Bauls of Bengal

Etymologically the word ‘Baul’ derives from the Sanskrit Vatula meaning mad or running amok or from vyakula meaning impatiently eager. During the last phase of the 15th century A.D. (in Srikrishnavijaya of Maladhar Basu) or nearly the end of 16th century (in Chaitnyacharitamrta of Krishnadasa Kaviraj) ‘Baul’ entered into Bengali literature, when it indicated an individual who was spiritually ecstatic or mad. It is generally accepted that from the first half of the 17th century A.D. it began to be applied to an esoteric sect of religious mendicants whose faith has much in common with both Sufism and Vaishnavism.

Their unusual approach to life has earned them this nomenclature. Baul i.e. mad or different from others. The Bauls are apparently a godless sect, seemingly overwhelmed with emotions to attain a state of the sublime, which they describe as the abode of the sain or Lord. They do not observe rituals of any sort.

The Baul cult developed in the 17th century among the lower echelons of the social ladder. The idea of attaining the ‘sublime’ is somewhat similar to the Sufi principle of Fana or the ‘ultimate’, which could be obtained through Sama or ‘meditations’, songs and dances. This is known as ‘Ulta sadhan’ or the obverse way of meditation.

Bauls believe that Lord Chaitanya was their first spiritual preceptor or guru but there are fundamental differences between Gaudia Vaishnavism and the ideas of the Bauls. For they have look to adhara moner manus (the intangible beloved) as their Lord or Sain, who does not exist in any temple or mosque, but in the innermost core of the devotee. To him, he is the ‘neighbour’, living in the mirror-town (‘arshi nagarer parshi’), which in other words, is the reflection of one’s own self.

To the Baul, the human body is the highest temple of the Sain. In this temple lives their ‘moner manus’ [the ‘eternal beloved’]. For this reason they attain divine grace by converting the communion between woman and man (prakriti and purus) through the medium of love, which is abstract and divine. According to the Baul philosophy the woman is not just an object of desire but akin to Radha, symbolising eternal love.

The devotees belonging to this sect always seem to be absorbed in a mystic state. Their understanding is always with themselves i.e. union with the Supreme Source [moner manus]. Many Baul songs refer to this union and speak of this mystic love.

There are Bauls who adopt asceticism – they are medics, though some lead a family life. Neither sects forsake womenfolk but see them as ‘prakriti’ or spiritual associates. Of course, the Grhi Bauls (or those living with their wives and children) are in no other way different from the mendicants. The form and philosophy is the same for both. Sometimes, the whole family may belong to this sect.

Bauls attach supreme importance to their Guru. They do not chant mantras have any nor any scriptures of their own. Their religious doctrines are traditionally received in an oral form from their guru through songs and dances which refer to particular secret practices.

In Bengal, people from both the major religious communities of Hindu and Muslim are converted into Bauls. When someone enters the Baul sect, tearing off his previous socio-religious bonds of Hinduism or Mohammadanism, he becomes a man without a cast or creed.

Though most of the Bauls are unlettered their lyrics are extraordinarily poetic. Spontaneous, metaphoric verses express intense devotion and a metaphysical philosophy. Let me cite a lyric composition composed by the famous Baul poet Lalon Fakir to end this short note;

I didn’t see him even for a day
Close to my place is the mirror-city
where lives this neighbour of mine.
Encircling the city is bottomless water
without any limit, and there is no boat
at this end.
I long to see him.
But tell me how can I go to that village?
What can I tell of this neighbour?
Hands or legs or shoulders or head
He has none.
Now he is up in the air,
Now deep in the water,
If that neighbour touches me
all my mortal anguish will end.
He and Lalon are close neighbours
But between them lies a wide gulf.

References