

The Bauls: Communicators and Artists

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For centuries the Bauls of West Bengal have embodied in their life style and broadcast in their songs a very articulate counter-culture. Today, industrialization and urbanization, with large components of a Western-like culture, have set in crisis the traditional ethos which the Bauls have relentlessly countered. In particular, the spiritual framework provided by that ethos is disintegrating. What are the Bauls to counter now? Can they define themselves on their own terms? How will they react to the assimilative influence of the technological mass media?

Answering these questions is essential because they relate to the core of the cultural crisis in West Bengal—with possible applications to the whole of India. A cultural crisis is not merely a matter for debate. It is essentially a redefinition of man and of the humane in given circumstances. In this redefinition are at stake not man in general, but this man, here and now, his spiritual freedom and the quality of his experience of life. In other words, it is a redefinition of self, and, therefore, a choice and a responsible act.

As members of Chitrabani, a centre for training and experimenting in the use of audio-visual media in support of educational and developmental programmes, we have been interested in the Bauls for some time now, but our approach departs somewhat from the academician's approach and it has nothing to do with the inquisitive tourist's approach. We are not interested in documenting 'strange' ways of life, as if the Bauls were mere objects arousing curiosity. Nor are we interested in producing a statistical, descriptive or even interpretative, discussion of the present cultural crisis as it is experienced by the Bauls. We do not wish to be mere observers. We value the human experience of the Bauls, we value ours, and we believe that an interaction between the two can benefit both the Bauls and ourselves. That is why the approach to the questions we formulated at the beginning cannot have, in our view, the detachment and apparent indifference of the so-called academic studies. We believe that the approach has to be *holistic*, wilfully trespassing the boundaries of conventional scholarly disciplines, and taking the risk as well as the responsibility of the particular weaknesses which are bound to hinder the generalist. Furthermore, the approach to the subject has to be *committed*, again taking the risk and the responsibility of its conscious or unconscious biases. The approach, finally, must be open. The attempt at a qualitative assessment of man in his milieu must be a process in which the student grows with his studied subject. Our reflection on the Bauls and the present cultural crisis amounts to inserting ourselves into the vital processes at work in contemporary society, with the confidence that as a result of this insertion our own vision of man and we ourselves will be enriched and enlarged. At the same time, we are confident that we can contribute to inflecting these socio-cultural processes in favour of man.

Who are the Bauls?

The Bauls of West Bengal, of some adjacent states of Eastern India, and of Bangladesh are wandering minstrels perpetuating a mystical tradition known as *Sahajiya*—*sahaj* meaning direct, distinct, concrete. No one knows how many Bauls there are in this area but it is estimated that a yearly festival like the one held at Kenduli, Birbhum, draws at least 10,000 of them from various parts of West Bengal. Their origin may be traced back to the remote pre-Aryan days of the eastern nomadic outcasts who, in the *Atharva-Veda*, were considered to be 'fallen' people.¹ They were 'fallen' because they believed that the sexual relationship between man and woman reveals an aspect of man's search for God. Since not much is known about those 'fallen' or *vratyas* people and their spiritual life, scholars satisfy themselves with the view that the origin of the Bauls may be related to the Buddhist—Tantric faith prevalent in Bengal during the four hundred year reign of the Pala kings from A.D. 700 to 1100.²

Certain esoteric rituals having an emancipatory effect on man's view of life were widely practised in the three major paths of the Buddhist-Tantric faith. These three paths were *Vajrajan*, the hard path of indestructible inner light, *Kalachakrajan*, the path of the wheel of time, and antithesis of the indestructible light; and *Sahajjan*, the direct path, thus qualified in terms of man. The first two paths offer a duality of indestructibility and destructibility and the third path, a human measure. They may also be viewed as essence, existence and man, respectively.³

Filtered through various spiritual movements having their focus on man, the *Sahajiya* faith found its final expression in the Bauls in the beginning of the 17th century A.D. These influences were: (a) Sufism, under the patronage of the Islamic rulers of Bengal in the late 11th century A.D.; (b) the Vaishnava Movement led by Chaitanya in the 15th century A.D.; and (c) various other obscure mystical cults of Fakirs and Darveshis and also the vision of life expressed by the medieval saints like Kabir, Dadu and Ramdas. The esoteric Buddhist-Tantric practices remained, giving a foundation to the Bauls' philosophical concept of duality in non-duality. The Vaishnava poets provided a form of narration and an aesthetic praxis that enabled the Bauls to deal with this concept. Radha's love of Krishna is seen by the Bauls as a longing of the alienated part (Radha) for the human essence (Krishna), for the whole man.

