



# New Religious Movement and the Mystic Minstrels: Exploring the Baul Tradition of Bengal

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## Abstract and Keywords

The debate on New Religious Movements (NRMs), has emerged as a discourse around which the ordinary perception of religion is challenged and the emancipatory potential of new religions are highlighted. It becomes an interesting exercise to examine those characteristics of NRMs that distinguish them from the mainstream religions.

The study of Baul tradition as a New religious movement is one way of understanding the changing nature of religion. The songs of Bauls and their lyrics are enough to differentiate their cult with the mainstream conceptualisation of religion which had its effect of alienating people and their rootedness. So Baul as NRM leads us to a direction of inner peace, coexistence, the spiritual self and the larger idea of locating oneself in the center of the universe.

**Keywords :** NRMs, Bauls, divine, spirituality, metaphysical, devotion, Sadhna, Hinduism, salvation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The paper is an attempt to understand the rise of new religious movements in the wake of certain socio economic and political processes and its influence worldwide. Specifically focussing on the Bauls of Bengal it's a descriptive analysis of the cult tradition, its rise as a new religious movement and evaluation as a tradition through which it acquires a radical character. It is also a contextual thematic understanding of the new religious movements and the processes through which the movement acquires global and regional variations.

The paper also explores the relationship between the self and the divine through examining the lyrics of the Baul songs. With this expectation that the songs of the Bauls presents us with a radical departure from the mainstream religions and ritual practices, the paper gives an interesting description of the spiritual aspects of this new found cult

tradition. It explores the newness of the tradition in terms of its identification with the transcendentalism of their form of worshipping. It is through such a reflection of the new cultural development that we get a sense of the permanence of the divine that the members of the tradition relate with.

Referring to the organization and the pattern of the new religious movement the paper is an effort to bring into consideration those factors that are responsible for its propagation and widespread recognition at the same time it also emphasizes on the importance of religious toleration and pluralism, while doing such an evaluation the often neglected aspect of the transformative aspect of religion<sup>1</sup> is also factored in to understand the importance of new religious movements.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The foundation of the paper lies on both primary and secondary sources including newspaper articles, journals, books as well as electronic media. These sources have helped to frame a theoretical background for understanding the Baul tradition and associating its principle of unity with the philosophy of the new religious movement.

For research convenience the paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives an account of the New religious movement, the second section explores the Baul cult and the significance of their mystic path to salvation. The third section throws light on the future of NRMs and the impact of socio political economic processes on their modes of organization.

The fourth and the final section concludes the paper followed by a general analysis and references of available literature as well as other varied sources for studying the Baul tradition.

<sup>1</sup> Transformation here refers to the 'discovery of the self'.



## 1) THE CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF NRMs

Much of our conception of NRMs are shaped by the sociological and psychological understanding of the movement including its organizational structure, social base and ideology. Given its interdisciplinary significance, the nature, characteristics and relevance of NRMs cannot be confined to a single narrow definition.

Before, moving to a wide range of explanation and multidimensional aspects of NRMs, as well as the wider discourse of religious innovation any theoretical background of NRMs must be framed within the contextual background within which it takes a definite direction in the presence of some conditions while taking a reverse route in the absence of those conditions<sup>2</sup>.

A contextual analysis determines the prospects of different NRMs and shapes its character. The roots of the NRMs can be traced to the changing socio-cultural and religious environment of the second half of the twentieth century. It was the context of increasing disenchantment with the existing modes of self realisation. They are based on the idea that the mainstream religions have limitations as they have not been able to combat the forces of repression and subordination of certain groups and minorities. Further, NRMs have also been presented as an outgrowth of those processes that give rise to global consciousness and thereby leading to religious diversity within societies. Through the global networks that some of these new religions have been able to establish, a syncretic culture, combining elements of different religious traditions further plays an important role in the diffusion of minority religions. Thus, we see the rise of these minority religions under conditions of rapid social change.

An important characteristic of the NRMs is that they originate from the mainstream religions but at the same time differ from major religions in many aspects. Most NRMs do not have a codified

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such conditions can be seen in the case of Al- Qaeda, where religious terrorism is advanced as hostility to USA in particular and the struggle against West in general. Whereas conditions conducive to inter personal religious faith could have produced an altogether a different outcome.

scripture or religious text listing the beliefs and practices for its followers. Some of

the characteristics of NRMs have been depicted with negative connotations. For example, the psychological understanding of NRMs have confined themselves to certain select categories for evaluating NRMs. These include vagueness of doctrine, manipulation of fear and guilt to control members, brainwashing, etc. This psychological reactions to NRMs, is well captured by Flo Conway and Jim Siegleman's book '*On conversion to the new religion*', to that of "*hypnotized*", or "*brainwashed*" individuals or in their description as "*mindless robots*", who are in an induced trance state.

