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The Bauls of Birbhum: Identity, Fusion and Diffusion

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Abstract

In the political climate of ardent nationalism the pride on a glorious, indigenous past was to be resuscitated through the revaluation and rehabilitation of local folk traditions, that led to my interest in collecting folklore and the increasing use (and misuse) of folk themes. The relationship between folklore and technology is a long debated one. In the earlier phases of folkloristics, technological development was seen as a threat to the conservation of folklife and scholars were busy in collecting and preserving 'authentic' tales, songs and handicraft before the homologating assault of modern civilisation destroyed them. This article intends to examine the nexus between folklore and technology in the context of Bengali Baul songs of Birbhum and their Sahajiya Sadhana, from a different perspective from the earlier. It takes interest in discovering the bricolage of humanism, the fusion and diffusion from beyond that helps increasing the "cultural syncretism" through Baul songs that has been delivering the secrets of Indian culture through their performances all over the world, without media and technology this could never be possible.

Key Words: *Baul, Sahajiya, Change, Modernity, Adaptation, Negotiation, Globalisation.*

Introduction

This article is an attempt to explore something more about the origin, development and current identity of Baul communities in Birbhum. Moreover here I shall bring forward the transliteration of Baul songs by the *bauls* and *non-bauls* that lead to the origin of virtual reality and augmented reality within the Baul songs; I shall trace out whether this tendency of fusion and diffusion cause gradual dismantling of the regional charm of *sandhya-vasha* of *Sahajiya Mahajon Sadhaks*. My interest is also to investigate upon the hidden truths of *Sahajiya Sadhantattwa* and distinguish the *sadhak bauls*, *gayak bauls* and *sakher baul* or *non-bauls* of Birbhum, find the "real" in the true term.

Methodology

In this article I insist on ethnomusicology as an essential tool of my overall research approach. Ethno-musicologists believe that music must be understood as a part of culture, as a product of human society. While many pieces of research do not directly address the problem, I am interested in the way in which Baul communities of Birbhum musically defines itself, in its taxonomy of music, its ideas of what music does, how it should, and also in the way a society changes its music,

relates to, absorbs, and influences other music. To measure this musical change and its influence, present study will be presented in the form of a purposive ethnography. Intensive anthropological investigation had so far been carried out to understand the actual functioning of their culture in the context of field investigation. Almost all the conventional tools of research like participant observations, depth interviews, case studies and genealogies were used for collection of data; both structured as well as non-structured interview methods were implemented. Apart from collecting fresh data of rituals, religious beliefs of both the indigenous cultures, emphasis was laid on the qualitative assessment of the data and comparing them.

Exposure of Baul: Negotiating Tradition & Modernity

In order to attract an International market some exponents of this so called folk music, attempt to modify their traditional form to suit popular taste by using catchy words and even slightly westernised tunes with musical interludes. Currently Baul compositions are incorporating objects of modernity; the Bauls have been modifying them into the structure of metaphorical songs through the use of their enigmatic jargons known as *sandhya-bhasha* and their cultural sexo-yogic practices of self-realisation. Regarding this, Shaktinath Jha notes: From the nineteenth century onwards the subject matter of Baul songs started to extend. The advancement of communication and technology helped them to flourish their songs make their voice reach toward the global audience. Bauls in course of their journey to the abroad came to know about Western culture, they started to fuse alien tunes, techniques, gimmicks in their songs, although they assimilate this influence in their songs in their own way (Jha, 56). Globalisation works with its own sets of paradoxes. On the one hand it seeks out diversity because therein it finds fresh products that can be offered to the new and ever growing markets of this world.

But at the same time, the diverse offerings it seeks to exploit must conform to the terms and conditions of the global market even at the risk of losing their unique identities and traits which made them eligible. It may argued justifiably that in any sphere those who are able to be in step with the times survive and others fall by the wayside and this is indeed one of the constricting pressures that globalisation has inflicted on many an existing artist and art forms especially music. Such is the impact of this aspect of globalisation that most forms of Indian music desperately try to conform to the successfully globalised Bollywoody Hindi songs. On TV channels catering into the regional viewership, music videos provide ample proof of this homogenisation which has undoubtedly had a tragic impact on the diverse forms of musical expression in the country. Therefore songs with slow tempo or complex rhythms are usually rejected and what retained are the songs that can be converted into dance tracks with a primal beat. What happens in such situation to the innumerable artists who bare exponents of marginalised forms like classical music, folk music especially Baul. Apart from the problematising notions of authenticity attached to cultural identity, also makes possible an interrogation of the bifurcation of the global and local identities particularly in the onslaught of globalisation as a strategy, technique and ideology and Hall observes: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, 54).