Ramananda Das Baul of Birbhum sings:

Dear bird in the cage of my heart, chant the names of Radha and Krishna, please.

My beast-life will disappear and Paramatma will come and sit in my body-jar,

My own nature will vanish and I will not have any want.

Dear bird in the cage of my heart, chant the names of Radha and Krishna, please.

There are sixteen names in thirty-two letters,

Take twenty-eight out, cling to the four that remain and



*That is the ajapa nam (the unsingable name) in four letters.
The Sadhu sings that name, the jib (the physical human) doesn't
know it.*

*Dear bird in the cage of my heart, chant the names of Radha
and Krishna, please.*

*I sang that unsingable name
When I was in my mother's womb
But while sucking her breasts I forgot everything.
Dear bird in the cage of my heart, chant the names...*

*Gossain Premananda says: Whom to tell the story of my mind?
My sorrows remain in my mind
I know my mind but not the man (the living embodiment) of my mind.
Dear bird in the cage of my heart, chant Radha-Krishna, please.**

In order to rejoin the whole and to objectify his search for God the best means open to man would be to strive for a realization of that supreme longing through the medium of a co-searcher. For, the longing of man of which Radha's longing is an image must be fully experienced not as an imaginary process but in the reality of human life.⁴

The Bauls' search

An achieved Baul is real man in his quintessence. A Baul constantly aspires to reach within himself his supreme essence. His insatiable hunger for his innermost self finds release in an expressionistic form which in turn shapes his personality and his life style. He learns to observe reality and to question it with the help of a guru and a co-searcher. He transcends his socio-economic constraints through an aesthetic praxis.

Thus sings Pavan Das, a twenty year old Baul from Birbhum:

*Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?
Only my guru knows it. Only he knows who knows
Chillies grow on bamboo trees and cucumbers on the
aubergine plants*

Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?

*In the morning the wedding arrangements took place,
At noon was the wedding,
On the evening the bride comes home with a baby
in her arms,*

Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?

*The plough works in the field,
The calf is in the womb of the cow,
Krishna was born and he has just gone to the fields
to get his food.*

Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?



*There is no water in the sea,
 But there are wild waves in the bazaar.
 Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?
 When the Father was not born
 The son had a bride sitting on his lap.
 All the Fakirs came from faraway lands,
 There was a huge, torn blanket covering the sky
 And, now, where will I bury that Father Fakir,
 The one who knows, after he dies?
 Who knows the innermost mind of the Fakir in our mind?**

The Bauls' style of life

The word 'Baul' means "frenzied", "in a state of trance" or "wild wind". With his long, tattered robe, a vest with multi-coloured patches (borrowed from the Sufi, Fakir and Darvesh traditions), a scarf around his waist, a piece of cloth like a lungi covering the lower part of his body (loose enough to allow fast and sudden movements), a headgear (on special occasions) and any other object with which he has formed a personal relationship, the Baul distantiates himself from society. He loves his body and cares very much about how he looks but not in a narcissistic manner. The Baul is a sincere communicator and his care for his appearance is part of his communication strategy. Since his childhood he has been made aware of the exemplary function of his existence, which is to create an image of, firstly, a search for the supreme and, secondly, an image of the supreme itself, that is, Radha-Krishna-in-one or Purusha-Prakriti.

The wandering Baul may be seen carrying one or several of the following instruments:

- (1) *Ektara*, a one-stringed drone instrument;
- (2) *Anandalahari* or *Gubgubi* or *Khamak*, a drum with a pair of gut or nylon strings attached to the skin of one side of the drum, which is open on the other side. The other end of the strings are tied to another, much smaller, drum. The Baul holds the smaller drum in his left hand and, loosening or tightening the strings, he controls the variation of pitch as he plucks the strings with the other hand;
- (3) *Dotara*, a four-stringed lute;
- (4) *Dugi*, a drum tied to his waist;
- (5) *Kartal*, or *mandira*, small cymbals made of brass;
- (6) *Ghungur*, small bells, often attached to the ankles;
- (7) *Dubki*, tambourine.