On the contrary, the sociological aspect of NRMs broadens our understanding by giving us a more neutral and optimistic perspective towards NRMs. James A. Beckford in his book '*New religious movements and rapid social change*', highlights the social changes that took place at the level of social and economic structures which later triggered an emotional and spiritual awakening among some religious minded groups. The rise of NRMs is explained through a relationship between religion and culture and that any changes in the culture affects the mainstream idea of religion which causes bewilderment among some segment of society<sup>3</sup>. The sociological analysis of NRMs deals with questions such as the kind of person attracted to the ideals of NRMs, its beliefs and practices. It provides explanations for those factors and motives that might lead young adults to move towards a more unconventional and spiritual ideological path. Though, the sociological aspect of NRMs remains cautionary in terms of acknowledging the distinctive features of specific religious movements in certain societies and at certain time and place, but the emergence of a new cultural formation is associated with "movement" to denote a broad shift in people's sense of religious ideas and the initial search for stability and rootedness<sup>4</sup> which occurs independently of any organised religious movements.

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<sup>3</sup> See Beckford (1992).

<sup>4</sup> NRMs are supposed to serve as an antidote for injustices, violence and repression that some of the members as part of mainstream religious groups have to face.



However, as mentioned above, NRMs are difficult to theorise given its interdisciplinary significance. Thus, any understanding of NRM, confined to social phenomena, will be inefficient. Therefore, both individual beliefs and action as well as the social context within which religions emerge has to be examined to understand the expansion and diminution of these NRMs.

## 2) THE BAUL TRADITION OF BENGAL

The Baul tradition is not just a fusion of Tantric, Bhakti, and Sufi ideas but also Bengali (Gaudiya) Vasinavism and Buddhism. The Bhakti and Sufi movements which emerged in medieval India sought to challenge the sectarian reaction of mainstream religion including both Hinduism and Islam. Parallel to the philosophical tenet of syncretism of medieval India, the Bauls in Bengal have attempted to clarify man's relationship with God. The Baul singers often travel from one place to another while singing devotional songs to commemorate the teachings of ancient traditions of harmony and coexistence. They tend to create their distinct identity by creating a more inclusive space for hitherto marginalized and discriminated sections of society. They reflect on the lives and experiences of the villagers of rural Bengal, tribals and forest dwellers as well as the experiences of women. They do not identify themselves either as Hindus or Muslims. Poetry, singing, music, dances are mediums through which the Bauls express their religious experiences. Most Bauls are singers who are residing in the states of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Atis Dasgupta in his paper, '*The Bauls and their Heretic Tradition*', explains in detail the emergence of Baul as an alternative to religions that were confined to scriptures, religious norms and religious intolerance. On the contrary, the Baul is an innovation in a sense that it is based on the power of love. The songs are usually in the form of instructions that a guru gives to his disciples to make him understand the ultimate reality<sup>5</sup>. Though the guru is assumed to be the human form of the divine who acts as an intermediary between the self and the soul and commands respect by the disciples, yet the disciples are not coerced to bear any

<sup>5</sup> The reality of human unity, of rising above social differences.

responsibility or pursue any commitments. The novel of the Baul tradition lies in the fact that it's a voluntary search for solace and a blissful state of mind.

The Baul songs have been depicted to be more popular among lower stratum of society. The most popular form of Baul singing is through indigenous musical instruments which sometimes is also accompanied by dancing. Ektaras are used as a musical instrument as well as drums called 'dumkis'. The songs are composed in Bengali dialect and the text of the songs are simple and easy to comprehend. In referring to the text of the songs Chakraborty, (2009) says, "The

texts of the songs express all the essential ideas of their philosophy but in simple and vivid language". Baul songs are spiritual and philosophical in nature and are divided into different tattwa (theory of epistemology) such as, "prema-tattwa" (spiritual love), "guru-tattwa" (spiritual teacher), "deha-tattwa" (body), "param-tattwa" (supreme or almighty), "srishti-tattwa" (creation), "manasiksha" (self-realization), "gujhyo-tattwa" (esoteric) (Sengupta, 2015).

Based on Tagore's philosophy of religion, the Bauls in Bengal believe in '*Kaya Sadhan*', (realisation of the soul through the body by taking a spiritual path. (Tagore 218). Sources of the knowledge of Bauls are not derived from any philosophical writings nor do they depend on any tradition. They strongly believe in the fact that rather than finding truth in the books, one should search for it. For truth lies in balancing between knowing and unknowing of life with death. (Bhatt 36). Thus, they strongly reject the teachings of Puranas and Vedas as authoritative texts in searching the supreme soul within us.

Kshitimohan Sen, Muhammad Mansuruddin have also been credited with popularizing the tradition among larger audience with its message of an evolving higher self consciousness. Since the philosophy of Baul is not restricted to ritualism and ceremony, Bauls call their religious path as '*ulta*', (the reverse). By identifying their religion as 'religion of man', the Bauls have also justified their sense of salvation against the claims of being possessed or illogical. The Bauls say that their madness signifies their deep attachment to the divine. It does not mean to hallucinate rather to achieve the immortal state of being.

