

Baul-Tourism: Vision of a Value-added Life

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According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'Eco-tourism' is the business of organizing holidaying to places of natural beauty in a way that helps local people and does not damage the environment. It is about synchronizing the ideas of conservation, community-culture and sustainable travel. The Kenduli Mela in Birbhum is such a place for 'eco-tourism' rich with the potentials of socio-cultural promotion primarily because of the Bauls, a group of mystic mianstrels, the bearers of a unique musical tradition, identified by their saffron attire and distinctive musical instruments. Baul singers sing a philosophical way of life and living, a simple natural musical life deeply engaged with the lessons and motivations of eco-friendliness in senses more than merely physical. Living in village huts, singing with their ektara / dotara, discoursing in their akhras, Bauls are a traditional community of travelling minstrels, rooted in soil and located in 'nature' in the physical as well as spiritual sense of the term. Learning the life and living of Bauls might be construed as an effective module in 'eco-tourism', especially for the urban / metropolitan tourists. This paper aims to focus on the Bauls of Birbhum with special reference to the annual fair of Jayadev at Kenduli to consider how promotions of tourism through a Baul circuit in Birbhum can more seriously embrace the cultural heritage of the Baul tradition and thus inculcate the vision of an environment-friendly, planetary life.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Baul-tourism, musical tradition, planetary life.

“Those who do not move do not notice their chains”: Rosa Luxemburg.

Urgency for emotional self-sufficiency and detoxification of routine-bound mundane life often ignites a passion for liberation from the bondage of a claustrophobic 'chain'. The word 'chain' carries a metaphorical sense of restriction, the breaking of which may lead to the joy of being liberated from mundane materiality. Our choking heart always craves for some resting place, some soulful solitude in the lap of Nature where a man can identify himself or herself with the fostering surroundings, where a sense of oneness with some larger planetary life upgrades the coherence of body and mind, of mind and spirit. Such a refreshing journey to one's own self is vital for a contemplative, holistic life-experience. This paper tries to focus on the possibilities of *Baul*-tourism, as a contemplative version of 'eco-tourism', the tourism that may also inculcate a more philosophical attitude to travelling through life by negotiating the limitations of time and place. This philosophical or rather spiritual

attitude to travelling lies deeply grounded in many of Tagore's songs, for example,

“পাছ তুমি, পাছজনের সখা হে,
পথে চলাই সেই তো তোমায় পাওয়া।
যাত্রাপথের আনন্দ গান যে গাহে
তারি কণ্ঠে তোমারি গান গাওয়া।”

The Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘eco-tourism’ as the business of organizing holidaying to places of natural beauty in a way that helps local people and does not damage the environment. It is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>). To quote Epler Wood, ‘eco-tourism’ is “purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history_of the environment, taking care NOT to alter the integrity of the eco-system while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources financially beneficial to local citizens” (Weaver: 2006, 192). From another point of view, Fennel said, eco-tourism is “a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that forces primarily on experiencing and low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented” (ibid: 192). For Ceballos Lascurain, cultural influences may be the secondary part of attraction for eco-tourism. Cultural importance of a place can provide an elemental and holistic approach sometimes with direct sometimes with indirect influences on human mind, philosophy, ethics and nature that surely affect the ‘dynamics of any contemporary eco-system’ for ‘interpretation and understanding’ (ibid:192). Keeping these reference points in consideration, the paper would like to stress on promoting Baul-philosophy and fitting it into the domain of eco-tourism. The basic argument is clear and the underlying question simple: can the philosophy of life and the songs of the *Baul* be cultivated and promoted among tourists as a value-adding qualitative component of ‘eco-tourism’ to make a better and healthy environment for all lives on the planet?

West Bengal, particularly Birbhum, is famous for the *Bauls*. Of course, *Bauls* are not only found in Birbhum; we find them also in Nadia, Murshidabad and other districts of West Bengal. Pabna and Kusthiya in Bangladesh are also famous for *Baul* songs and

