

Baul: A Spiritual Quest and a Response to Lacan's Concept of Lack and Real

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Abstract

Bauls, the minstrel folk originally from Bengal, are known for their music loaded with the philosophy of body and soul and they are detached from any kind of institutional practices or orthodoxies. Their captivating music is their medium to get united with their 'moner manush' (soul-mate). This paper aims at exploring the possible inherent implications of the term 'baul' to reveal the fact that there is always a baul resides in us, consciously or unconsciously. The paper also intends to confront the issues that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has raised in his analysis of 'lack' and 'real'.

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Bauls are the minstrel folk originally from Bengal known for their music loaded with the philosophy of body and soul. They are mainly the spiritual seekers of the Ultimate Truth the realization of which can only make them taste absolute bliss. They are detached from any kind of institutional practices or orthodoxies which make it quite reasonable to find in them the germs of several forces like 'Tantric' or 'Sahajia Buddhism', 'Vaishnava-Sahajia' and 'Indo-Persian Sufism'. Rejecting the prescriptive requirements of any of the current religious sects, the Bauls' personally oriented pursuit of spiritual perfection has made them reject caste. Their captivating music is their medium to get united with their 'moner manush' (soul-mate). They are most often not very well versed in the written scriptures or theoretical documents meant for the spiritual seekers. Their songs are the result of spontaneous overflow of emotions purified through meditations and hence in their songs we get the gleams of higher truths of human life conceptualized in a simple way. Dr. Jeanne Openshaw writes that the music of the Bauls appears to have been passed down entirely in oral form until the end of the 19th century, when it was first transcribed by outside observers (Openshaw 56). A baul leads a vagabond life where simplicity and plain-living are its significant criteria, truly executing the principle of 'less luggage and more comfort' which our Upanishads teach about. Upanishads speaks for renunciation of all worldly possessions and desires and to get engaged in the discovery of 'the self'. Here it may be better explained that a baul's earnings to know his 'moner manush' leads him in one sense to this discovery of the soul. Though apparently wanderer, their journey is inward, a voyage within. Their song exemplifies their realization of this fact- "jaar tore praan kedechhe se je re tor hrdei

ache" (whom your heart aches for is already there within yourself). As bauls do not belong to any so called institutional practice of religion, their life style itself becomes a sect. They were recorded as a major sect as early as mid eighteenth century, but still they are marked for their 'otherness' in the society.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst who made remarkable contribution in the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism with revisiting Sigmund Freud from a new perspective. In 1955 at a conference in Vienna he called for a new 'back-to-basics' Freudianism where he evoked the importance of the unconscious as 'the nucleus of our being' rather than confining it to the shadow of the conscious personality. The conscious mind has long been given prime importance and considered as the essence of selfhood which is better exemplified by Descartes statement "I think, therefore I am" (Barry 112). But Lacan challenges it with his "I am where I think not" (Lodge 97), that is, there is something else which is our true being and which we are not aware of. So the individual self is deconstructed defying the liberal humanist notion of unique, individual selfhood. For Lacan it is the unconscious where lies our true selfhood as he asks 'who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?' (Lodge 102). Now we take a pause here before entering into Lacan's further arguments on unconscious and have a look into the same individual self from the Baul perspective which is also not different from Upanishads. A baul's quest is for the man of the heart, for the ultimate truth, that lies within the individual self and so their journey is inward. Then the question is who is there within the individual self? Who is this 'maner manush' whom a baul is searching to