The following lines of the Baul song sung by Parvathy Baul presents '*Shakti Bhav*' as one of the songs from Tantric mysticism. The lines capture the



essence of the philosophy of the tradition and the message of spiritual union that it seeks to spread.

What will happen to me..... oh the compassionate one?

I have no worship..... I have no inner action to realise you.

I am in poverty of the 'self'..... I am an impossible child of yours.

Will I ever get your blissful divine feet mother? Whether I am a good daughter or a bad daughter of yours?

I have offered all to your divine feet.

Even if the daughter is sinful will the mother ever abandon her child?

To whom shall I tell the tale of my heart?

It defines a relationship between a mother and her daughter. The unfulfilled longing for the divine is expressed through love and devotion that captures the realisation of the true sound of the universe in the body. The worshipper here can be seen as having no 'Sadhna' or worship.

For her, nothing else matters as nothing else exists in this world, except her divine mother.

Sadhan Das Baul, a popular Baul musician says, "Baul is one who is in love with the entire world. He is madly in love with every living creature in the world. A Baul doesn't care about caste, community or creed. He only believes in love. Humanity is his only religion."

We get a clear sense of this enlightened consciousness through Mimlu Sen's work of *Baulsphere*. The book beautifully expresses the presence of an immortal divine in human beings. The supreme, the ultimate reality which has no boundaries gets reflected through the message of non duality between the self and the other. Paban Das Baul who collaborates with Mimlu Sen on all his recordings talks about his experiences of the Baul culture. Where he says, "through the human body and soul, I have found my temple. A place of worship should provide a person with peace and relaxation". He tries listening to music from every part of the world even though he is unable to comprehend the language, yet he believes that the feel of the songs have a language of their own that connects one's heart to the music. This is one way through which an individual rises above his sufferings and becomes aware of the divine residing in his body. Thus, the bhakti or devotion comes from within rather than some external manifestation; it's something that develops naturally and organically.

### III. FUTURE OF NRMs & THE BAUL TRADITION

In his Encyclopaedia of NRMs, Peter Clarke makes reference to the process of "osmosis", through which NRMs are now influencing the mainstream religions. It has also created space for globalization of varied forms of spirituality and religion. The significance of NRMs, in the globalised world has to do with what Clarke calls as 'democratisation of religious practices<sup>6</sup>.' With increasing individualism, the older forms of religion that held wider legitimacy among the people as a cementing force binding the community is losing its significance because of its inability to secure well being and prosperity for the masses. Their replacement with NRMs, is

supported by the belief in achieving knowledge through experience. The desire to find the true nature of the self is being encouraged worldwide including the teachings of the Bauls.

Bauls have now gained popularity worldwide with concerts being organized in different parts of the world. The Baul singer Purna Das also influenced the famous American musician Bob Dylan. It was when Bob was recovering from a major accident that he met Purna Das. And the initiation of Bob to Baul music began with Purna's description of the Baul Sadhna to Bob

Dylan. Purna says about Bob that he calls himself an "American Baul singer". Both Purna Das Baul and Bob Dylan identify their mission to spread love through their songs. The increasing reach of the Baul community worldwide has generated passion for their music which has both positive and negative impact on their mode of organization. To reach wider masses the Baul singers have transformed their ways of living including their attachment with the global world and increasingly their contact with non Bauls or persons within worldly life which questions their philosophy of religion. Mimlu Sen in her work *Baulsphere* also pays attention to the toll that urbanization and globalization takes on these wandering spiritual musicians. With some mystic saints expressing their desire to improve their materialistic status.

Despite some challenges that some of these NRMs face in the context of globalisation, NRMs,

<sup>6</sup> NRMs champions the idea of equality in terms of the purpose of our existence, our identity. Therefore, there remains no exclusive control of one group or sect over spiritual knowledge.



and the alternative religious groups have a message to give to the world. They are based on the idea that the mainstream religions have limitations as they have not been able to combat the forces of repression and subordination of certain groups and minorities. Moreover, religious freedom should be given utmost importance as a fundamental human right as religious pluralism and cultural diversity promotes greater accommodation of minority rights.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As we come to the end of the spiritual journey of the Bauls, some characteristic features of contemporary NRMs that differentiates them from new movements of the past can be surmised in terms of their orientation towards secular belief systems by combining psychology with spirituality. By doing this fusion of inner and outer methods of realising the religion of the true self, they go beyond the exercise of experiments in ideas, feelings, and social relations to discover the 'God' within.

Bauls envisions a society based on non discrimination. Their songs have relevance for bringing social transformation and reform of conservative religious practices. Moreover, the Baul singing is a song of love where there exists no injustice or even an iota of the feeling of ill will or jealousy is not promoted. For a Baul there exists no distinction between 'you' and 'me', 'higher or lower', 'poor or rich'. Thus Baul singing is about bringing transparency in human life while seeing the truth. Concomitantly, socio economic issues like that of poverty, injustice, inequality are often chosen as the theme of their songs.

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