The Bauls' manner of communication

Usually the Baul searches for a *Sadhan Sangi*, a companion in the same meditation praxis, who shares all his 'worldly spiritual' concerns. The female partner is known as *Vaishnabi*. This two-person troupe then starts an intense apprenticeship of frenzied, spectacular, communication styles

which include singing, dancing, tranced histrionics and other esoteric meditation enactments. Since they have a strong community orientation, the Bauls are in constant touch with the rural mainstream of Eastern India and, thus, are sensitive to local social, cultural, and economic issues. This enables them to concretize among the rural folk the basic human dialectic of commitment towards theory and praxis, towards God and World. They perform at ground level and maintain eye contact with their audience. The latter are drawn in an effort at embodying in their life-experience the longing for a heavenly Vrindaban. This secret Vrindaban is known to the initiates in the audience. Out of that Vrindaban they feel like the Hebrews out of their Holy Land, or like the Christians longing for heavenly Jerusalem. The Baul's performance quickens the desires of those longing souls, who yearn for Vrindaban as if they were in an emotional diaspora. And the Baul urges them on, calls upon them to return to Vrindaban. The whole performance is an exercise in elevating oneself from the level of intellectual metaphor to that of experiential sacrament.⁵ The Yin and the Yang of each member of the audience unite in an experience of tranquillity which is not a catharsis, but a conscious perception of unity. The dialectical pairs of existence, the either/ors of life merge into a higher organic unity.

The Bauls' aesthetic praxis

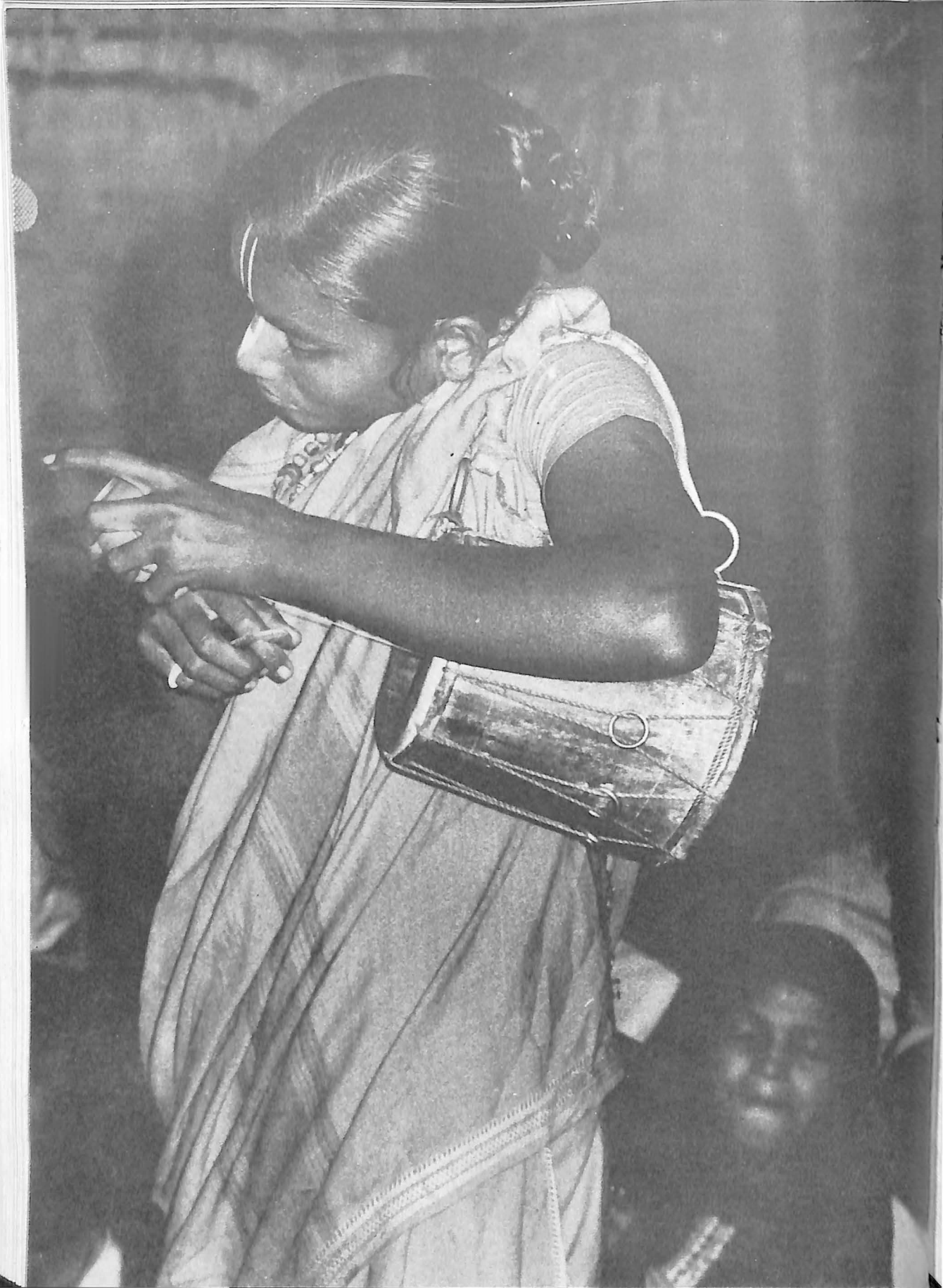
The Bauls are artists, just as Zen Koan writers are artists. They are not Vaishnavas, in the same way as Zenists are not Buddhists. The Bauls strive at transforming human reality radically. On a concrete historical level they seek to transform a society which is caste-ridden, class-structured and exploitative of its members, and establish a society in which humanity can give free rein to its essential powers, chained for so long. Baul art is a practical activity.

