enlightened male and the female: the allusion to the

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<sup>413</sup> This is not to discount the possibility that other creation myths that might use the notion of the cosmic egg in numerous ways might impact the Baul's perception and representation of the womb in a similar way. In fact, individual Baul singers, depending on their very specific sectarian affiliation might use different creation myths to elucidate the same point. This debate, though worth pursuing, is outside the ambit of my thesis. However differently, the notion of the womb as the cosmic egg or centre pervades all Baul songs. Since Buddhist Tantrism places central importance to the idea of the cosmic egg which is remarkably similar to the Baul's deployment of the same and since their impact on the Baul school of thought is unanimously conceded by all Baul scholars, we have chosen to locate the Baul's conception of the womb in this strand of thought in the vast body of Indian creation myths.

<sup>414</sup> See, for instance, a similar assertion made by Carol Solomon, "The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalan Fakir", in Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, Margaret Ann Mills ed. *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, pp. 283-4.

location of the male essence, the *bindu* (literally, the semen) in the head is a direct suggestion to the spiritually awakened state of the father. It is his desire or lust to multiply that directed the seminal fluid into the maternal body and thus effected the formation of the womb. While this has resonances both in Puranic and Buddhist Tantric creation myths, what is of more significance is the Bauls' peculiar deployment of the womb as both an idealised and an imprisoning space. In its first function, the idealised inverted womb-space or the *ultodesh* reveals the Bauls' attempts to embody their philosophy of the *ultoshadhona*. In its second function as a site of containment, as the 'gorbhoghor karagar' escape from which is only possible through *shadhona*, it echoes similar notions within early Buddhist thought. The womb-space, in this school of thought, is equated with the imprisoning world of the *sansar* that cracks open to release the awakened. And the path to this freedom from the shackles of the womb-like *sansar* lies through the Baul *shadhona*. But this rather dystopic representation of the womb is soon dismissed in view of the external world into which one is thrust out. Immediately afterwards, Shorot says '*Michhey mayaye bhuiley roiley jabar upaye ki korechho?*'<sup>415</sup>

This ambiguous framing of the womb-space as at once a space of confinement and spiritual release along with the Baul's concomitant desire for a symbolic return to the womb too has resonances in early Indian thought, both orthodox and heterodox. For instance, as far back as the Vedic Brahmanas, sacrificial rites [*diksa*] involved the physical and symbolic return of the sacrificer to the womb-like hut wherein, crouched like a foetus and experiencing the bliss of consciousness without objects, the sacrificer is reborn into the world of gods. In fact, as David Gordon White has pointed out, this symbolic framing of the womb-space and the desire to return to it had striking parallels in the Ayurvedic treatment technique of *kuti-probesh* (entering into the hut). According to the Ayurvedic theory, the human being experienced in the womb the perfect functioning of the three *dosas* (humours) that were thrown off-balance by an exposure to the outside world and its fluctuating climate of elements; the ill-health thus generated could only be cured by sequestering the patient in a womb-like cave and restoring the hitherto lost equilibrium between the body and the universe—an act that metaphorically stood as a return to the figurative womb. In the Nath-Siddha accounts of the yogins, too, White further tells us, one encounters a plethora of well-symbolisms wherein entering into the well symbolically stood for 'entering into yogic practice, in which

<sup>415</sup> See above, p. 201.

consciousness, breath and semen are simultaneously raised into the cranial vault, the abode of Siva. It also evokes a *regressus ad uterum* from which the yogin, like the Vedic sacrificer in his initiation hut and the Ayurvedic patient in his womb hut, emerges, reborn'.<sup>416</sup> The resonances of these framings of the figurative return-to-the-womb in these traditions in the Bauls' yearning to return to the womb-space—that realm of the zero point of consciousness—through their practice of *ultoshadhona*, are thus hard to ignore.

The question here, then, arises that if all that the Bauls are doing has already been said and done by other authors of other texts, then precisely how and where do we locate the historically specific agency of the Baul authors. The key to this, we contend, lies in the very framing of the womb-space in Baul song-texts as the *ultodesh*. As we have argued throughout the thesis, the agency of the Bauls lies not in a unique narrative structure nor does it lie in a distinctive conceptual and metaphorical vocabulary, but it lies in their continuous effort to utilise available intellectual, conceptual and narrative resources to invert hegemonic ways of representing the world and society. The content of this inversion as inherent in the spatialisation of the womb-space as the *ultodesh* is never static, nor is its form. What is constant, however, is the fact of the inversion itself. The marginality of the Bauls' perspective in fact lies in the very fact that in order to articulate their inversion, they still have to draw upon largely accepted narrative and conceptual resources. Moreover, and this is what we think is unique about the Bauls' deployment of the spatial metaphor of the womb-space, is the framing of this space as *desh*. It is here that the historically specific agency of the Bauls can be discerned. The womb-space is not merely deployed in the Baul songs as an empty imaginary space as indeed it was in the various aforementioned embryological traditions of pre-modern and modern India<sup>417</sup>; indeed its very framing as a *desh* renders it into the lived social space of a specific as well as largely shared geography. Though the specific connotations of the highly evocative Bengali word '*desh*', as historians of colonial Bengal have pointed out, differ depending on its usage in specific semantic registers, what the word most commonly connotes is a sense of belonging to a specific place. In other words, depending on its context of utterance, the spatial inscription of *desh* might render it to

<sup>416</sup> David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 26-7, 244-5.

<sup>417</sup> This is to clarify that we are not denying the existence of this spiritualised abstracted meaning. By focussing solely on this, we miss out on other historically specific and material meanings. This is the focus of this thesis.

refer to any place ranging from the highly localised space (as in the native village/homeland) to popular space (as in *deshiyo* as opposed to *margiyo*) to nation-space (as in the late-nineteenth century Bengali literati's conflation of Bengal and India into the collective nation-territory of *desh*) and even to fantasy-space (as in the articulations of *shwopner desh*, *rupkothar desh*, *bhutpatrir desh*). In all these conceptualisations of *desh*, however, what is stressed is the organic link between the land and its inhabitants: someone belongs to the *desh* and the *desh* belongs to somebody. Hence, when Din Shorot sings '*abar shei desher lok obiroto ei deshete astechhe*',<sup>418</sup> what is at once striking is not only the framing of the womb-space as a *desh*, but also the construction of the binary between the *shei desh* of the womb and the *ei desh* of the external social world.

In this oppositional spatial construction of the two *deshs*, it is the Baul's nostalgia of and desire to return to the land of the womb that at once renders it into his home-land, as a place where the Baul emotionally belongs to, from where he is exiled into the external alien land of mere physical being. For the wandering Bauls, all local and regional boundaries of the external world meld into sameness; their perception of marginality in the larger social world renders this land of physical being into the *desh* that they yearn to be released from. And it is in this relational grid that the womb-space comes to be inscribed with a specific socio-geographic location. The *ultodesh* of the womb in this spatial imagination is no longer merely the projected non-space of the idealised Baul-world wherein resides the formless one, the *Nironjon*. Not only does its place within the maternal body inscribe it with a highly specific materiality, but its constitution as an inverted *desh* ties it up, albeit oppositionally, with the Baul's historically specific understanding of the many connotations of *desh* that come to mark his perception of his immediate social world. What is even more striking in this assertion is the framing of the perception of marginality in this external land. Din Shorot's nostalgia of and consequent yearning to return to the womb marks not only the Baul's historically specific perception of his marginal position in this land of exile, but also that of the entire social existence in this alien land. Put simply, in the Baul spatial imagination, all of us living in this world belong to and are cast-aways from that original home-land of the womb. In this universalisation of the experience of marginality then, two related processes can be discerned. First, since all particular

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<sup>418</sup> See above, p. 180.

marginal experiences of individuals and groups merge in the Baul imagination into the all-engulfing experience of marginality in this land of exile, the frameworks legitimising the Baul's specific marginality come undone. Second, and this is crucial, this universalisation of the marginal experience is attempted from a position that is always essentially marginal. In other words, what the Bauls make possible in and through this universalised framing of the marginalised experience is the opening up of this marginal space wherein everyone who subscribes to the Baul way of life can potentially share the experience. Thus, in the Baul imagination, the spatial re-inscription that render social existence as always already exiled from and hence marginal to the *ultodesh* of the womb-space not only allows the Bauls to undermine their own social marginalisation in this world and the hierarchies that enforce it, but also allows the Bauls to be socially-inclusive and non-isolationist inasmuch as it allows others to share their experience of marginality.

## Section II:

### ***Ja Achhe Brohmande, Tai Achhe Ei Deho-Bhande* : The Body-Space as World-Space**

We have seen in the previous section how through the particular deployment of the spatial metaphor of the *ultodesh* in the Baul songs, the Baul body sought to produce itself in space as a biosocial body. In this section, we will see how the Baul body not only produces itself in space out of an active engagement with the many practices, both discursive and social, in its surrounding world, but also crucially produces that social-material space in and through a dialogue with their own bodies and their lived experiences. And the Bauls' articulation and deployment of the spatial metaphor of the *dehobhando* will be at the centre of this study.

To begin with, the Bauls' particular spatial conceptualisation of the *dehobhando* needs to be addressed. Literally meaning the body-as-receptacle, the metaphor of the *dehobhando* has been deployed in the Baul songs as the corporeal container of both the individual (*jibatma*) and the divine soul (*poromatma*), collectively articulated in and by the Baul imagination variously as *manush*, *moner manush*, *odhor manush*, *shohoj manush*, *rosher manush*, *bhaber manush*, *alekh manush*, *shonar manush*, *shnai*, *odhor chand*, etc. Herein, in the internalisation of the divine soul or *paramatma* within the

Baul's microcosmic body, we argue, lie two crucial features of the spatial structuration of the *dehobhando* that not only produce the context for the perambulations of the wandering Bauls in social space, but yet again undermine their social marginalisation in external space.

First, the *moner manush* enveloped by the *dehobhando* in the Baul *dehatmobadi* imagination is a localised entity with a distinct form. As Upendranath Bhattacharya has shown, this process of interiorising the *poromatma* within the individual Baul body has been influenced by a similar process discerned in the Upanishads, Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, and Sufism. For instance, while in the Isha Upanishad the *poromatma* or *brohma* has been referred to as the '*purush*' residing in the bodily city, in the Chandogya Upanishad, its location within the human body has further been narrowed down to the chamber of the lotus-like heart, searching within which one could witness the *brohma*. Similarly, in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric texts, the *poromtottwo* or *porom shib* has been located in the *sohosrodolpodmo* or the *chokro* of the thousand-petalled lotus in the head, and even sometimes in the *dwidolpodmo* or the two-petalled lotus in the *ajna* chakra in the forehead. It is worth mentioning here that, in the Baul imagination, it is this latter realm of the two-petalled lotus that the Bauls believe to be the site of the full manifestation of the *moner manush*. And the Sufi declaration of *anal haq* (I am the Truth) or *an hiya* (I am Him) at once blurs the lines between the divine and the human, rendering them interchangeable in the ultimate spiritual realisation. Hence, when the Bauls come to locate the divine essence of the *moner manush* within their body, their interiorisation clearly echoes the spatialisation of the *poromatma* in these aforementioned religious traditions.<sup>419</sup> However, it is essential to note here in passing that the Bauls' usage of the term *moner manush*, as Jeanne Openshaw has argued, has both internal and external referents for the Bauls, referring to amongst other things the semen (also equated with the *atma*/Self), Radha (or the female ritual partner), the guru, or even to the male-female sexo-yogic union (also equated with *bhogoban*= *bhogo* [vagina] + *ban* [arrow/ penis]).<sup>420</sup> But what is of significance to the present study is not the symbolic plurality of the term in the Baul's *dehatmobad* register, but the spatialising process that renders this internalised divine essence not into the formless presence of the Upanishads or Tantras or indeed of the Tagorean Transcendent Humanism, but into a

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<sup>419</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, pp. 348-56.