Baul community habitation. These *Bauls* are mystic minstrels. According to some scholars, the word ‘*Baul*’, derived from Sanskrit ‘*batul*’ or Prakrit ‘*baul*’, means some sort of ‘madness’ (Sources: *Baul and Fakiri Traditions of Bengal*, [sahapedia.org/বাউল baul](http://sahapedia.org/বাউল%20baul) , মনসুর মুসা সম্পা. মুহম্মদ এনামুল হক রচনাবলী, প্রথম খণ্ড, “বঙ্গ সুফি প্রভাব”, ঢাকা: বাংলা একাডেমী, ১৯১১, <http://www.uniindia.com/baul-tradition-a-unique-heritage-of-bengali-folk-music/entertainment/news/965399.html>) The *Bauls* are mad in search of some kind of god close to their mind; in other words, they search madly for some sort of ‘inner-self’, a man living deep within (*moner manush*); they long for some sort of harmonization of a man living ‘without’ with a man living ‘within’. *Bauls*’ chief instrument, the ‘*Ektara*’ which symbolizes ‘unity’ and ‘peace’ bear a unique musical legacy. The term ‘*Baul*’ was mentioned in ‘*Chaitanya Bhagavat*’ by Brindavana Das as well as in ‘*Chaitanya Charitamrita*’ by Sri Krishnadas Kabiraj. The word came into use in the early part of the 17th C (www.sncwgs.ac.in). *Bauls* and *Fakirs* are commonly known to the people as wandering minstrels having *Ektara* in their hands and a bowl for alms. Their simple way of living a life portrays their philosophy which is greatly influenced by ‘*Sahajiya*’ Vaishnavism, Hindu Tantric thoughts, Buddhism, Sufism and also the Upanishads. The key-message of the Upanishads ignites its believers to look into one’s own-self. Such a philosophical and introspective search certainly moulds a man morally, ethically and psychologically, and does qualitatively enrich a person.

The image of an engaged performer of the *Baul* tradition—many such images being readily available in the public domains of many digital platforms—may give us a preliminary impression of their soulful vocation:



These photographs of Baul *akhras* surely provide primary impressions of their art and life:



Baul philosophy is a mystic philosophy of singing and living. The *Bauls* inculcate people to live 'naturally' as they believe in the 'Sahajiya' theory of learning 'naturally'. They search for the basic truth, knowledge and wisdom of life in a holistic understanding of the universe. The *Bauls* search for 'inner-self', free from the temptations of 'materialism'. They possess and promote all-encompassing love and sympathy for man and nature. They are eager to experience the taste of some metaphysical life going through the physical. This idealistic attitude helps them to negotiate all bitterness of troubles and miseries. A craving for the 'desired good' makes them look into a life of common man who in spite of his poor and wretched condition, never stoops to his circumstances. *Baul* singers, both men and women, rather address smilingly to the call of the '*moner manush*', with their songs sung to the accompaniment of *Ektara*. This dichotomy is believed to be the very essence of man's life. The man within lives like a bird in a cage, the soul confined in the body. Human body with the deep craving of the soul within is also the key-theme of their songs, the term, in Bengali, being 'Dehotatwo' (theory of the body).

The *Bauls* never negate the existence of our corporal life; rather, body and its usages repeatedly come back as a focal theme of their songs. But they do not like to be confined into the cages made of flesh and blood. Through their songs and philosophy they aspire to transcend from the mundane and materialistic life and reality to the world of the Infinity. It refers to the three-tier structure of body-mind-spirit: the basement or the ground floor is our body which can never be denied but through surpassing the barrier of corporeal limitations, the search may touch the ground of the mind which gradually drags to the realm of spirit. Somehow, this 'metaphysical' approach is needed to be incorporated into the very capitalistic approach of our life. This particular orientation may be understood with reference to a very common and popular song of Lalon Fakir:

"Khanchar bhitor achin pakhi kemne ase-jae, / Dhorte parle monoberi ditam pakhir paye". (How come an unknown bird moves in the cage? / If I could, I would have tied its feet with the strings of my heart). The *Baul* philosophy is deeply indebted to the songs of Lalon. Lalon's songs mock at identity politics which divides communities and generates violence; Lalon's songs build up a strong philosophical and cultural resistance to any communal conflict, conflicts based on castes, creeds, races and classes. Lalon's songs strongly reject the jingoistic nationalism. We may remember songs like:

"Jaat gelo, jaat gelo bole", (with the hue and cry of losing one's caste) or,

"Sab loke koy Lalon ki jaat sangsare" (everyone asks about which caste Lalon belongs to in the society). Both the songs are strongly vocal against the evils of casteism and racism. Even today, the *Bauls* keep singing songs that deal with the tenets of Lalon's philosophy. Many more songs of the *Bauls* centre on themes like devotion, mystic realisation and self-realisation. We may mention samples like the following:

- *"Moner manush ei manushe achhe layo chine / Tare dekh re mon, gyan nayone"* which means that the man dear to one's own self lives within and can be recognised only through the eyes of knowledge.