*Lalan says: Dear wild mind of mine, I am yet to know what caste is.
People ask: What is Lalan's caste in the family of man?*

*A Moslem is known by his circumcision.
How do we know his woman?
A Brahmin is known by his sacred thread.
How do we recognize the female Brahmin?
People ask: What is Lalan's caste in the family of man?*

*Some have flower garlands around their neck
Some, icons.
Dear mind, how do you see the world?
Does all this tell you about the caste differences?*

*How can the caste be determined in the coming and going of life?
If the water is in the well, we call it well-water,
If it is in the Ganges, it is Ganga-water.
In essence it is the same water.
Only the names are different.
All over the world people pride themselves at random
on the caste differences among themselves.*



*But Lalan has already swallowed up the head of caste.
He has sold himself to the world. Oh! dear wild mind,
how do you understand all this?**

It is the creation or restoration of a new reality (exterior or interior) to a human measure. It is not the mirage of Radha-Krishna or Juganaddha, that inspires the soul of the Baul. Like his black American counterparts, the Blues and Jazz musician, the Baul believes very strongly that he is responsible to God and to self. These exemplary forms of aesthetic praxis cannot be defined analytically. They can only be approached with an open aesthetic conception which does not mutilate the richness, diversity and dynamism of their art-acts. The *Sahaj* path of the Bauls calls for a *sahaj* approach. And thus, an interaction with the Baul tradition may contribute to the creation of 'another' culture.

The Bauls and modern media

The Bauls are amongst the best communicators in rural Bengal. Development officers have already become aware of this and they have started to examine how they can 'use' the Bauls in the service of their programmes.⁶ Political demagogues have also attempted to 'use' the Bauls. And mass media have put a number of Bauls 'on the air'.⁷ In the hands of media men, politicians or development agents the Bauls are being manipulated, often subtly but not seldom crudely. This manipulation results in a confrontation between a pragmatic, utilitarian, form of communication and an aesthetic one. To the extent that they are aesthetic forms, the folkloric media are not meant to convey messages extraneous to themselves. They have their own source of inspiration: the life-experience of a people, and they fulfil their own essential function: to express the soul of a people, to arrive at a vision of life and share this vision with the community.⁸ When attempts are made to assimilate the folk media and make of them 'extension arms of the mass media'⁹, there can only result a cultural conflict and the necessity of a cultural struggle.