Baul is changing: Digitalising the Tradition

During field investigations while I have traced out a handful of Baul songs by virtue of their specific wordings, rhythm, tuning and mode of presentation, I have found a conspicuous charm almost they have turned into a musical medley that can be enjoyed by the listeners throughout the

world. Bauls added special attractive features in traditional mode and being controlled over the tuning and playing of the traditional musical instruments they could not find it difficult to mould the songs and their connected tuning to get equal attraction from all classes of audience. I have surveyed in several *akhdas* and *ashrams* of Bauls in many places of the Birbhum district and collected relevant data regarding this by conversing with many Bauls and listening to their songs. Those who still remain as the traditional are not only found to present themselves in more sophisticated dresses and manners, but also the type of songs sung by them now-a-days are not with the same spirit as before. Songs are found to be the principle traditional medium through which the Bauls are trying to communicate as a special group to the massive and fast exposure to the larger society through the modern means of communication and network of administration, development and political process these ethnic regional songs from the rural areas of Birbhum spread over rapidly throughout the country. Their songs have undergone noticeable modification in composition and tune and “this modern brushing up has substantially erased the original flavour and depth of the older songs” (Bandyopadhyay, 101). While performing the traditional songs, many of them are found to have deviated from their traditional styles, by adding to them a special colour of their own, making it commercial to attract the foreign audience who came in Birbhum to hear original Baul songs. The examples of such songs are in the following:

*Age Tribenir khobor janre mon, tattwa jene motto hole kam-
ripu tor habe domon...swadhan kar Tribeni habe nirupan.* (Bhattacharya, 123)
(Traditional)

Come faster my young brother, rajrajeshwar dorshone
here pure love-e, vasi sobe, present hoe shantashrame.
jahar for we vogi lanchona, be careful tai bhulo naa,
always koy ei legvabna, nothing fear r shomone... (Modern)

[Free Translation: Control your lust, transform your lust into love and destroy your lust with pure love to be successful in sadhana.]

Dichotomy of Real & Unreal in Baul: Adaptation of New Compositions

Many of the Bauls of Birbhum now live in urban areas of Bolpur, Illumbazar, Rampurhat and Suri in these days perhaps to make their livelihood easier and their life more comfortable. Bolpur is a matter of attraction to local, regional as well as global tourists, Rabindranath Tagore’s Santiniketan, at a distance of only one and a half kilometer, receives huge number of tourists, almost round the year and many of them come to visit in this town. Again Joydev which is famous for the *Baul Mela* is nearby from Illumbazar town, Suri is the capital city of Birbhum and Tarapith which is famous as a *shakti-pith* is in Rampurhat town, in order to have the facilities of these towns and to connect with foreign tourists the Bauls are shifting from their village households and Guru’s *ashramas* that lead the modification or modernisation of their traditional songs. Their leanings towards the secular world has expanded their field of activities and established a far-flung and complex network of interaction with the *non-bauls*, who are not descendants of traditional Baul families. Not only these non-Bauls are composing the tune and music of the Baul songs, they are now very much interested in writing the Baul songs in their traditional format:

*Gari cholche ajob kole die mati paripati agun jalae hawar bole...
Eh garir bolbeyaring hare spring tar, emon fit kora, ekbar
Thread kete gele nebe na to r jora...*

[Free Translation: Oh dear driver, drive your car fast, by turning your steering to the right or to the left, and by feeding oil to the engine...When the Engine of the Body becomes out of order. The wheel of the soul remains but where is the salvation?]

*Vakti bina se dhan mele na...ache Vakti ratan amulla dhan
ajatone pabe na....(Bhattacharya, 129) (T)*

Oh tor kharid kora mobile wrong numbere koris call
tar khabor ki pabi!!! mon tui bol...hello chere hari bol...(M)

[Free Translation: Without Devotion a man cannot achieve the salvation of his soul. Therefore instead of calling your ladylove pray to God.]

*Ogo sakhi, tui ki tai parbi
O je boro kothin pirit
Seshe rastai bose kandbi...(T)
(Bhattacharya, 131)*

Piriti kanthaler antha se antha lagle
pare chare naa golemale golemale
pirit koiro naa....(M)

[Free Translation: Although it is very easy to fall in love but it's very difficult task to do justice to that as this is the most critical creation of this world.]

Due to this the 'Real Bauls' are found to be very much concerned about their cult as instead of getting success in Sadhana the Bauls are now found to be more interested in recording their discs or in cassettes. After doing fieldworks I observed that at present Bauls have shown great capability in handling modern media and situations of communication by adapting new tunes, words and melodies in spite of retaining the traditional format along with modern musical instruments with that of traditional Baul instruments like *Ektara*, *dotara*, *dugi*, *dubki*, *gabgubi*, and *khamok*.