know? Upanishads speaks about 'jivatma' and 'paramatma', the former is restless, and its restlessness is inherently meant for getting united with the latter where lies the absolute bliss. We can even more rationally divide the individual between the conscious mind or waves of thought and the soul or 'atma', and it is the latter where lies our true identity. For Lacan the unconscious is related to desires or drives which can never be fulfilled completely in the conscious personality and so an individual is destined to be dissatisfied. The 'lack' that a child is initiated to experience in its oedipal stage continues to haunt the future individual throughout his life. The subject experiences something to be missing from them and this 'something missing' is the other side of the split out of which unconscious emerges. The individual moves from one signifier to another to fulfill that original lack. Here it is necessary to know Lacan's views on language and its relation to the subject. For Lacan "what is primary is the limitation imposed by language upon all speaking beings, in that the body's motivation (the Freudian drive) is denied full satisfaction. This creates a subject split between its symbolic identity and the body that sustains it...." (Wright 19) So entering into a system of rules itself demands a sacrifice. When a subject is caught in the defining network of signifiers a split occurs between the symbolic identity and the actual being, leaving the subject experience the lack. A baul, in general, is found free from the restraints of the religious practices available in the world. Literally a baul is not expected to be fitted in the social network of signifiers as he leads the life of a vagabond, obsessed to know his soul mate. There is a little chance for a baul to experience Lacanian split. But of course a baul experiences lack until he gets reconciled with the Man of his heart or 'maner manush'. Here it should be

made clear that we are talking about the baul in their ideal situation.

The word 'lack' that an individual is destined to experience and feel dissatisfied gives rise to Lacan's concept of 'real'. Generally the term 'real' is confused with 'reality', for instance, the external world or what can be defined, expressed in words. But Lacan distinguishes 'reality' from the 'real', 'what exists' from 'what ex-sists'. The former implies the everyday world of familiar objects and the latter what 'stands outside'. For Lacan the unconscious is the real and getting the sparks of it involves the invasion of the consciousness by the unconscious. The real is something we only ever experience, we feel, but never wholly conceptualized. The language works upon the real with the signifiers to get hold of it in the effort to establish an identity. But the real remorselessly invades the effort. The real has the promise to fulfill the lack but unfortunately it is unidentified wholly. Here we shift our discussion to the baul in an attempt to identify the 'real' that Lacan left only giving it the status of unconscious wishes never wholly conceptualized. Just forgetting about baul, the minstrel folk of Bengal, we need to concentrate upon what this 'baul-bhava' implies.

The term 'baul' may be derived from Sanskrit word 'vatula' or from 'vyakula' as Shashibhusan Das Gupta has suggested (Das Gupta 160). 'Vatula' denotes a state of losing one's sanity, God's madcap, seeker of truth, detached from the world. 'Vyakula' denotes restless or agitated and here the agitation is due to the ecstatic eagerness for a spiritual life which leads the *sadhaka* to his eternal beloved. The Arabic word 'auliya', which means devotee, is also related to the word baul. If we pick up the word 'vyakula' suspending its attachment to

spiritual eagerness, then it turns up as a very common emotional state that an individual often experiences in his life. Even when demands are continued to be fulfilled in life, a sense of dissatisfaction still sustains. Here Italian thinker Rousseau is worth quoted who in his autobiography states that he was burning from desires but those did not have any visible goal. But Rousseau has realized the answer as later he says that nothing is beautiful other than that which is not available. (Basu 24). Lacan's view of the 'real' can be discerned here. Pascal identified the cause of dissatisfaction in a different way which Buddadeb Basu has quoted in Bengali "manusher sab durvagyer ekti e karon: se taar ghare tikte pare na" (all misfortunes of human being has the sole reason: he cannot stick to his home) (Basu 27). We can explain the statement from two different viewpoints, viz, the individual is not satisfied in his own situation, he wants more, and the individual cannot remain confined to a particular place for a long time, performing his assigned roles in the society. A sense of restlessness is always there inherent in his psyche. Lacan explain it as the unconscious repressed desires, whereas Rousseau's declaration is "Je ne sais quoi" (I don't know what it is). This is the fundamental issue addressed by the Romantics. In Rabindranath Tagore we come across repeated use of the words like 'okarone' (without any reason), 'ki jani' (don't know why!), 'ke jane' (who knows!), etc. and all of which simply echo Rousseau's declaration. The Romantics in their search only identify different possibilities but fails to recognize it definitely and so a melancholic tone almost always sustains with them. There is always attraction or yearning for the remote land, for the unknown, unexplored, in an individual. This is romantic spirit and a baul is a romantic in true sense. He is a wanderer,