<sup>420</sup> Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls*, pp. 38-9.

plurality of distinctly formed life-creatures (*jib*) whose bodies in their context-specific finitude of forms can be captured, as it were, by the spiritual lens of self-realisation. And Jalaluddin (1894-1972) sings thus:

*Jalal tumi bhaber deshe cholo.  
Allahke dekhbe jodi  
Agey chormochokher porda kholo.  
Giya tumi bhabnogore cheye thako rup nehare  
Shojol noyone tare photographe tolo.*<sup>421</sup>

[Jalal, you come along to the land of spiritual ecstasy. If you want to see Allah, first open your physical eyes. Going to the land of spiritual ecstasy, stare at His flowing beauty, with tearful eyes capture him in a photograph.]

When Sworupdas asks ‘*Moner manusher ki akriti e deher konkhane ashon*’ (‘What is the form of the *moner manush*, where in the body does He reside?’)<sup>422</sup> the responses that we find within the corpus of the Baul songs are various. To mention a few, the internalised divine essence is imagined in the Bauls’ oft-repeated articulation ‘*manusher akar dhore khod khoda je ghore phere*’ (‘Having taken on the human form, Allah himself roams about’)<sup>423</sup> as the anthropomorphic life-creature (*manush*) that is at once *shakar* by taking on the form of the human body and *nirakar* in its endless potential for mutability and its infinite consciousness. It also comes to be called the father (*baba*) which is another name in the Baul’s esoteric register for semen:

*Bol amar baba kothaye gelo  
Dekhite dekhite amar din goto holo.  
...  
Atmotottwo je jenechhe babar khobor shei peyechhe  
Shotyo kore amar kachhe bol.  
Bol babar rup bornon nam rup tar bhinno bhinno*<sup>424</sup>

[Tell me, where has my father gone? Looking for him, the day passes by. ... He who has knowledge of his self (*atmatattva*) has the news of my father’s bearings, tell me truly. Tell (me) that the father’s form, description, name, appearance are all different.]

Elsewhere, it is imagined as the fish (*min-rupi*) that resides on the banks of the confluence of the rivers of *sushumna*, *ira* and *pingola*—a figuration that at once recalls the Nath-Siddha resonances of Matsyendranath’s doctrine of the fish-belly (*kumbhok*) in

<sup>421</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 119

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.



the Baul songs<sup>425</sup>:

*Tirpinir tir-dhare*  
*Minrupe shnai bihar kore*<sup>426</sup>

[On the three banks of the three-streamed river, in the form of the fish does *shnai* play about.]

And in other songs, notably in the following rather popular song of Lalon, it is imagined as the ever-elusive strange bird (*ochin pakhi*) that is caged within the human body:

*Khnachar bhiton ochin pakhi komne ashe jaye*  
*Dhorte parle mon-beri ditam tahar paye.*<sup>427</sup>

[In the cage, how does the strange bird come and go; if I could catch him, I would have fettered his feet with my mind-chain.]

Moreover, and this is the second feature of the spatial organisation of the *dehobhando*, the Baul's *moner manush* is not merely a localised entity with a distinct form, but it is also at the same time a circulating centre. The *moner manush* of the Baul esoteric imaginary is not the all-pervading formless and static *atma* of Upanishadic or Tantric thought. It is a free-floating perambulating life-creature that plays, swims, swings and travels all around the microcosmic body-space of the *dehobhando*. Thus Podmolochon sings:

*Khelchhe manush bnakanole,*  
*Dulchhe manush hridkomole,*  
*Otol manush ujan chole,*  
*Dwidole tar jaye go jana.*<sup>428</sup>

[The *manush* plays on the curved pathway, the *manush* swings on the lotus-heart, the unwavering/immortal *manush* keeps travelling, you can only know him in the two-petalled lotus.]

and Pagolini sings thus

<sup>425</sup> For a detailed discussion on the trope of the fish and the doctrine of fish-belly in the Natha-Siddha tradition, see White, "Homologous Structures of the Alchemical Body", *The Alchemical Body*, pp. 218-262; Also for a discussion on the esoteric symbolism of the fish-like *moner manush* in the Baul songs, see June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 182-90.

<sup>426</sup> Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, no. 52, p. 578.

<sup>427</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 234.

<sup>428</sup> Quoted in Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baul*, p. 346.

*Besh luklukani khelte shikhechho bnaka nondolal*  
*Odhora mon omon dware dhora je poirechho.*  
*Tomar choturali ar chole na*  
*Ochenaye besh gelo chena*  
*Etodine gelo jana tumi orup rupe achho—<sup>429</sup>*

[Finely have you learnt to play the game of hide-and-seek, o *nondolal*;  
 your elusive mind has now been caught in that door; your trickiness  
 cannot go on anymore; in strangeness have you well been recognised;  
 after so many days have I come to know that you live in a formless form.]

While it is impossible to ignore the specific resonances of the Vaishnav elements of the divine *lila / krira* in the Baul's configuration of the *moner manush* as the playful elusive lover, namely the *nondolal* or Krishna, what is of significance to the present study is the way in which this configuration of the *moner manush* as a fluid, endlessly mutable, circulating centre goes on to constitute the particular spatiality of the *dehobhando*. This spatialising strand of the Baul imagination that stresses the elements of playfulness, flux and mutability as opposed to the elements of stability and immutability of the embodied Upanishadic or Tantric divine essences recalls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's model of 'smooth' and 'striated' spaces. Put simply, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that spatial practices may be heuristically organised into those which promote a 'smooth space' or those promote a 'striated space', spaces that respectively reverberate with either the Nomadic/anarchist or Statist/sedentary praxes. Striated space is the enclosed, hierarchical, centered, totalised and linear space of the State apparatus, a coded series of points which thus allows it to be measurable, and through which the State seeks to constrict or divert its flows. Smooth space, by contrast, is the deterritorialised, polymorphous, flowing and a-linear space of the nomads, the space of vectors that lacks a centre point, the space that exists, or comes into being, between the measurable points: '...in the case of the striated, the line is between two points, while in the smooth, the point is between two lines'.<sup>430</sup> For instance, in one's journey from point A to point B, while momentary locations in points A and B and their intermediary points become the determinants of the gridded 'striated' Statist space, in the nomadic smooth space, it is not the points but the line of flight, of continuous movement between these points that is highlighted. However, it needs to be mentioned here that these two spaces are not

<sup>429</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 173.

<sup>430</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (Brian Massumi trans.), *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 530. However, it needs to be qualified that according to Deleuze and Guattari, smooth and striated spaces are ideal types and in actual practice, they exist in admixture or combination. Smooth spaces become striated over time, while striated spaces include conditions necessary for new types of smooth space to emerge and flourish.

mutually exclusive and elements of each are often found in the other. Hence, when we read the Baul's configuration of the embodied divine essence as the polymorphous and circulating centre and the resultant bodyspace in this light, what seems to stand out is the importance ascribed to the elements of flux and playfulness, elements that threaten to destabilise the centrality hitherto attached by the Upanishads or Tantras to the residing location of the stable, immutable embodied divine essence. In other words, though the final destination of the *jibatma* in Baul songs is fairly fixed (the *dwidol podmo* in Sahajiya-influenced Baul songs or the heart in Fokiri songs), what is stressed in these songs is not this static spatial centre, but the playful journey of the *moner manush* towards this centre. For instance, in the aforementioned song by Podmolochon, the accent is on the rollicking journey of the *otol manush*, i.e. his playing, swinging and travelling upstream to its final destination in the two-petalled lotus in the forehead. In this prioritisation of the spiritual journey over its various points (i.e. the curved pathway of the *sushumna nadi*, the lotus-shaped heart, and the stream of the three *nadis*), the bodyspace is rendered flat, much like the Deleuzean desert, wherein the spatial vectors of the traveller's journey flow into or out of each other without a linear pattern or a centre.

Hence, when Kubir sings

*Ei dhorer bichar kor re mon bhai. Choddo powar majhe  
Kotha kon khanete biraje shnai.*  
...  
*Dhorer kotha goya kashi konkhanete baranosi  
Konkhanete purnomashi here moner agya purai;  
Achhe kon khane ojdhyabashi ditechhe ram sitar dohai.  
Kotha dojok bhestokhana dhorer konkhane modina  
Konkhane kafer bedina konkhane karbala koshai;  
Dhorer konkhanete sayid [shohid] holer hasan hosen bhai duti bhai.  
Konkhane boikunthopuri goloknath golokbihari;  
Konkhanete gobordhongiri here duti noyon jurai;  
Dhore brindabon royechhe kotha biraj koren kanai bolai.  
Dhorer kotha shoptosagor bhashichhe kotha motsho mokor;  
Konkhanete shingho shukor ihar shokol thikana chai;  
Dhorer kon gachhe kon pokkhi boshe krishno gun gaichhe shodai.  
Shorgomortyo patal adi konkhane pulchheroto nodi;  
Konkhanete allahadi hoben shei akheri kajai;  
Kubir bole ami choron bhebey oti shongkhepete bujhai.<sup>431</sup>*

[Judge this body, O heart, where in this body resides the *shnai* ... Where in the body is Gaya-Kashi, where is Varanasi, where is the full moon, seeing

<sup>431</sup> Chakraborty, *Shaheb dhoni*, no. 37, p. 182.

it all I fulfill the mind's command; in which place are the Ayodhya-dwellers appealing to Ram-Sita? Where are the hell and the heavens, where in the body is Medina, where is the infidel Bedina, where is the slaughterer of Karbala; where in the body have the two brothers Hassan and Hussain become martyrs, O brother. Where is the paradise (*boikunthopuri*) and its gods; where is the Gobardhan mountain, I console my eyes seeing it all; where in this Brindavan of the body reside Kanai (Krishna) and Bolai (Balaram)? Where in this body are the seven seas, where do the fish and the *mokor* (mythological aquatic animal) float? Where are the lions and pigs, I seek all their addresses; in which tree of this body does the bird sit singing praises of Krishna all the time; in this heaven-earth-hell, where does the river flow bursting with delight? Where will Allah be realised in the final work? Kubir says, I think of Choron and summarise it thus.]

what immediately strikes the eye is the flattening of the bodyspace wherein the rigid dualisms of the sacred and the profane, nature and supernature, subject and object that map the sacred geography of the external world, all merge into a sort of mythic wholeness of the sacred centre of the Baul body. Once again, it needs to be re-iterated at this point that this spatialising process of mapping the sacred geography of the external world onto the symbolic space of the body was by no means unique to the Baul imagination. For instance, in the esoteric imagination of yogic physiology, as David Gordon White has shown in his classic study of the alchemical body in the Siddha traditions in medieval India, spatial imaginations of the subtle body often charted the three major sacred rivers of the Hindus, i.e. Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, in the three principal subtle channels (*nadis*) of life force, i.e., *ira*, *pingola* and *sushumna*. In the ever-fluid plural symbolisms of the subtle body, it is between the upward-flowing *ira* (known as *Varana*) and *pingola* (known as *Asi*) that the sacred city of Varanasi came to be located. This spatial imagination of the three *nadis* as comprising the sacred centre of Varanasi, White argues, mimics the seasonal phenomenon of the periodic backflooding of the Ganga in Benares when, in the rainy season, the river flows up back into its tributary Varana and the Asi and eventually empties back into itself.<sup>432</sup> Thus drawing from the existing repertoire of these esoteric symbolisms in yogic physiological cartography of the subtle body, this natural phenomenon of the reverse upward flow of the flooding Ganga, needless to say, presented itself as the central metaphor in the Baul imagination of the subtle body—a spatial imagination that had at its centre the crucial sexo-yogic ritual of attaining nirvana through the reverse upward flow of the sexual fluid into the chakra in the forehead, i.e., *ajna*. Furthermore, as Shaman Hatley has argued drawing heavily from Ahmad Sharif, even in the esoteric imagination of

<sup>432</sup> White, *The Alchemical Body*, p. 226.

