

The Baul Religion

The Bauls of Bengal are people who practice the Baul religion. The Baul people are mostly known for singing because singing is one way in which they project their beliefs (Thielemann 1). This religion is a combination of Hindu and Islamic beliefs and is based on the Upanisads and the Vedas (Capwell 255). To be Baul requires not only studying, but an immersion in the knowledge acquired (Thielemann 20). In order for the Bauls to be consumed with this knowledge, they must learn by experience. The most important aspect is self-realization, *sadhana* (1). The Baul does need guidance from a spiritual master, *sadguru*; the only way for a person to fully achieve *sadhana* is by attempting it themselves, not just learning about it.

The main component of the Baul religion is that the true divinity, *maner manusa* (the man of the heart), dwells within the human heart (17). The Bauls believe that the human body is the temple of the gods, so they must take care of and properly cultivate their bodies. Before one can unite with the Supreme Divinity, his soul must be completely purified. A person must be purified through body and heart; means of attaining this includes having good thoughts, company, conversation, and environment. One must also completely give up his ego. The main goal for a Baul adherent is to surrender himself to the divinity within himself. Once the human and Supreme Soul has united, he or she is able to attain infinite reality; this is Baul *sadhana* (21).

The path to attaining *sadhana* is not easy; it takes much control and selflessness. One of the most important aspects of Baul *sadhana* is *aropa sadhana* (the fundamental process of implementation). This is achieved by mastering breath- control (38). Within this process there are three stages to perform: “drawing the breath upwards, suspending it for some time, and finally releasing it again” (39). There is a whole process on how one performs these steps which takes a great deal of strength and control. The first step is called Puraka and it consists of using

one's finger to close the right nostril and breathing through the left, then switching and breathing through the right. The next step, Kumbhaka, is when the Baul holds the breath within him by holding his nose and mouth closed with his right hand. The final step is Recaka, where the breath is released through one nostril. This is a very specific procedure but it helps the Baul gain strength to attain *sadhana*. The amount of time one is supposed to hold their breath is not specified but being able to train and hold it for long periods of time shows that person has full control over the vital air and their inner strength (40). Another aspect that goes along with the vital air is *ajapa* (the soundless incantation). After one is fully conscious of the supreme divinity within them, this incantation is automatically pronounced while that person breathes in (41). When the Bauls have achieved the highest level of control, which is done through their breathing, they are able to pursue more in their *sadhana* (43).

Once the Baul has found his true self, a brilliant light shines before him. This light allows him to see everything within himself by illuminating the inner self. Man's own self is this light, it is *atma* (the self – illuminating human soul) (81). To attain the spiritual goal of *atma* the Baul must have total knowledge of their body and have achieved proper *sadhana* (Capwell 260). Also, for one to see their inner self they have to tune – out everything outside of their own body.

Baul philosophy is mostly known for the songs that the Baul people sing; in the *Samsad Bengali – English Dictionary* the definition of Baul is “one of a class of Hindu stoical devotees singing songs in a special mode illustrating their doctrine (Thielemann 1).” Although the Baul religion may be synonymous with singing, it is not the totality of the Baul religion. The reason the Bauls are known for their singing is because it is one way they are able to share and attain *sadhana*, which people hear and therefore relate to them. The Baul's song comes completely from his heart. Through his song he can express his feelings and sing them to everything around

him. The Baul becomes engrossed in the song he is singing and nothing else around him matters. This is because while singing he has become one with the Supreme Being within him (36). Becoming one with the *maner manusa* is the ultimate goal for the Bauls, which explains the prevalence of singing within the Baul religion.

While singing the Baul plays a one – stringed plucked drum called the *ekatarā*. This instrument symbolizes union of the body (*deha*) and the mind (*mana*). The clothes worn by the Baul also symbolizes unity. Their *guduri* is a dress that is made of many different pieces and colors of fabric that are sewn together. Each of the pieces is supposed to represent every caste and every religion and they are being brought together in unity and equality in the dress (35 – 36).

The Baul is always trying to achieve *sadhana* and by singing, dancing and playing his instrument he is able to perform his *sadhana*. The Bauls believe that worshipping alone is a form of selfishness because it is not universally shared. Therefore, an act of devotional selflessness can be found in the Baul interaction with the surroundings and audience (102). Being unified with all is very important to the Bauls and singing is claimed to unify all individual aspects into a whole. When sound (*svara brahma*), rhythm (*tala brahma*) and speech (*vakya brahma*), combine to make music, it becomes the highest point of emotion and at this point it has gained full strength and that is when everything is united (112).

Although it seems that plain singing is all that is needed to reach this great height of oneness, this is not the case. It is very important that the singer be in tune and be completely focused on praising the divinity within him. If the singer fails to do either of these then negative forces are able to enter his heart (114). Done correctly though, the Baul is able to show his

worship to the Supreme Divinity within himself. *Samkirtana* is the congregational rendition of musical worship. This brings together many like – minded people to worship, which intensify the devotion to the Supreme Divinity.

Music is a way in which the Baul people are able to worship their inner deity and move closer to their ultimate goal of *sadhana*. Because the Supreme Divinity dwells within the hearts of men, *sadhana* (self-realization) as the greatest aspiration of the Bauls, is to become completely one with The One inside of them.

Bibliography

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Capwell, Charles (1988) “The Popular Expression of Religious Syncretism: The Bauls of Bengal as Apostles of Brotherhood.” *Popular Music*, Vol. 7, No. 2, The South Asia/West Crossover (May): 123 – 132.

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