- “*Teerthe giye ki fal pabi mon / Jodi teerthe jabi, age tobe karo ayojon / Ja tor ghumaye mone, ore chinli na tare*” which regrets for lack of introspection and unnecessary importance given to formal pilgrimage.
- “*Pakhi kakhon jani ure jaye, / Ekta bad hawa lege khanchaye*” uses the same bird in the cage image to suggest that the bird may flee if the cage is hit by a foul wind.
- “*Khanchar bhitor achin pakhi, / Jwolchhe ekta ruper bati / E bado ajob kudrati*” indicates the philosophy of body and also focuses on the virtues and good habits of a man which help him to go through the dark phases of life. The song may carry a similar import like that of the famous Tagore song “*Nibir ghano andhare, jwolichhe dhrubotara, / Mon re mor pathare, hos ne dishehara*” (The polestar shines in deep darkness, / O my mind, don't get lost in the waves).
- “*Mon majhi tor boitha ne re / Ami aar baite parlam na / Aami janam bhoriya bailam boitha re...*” sings about the struggle of life against all adversities and about the need that the boat-like life must come to the shore.
- “*He mon tare daikho aankhi khuliye / Jini achhen sada antare / Sobare chhari prabhu karo tare / Deho mon-dhan-jouboun / Rakho taari odhine*” provokes us to make the ultimate surrender at the feet of the ultimate Lord to attain eternal love and peace.

There is no thread of any religio-cultural exclusionism like racism, casteism, communalism or aggressive nationalism in the songs of the *Bauls*. The philosophy is echoed in the words of Albert Einstein: “A man's ethical behaviour should be based effectually on sympathy, education and social ties; no religious basis is necessary.” (Roberts, 2011: p: 103) In Tagore's songs, these life-enhancing features of *Baul* philosophy have been clearly imprinted.

The *Bauls* of Birbhum get highlighted compared to their compatriots at other places primarily because of the aura of Santiniketan and the overwhelming presence of Tagore as well as because of the Kenduli Fair of Joydeb being held at Illambazar in Birbhum, every year in the month of January on the bank of

River Ajay. The fair has been declared by the UNESCO as one of “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in 2005. This happens to be the largest fair for the *Bauls*. *Bauls* come from different parts of the world to perform. Tagore's Santiniketan is not very far from Kenduli, and much of Tagore's performing arts like his songs and dances are very close to the *Baul* culture and tradition. Some of his songs directly come under the *Baul*-category, for example, “*Aamar ei path chaoatei anando / Khele jae raudro chhaya, barsha ase, basanta*” (I am pleased with this looking at the road / Here play the sun and the shadow, the monsoon comes, and the spring) It is, as if, the singing voice here is that of a *Baul* minstrel observing the walkway of life, searching through the seasons the ultimate truth. We may also remember “*Aamar praner manus achhe prane, / Tai heri tae sokol khane*” (My man of life lives in me / So I see him everywhere). It is, as it were, the singing voice refers to the inner self of every human-being. When the poet notes “*Majhir laagi achhi jagi sakol ratri bela / Dheu gulo je amay niye kore kebol khela*” (As I remain sleepless all through the nights / The waves only keep playing with me), it directly harps on an ardent soul which is craving for a meeting with his most desired one, so that he can calmly tide over the turbulent waves of sorrows, anxieties, troubles and miseries of life. Here are some more songs of Tagore that reflect the *Baul* philosophy in a soulful way:

“*He mor debota / Bhoriya e deho-praan, / Ki amrito tumi, chaho koribare paan*” (O my lord / Filling this body and soul, / What elixir of life you want to drink), or “*Prabhu amar, priyo amar, parom dhan hey*” (O my lord, my love, my essence of life), or “*Pathe chole jete-jete / Kothay konkhane / Tomar parosh ase, kakhon ke jane*” (While travelling through the roads / Who knows where and how / Your touch comes to me)—each of them suggesting how the poet eagerly awaits the unification with the Man living within him.