Islamic Yoga wherein the basic template of the yogic body of the Nathpanthis got appropriated and reconfigured by Bengali Sufism, the Islamic body is likewise imagined to be the microcosm within which is present Allah's entire creation of eighteen cosmological spheres (*alam*).<sup>433</sup> This sacralised bodyspace of Sufi Yoga, Hatley tells us, is not only the sacred space of waging the holy war against Iblis and his minions, but is also simultaneously imagined as a

province (*wilayah*, Bengali *bilat*) or city under the rule of the soul, as king, with the various administrators of Indo-Islamic polity under his jurisdiction: the *'aql* (intelligence, Bengali *akal*) is the *vazir* or prime minister (*ujir*); correct discrimination is the *qadi* or judge (*kaji*); and the body's hair the masses of subjects (*ru'aya*, Bengali *rayat*), all the transactions of whom are recorded in the *daftar* (Bengali *daptar*), or account book, of the heart. Filling the coffers of the royal treasury is the body's stock of seminal fluid, the expenditure of which spells the kingdom's ruin. The sun and moon, or rather four moons, circulate through the human organism, in which are also present the planets, the twelve signs of the solar zodiac, and seven days of the week. Bengal's plentiful rivers and canals for their part find biological correspondence in the body's *nadis*, conceived of as carriers of blood, semen, and the vital airs; also present in the body are the seven oceans of Indian cosmography in the form of the bodily fluids.<sup>434</sup>

However, the symmetries with and the import of both Hindu and Islamic esoteric imaginations on the Baul imagination notwithstanding, what this spatial transposition of the external space of both Hindu and Islamic real and mythical sites onto the microcosmic Baul body uniquely does, we contend, is twofold. First, it subverts the spatial hierarchy implicit in sacred geography, the hierarchy that simultaneously sacralises the profane and accents the dualism of the sacred and the profane. In other words, by mapping Varanasi and Medina onto the symbolic body-space, the Baul imagination decenters these holy sites in the sacred imagination of the Hindus and the Muslims and subversively relocates them in the space of the marginalised Baul bodies. Moreover, by sacralising the hitherto profane (the Baul body) and fusing both the sacred and the profane, nature and supernature, subject and object into the transcendental wholeness of the sacred world of the Baul body, it calls into question these very binaries that render any space into a sacred place that is both outside and above the rest of the profane world. And Bhualoddin thus sings:

<sup>433</sup> Hatley defines Islamic Yoga as 'the translation into Islamic categories of the yogic or esoteric body, that which Sanskrit sources commonly refer to as the *sukhma* (subtle) body, or *purvastaka*.' Shaman Hatley, "Mapping the Esoteric Body in the Islamic Yoga of Bengal", *History of Religions*, 46:4, 2007, p. 352.

<sup>434</sup> Hatley, pp. 353-4.

*Mokkaye je nokol kaba ei dehete ashol kaba  
Momin dele khnuje jeba shei to haji hobe.*<sup>435</sup>

[In Mecca there is the false black stone (*Kaba*), in this body lies the true black stone; He who searches in his believing heart, he will become *haji* (one who has already made his pilgrimage to Mecca).]

And second, simultaneous with their condensed symbolic appropriation of the sacred sites into their bodyspace is the Bauls' negation of pilgrimage—that organised network of specific religious beliefs and practices shaped by sacred cartography that validates the very sanctity of the sacred site. The physical act of the symbolic crossing over, of *tirtho*, is denounced by the Bauls: since all sacred spaces are contained within the Baul body, it is but *within* the body that one should 'cross over' from this world to the far shores of the other world of everlasting happiness. Lalou sings thus:

*Kon deshey jabi mon chol dekhi jai  
Kotha pir hou tumi re  
Tirtho jabi shekhane ki papi nai re?*<sup>436</sup>

[Which land would you want to go to, O mind, let us go and see; where do you become the master (*pir*); you seek to go on a pilgrimage, are there no sinners?]

and Bhualoddin too tells us:

*O khyapamon kor shadhon haji shaheb tumi hobe  
Begar khata rasta labh kichhu na hobe—  
Goya Kashi Puri Dwaroka Modina kingba Mokka  
Apon kachhe na khnuje jeba britha bhromon koribe.*<sup>437</sup>

[O mad mind, meditate and worship, you will be *haji*; you toil fruitlessly, nothing will come out of it— Gaya, Kashi, Puri, Dwaraka, Medina or Mecca, if you do not seek these near you, you will journey futilely.]

This complete negation of pilgrimage and its simultaneous re-inscription within the interior space of the body, we recall, not only subverts the hitherto hierarchised external space and renders it into the flattened space of the body, but it also simultaneously erupts into the bounded, fixed nature of the *tirtho* routes: all the conventional sacred places of Gaya, Kashi, Puri, Dwaraka, Medina and Mecca are rendered irrelevant and false and get re-inscribed into the symbolic space of the Baul body. Once again, in this deplaciation of these sacred places into the infinitely mutable symbolic space of the

<sup>435</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 194.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4.

Baul body, what we see is a rendering of the structured, closed spatialisation of sacred geography into the fluid, non-centric 'smooth space' of Deleuze and Guattari. Sacred geography with pilgrimage at its fulcrum produces spaces that have a definite and static starting and ending points wherein the destination points such as Gaya, Kashi, Medina or Mecca are valorised over the actual experience of the journey. Put simply, while to the pious Hindu or Muslim pilgrim the fruits of the *tirtho* lay in his/her reaching the sacred destination, to the Baul, it is in his experience of the journey itself that his salvation lies. Moreover, simultaneous to this valorisation of the ever-fluid, playful, non-centric experience of the journey over the linear, centered and hierarchic journey of conventional *tirtho*, what the Baul imagination does by inscribing the sacred places onto the symbolic space of his body is to produce instead the sacred centre within his bodyspace. In this re-alignment of the spatial axes of sacred geography, the Baul body is at once inscribed with a centrality that is denied to him in the external social world: since all sacred places are within him, he is in the centre and the centre is within him. The Baul's *dehobhando* then is rendered into a flattened space that in its everywhere-ness not only produces the context for the perambulation of the wandering Bauls in the external social world, but also, in its deplacialisation and simultaneous internalisation of the external sacred places, renders the Bauls into an everyman, thereby allowing them to undermine their social marginalisation in the external world.

### **Section III:**

#### ***Manobdeho Kolkata Tar Keta Chomotkar:***

#### **The Spatial Politics of Naming and the Body-City Metaphor:**

In the previous sections we have seen how through the particular deployment of the intertwined spatial metaphors of the *ultodesh* and the *dehobhando*, the Baul's body-centric imagination has sought to produce not only its own space as a bio-social body, but also the space of the external social world. In the Baul's spatial imagination, just as the Baul body has been spatialised as the *ultodesh* or indeed as the microcosmic *dehobhando*, so have city-spaces been physicalised in terms of the Baul body. This section will extend this dialectical understanding of spatiality to the Baul's construction and use of the frequently deployed spatial metaphor of the body-city in their songs.

The body-city metaphor has been central to the spatial imaginations of most sacred geographies of India. As we have seen in the previous section, recognition of the body as a microcosm and the cosmogonic aspect of the spatial arrangements of sacred cities extends back to the time of the Vedas. For instance, going back to the example of the sacred landscape of Varanasi, the analogy between the microcosmic human body and the physiognomy of the mesocosmic city in pursuit of the macrocosm of heaven in the form of pilgrimages become at once manifest when we look at the sacred imagination that translates Varanasi in terms of the spiritualised body: like the human body, the territory of Varanasi is the Brahman who illuminates the world and dwells inside the citadel of the five sheaths, the world within. In this spatial imagination, the Vishweshwor temple of Shiva, the site of the Brahman within the heart in the human body, forms the axis mundi covered by the five layers of sacred routes of Chourashikroshi, Ponchokroshi, Nogor Prodokshin, Obhimukto and Ontorgriho that stand as metaphors of the head, legs, face, blood and the heart of the microcosmic human body.<sup>438</sup> Even in Vaishnav sacred geography, places where mythical individuals were believed to have lived, performed miracles and/or experienced revelations came to constitute important sacred landmarks. But, the body-city analogue features even more strongly, and in a way more akin to the Bauls' deployment of the same, in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric worldviews. In the Hindu Tantric worldview, the world is perceived as the body of the Mother Goddess, dotted with its myriad religious landscapes as her physical features. While the river Ganga, in this sacred geography, comes to embody a sort of liquid divinity whose grace flowing over the bather's body can be felt to empower, cleanse, purify, heal, and enlighten, the body-city analogue deployed herein is made most palpably manifest in the sacred cartography of the Shakti Pithosthans, the powerful landmarks of the Shakta landscape which were conceived to be the sites where parts of Shakti's (Shiva's consort) body mythically fell to earth and installed themselves.<sup>439</sup> Such notions of perceiving the world as the body of the goddess also found their way into the numerous 'womb-caves' of the Tantric goddesses that mark the Tibetan and inner-Asian Buddhist landscapes. As Shinichi Tsuda has demonstrated in his study of Buddhist Tantric symbolism, the entire ultimate reality, both external and internal, is manifested through an intricately balanced system of correspondences wherein the external pithas have corresponding pithas within the 'vajra body' of

<sup>438</sup> See Rana P.B. Singh, "Cosmic Layout of the Hindu Sacred City, Varanasi (Benaras)", *Arch. & Comport. / Arch. & Behav.*, 9:2, 1993, pp. 239-250, table 1 and figure 1.

<sup>439</sup> See D.C. Sircar, *The Shakta Pithas*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973.