A culture is the collective personality of a group, that is, a group's particular manner of "being-in/to-the-world". And communications are the particular manner in which the members of a group relate among themselves and with other groups. For instance, Baul communication, as was mentioned already, is dialogical, horizontal, participatory and emancipatory. It is basically democratic. It also has its technique, that of oral communication as opposed to written communication. Oral communication implies a face-to-face situation and a direct mediation of words, where words do not *refer* to particular realities so much as *stand for* these realities.¹⁰ Thus, Baul communication favours collective participation and emphasizes immediacy of experience. As can be seen by this example, at the heart of culture is communication, and communication is wedded to a particular value-system and supports it.¹¹ However, a group has a right to change its culture, as a person has a right to alter his/her personality. It is not change that is dangerous but the fact that a change is forcibly—however gently and persuasively—brought about by an external influence and is not fully understood, thus mastered by those concerned.

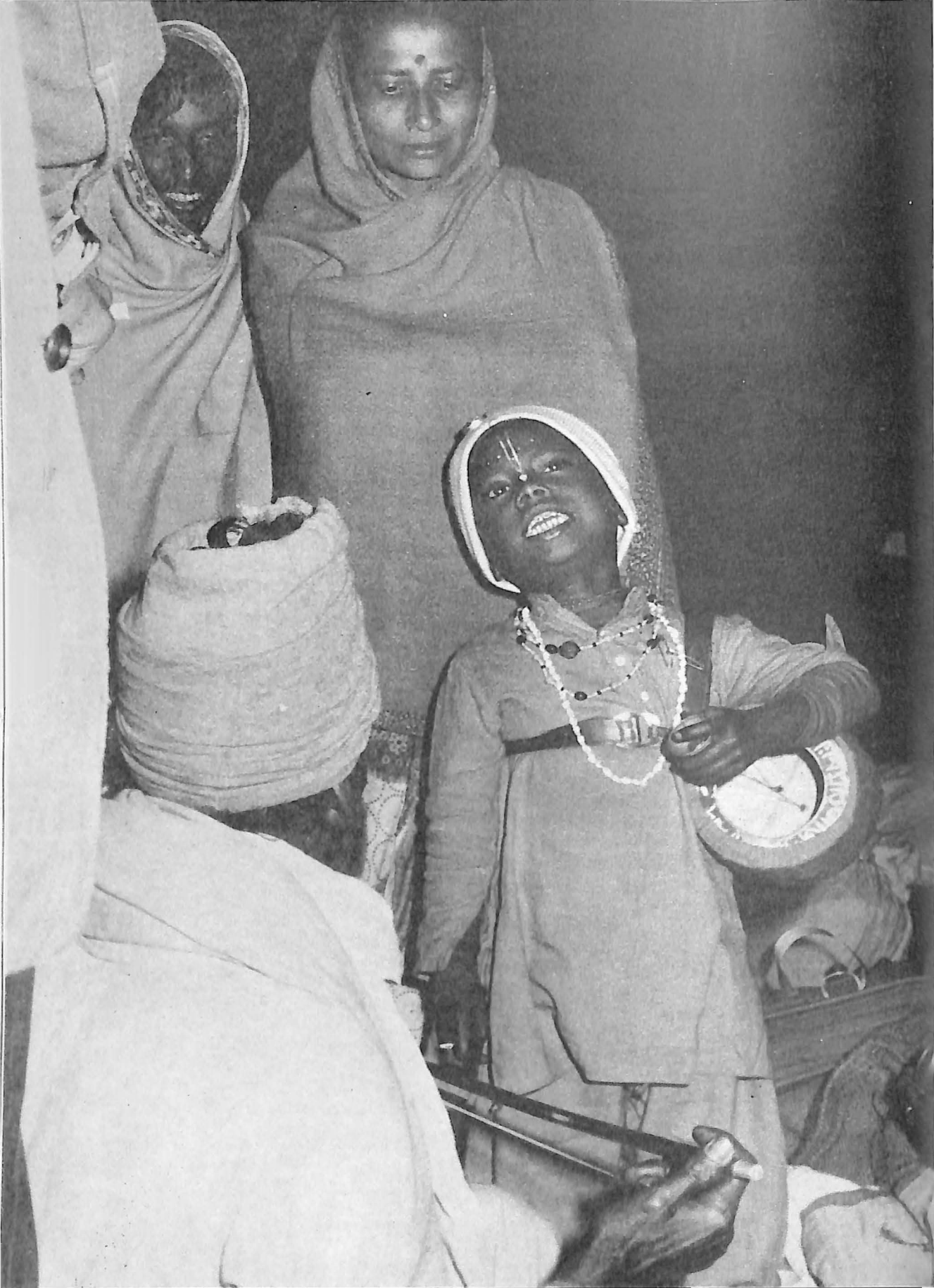
The Baul, as a communicator, is essentially alien to the media man, to the political or developmental harbinger. The latter on the one side, and the Bauls on the other, propagate cultures which are not only alien, but exclusive of each other. The encounter of the two cultures can only result in the disappearance, absorption or falsification of one of the two. In the case of the Bauls vs the mass media, the dice are thrown, the protagonists have taken their positions. But the game or drama to ensue is not a matter of chance. The action follows laws that are almost as ineluctable as physical laws. One might be inclined to forecast the death—spiritual and otherwise—of the Bauls and their subsequent accession to the rarefied atmosphere of museums and academicism . . . but a number of facts indicate that the Bauls' faith in the emancipation of man and their resilience in the face of alien cultural trends should not be underestimated:

- (a) Repeated attempts at organizing centrally controlled programmes have never succeeded with the Bauls.¹² They strongly favour a decentralized festival system with events all over Eastern India throughout the year. These festivals follow a heterodox socio-religious calendar. This is done, of course, in addition to the Bauls' usual rounds in their immediate environment.
- (b) The Bauls' aesthetic praxis calls for an interaction of those involved, each receiver being also a potential transmitter. Bauls cannot accept a passive consumer behaviour not any more than uni-directional communication.
- (c) They never miss the opportunity of practising a form of political enlightenment as opposed to obscurantism—with its depoliticising tendency. At each and every one of their long sessions the Bauls engage in a manner of dialogue known as *Paltapalti* or repartee.
- (d) This dialogical process ensures collective production and works against any attempts at specialized production that may be thrust upon the Bauls.
- (e) Of course, there is a shadow elite among the Bauls—there always has been—imposed by the manipulations of the larger elite of society. But the Bauls by their ingenious elusiveness have survived those situations in the past and they are doing so at present. The future will depend upon the ability of the collective Baul leadership which is loose but functional enough to strengthen their self-organization and to withstand any coercion coming from outside.
- (f) The Bauls are becoming aware of the cultural and political energies contained in their vision of society. They are even showing signs of an astute awareness, one which protects them from being manipulated by the new media and even incites them to control the image they project in those media.

Conclusion

In this preliminary article we have defined our subject, stated what we believe to be the main issues in its respect, and described our method of studying it. A large number of questions now arise which we propose to examine in the next few months by means of (a) frequent field trips for ob-





servation of and dialogue with the Bauls; (b) Baul-*utsava*-s held in our premises where Bauls will perform for urban audiences interested in a dialogue with them, and (c) interdisciplinary discussions of the material gathered during the field trips and the *utsava*-s. Some of the questions which we can already formulate are as follows:

- (1) What are the main tenets of the Baul philosophy/an experience of life which man in crisis might do well to preserve?
- (2) What are the main characteristics of the Bauls' communication performances? How are these characteristics wedded to a particular view of man, and how do they interact with the non-participatory, non-emancipatory, totalitarian, technological media of communication?
- (3) Can it be that progress and, more topically, development means preserving some of the values of the Bauls even at the cost of rejecting or at least minimising certain values which have become paradigms of development?
- (4) How can the dialectical Baul philosophy of duality in non-duality help counter the excessive digitalisation¹³ (either/or type of questioning) in the field of human sciences?