Tagore-family patronized the *Baul* and Lalon songs. We may cite the comment of a learned observer in this regard: “This goes without saying that if Jorasanko Thakur Bari and especially Rabindranath Tagore did not search through their constructive patronage,

however strong be the campaign by the middle-class intellectuals, Hindu resurrections never could see Lalon. That was a strong promotion backed by the Tagores who gave *Baul* songs and Lalon immortality". (Chakraborty, S. 2001, pg. 103). Even Tagore himself once wrote: "In so many songs of mine, I have used *Baul* tune and in some others, knowingly or unknowingly, my songs are influenced by *Baul* tunes tinged with other Ragas. Through this fusion, it is quite evident that *Baul* songs for both lyric and tune quite easily mingle into my senses so much so that they become inseparable from my creation" (ibid: 103).

We initiated this paper with the argument that such philosophy can be tagged on to the project of tourism to make a different sense of tourism in the promotion of environment in a more philosophical way. In this regard, we would like to mention a comment made by Charles Darwin: "In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively, have prevailed" (Roberts, 2011: 81). *Bauls*, undoubtedly, have the quality of being 'together' with mankind, 'improvising' their thought, feeling and philosophy through their songs as well as their life and living, their attitude to life with a positive and long-term effect. If the *Baul* philosophy is promoted through tourism, a holistic world-view can be built against the backdrop of today's capitalistic world. Once G. B. Shaw commented: "Capitalism has destroyed our belief in any effective power but that of self interest backed by force" (ibid: 87). This menace of 'self-interest' can be positively challenged if we nurture the philosophy of brotherhood and ethics, of 'being together' with nature and environment, and obviously having a 'co-ordination' in mentality and attitude.

Before we conclude, we would like to defend our argument with some proposals because Baul-tourism may be a new and innovative concept to extend the frontiers of eco-tourism. We do believe that eco-tourism should not primarily aim at making business or profit. Its primary target is to cultivate and promote tourism in such a way that it can substantially protect our environment—not only the physical but also cultural, precisely human environment. By opening a

permanent cultural centre somewhere in Santiniketan ('The Gateway of Birbhum') to make tourists fully aware of *Baul* music, *Baul* philosophy of life, *Baul* way of living, a new kind of cultural tourism may be initiated keeping close eyes on the *Baul* fair at Kenduli, *Baul* Akhras at different places in the district of Birbhum, such as Suripara, Parul Danga, Kangkalitala, Adityapur, Bhuvan Danga, Sonajhuri and other locations, taking into account the features differently associated with the *Baul* tradition. After a thorough introductory exposure to the Baul tradition and heritage at the said cultural centre, Indian and foreign tourists may be escorted to a *Baul* circuit including chosen spots vibrant with *Baul* life, *Baul* music and *Baul* philosophy of life and environment. It should be noted that foreign tourists have especial curiosity and inclination for our culture and heritage. Tourists from outside Bengal may also find this tourism attractive. The proposed *Baul* tourism shall hopefully inculcate a natural, musical, environment-friendly attitude among the tourists. Such tourism shall serve to promote and explore a long-cherished cultural heritage of Bengal in India and abroad. Promotion of *Baul* tourism among the foreign tourists may also open up some source of earning and a better livelihood for the *Baul* singers.

In order to protect and promote our environment, we need a natural and spontaneous motivation, better understanding of and sympathy with Nature. *Baul* tourism may thus harvest a more than material profit if it is envisioned and implemented on a long-term basis. Our vision and proposals for launching this experimental tourism are:

- a) Promotion of tourism through a *Baul* circuit in Birbhum to more seriously embrace the cultural heritage of the *Baul* tradition and thus inculcate the vision of an environment-friendly, planetary life.
- b) Establishment of a *Baul* tourism-cum-cultural centre at Santiniketan.
- c) Making proper study to map out the tourist locations and mobilising all feasible resources to build up the basic minimum infrastructure for the tour programmes.

This is because we believe that only tree-plantation is not enough to make an eco-friendly environment; rather a man philosophically upgraded in spirit and thought can make a better and sustainable eco-friendly environment. The life and living of *Bauls* can surely be a model to make a beginning in this direction. The question of its feasibility may arise; there may be some doubt as to how far the scheme is practicable. But every thesis begins with a hypothesis before it arrives at a confirmation. When Bernard Shaw wrote his famous play, 'Man and Superman', he gave it a sub-title, 'A Comedy and A Philosophy'. We may follow suit by calling our idea of *Baul* tourism 'A Tourism and A Philosophy', inculcating the vision of a value-added life.

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