Buddhist Tantrism: the twenty-four sacred places of the external world are mirrored in the corresponding twenty-four places within the body and vice versa.<sup>440</sup> And when Kanha sings in the *Charyapadas*,

*nagara bahiri re dombi tohori kudia,  
choi choi jasi bamha nadia.*

[Outside the town you go toward your tattered hut,  
You go touching priests and touching monks, you slut.]<sup>441</sup>

the movement of the *dombi* through the city touching priests and monks to get to her hut mirrors the movement of the *kundolini* (*dombi*) through the body of the Buddhist Tantric practitioner, via the *sushumna* (*bomha nadi*) to return to her true abode which is outside the body, beyond empirical existence, in the mythological realm.<sup>442</sup> Considering the large-scale sharedness, whether antipathetic or sympathetic, of the Baul esoteric philosophy with these religious traditions, it is no wonder then that the body-city analogue came to be recurrently deployed in the Baul songs.

However, what is strikingly peculiar about the Bauls' deployment of the spatial metaphor of body-city and their corresponding physicalisation of social spaces in their songs, we argue, lies in the spatial politics of naming. Alongside the numerous inscriptions of mythic geographical features like the *shoptoshagor* (seven seas) and *srirup nodi* (auspicious river) and symbolic place-names such as *rupnogor* (city of beauty) and *chetongonj* (town of consciousness), etc onto the spatialised Baul body, we also find the Bauls' metaphorical deployments of real historical place-names onto their

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<sup>440</sup> "Internal *pithas*" are abodes of veins (*nadisthana*) as external *pithas* are abodes of *dakinis*. There are twenty-four parts of the body, such as the head corresponding to the external *pitha Pulliramalya*, etc. There are twenty-four veins (*nadi*) which rely on these internal *pithas* such as (a vein) flowing through fingernails and teeth (*nakhadantavaha*), etc. These veins (*nadi*) are regarded as deities (*devata*), that is, *dakinis*. A *nadi* is nothing other than a *dakini*... A human body is composed of this twenty-four "internal *pithas*" such as the head, etc, as the world, that is the *Jambudvipa* in this case, is composed of twenty-four "external *pithas*", i.e., twenty-four countries such as *Pulliramalya*, etc. An "internal *pitha*" is existent as long as it is an abode for a vein. A vein in turn is existent as long as it conveys a humour in it or flows in an internal organ. Therefore, if one makes (the) twenty-four veins of one's own body *active*, through (the) yogic practice of making each of the humours flow through the corresponding veins or each of (the) veins through the corresponding internal organs, he transforms his body into an aggregate of internal *pithas* or an aggregate of *dakinis*, a homologous miniaturisation of the world as an aggregate of external *pithas* or an aggregate of *dakinis* (*dakinijala*). Thus he can unite himself with the ultimate reality on the basis of the Tantric logic of symbolism." Shinichi Tsuda, "A Critical Tantrism", *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko (The Oriental Library)*, 36, 1978, pp. 167-231, as quoted in Janice Dean Williams, *Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Gauden Oral Tradition*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp. 27-8.

<sup>441</sup> As quoted in Lee Siegel, *Bengal Blackie*, p. 52. Author's translation.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

body in their songs. One of the ways in which this physicalisation of social places occur in the songs is through the Bauls' recurrent use of word-play and puns on the various real place-names available to them in colonial Bengal. Place names, as Paul Carter has demonstrated in his classic study of the 'ironic' place names in Australia, are not fixed objective referents, but rather fluid, associative, rhetorical facelifts engineered by the particular experiences of particular groups of the place in specific points in space and time.<sup>443</sup> In other words, if we align ourselves to Carter's argument that urges one to read one's sense of place as a certain way of imaginatively engaging with one's surroundings, as a personal and cultural appropriation of the world, then the Bauls' metaphorical deployments of place-names in the physicalised space of colonial Bengal generate a fresh set of significations. For instance, consider the following song:

*Age guptipara chhara re mon tobe shantipure jabi  
Shoda anonde robi.  
Achhe shantipur node kotha noye shidhe  
teghori nodiyar majhe bishom gol bnadhe  
tomar kori baron teghori jeo na mon  
moja dekhabe she rajar shomon  
sheshkale koblate bhyabla hobi.  
Shei guptipara gopon brindabon  
chondro jemon gopon roye kore ashon;  
Shadhoker kachhe re tar shondhi pabi.  
Achhe ombike kalna chepe dhore tor kolla  
Shamlate parbina jibe jabi re gollaye  
Shantipur roy bohu dur.  
Kalnate khatbe na phakur phukur  
Kaler gha mere sheshe khabi khabi.  
Gosnai Kubirchnad rote oi nodir nikote  
Sworupgonje bash korile sondo jaye mite.  
Shon jadubindu boli chine ne nodiyar goli  
Tobe to shantipur jabi.<sup>444</sup>*

[First leave Guptipara, O mind, then shall you reach Shantipur, you will stay in perpetual bliss. Shantipur is in Nadia, it is not a simple matter; between Teghori and Nadia, there is a lot of confusion; I caution you, do not go to Teghori, O mind; there you will feel the pinch of the King's summons; finally, you will be confounded in Kobla. That Guptipara is your secret Brindavan, like the moon remains secretly in its seat, from the *sadhok* will you understand its mystery. There is Ambika Kalna which will take you by your collar, you will be unable to protect yourself, you will perish there. Shantipur lies far away— In Kalna none of your tricks will pay off, beaten by the blow of time, you will gasp for life. As Gossain Kubirchand has announced, living near that river in Swarupganj your doubts will be resolved; Listen, I Jadubindu say, recognise those alleys of Nadia, only then will you go to Shantipur.]

<sup>443</sup> Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987.

<sup>444</sup> Chakraborty, *Shahebdhoni*, p. 198, no. 58.

As Baul scholars have noted, the Bauls' deployment of the names of real places in colonial Bengal functioned very much as symbols of their esoteric beliefs and practices. In the aforementioned song by Jadubindu, we can decode the place-names in the Bauls' esoteric register into the following: Guptipara stands for the *gupta marga* or the hidden path to spiritual salvation as well as a symbol of the hidden esoteric body; Shantipur stands for the ultimate realm of spiritual bliss (*shanti*) that the *shadhok* seeks to attain; Kalna is the realm of the ever-diminishing mortal time (*kal* [time] + *na*); Swarupganj is the realm of spiritual self-realisation (*shworup*); and Nadia with its labyrinthine lanes and bylanes stand for the subtle body and its matrix of arteries and veins. The song, at the level of religious symbolic reading, then offers a metaphoric restructuring of the Baul's spiritual journey that commences with an understanding of their hidden esoteric body, passes through the temporal grid of mortal life (Kalna), the matrix of the subtle body (Nadia) and the realm of spiritual self-knowledge (Swarupganj) to finally reach its destination in the nirvana-like realm of spiritual bliss (Shantipur). In other Baul songs, we also discern the use of place-names such as Debogram signifying the realm of bodily erosion, Nobodwip standing for the nine (*nobo*) portals of the body, Akherigonj signifying death, the last station (*akher* [last] + *gonj* [station]) of the human body, etc.

At another level, this rich polysemic deployment of these various place-names generates a range of social-historical meanings that open up a window to the Bauls' engagement with the various socio-political and technological changes that colonial modernity had brought forth in late-nineteenth century Bengal. As Sudhir Chakraborty has argued, though these places constituted important points on the age-old waterway, with the opening up of the Samudragarh railway station situated within five miles of Jadubindu's village of Pnachlokhi and Calcutta only three and half hours away on the rail route, it is small wonder that these place names came to feature so prominently in his song. By late nineteenth century, access to most of these villages were facilitated either by their being converted into railway nodes or by their proximity to the various railway stations. In 1910, J.H.E Garrett tells us in his District Gazetteer of Nadia that

The light railway which runs from Aistola Ghat, on the right bank of the Churni about two miles from Ranaghat, to Krishnanagar via Santipur, is about 20 miles in length, and has seven stations. ... The line was opened in the year 1898, and was worked by the Company [Messrs. Martin and Company] until it was taken over by the Eastern Bengal State Railway on

1<sup>st</sup> July 1904.<sup>445</sup>

While most of these towns, namely, Guptipara, Shantipur, Kalna, Sworupganj and Nodia hold a special place in the Baul consciousness in their being important places in the sacred geography of both the Vaishnavs and the Shaktas in rural Bengal, what strikes as most interesting in this song is in the choice of its destination point in Shantipur. First, Jadubindu's choice of the place-name might have been biographical: being a *jugi* or weaver by profession and Shantipur being the weaving centre of rural Bengal, it is hardly surprising that the town's name got inscribed with a cultural centrality in Jadubindu's social consciousness. Second, the town of Shantipur, we may remind ourselves here, has been and still held to be a major sacred site by the Vaishnavs as the residence of the descendents of Adwaita, and consequently as the site of the highly popular Ras Jatra. Third, the choice of the place-name might also be ascribed to the town's changing socio-economic-historical relevance, to the increasingly important role it came to play following the establishment of the rail lines in 1898. The advent of the railways in colonial Bengal, as we have briefly shown in the preceding chapter, called for varying degrees of shuffling in the economic roles of a number <sup>of</sup> rural towns and villages. While on the one hand, hitherto remote villages gained a newly ascribed centrality in becoming an important railway junction or indeed as a prominent seat of commerce, such as the growth of Kushtia, for instance, on the other, existing river-marts sometimes paled in comparison in the face of the competition offered by nearby railway towns. Durgadas Majumdar, in his *District Gazetteer of Nadia*, summarises the situation thus:

Nadia being the immediate hinterland of Calcutta, was affected the most by the railways. Swarupganj on the south bank of Jalangi at its junction with the Bhagirathi, Hanskhali on the Churni river and Bangaljhi on the banks of the Jalangi near Chapra which were important river-marts or stations for the collection of Nadia river tolls, declined with the advent of the railways. The railways failed to help these centres. In contrast some of the flourishing settlements, such as, Birnagar, Chakdaha, Krishnanagar, Navadwip, Ranaghat and Shantipur gained so much additional significance with rail connection that it was immediately followed by the extension of municipal administration to these towns.<sup>446</sup>

It is then perhaps no wonder that Shantipur, in the Baul's cartographical imagination, came to occupy a centrality that was not only esoteric but also at the same time personal, sacred and socio-economic. In fact, the choice of the town of Narayanganj in

<sup>445</sup> J.H.E Garrett, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Nadia*, Calcutta, 1910.