Social Picture in Baul: Updated Version of Baul Songs

During field investigations I also found their songs to be mixed with politics, social picture and other things, happening around our society which truly refined them with literariness. In the following song I have collected from a local baul of Suripara (Bolpur) Bapi Das, which is about current political status of West Bengal, ruled by first female chief minister Mamata Banerjee:

*Purushk banor sajaye bede hoeche nari
purushere golay die dori nachache bari bari
bidwan joto lekhopora nari dekhle hoe sob vera
bolbo ki narir khomota nari hoe rajjer korta
jemon raja temon proja saja dicche vari...*

In this song the Baul is expressing his respect for the female or *prakriti shakti*, which is supreme power than the male or *purush shakti*. Another song I have found from a local baul Jaga Khepa of Suri about strike, which is a key political problem in our society---*Geli keno Dhakar sahore sarkarete bandh dakile dokan khole na re* [Free translation: Why did you visit Dhaka, the city where the shops remain closed during strike.]. Recently I heard another song sung by the Tushar Das Baul of Illumbazar to attract the modern audience from abroad in order pave their path to get the opportunities to go abroad—*Ami jai Londone batashe veshe*. [Free Translation: I'm going to London by air. My body and mind don't permit me to stay in Calcutta... Someday when I come back, I'll also get on the metro-rail. Now I'm going to London by air.]

The Authenticity of Baul amidst Fusion & Diffusion

Thus it can be seen that the aesthetic and religious attitude of the Bauls is gradually being replaced by lyrics composed on the light social matters which are devoid of any professional thought, approach of mysticism. On the contrary, the verse and the tune are constructed commercially in order to make it catchy for mass entertainment but it is hardly acceptable as authentic Baul songs by its character. But due to the audience's degraded taste while devoted Bauls hardly get any chance to present their songs from the core of their heart, most of the times fake Bauls are being introduced as the successful carriers of their artistic tradition, who sometimes find out various means to adopt different techniques to attract the minds of the present day audience, their Baul songs with improvisations and fusions of western and bollywood hit music gains popularity and in this way they exert a serious blow upon their ethnicity and their traditional background has now faced a challenge. Therefore as a living embodiment of the cultural heritage of Birbhum, the Bauls of this district need all-rounded protection from decay or distortion as well as effective nurturing of their highly valued philosophical principles based on the universal brotherhood of mankind. The Baul communities of this district have never been given any special reward or any kind of economic security by the government despite its silent work for the people of this country. It is appropriate time to throw discernible light and all possible efforts to develop their condition among adverse situations and all possible efforts should be made to flourish their tradition even in the midst of modern trends of fusion and diffusion. Moreover most of the Bauls are now suffering from addiction to the extreme level, as we all know from the age-old times the Bauls like other tantric-sadhus believe that the addiction of *Ganja* help them to concentrate on their sadhana and yogavyash. But on the contrary I came to know about many local Bauls of Birbhum whose careers were finished due to this addiction of *Ganja*, along with other obnoxious sources of intoxication. Shyamsundar Das Baul in one of his songs protested against this:

Ganja tor patay patay rosh na khele jay na bojha
khelei opojosh....ganja khele sorir mati...vul kore tui
volababar hoe geli bosh...ganja tor patay patay rosh. (Chakraborty, 49)

[Free Translation: The leaves of Ganja tree have intoxicated juice within it. In spite of being aware of the fact that addiction of it may cause injury to health, you became its victim.]

Change is Inevitable: Keeping in Pace with Globalisation

In the last decades, it has been perceived as more profitable to analyse instead the positive relation between folkloric productions and the impact of new means of reproduction and communication, such as radio, television and mobile phones. The aim of this study is likewise to argue in favour of these changes, taking into account the current scenario of this globalized world, we have to remember that changes are inevitable as the total scenario of this world has been changed due to globalisation. But according to Newton's third law the mutual forces of action and reaction between two bodies are equal, opposite and collinear, so a Baul can get or adopt the chair of globalization; but he/she has to keep it mind that against this they will have to deposit their traditional resource under the bank of "Bisshwayan" (Globalization), unless that they will lose their own all specimen heritage. Therefore in the context of Baul music, this would mean that in the midst of competing with the non-bauls to attract an international market, the real Bauls of Birbhum must retain some part of his or her traditional identity, so that globalisation could not make their ethnicity frighteningly unfamiliar or alienating.

Conclusion

I shall conclude my article with the current condition and future of other folk-performing arts of Birbhum apart from Baul. Folk songs like *Tappa*, *Thumri*, *Bhatiali*, *Sari* are the prominent vehicles of folk songs composed by Tagore, but all these traditional assets of Birbhum has been lost almost under the gigantic shadow of Baul's popularity. On the other hand martial dance forms like *Raibenshe*, artists like *Bahurupies*, folk theatre forms like *Bolan*, *Yatra*, which were once very popular in Birbhum, now very few people are interested or even know their identity. Even other folk performing arts like *Kirtan* and *Kabigaan*, which are still performed in front of wide audience, have been losing their distinctive identity as many of the artists take recourse of Baul to make it much attractive to the audience or they are desperate to make their folk art form a popular culture to earn global fame and money just like Bauls of Birbhum.

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