a lover, a seeker of the ultimate truth that can only bring absolute happiness and complete satisfaction. Our Vedic Sage through his meditation finds out the source of complete satisfaction. He declared in trumpet voice, 'Here, ye children of immortal bliss! Even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion: knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again' (Svetasvatara Upanishad 2:5, 3:8). Here 'save from death' means get rid of sufferings caused by desires. A baul's search for 'maner manush' is nothing different but for that 'Ancient One'. Lacan's quest was not spiritual but still he could not help but identified the possibility of experiencing unspeakable ecstasy which he termed as 'Other' or 'Feminine Jouissance'. It is beyond the symbolic and the subject and therefore 'outside the unconscious'. Lacan's concept of 'feminine jouissance' makes him come closer to Husserlian phenomenological notion of the unconscious that is spatially beyond, beyond in a horizontal sense. Psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious is mainly emerged from the repressed desires, from what is not shown in and by the hegemonic. Phenomenological notion of the unconscious speaks of what is not yet clearly seen, the remainder. There may be the possibility or even evidences of fulfilling the repressed or unspoken desires, sometimes violating social norms, but still the fulfillment is followed by sense of dissatisfaction. It is what Lacan's concept of 'phallic jouissance' that always fails the subject. 'Jouissance' means 'drive' and 'phallic jouissance' is accompanied with a sense of dissatisfaction even after we possess our object of desire. The spiritual seekers realize that the pleasure which we get from sense object contact cannot provide complete satisfaction or permanent happiness. It is not the failure of Lacan's

‘phallic jouissance’ that frustrates the subject, it is rather the failure of realizing that unspeakable which stimulates the ‘vyakulata’ or restlessness. This unspeakable or ‘feminine jouissance’ is what the baul has termed as ‘maner manus’. Every individual, knowingly or unknowingly, is hankering after that unspeakable. If it is not there in the conscious mind, and again if it is ‘outside the unconscious’, then where it is! Upanishads asserts that it is within ourselves; it lies in the realization of ‘Atman’ or soul and ‘Atman’ is the absolute consciousness or ‘chaitonyo’. Rabindranath Tagore has conceptualized this truth in many of his songs, for instance, ‘amar hiyar majhe lukiye chhile dekte ami paini tomay...bahir pane chokh melechhi amar hridoy pane chaini’ (you are there hidden in my heart, I didn’t notice you...I wandered outside, never looked within). In the songs of the Bauls human love is mixed up with the celestial love. In the book *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* we get to know about the Bauls who calls the man of supreme perfection a ‘Sai’ who is again called a ‘Paramahansa’ in the *Vedanta*. A ‘Sai’ does not see any differentiation in the world as he knows that every individual is part of that Eternal Being. When *sadhaka* realizes the presence of God within himself, he then starts to realize the presence of that supreme being or ‘Paramatma’ everywhere outside. The songs of the Bauls contribute, to a large extent, in the Vaishnava-vakti movement and profoundly advocate the religion of humanity. Rabindranath Tagore has been greatly influenced by the Bauls and his song illustrates how human love transcends to unite with spiritual love:

“The man of my heart dwells
inside me

Everywhere I look, it is he.

In my every sight, in the
sparkle of light

Oh, I can never lose him-
Here, there and everywhere,
Wherever I turn, he is right
there!

(“amar praner manush achhe
prane tai heri tay sokol khane....”)

God has not simply created the world, He has rather manifested himself in different forms in nature. This realization creates a sense of wholeness as the subject feels a sense of bond or unification with the outer world. William Wordsworth, a Romantic poet, is relevant here who realizes the same soul running through the human being and the objects of nature. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, stresses the importance of exploring the world of religion and spirituality for psychological growth and maturation, which he calls the process of individuation, of the individual. This process starts with the encounter between consciousness and the symbols arising from the unconscious. Analytical psychology finds out a collective unconscious which is different from the personal unconscious in the sense that it possesses archetypes common to all human beings. The individual going through the individuation process may get the gleams of symbols which are related to the experience of not a single person but humanity in general. These are the symbols which through light upon the fundamental questions like life, death, happiness, etc. The Bauls, if it can be considered as symbol, is related to that collective unconscious. Literally the baul may be a minstrel folk constituting a sect of spiritual seeker, but a deep dive into the ‘baul-bhava’ (emotions) prompts to go further in defining baul as the objective correlative of that bhava or emotions that lies hidden in almost every