<sup>446</sup> Durgadas Majumdar, *West Bengal District Gazetteer: Nadia*, Calcutta, April 1978, pp. 223-4

Dhaka as the final port of call in another late-nineteenth century Baul song,<sup>447</sup> too, testifies to this organisation of the Baul's spatial imagination which was as impacted by the place's sacred culture as by the growing importance of the place as the seat of trade commerce following the advent of the steamers and railways in late-nineteenth Bengal.<sup>448</sup>

Moreover, the choice and the deployment of real historical place-names of rural colonial Bengal in Baul songs can be ascribed to a certain textual economy that largely dictated the sequence of the occurrence of these places. For instance, while Jadubindu's deployment of the sequence of Guptipara-Nadia-Kalna-Swarupganj-Shantipur in the aforementioned song has been inscribed by a range of esoteric, social and historical meanings, the sequence also operates within and is governed by the textual totality of the song as well as the structural economy of the Baul's esoteric philosophy wherein none could swap places with the other in the chain of their occurrence in the narrative. Furthermore, this sequence is also governed by the very specific punning potential of the individual place names whose resonances in the Baul's esoteric register make them more easily amenable to the Baul's ingenious deployment of the rhetorical strategies of word-play and punning on place-names. For instance, the following Baul song by Chand Shudin offers, perhaps most expansively, the deployment of the full range of socially possible meanings of the place-name *dhaka*:

*Dhaka shohor dhaka jotokkhon.*  
*Dhaka khule dekhle pore*  
*Thakbe na tor shabek mon.*

*Dhakar kotha shon tore boli,*  
*Dhakar bhitor achhe dhaka teppanno goli;*  
*Tate chotur manush keu na pore,*  
*Pore joto ondhojon.*

*Dhakaye kup royechhe gota at-noye,*  
*Ater kachhe jemon-temon,*  
*Eker kachhe bhoy.*  
*Shethaye behnushare porle pore*  
*Tokhoni harabi jibon.*

<sup>447</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>448</sup> 'The Narayanganj-Dhaka-Mymensingh State railway was opened in 1885-86; the rail line was laid almost parallel to the Mughal road from Tongi through Tejgaon, Kawranbazar to the Shah Bagh area, then in order to save the garden area it formed a loop around Ramna and turned towards the east cutting through the Nimtali-Fulbaria area it turned south towards Fatullah and Narayanganj.' A.M. Choudhury, "Dhaka", *Banglapedia*, [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/D\\_0145.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/D_0145.htm), accessed on 27 July 2008.

*Dhakate achhe bohutoro karbar,  
Mohajon onek achhe, chhutko dokandar;  
O keu labhe mule hariye boshe,  
Keu labh kore omulyo dhon.*

*Chand Shudin bole, haye ki korilam,  
Dhakeshwori na puje keno dhakate elam!  
Shethaye keu ba dekhchhe moni-kotha,  
Ami dekhi ulubon.<sup>449</sup>*

[The city of Dhaka, as long as it is covered, once you take its lid off, your mind will lose its original nature. The tale of Dhaka, listen to me, within the city of Dhaka are hidden fifty-three alleys wherein the clever ones get lost and the blind find their way around. In Dhaka there are wells, around eight or nine; the eight wells are trifles, but the one remaining is dangerous; if you carelessly fall into that, you will lose your life instantly. In Dhaka, there are many various trades; there are many merchants and small-scale shop-owners; O some lose all, some gain priceless wealth. Chand Shudin says, alas! What did I do? Why did I come to Dhaka without worshipping Dhakeshwori? There some see the treasure house, I see a fruitless land.]

Within the body-city analogue deployed in this song, the play on the place-name ‘Dhaka’ is used to its fullest capacity. Put simply, the word-play on ‘*dhaka*’ primarily encompasses its use in the song in five broad senses: first, it is used in both its denotative sense as the name of the city and its metaphoric sense as an esoteric name of the female genital; secondly, it is used as a verb, meaning ‘hidden’; thirdly, it is used as a noun to both denote a lid and metaphorically standing for the lid of esoteric knowledge of the female body; fourthly, with its labyrinthine lanes and by-lanes of arteries and veins, it also stands for the subtle body of the Baul esoteric anatomical imagination; and finally, as a city of bazaars, it also stands as a metaphor of a spiritual marketplace dotted with both the dangers of spiritual dissolution and promises of spiritual salvation. In the last stanza, the allusion to Dhakeshwori is both an allusion to the patron-goddess of the city of Dhaka—arguably also the etymological root (*dhaka* [concealed] + *Ishwori* [goddess]) of the city’s name—and a metaphor for the female ritual partner, worshipping whom would bring about the much craved for spiritual salvation. In these polysemic usages of the place-name, several meanings are compounded together, intersect each other, are rarely univocal, and more often point at different directions thereby allowing for contrary interpretations that exist simultaneously and never exclusive of each other.

<sup>449</sup> Bhattacharya, *Bangla Baul*, p. 986, no. 594.

What, we may ask ourselves at this point, is the purpose of the Bauls' widespread use of puns and word-play on real place-names? If words are sites and vehicles of power, then through punning and word-play, these place-names come to offer a set of meanings that threaten to disrupt, at least in the representative realm of the songs, both their referential fixity and the order of the dominant social relations and power structures they represent, and instead render them into highly subjective and associative referents. However, it is crucial to remember at this point that though word-plays and puns tend to unleash the potentially unbridled forms of power by so rendering these place-names polyvalent, they paradoxically end up delimiting that power by restricting this very polyvalence. For instance, though the play on the place-name *dhaka* in the aforementioned song offers us an alternate semantics of place-names as also an alternate esoteric model of world-order, it necessarily delimits its polyvalent potential by being fully meaningful only within the Baul exegetical axis of esoteric beliefs: within the semantic economy of the Baul's esoteric register, it can be deployed in only five senses and no more. Although there is room for flexibility within the alternate semantics that punning and word-play on place-names offer us in and through the Baul songs, this alternate world of power and language is as contained and bound as the very semantic world it wishes to destabilise. Yet, as we shall shortly see, it is in and through the deployment of the rhetorical strategies of word-play and punning on place-names within the larger organising spatial metaphor of the body-city that the Bauls resist, however momentarily, the colonial space of the city.

Let us now turn to Jadubindu's classic song where the body-city metaphor gets articulated in its fullest capacity. The song, wherein the cityspace of Calcutta is physicalised into the Baul bodyspace, begins with the sense of wonderment that, as I have shown in the previous chapter, characterised the Bauls' perception of modernity and its associated technologies:

*Manob deho kolikatar keta chomotkar  
Tulona naiko tar  
Mone bujhe dekh bhai roti tophat nai  
Achhe dui gas-er alo dekhte pai  
Kore shonar shohor diptokar.<sup>450</sup>*

[Wondrous are the fashions of the human body-like Kolkata; it is beyond compare. Judge with your mind, O brother, there is no

<sup>450</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 206.

difference in quality; there are two gas-lamps that I can see, and they  
gloriously light up the golden city]

The point of similitude between the subject (body) and the object (city) of the comparison in the analogy that at once equates the Baul body with the urban modernity of Calcutta is premised on a pun on the word 'roti' that in its literal and figurative senses signifies, amongst other things, a measure of weight, copulation as well as an intent absorption of mind. Just as the 'golden' cityscape of Calcutta is illuminated by gas lights, so is the Baul body lit up by the light or the Supreme in semen<sup>451</sup> by and through which spiritual enlightenment is made possible within the space of the body. Jadubindu's sense of spectacular wonderment is directed both at the urban phenomenon of the city and the esoteric realm of the subtle body, and in his metaphoric imagination, the two are spatially transposed onto each other. Having established the referential framework of similitude in this body-city analogue, the song goes on to map the Baul body in the various landmarks and streets of nineteenth-century Calcutta. And the functional efficacy of these similitudes is effected through a striking deployment of the rhetorical device of puns. Rambling in the city, the ever-appropriating Baul body experiences and seeks to spatially order the urban space in and through itself, through its esoteric recognition of the structures and functions of the subtle body. The city in the very moment of its encounter with the Baul body, no longer remains an objective reality; the Baul bodyspace comes to spatially transpose itself onto the cityspace which thus becomes meaningful only within the body's own spatial arrangement of esoteric significations. The city and its spatial nodes, as it were, come to mirror the body's spatial nodes which in turn get re-inscribed on to the cityspace in the Baul's spatial imagination. This double movement of the subject and the object of comparison in Jadubindu's deployment of the body-city analogue generates its own spatiality. For instance, while the word-play on 'lal' in Lal Bajar refers to both the red eye of the muscle-flexing power-centre of the colonial state and the blood-pumping organ of the heart, China bajar, with its notorious alleys and by-lanes becomes a metaphor of both the matrix of arteries and veins within the body and the intricate rituals of the *dehoshadhona*, recognising (*chena*) and finding one's way through which would lead to a true recognition of one's dhormo in the Dhormotola street. Similarly, in the spatial organisation of this body-city, Mrijapur (Mirzapur), with its etymological associations

<sup>451</sup> See Carol Solomon, "The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalan Fakir", in Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, Margaret Ann Mills ed. *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, pp. 282-290.



of the wealth of the Mirza badshah, comes to stand for the sacred, spiritually wealthy, zone of the body; Harkata goli, notorious for its prostitute quarters, comes to stand for the space of spiritual dissolution; Lal Dighi, with the ambivalent cultural and religious associations surrounding its waters, comes to stand for the red waters of the menstrual fluid; Alipur, with its associations of the prison-house, comes to stand for the enclosing space of thought; the (Ochterlony) Monument, with its structural symmetries with the phallus, comes to stand for the male organ; and Ultodanga, with its potential for word-play, gets rendered by the Baul imagination into the inverted place of the Baul body.

While this deployment of word-play and punning on the various place-names in Calcutta calls into question the hitherto claims of place-names as fixed objective referents, it is the very nature of the Baul's ramblings in the city within the narrative of the song that goes on to produce a spatiality that contests the controlled, hierarchic, bound, striated spaces of the colonial capital. It is not along any externally imposed route that the Baul travels in the city; his touring of the city has a wandering quality, a quality that emphasises his journey over its specific points, a quality that in its apparent arbitrariness offers us an alternate view of touring the city where the Baul does not transcend one space into the other as much as he slips in-between them. The space of the body-city thus produced by the Baul's ramblings in the city is then a transitive space which is de-territorialised in its lacking any final destination and stable boundaries, fluid in its polyvalence, non-hierarchic in its plurality of centres and its simultaneous emphasis on the journey rather than these centres, and 'smooth' in its accent on becoming rather than stabilised identities. This rambling, non-hierarchic, fluid description of the city that is to be observed in Jadubindu's song thus is clearly a spatial practice which is distinct from those other spatial practices which organise the city along clear points of departure and destination with series of sites of varying importance. In this song, the sites all share their importance with each other and their importance seems to lie solely in the narrator's own logic of description.

Moreover, what is most striking about this production of what Deleuze and Guattari would call the 'smooth' space of the body-city out of the 'striated' space of the colonially ordered city,<sup>452</sup> is articulated in the last section of Jadubindu's song:

<sup>452</sup> It is crucial to remind ourselves here that to Deleuze and Guattari, the space of the city is marked by both striated and smooth spaces and a constant dialectical tension between them: 'In contrast to the sea, the city is the striated space par excellence; the sea is a smooth space fundamentally open to

*Ei manob-dehokhan achhe koto rup bagan  
Kolkata tar kothaye lage ingrajer nirman  
Achhe choudo powaye choudo bhubon  
Khoda khod kore toiyar.<sup>453</sup>*

[In this human body there are so many forms/beauties and gardens; Calcutta does not stand in comparison to it, it is (merely) an English creation. In this three and a half length's body there are the fourteen worlds, God Himself is building it.]

It is here that the space of the Baul's body-city most overtly extricates itself from as well as posits itself in a contestatory relation with the colonial space of the city. The spatial transposition of the Baul bodyspace onto the cityspace is now complete in the production of the 'smooth' space of the Baul's body-city as is manifest in the transposition of the epithet '*shonar shohor*' (Golden City) deployed in the very beginning of the song to refer to the external space of the city of Calcutta onto the space of the body-city: Jadubindu sings, '*Bhangbe jedin shonar shohor shob hobe mati*' ('The day this golden city crumbles, that will be the end of it all'). Not only does the body-city so produced within the narrative of the song contain within it the physicalised city of Calcutta, but its spatiality is now magnified by the Baul's *dehatmobad* to cosmic proportions to contain the whole of creation (*choudo bhubon*), a space that in its newly acquired cosmic dimensions is clearly beyond compare. In the final production of the spatiality of the Baul body-city, it is this hierarchisation, this positing of the divine creation of the body-city over and above the colonial creation of the cityspace that renders Jadubindu's deployment of the spatial metaphor of the body-city into a singular act of resistance against colonial modernity and its manifestation in the 'striated' space of the city that accent demarcation, hierarchisation and fixity—an act that, as we have seen again and again in the previous chapters, is even in its moment of **resistance** is in fact couched in the hegemonic rhetoric of hierarchy that it wishes to destabilise in the first place.

## Conclusion:

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striation, and *the city is the force of striation that reimparts smooth space*, puts it back into operation everywhere, on earth and in the other elements, outside *but also inside itself*.' *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 531, emphasis mine. For instance, the street of a dance party or the sprawling shantytown, despite being enclosed by striated and segmented space of the city, can assume a smoothening tendency that threatens to break down, however momentarily, the rigid hierarchic segmentarity of the city. The Baul's ramblings in the city in the narrative of their song, we argue, is yet another spatial practice with smoothening tendencies that temporarily disrupts the striated city space.

<sup>453</sup> Chakraborty, *Dehotottwer Gan*, p. 209.

In this chapter, thus, I have shown how the Baul's choice and deployment of the three intertwined spatial metaphors of the *ultodesh*, *dehobhando* and the body-city is premised on a dialectical understanding of spatiality that simultaneously produces the body's space as a biosocial bodyspace as well as that social-material space within which the body operates. Despite its resonances with similar spatial imaginations in various religious and philosophical traditions of India of both pre-modern and modern provenance, the Baul spatial imagination derives its historical specificity in its particular spatial re-inscriptions of the womb-space or the *ultodesh* and the *dehobhando* that allowed the Bauls to undermine their own social marginalisation in the external social world. Furthermore, in its deployment of both the rhetorical strategies of word-play and puns on real historical place-names and the very specific anti-hegemonic accent in its production of the 'smooth space' of the body-city, the Baul spatial imagination also opened up a space of resistance *outside* the hegemonic spatial practices that were instrumental in the production of the Baul's own position of marginality in the external social world. The spatial transpositions both of the external social space onto the Baul bodyspace and vice versa that so spatialised the body and physicalised social space within the narrative of the Baul songs are simultaneous, ever spiralling into each other wherein the Baul body produces both its own space and the external social space in its continuous dialogue with the external world.

## Conclusion

The thesis, as we have indicated at the very outset, is primarily born out of the need to revisit that particular stand in the existing Baul scholarship that views the Bauls as asocial, ahistorical, insulated esoteric groups. While our study has never sought to exclusively focus on nor seek to undermine the doctrinal and/or esoteric interpretations of the songs, it has attempted to contest this imputation of a certain atypicality of the Bauls from their society by contrapuntally using their songs as a window into the experiences of that very society. The clues and the traces to these shared historically specific experiences of the rural society of colonial Bengal, we have argued, lay in the particular choice and deployment of certain images and metaphors in the Baul songs. At the heart of our socio-historical study of certain recurring cluster of images and metaphors in these songs has thus been an attempt to situate these heterodox groups in their specific social and historical contexts: i.e., to desist from looking at their song-texts as productions of socially insulated esoteric groups and instead, retrieve a possible history of the moment of encounter and negotiation between the Baul realities and the hegemonic discourses from late-eighteenth to early-twentieth century rural Bengal.

In Chapter I, instead of peeling off and peering behind the gender-metaphors in Baul songs in search of esoteric truths and having looked closely at the metaphors themselves, we have seen that gender-metaphors are clearly crossmarked by a variety of other identities such as those of occupation, class, race, etc. In the deployment of the metaphors themselves then, independently of their esoteric positions, we can discern a much more pluralised engagement with social identities where gender is never the only axis of definition. Indeed, we have seen that Baul singer-composers also metaphorised the identities of various specific individual men and women. Such examples are discernible not only in cases where historical figures like the Tarakeshwar Mohunt, or Rani Rashmoni seem to have provided a broad outline for the metaphor, but also, more explicitly we find examples where figures such as Fawcett and Queen Victoria have by name been rendered as metaphors. This complex picture of Baul understandings of gendered social identities is further complicated through the existence of a wide number of songs wherein either the author assumes an authorial voice of a gender other than his own or while stating his own gender identity articulates an ardent desire to take on the

role of another gender. Since gender dimorphism is often the underlying logic of larger social hierarchies, the Bauls by pluralising gender, inverting established hierarchies and, most importantly, by presenting a performative and hence, denaturalised image of gender resists the larger structures of domination.

In Chapter II, we have attempted to read the Bauls' deployment of metaphors of agrarian power relations in their songs as an instance of what James Scott had called 'hidden transcripts'—that discourse including speech acts and a whole range of other practices which subordinate groups create in response to their ordeal of domination, a discourse 'that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant'.<sup>454</sup> We have thus tried to study how these metaphorical deployments could be read as contestations of hegemonic social formations. By way of studying how the Bauls' symbolic poaching and pilfering of the dominant discourse in and through their metaphorisations threaten to unravel the strategies of domination, we have read these metaphorical deployments as instances of the Bauls' everyday resistance against post-Permanent Settlement colonial-agrarian exploitation and oppression.

In Chapter III, we have taken our discussion a step further and investigated how the Bauls' construction and deployment of the metaphor of the broken/plundered house could be read as containing clues to their everyday resistance against the coercive hierarchy of law and order imposed on rural Bengal by the Cornwallis Police Reform of 1793. Moreover, we have also demonstrated how the Bauls' act of translation—i.e. their mapping of the metaphor onto their esoteric body and their simultaneous construction of a spiritualised bodily architecture—could be read as an act that sought to subvert the oppressive hierarchic model of police power that their bodies were subjected to in the social world of early-colonial rural Bengal. However, in so doing, we have also sought to go beyond Scott's conceptualisation of the autonomous consciousness of the resisting, self-determining subject and instead demonstrated how even in the very moment of their resistance, the 'prose of counter-insurgency' that the Bauls' resisting consciousness deployed was in fact conditioned by the very structures and rhetoric of hegemonic dominance it sought to resist.

We have shown in Chapter IV how nineteenth-century bhdrolok framings of the Bauls

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<sup>454</sup> Scott, 1990, xii.

as an idealised, ahistorical, highly localised, technology-free and ignorant figure come undone in view of the Bauls' choice and deployment of various transportation metaphors in their songs that betray their acute understanding of the complex mechanisms of modern technologies of travel. In particular, our case-study of the Bauls' deployment of the metaphor of railways and their various constructions of the esoteric metaphor of the body-rail car has sought to illustrate not merely how some of these metaphorical deployments could be read as instantiations of resistance against the machine-rule of the nineteenth-century colonial state, but also how these metaphorisations resonated and/or negotiated with various contemporary discourses of both the coloniser and the colonised elites of nineteenth-century Bengal.

In our reading of the various deployments of the spatial metaphors in Baul songs in the final chapter, we have shown how the Bauls' spatial imagination was informed by a certain notion of a dialectical understanding of spatiality that simultaneously produced both the body's space as a biosocial bodyspace and that social-material space within which the body operated. We have in the process sought to locate subversive elements in their historically specific spatial inscriptions of certain bodyspaces that, we contend, enabled the Bauls to undermine their own social marginalisation in the external world of hegemonic social formations. Moreover, we have also tried to demonstrate how in their deployment of certain rhetorical strategies of word-play and puns on real historical place-names on the one hand, and the production of the 'smooth space' of the body-city, the Baul spatial imagination also opened up a space of resistance against the hegemonic spatial practices that were instrumental in the production of the Baul's own position of marginality in the external social world.

Throughout our individual case-studies of the metaphors of agrarian power-relations, the domestic space of the plundered home, transportations and space/spatial practices in colonial Baul songs, we have thus not only attempted to locate the various moments of encounter between the Baul realities and the hegemonic discourses and practices of the day, but have also striven to illustrate how the contours of these moments were in fact shaped by their various acts of negotiation with and resistance against the hegemonic imaginations—acts at whose centre was the experiential, esoteric Baul body. In this concluding chapter, therefore, we would seek to bring together all the individual findings of our case-studies within our larger conclusion by way of revisiting two inter-

related concepts that underpin our argument throughout the thesis, namely, that of the experiential, esoteric Baul body and resistance.

### **The Experiential, Esoteric Baul Body:**

The idea that there is nothing ‘natural’ about the body and that all understandings of the body are in fact socially mediated through representations which are in turn constructed by various interpretive frameworks has now become a critical commonplace. Post-structuralist theorisations of the body, notably those of Michel Foucault, have argued for an idea of body as a discursive production. In Foucault’s epistemological projects, for instance, the body occupies a central place in the strategic configuration and historically contingent relations of power/knowledge within a given society. In contrast to so-called ‘naturalistic’ theories and the biological determinism of the body, Foucault’s genealogical analysis of power/knowledge, from the clinic to the confessional, from ‘normalising’ power to the ancient ‘arts of existence’ have all foregrounded the social constructedness of the body, its coming into being through the entangled triadic matrix of power/knowledge/discourse.<sup>455</sup> Instead of being viewed as essentially stable, static, given-in-nature, biological entities, bodies, hence, came to be viewed as historically contingent, malleable products of shifting power/knowledge relations. However, to say that the body is a discursive construction and that there is nothing outside discourses is not to deny its materiality, but to insist that our apprehension and understanding of it are necessarily mediated by the contexts in which we live. The body then is always comprehended through an interaction between its materiality and its symbolic constructions embedded within a given culture. Moreover, while the physical material body is itself structured by the symbolic representation of the body, it is at the same time an experiential resource for the construction of such representations.<sup>456</sup> Thus, alongside Foucault’s interrogation of ‘discourses’, we must also look at the practices which mediate the historically and socially specific bodies. It is this understanding of the body as constituted by various discursive/social practices, that has informed this thesis. It has been our intention throughout this thesis to foreground the materiality of the phenomenal body as an active producer of meanings, as an experiencing and intentional entity. As we have seen in our studies of the various metaphorical

<sup>455</sup> See for instance, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, New York: Random House, 1978.

<sup>456</sup> See for instance, Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Routledge, 1996.

deployments in the Baul songs, by so mapping those images of hegemonic discourses that threaten to discipline it onto his esoteric body, the Baul body seeks not only to actively produce meaning, but also subvert the power relations inscribed in those very discourses.