individual. Almost every individual experiences the moments in his life when he feels, putting it in the words of Tagore, ‘amar mon kemon kore ke jane kahar tore’(what my heart feels who knows for whom). This yearning or restlessness for someone unknown is conceptualized as yearning for the soul-mate.

For Lacan the ‘lack’ is initiated at the stage when the thought of absolute bond with the mother is frustrated or ruptured to the child. But for the spiritual seekers like the Bauls the ‘lack’ originates at somewhere else. About the ‘jivas’ (individual) the Bauls say, as written in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, “They come from Alekh and they go unto Alekh”. (Gupta 513). ‘Alekh’ means the ‘Ultimate Truth’ which *Vedas* call ‘Brahma’. The separation between the individual and the ‘Ultimate Truth’ creates the sense of ‘lack’. It is not something physical but spiritual as separation exists as long the individual remain unconscious of the presence of the ‘Ultimate Truth’ within himself. The failure of the ‘phallic jouissance’ sometimes makes the subject think about the source of complete satisfaction or permanent happiness. *Vedanta* starts with the answer – “athāto brahma jijñāsā” (so hence to know the Brahma). It is very surprising that a book is starting with the connectives. It implies that this kind of queries develops in the individual only after experiencing disappointments in the worldly affairs, when the person realizes that even after fulfilling his materialistic demands he feels dissatisfied. But unfortunately this kind of queries comes in a very few individuals who are the most lucky ones. The Bauls’ search for ‘moner manush’ is initiated by that ‘Brahma jijñāsā’. To get united with the ‘moner manush’ is going back to the ‘Ultimate Truth’ where the absolute bliss

lies. When Sigmund Freud writes, though in a different context, “It seems, then, that a drive is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things,” (Smith xv) he echoes the ‘jivas’ (individual’s) urge of going back to the ‘Ultimate Truth’ which is their original existence. Researcher James Marcia has expanded upon Erikson’s analysis of identity and role confusion, and found out that a strong commitment to an identity tends to give a healthier personality (Marcia 551). The Bauls have specified their identity and they are committed to their role playing. They are the seekers of the ‘Ultimate Truth’, their ‘moner manush’. So there remains a little chance for the Bauls to experience the pressure of repression or the pangs of the split as their self is more composed. They know what they want and they are supposed to channelize their desires accordingly. It is not that the Bauls have ignored the bodily desires; they rather consider the body as the most important organ of all experience and means to knowledge and their spiritual pursuit include Deho-sadhana, Mana-sadhona, and Breath-sadhona as well. “Many of them practice a type of psycho-physical manipulation or tantric yoga which emphasizes control of sexual union, the purpose of which is to enable the couple to achieve a break with phenomenal existence, to escape the endless cycle of death and regeneration, and to achieve a state of eternal stability or *Samadhi*.” (baularchive). So body is used as a means to acquire knowledge, understanding, and liberation. The poet Nissim Ezekiel in his poem ‘Enterprise’ (*Unfinished Man*) has made his personae speaks, “When, finally, we reached the place/ We hardly knew why we were there.” Lacanian subject are experiencing the same confusion as the goal is illusory to them. To Lacan the signifier only gives rise to other signifiers in search for an end signified

which is illusory or missing. So the subject is destined to feel the 'lack' as it is unidentified whereas the Bauls are also experiencing the lack but it is identified. The following famous Baul song by Gogon Har-kora illustrates the position of the Bauls in their response to the 'lack' and 'real' they experience;

“Where shall I meet him, the
Man of my Heart?
He is lost to me and I seek
him wandering from land to land.”
 (“ami kothay pabo tare, amar
Moner manush je re....”)

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