Running through all our individual case-studies of metaphors deployed in Baul songs of colonial rural Bengal is an attempt to counteract the various bhodrolok framings of the Bauls as asocial, ahistorical, apolitical, spiritualised, wandering minstrels. As the case-studies have shown, the Baul songs of late-eighteenth—early-twentieth century Bengal contained clues that indicated that the Bauls were not only deeply imbricated in their immediate social reality, but also had an acute understanding of and even actively responded to, negotiated with and even occasionally resisted the diverse socio-economic-political changes wrought in that rural reality by the forces of colonialism and modernity. At the heart of these acts of negotiation and/or resistance we have the Bauls' esoteric bodies. Throughout the thesis, we have tried to shed light on not only how the Baul bodies have experienced history, but also, more crucially, how through these experiences they have constantly sought to reinvent their bodies. The Baul body, we contend, is not merely a medium of experiencing history, of comprehending and negotiating with the changing socio-historical world. Through the very act of simultaneously experiencing and mapping the various images of this outside world onto the Baul body as its metaphors, the Baul body is rendered into a social object whose definitions are constantly shifting; whose contours constantly re-figured. In other words, we have argued that a closer attention to the deployments of the various metaphors in the Baul songs would enable us to see not only how the Baul bodies experienced and engaged with the various socio-historical changes wrought in colonial Bengal, but also how, through these various metaphorisations, the Baul body itself is rendered as historically specific, variously figured and re-figured, invented and re-invented as a plundered house, railcar, etc. One of our major concerns, then, throughout the various case-studies of certain cluster-metaphors in colonial Baul songs has been to chart not only the Bauls' experience of history, but a history of that experience.

Moreover, central to our understanding of the Baul's experiential esoteric body is a notion of an intimately entangled body-self in the Baul esoteric discourse of *dehotottwo*. The human body, in other Indian philosophical traditions, is primarily viewed as a



body-mind, a living entity combining a complex variety of physical and mental processes. It is caught up in a continual process of becoming, of making and unmaking, without a beginning or an end—a process constituted by an interaction with other processes and linking all persons and beings with each other in a web of interconnections that extends to all times and places. This continually unfolding body-mind however, is not the Self. With the exception of Buddhism and Carvaka, the body-mind is regarded in Indian philosophical traditions as an instrument of a Self that is autonomous, transcendental and independent of its embodied condition. As, for instance, the *Bhagavad Gita* put it:

[U]nborn, eternal, everlasting is this [Self], primeval. It is not slain when the body is slain.... As a man casts out his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones, so does the embodied [Self] cast off its worn-out bodies and enters other new ones.<sup>457</sup>

In this view that locates the body-mind and Self within an ontological hierarchy, the pure eternal Self is always superior to the mortal lived body-mind from whose karmic bonds of passion and ignorance it yearns to be liberated. Taken to its most extreme, in addition to subordinating the body to the Self, this view often tends to propose a negative/oppositional relation between the lived body-mind and the pure Self. It is in direct contradistinction to this hierarchic model of the lived body-mind and the Self that we can locate the body-self in the Baul's *dehatmabad* register. As the very term *dehatmabad* suggests, the Baul esoteric philosophy—taking its cues from Buddhism and Tantrism—rejects any notion of a Self outside the lived body and locates the lived body (*deho*) as the ultimate Self (*atma*). It is to be borne in mind here that this esoteric view does not propose a complete identification of the body with the Self; instead, it foregrounds a notion of an entangled body-self wherein the two entities do not fuse into each other as to render themselves indistinguishable, but are recognisable as separate beings at the same time as they are intimately intertwined with each other. For instance, as we have amply demonstrated in Chapter V, the anthropomorphic Self/soul endlessly circulating within the Baul body is at once distinguishable and inseparable from the Baul body for its recognition. Moreover, in this view of the intimately entangled body-self, the body is no longer regarded as the instrument of the Self. For instance, while in Brahminic ritual practices, the ritual body is an instrument mediating the connections between the pure divine Self (*brahma*) and its multiple embodied manifestations (*atma*),

<sup>457</sup> R. C. Zaehner trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 2.20 and 2.22, pp. 132-3.

in the Baul's *dehoshadhona* or bodily-worship/worship of the body, the ritual Baul body is both the means and the end of the ritual practice: it is both through and *within* the ritual body that the state of the true eternal Self could be attained. In orthodox Brahmanic rituals the body is merely the instrument through which ritual acts can be performed successfully and hence the eventual salvation of the Self achieved outside the body.<sup>458</sup> Orthodox Tantric rituals, on the other hand, aim to achieve super-human powers in the body itself.<sup>459</sup> The Baul rituals however, aim to achieve salvation both through and in the body itself. The Baul's salvation is not outside the body and neither is the body alone itself to be perfected.

It is through this subversive conceptualisation of an entangled body-self in the Baul's esoteric philosophy that we feel we can more adequately discuss the poetics of their experience. Because the body and the Self are intimately folded within each other, those social regimes of control that seek to regulate, contain and dominate the Bauls' social being are always experienced through this entangled body-self of the Baul's *dehotottwo*. What affects the body, affects the self and vice versa. Because the relation between the body and the self is always central to embodied experience, any subversion in the established order of the spiritual model calls forth a subversion in the nature of the experience of the world. Hence, while in most Indian philosophical traditions, for instance, bodily experiences are often poetically translated into symbols and metaphors on a spiritual register, for the Bauls, not only is the experiential the spiritual, but the experiential itself is metaphorical. If the experiential body is at the heart of all metaphorical processes and if poetic language functions, in part, to dehabitualise our perception of the world, then the Baul's defamiliarising metaphorisations are the very mode of their experience of the world (through their entangled body-self) than deliberately deployed rhetorical strategies.

### **Resistance:**

If, as we have seen so far, the Baul's metaphorical experience of the socio-historical world itself is conditioned by their subversive notion of an entangled body-self, then,

<sup>458</sup> See for instance, Wendy Doniger trans., *The Rig Veda*, London: Penguin Books, 1981 and Robin Rinehart ed., *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2004.

<sup>459</sup> See for instance, David Gordon White ed, *Tantra in Practice*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001 and Gavin D. Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2006.

what does this tell us about the articulation of agency and location of intent in their resistance against hegemonic forms of control and domination? Is their resistance intentional? In fact, is intent central to acts of resistance, both overt and implicit? Throughout this thesis we have argued that through a socio-historical reading of certain frequently deployed metaphors in Baul songs of colonial rural Bengal we can glimpse at how the Bauls have often engaged with and resisted against the various socio-economic-political forces of the time. The key questions that emerge at this point are: Are these acts of resistance intended by the Bauls or are we ascribing intent to them? Must the Baul be aware that he is resisting some exercise of power—and intending to do so—for his action to qualify as resistance? Faced with these questions, what this section would attempt to do is to disengage our conceptualisations of resistance from implications of direct intentionality.

An actor's conscious intent has been viewed by some theorists of resistance as the key to classifying a behaviour as resistance. This view held that regardless of their scope or results, if an actor (whether individual or collective) intends to resist, then his/her actions would qualify as resistance—a view that has continued to inform studies of resistance across disciplines. For instance, in feminist and cultural studies we have Lauraine LeBlanc arguing that:

Accounts of resistance must detail not only resistant acts, but the subjective intent motivating these as well.... In this conceptualization of resistance, an attribution of any type requires three distinct moments: a subjective account of oppression (real or imagined), an express desire to counter that oppression, and an action (broadly defined as word, thought, or deed) intended specifically to counter that oppression.... It is crucial that the first two conditions hold before any observational account can be deemed resistant. That is, the person engaging in resistant acts must do so consciously and be able to relate that consciousness and intent.<sup>460</sup>

However, it was James Scott's concept of 'hidden transcripts' that shifted the focus from intent to the nature of the act of resistance as a determinant.<sup>461</sup> According to this view, oppressed people may be conscious of oppression and may intend to resist it in some fashion, but this resistance may occur privately, because public resistance is too dangerous, and hence the intent may not be visible to others, especially to those that they oppose. In fact, Scott suggests that we can reasonably infer intent from actions,

<sup>460</sup> Lauraine LeBlanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*, New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999, p. 18.

<sup>461</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

even those that appear to be purely self-indulgent rather than resistant:

A peasant soldier who deserts the army is in effect “saying” by his act that the purposes of this institution and the risks and hardships it entails will not prevail over his family or personal needs. A harvest laborer who steals paddy from his employer is “saying” that his need for rice takes precedence over the formal property rights of his boss.<sup>462</sup>

What these various formulations of intent in small-scale, everyday forms of resistance seem to take for granted is the view that mass-based movements and violent insurrections clearly represent resistance and hence the intent behind such acts is unequivocal and direct. As we shall soon see, even in instances of overt resistance in the form of peasant insurgencies, the twin questions of the articulations of agency/selfhood and intent of the rebelling consciousness are not as unambiguously answered as it may seem. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, Ranajit Guha’s study of the Santal rebellion of 1855 in his classic essay “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” remains vexed by these very same questions that seem to haunt the whole Subaltern Studies project of reconstructing subaltern pasts.<sup>463</sup> As Guha has foregrounded in his celebrated essay, the rebelling Santal leaders, Sidhu and Kanu, had explained the rebellion in supernatural terms, claiming that it was the Santal god Thakur who had urged them to carry out the rebellious act, assuring the devotee-rebels protection from the British bullets: ‘Kanoo and Sedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight.’<sup>464</sup> In this singular explanation of the cause of the rebellion provided by the rebelling peasant consciousness that predicated the rebellious act on a will other than their own, as Chakrabarty points out, we find the rebelling consciousness not only refusing agency in his own telling, but also formulating an intent that is different from the unequivocal, direct intentionality usually ascribed to acts of overt resistance: the intent behind the Santal *hool* is not to fight the oppressive British and the non-local Indians, but to follow the dictates of their Thakur. It is, on the one hand, the rebelling subaltern’s simultaneous denial of agency for themselves and conferring it instead on supernatural beings and on the other the historian’s methodological handicap in not being able to ascribe any real agency to the supernatural beings in historical events and consequently reifying this supernatural ascription onto ‘rationally defensible’ social conflicts, that Chakrabarty

<sup>462</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 301.

<sup>463</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 102-108.

<sup>464</sup> As quoted in Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency” in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 34.

contends, leads to the ironic reversal of the subaltern historian's own stated project of listening to the subaltern's own voice. Chakrabarty's critique underscores how even in acts of violent resistance articulations of agency and intent of the rebelling consciousness are far from being unproblematic and unequivocal and how the search for 'intent' may actually cause epistemic violence to subaltern pasts.

Our problem of locating intent and agency with the Bauls becomes even more compounded when we look at the archive we have at our disposal. Since apart from the Baul songs, we have no other historical record of the Baul voice (such as autobiographies, letters, statements, etc) in the archive wherein we can even attempt to read the 'intent' of their resisting voice, the already vexed issue of locating intent in their acts of resistance becomes particularly acute. Moreover, as we have already stated in the Introduction, because of the fluid nature of the primarily orally transmitted Baul songs and the related problem of authorship and attribution, attempts to locate agency or subjecthood in the resisting voice of any actual historical individual Baul singer/composer would always be thwarted by the very nature of our archive. The only available trace of their voice is to be found in their deployment of colophons in the songs wherein their subjecthood is not asserted but, like Sidhu and Kanu, undermined and deflected on to that of their sectarian guru's. These colophons also position the act of composing songs exclusively within protestations of religious piety. Articulations of subjecthood and intent are therefore mediated by generic and stylistic considerations as well as protocols of social and spiritual practice. It is perhaps crucial to remind ourselves here that in the face of the absence of any historical record of the 'real' voice of actual historical Baul composers (such as Lalou, Kubir Gossain, Duddu Shah, etc) in the archive, our study of the authorial voice of the Baul songs has not concerned itself with locating any 'hard' historical author, but has instead engaged itself with the 'soft' authorial voice, with the author-function ascribed to these song-texts by the discursive logic of the archive's economy. Hence, attempts to look for a subversive subject have been replaced by attempts to locate various subject-positions articulated in and through these songs that collectively have a subversive potential. The focus in our study of the various acts of resistance glimpsed at through the deployments of various metaphors in Baul songs has not been on the subversive subject, but on subversive acts whose existence is not contingent upon the express 'intent' of these individual subjects. Wherever we have talked of any instance of individual resistance, we have used it as

either an instantiation of these subversive acts or an allegory of how these subversive acts generally operate in a given socio-historical context.

Since the issues of intent and agency in acts of resistance, whether overt and violent or everyday, can never be successfully understood and only partially grasped, our central concern in the thesis, then, has not been to stake a claim for either of these. Instead, what we have tried to map here is how established forms of hegemonic power are constantly getting thwarted and even subverted in and through the articulations in the Baul songs of the soft, collectively resistant Baul consciousness. Through the individual case-studies, we have sought to chart a trajectory of understanding the various forms of resistance as also of power—i.e., from resistance as denaturalising performance and forms of ‘everyday resistance’ to an understanding of power and resistance as perennially shifting flows. Elucidating these shifts in our understanding of the various forms of power/resistance articulated in the Baul songs thus necessitates, once again, a brief revisitation of our individual case-studies.

For instance, Chapter I has highlighted how, in the deployments of the gender-metaphors in Baul songs, we can locate not only an inversion of established gender hierarchies, but also—in the Bauls’ presentation of gender as performative—a form of resistance that denaturalises the entire structure of domination. In Chapters II and III, we have demonstrated how the metaphors of agrarian relations and the plundered domestic space in Baul songs could be read as the ‘hidden transcripts’ of the dominated—‘those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript’ of the dominant groups.<sup>465</sup> Furthering James Scott’s formulation of everyday forms of resistance that critiqued, amongst other things, the Gramscian insistence on the notion of a hegemony impressed upon the subordinate by dominant groups, we have illustrated not only how the subaltern Bauls were able to ‘penetrate’ and even ‘demystify’ the dominant ideology, but how at the same time their very act of resistance and its rhetoric were in fact conditioned, at least in part, by the very logic of hegemony that it set out to oppose: power and resistance here are irretrievably entangled with each other wherein neither is autonomous and each is conditioned by the other. By Chapter IV, we have moved away from looking merely at articulations of resistance in Baul songs to a more open engagement with the various

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<sup>465</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. 4-5.

processes by which the Bauls' subaltern consciousness sought to negotiate with the technologies of colonial modernity. Taking, for instance, the various deployments of the cluster-metaphor of railways as our case-study, we have highlighted the need to critically distance ourselves from uni-dimensional readings of the historical moments of encounter between the Baul's subaltern consciousness and the hegemonic domination merely in terms of acts of resistance. Moreover, we have also attempted to problematise resistance itself wherein the oppressiveness of the targets of such resistance (e.g., the railways, the English makers) is far from being unequivocal and is often ambiguously perceived by the resisting consciousness—a shift that owes much to the changing socio-historical contexts of their experience. In the final chapter, we have further problematised the definitions of resistance in moving beyond the oppositional binary model of power and resistance. Through our study of the spatial metaphors and practices articulated in the Baul songs, we have, following Deleuze and Guattari, foregrounded the need to de-centre the 'territorialised couplings' of power and resistance, and instead view both as territorialising and de-territorialising tendencies or flows that are outside of each other and yet interlocked by a dialectical tension between them. Resistance then, as glimpsed at through the production of a de-territorialised, fluid, non-hierarchic, constantly becoming, 'smooth' space of the Baul body-city as against the territorialised, stable, hierarchic 'striated space' of the state, is no longer defined negatively in terms of power nor does it reside within its matrix; rather, in its being a non-place formed by the absence of essence and characterised by pluralities, multiplicities, difference and becoming, this resultant smooth space of resistance escapes state coding and is outside of power precisely because it eschews the binary structures of the hegemonic state.

### **Historical Specificity of Methodology Deployed and Recent Trends in Baul Songs:**

In conclusion, it needs to be pointed out that the relevance and efficacy of the methodology employed in reading the Baul songs of rural colonial Bengal—i.e., our study of the forms of subaltern negotiation with and resistance against hegemonic forms of social power acted in and through the experiential esoteric Baul body—is itself historically limited. The same methodology may not be productive in studying extant Baul songs of today. A primary reason for such a historical de-limitation lies in the radical transformation of the performative contexts of Baul songs in recent decades. A

look at the performative contexts of Baul songs in present-day West Bengal would perhaps clarify this point. With the increasing commercialisation of Baul songs, most of the Baul songs that we hear today are produced and performed within a tightly structured patron-client network—a network whose capacity for controlling and shaping Baul songs is unprecedented. It is also worth noting here that these institutional structures of patronage, both governmental and non-governmental, which are dominated by the bhodrolok are very distinct from the loose patronage structure (mainly through alms-giving) which had informed Baul performances of the past. For instance, during our fieldwork in Shantiniketan in the district of Birbhum at the time of the annual congregation of Bauls and Fokirs in the Poush (December/January) Mela (Fair) of 2006, we had encountered a curious phenomenon: all the Bauls and Fokirs who performed onstage (catering to a predominantly bhodrolok audience), we noted, sang songs of love—songs which were, in turn, understood along two largely fixed frames of reference. The first ‘reading’ interpreted the songs firmly within a Tagorean reference-frame by bhodrolok audience who found in it intimations of transcendental love; and the other frame—deployed by those who claimed to ‘know’ about the secretive sexo-yogic beliefs and practices of the Bauls—found in them articulations of esoteric love. Both readings thus understood the songs outside any specific historic frame and hence the song-texts thus came to stand outside of history in both these readings. Despite the differences between these two frames of reading, the consensus thus seemed to be that all Baul songs were about ‘love’—either transcendental or esoteric. Such a consensus was reinforced by the fact that Bauls themselves seemed to sing almost exclusively love-songs. This struck us as being a very curious shift. Being acquainted, as we are, with a wide variety of older Baul songs which dealt with a wide range of themes, we were at a loss to explain the reasons behind this narrow, exclusive focus on ‘love’. Personal interviews however, soon cleared up the reasons behind the Baul’s depleted repertoire. Interviews with contemporary performing Bauls clarified that they had been expressly asked by various organisers to sing ‘love-songs’ since the organisers had felt that the bhodrolok audience would not be suitably entertained by other songs. Framed by the logic of ‘entertainment’ and sensitive to bhodrolok sensibilities, the Bauls have thus repeatedly been instructed to sing nothing but love-songs. Hence, while the emergence of these new institutional structures of patronage and arenas of performance have undoubtedly opened up new opportunities for Bauls and their music, the extent of framing and control to which their performances are now subject is unprecedented.



Furthermore, besides 'entertainment', Baul songs are also these days often directly deployed in government-sponsored projects with a view to promoting public awareness of government schemes. For instance, a number of Baul songs and performances have been commissioned by the State Government in both its AIDS awareness campaigns and its campaigns to spread literacy.<sup>466</sup> Such direct commissioning of songs and performances which expects the Bauls to convey a pre-defined 'message' through their songs, thus, automatically constricts the Bauls' poetic autonomy and instrumentalises their songs so that images and metaphors used are no longer directly fashioned by the poetics of their historically contingent experience.

While both the transformation of Baul songs into bhodrolok 'entertainment' and their appropriation by the government's publicity and propaganda machinery have radically transformed the nature of modern-day Baul songs, it has also curbed the freedom of their authors to critique the social power of the bhodroloks. A rather extreme case of such lack of freedom, narrated to us by one of the Bauls we spoke to, might serve to clarify the situation. The Baul concerned had composed a song titled '31<sup>st</sup> October' upon the assassination of the erstwhile Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In the song concerned, Mrs Gandhi had been depicted in the image of a 'Mother'. Upon performing the song at a cultural event however, the organisers—who were supporters of the ruling CPI(M)—took exception to the song. Though the song, we are told, was not intended as a statement of support for the Congress party (of which Mrs Gandhi was the leader), it was taken to be as such by the organisers and led not only to the Baul singer not being paid for his performance, but also to his physical assault by the organisers.<sup>467</sup> What is significant about this event is that it was not so much the actual 'message' of the song, but the unfortunate use of an image/ metaphor drawn from the Baul's immediate social world that had led to his predicament. Such instances—even if this is an extreme example—clearly demonstrate how today's Bauls, increasingly dependent upon bhodrolok patronage as they are, are no longer free to choose their images and metaphors and need to be very careful about exactly what metaphors they use. The anecdote can be contrasted with the several Baul songs produced by mid-nineteenth century song-writers who used the image of Queen Victoria as a mother in their songs

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<sup>466</sup> Songs collected during fieldwork in Shantiniketan in December 2006.

<sup>467</sup> This anecdote was narrated to us by a local Baul in Santiniketan in December 2006 on a strict assurance of confidence as reprisals are feared. Hence, we have been unable to reveal the identities of both our narrator and the Baul singer in the narrated event.

without anxieties about the Queen's affiliations to 'Empire'. Though some muted critiques continue to surface in contemporary Baul songs—especially through their frequent deployments of the metaphor of topsy-turvy 'Kolikal'—such critiques are much more ambivalent and ambiguous.<sup>468</sup>

Our contention, thus, throughout this thesis has been to re-insert Bauls and their songs within a socio-historical framework. Part of this re-appraisal resides in the insistence that as historically specific texts, these songs can only be studied through analytical tools which are suited to their contexts, archives and subjects. It is this impulse that leads us to accept that our analysis of Baul songs cannot be deployed to contemporary examples of the genre—despite obvious doctrinal, textual, musical and imagined continuities. Through the acknowledgement of the limits of our analytical framework therefore we re-assert the need to thoroughly historicise the allegedly 'ahistorical' Baul songs.

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<sup>468</sup> Songs collected during fieldwork in Shantiniketan in December 2006.

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This thesis breaks with existing scholarship on the Bauls by moving away from an exclusive interrogation of their esoteric beliefs and practices. Instead, we foreground the socio-historical dimensions of metaphors found in Baul songs. Rather than using these metaphors as keys to unlock the esoteric registers of Baul praxis, we see how the metaphors themselves are drawn from and mediated by the Baul singer-composers' locations in history and society.

In the Introduction of the thesis, we sensitise the reader to the history and politics of the particular frames used by song-collectors through which the songs—our primary material—have become available to us. Thereafter, we develop our enquiry through five specific case-studies. In each case-study, i.e. those of gender, agrarian relations, domestic space, transportation and spatiality, we look at clusters of metaphors around each of these themes and see how the metaphors themselves reveal clues to both the specificities of the Baul singer-composers' socio-historical locations and their experiences of these locations.

Throughout these studies we remain interested in how Baul singer-composers as members of a larger rural society resist and/or negotiate with the structures of domination. In conclusion, we argue that not only is their resistance intimately tied up with their specific socio-historical experiences—which they often also share with non-Baul contemporaries—but also that both their experiences and their modes of resistance are themselves shifting and historically contingent. Thus, just as we find several shifting layers in their resistance to structures of power, similarly we find multiple shifting locations for their experiential body.

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