References

1. *Banglar Baul* (in Bengali) by Upendranath Bhattacharya, Orient Book Company, 1364 Bengali Calendar, pp. 133-290.

In this monumental work on the Bauls the author discusses in detail the possible Vedic origin of the Baul philosophy. He refers to the following sources:

Winternitz: *History of Indian Literature*; Niharranjan Ray: *Banglar Itihas*; Farquhar: *An Outline of the Religious Literature in India*; Bhandarkar: *Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Minor Religious Systems*; *Atharvaveda Samhita*, Book XIV, *The Vratya*.

2. *Banglar Baul*, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-244.
3. *Obscure Religious Cults* by Shashibushan Dasgupta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 165-166.

"The earlier Sahajiyas conceived of the ultimate reality as the Sahaja and this conception of Sahaja is also found in the songs of the Bauls; and like the earlier Sahajiyas the Bauls also advocate the most natural path for the realization of this Sahaja-nature..."

But the earlier Sahajiya cult underwent a notable transformation in the hands of the Bauls; for, the Bauls, by deviation and innovation, effected a great change both in the ideology and practice of the Sahajiyas. The difference in ideology is palpable in the conception of Sahaja. The Buddhist Sahajiyas conceived Sahaja as Maha-sukha which is the unity of the duality represented by man and woman as Upaya and Prajna. The method for the realization of this Sahaja consisted, therefore, essentially in a sexo-yogic practice... But the Bauls conceived Sahaja as the innermost eternal beloved who is the 'man of the heart' (*maner manus*). The Bauls also speak of love and union, but this love means love between the human personality and the Divine Beloved. Within and in this love man realises his union with the Divine, or in other words he merges his personal existence in the Beloved that resides within this temple of the body."

4. "It is through the medium of human form that the divine beauty is to be realised." Lalan Fakir, the celebrated Baul of mid-nineteenth century Bengal, sang: "In man resides that Jewel of Man, but ah me, that Jewel I could not recognize." *Obscure Religious Cults*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
5. Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, N. Y. Ballantine, 1972; See Metalogue: "Why a Swan?"; Gaston Roberge: *Films for an Ecology of Mind*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1978, p. 46.
6. Official signboards are seen in Birbhum, West Bengal, welcoming the visitor to the 'land of the Bauls'. Tourism publicity uses the image of the Baul both at the state and at the central levels. There is a long practice of political parties belonging either to the right or to the left 'using' the Bauls to give a 'grassroot' character to their cultural fronts. A veteran Baul from Birbhum attended Congress sessions in the early fifties under the recommendation of a socio-political elite. His son was sent to Eastern Europe around that time by another socio-political elite, and lately he has been extensively travelling in the U.S.A. and other parts of the world, patronized by both the elites.

7. Quite a number of Bauls broadcast their songs on the AIR. Professional radio singers also sing Baul songs. In fact one such singer from Bangladesh radio, Runa Laila, may be responsible for the recent revival of the popularity of Baul songs on the radio in both the Bengals. The multi-dimensionality of a Baul performance is lost in these broadcasts, and a significant increase in radio programmes featuring Bauls has both merits and demerits in terms of what we have called the aesthetic praxis of the Bauls. Films have also been made which included one or more Bauls performing the role of *vivek* or a choric commentator on life. An exceptional case for its awareness would be Ritwick Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Gappo*. In March—April 1979, a French television team made a documentary film on the Bauls. The Bauls greatly contributed to the quality of the film.
8. Gaston Roberge: *Mediation, the action of the media in our society*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1979.
9. Cf. S. Parmar: *Traditional Folk Media in India*, Geka Books, New Delhi, 1975, p. 13.
10. Cf. "Literacy as a communication skill" by R. N. Srivastava, in *Indian Journal of Adult Education*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Mar. 79, pp. 1-14.
11. Cf. "Mass Media and National Culture" by Antonio Pasquali, in *Media Asia, an Asian Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1978, pp. 62-67.
12. There are a few Bauls who have been abroad during the last two decades. They are in the habit of using titles like 'The King of the Bauls', 'London-returned Baul Butterfly', 'The Jewel of the Bauls'. There is a tradition of giving titles to veteran Bauls. These titles usually evolve out of the consensus at repeated festivals, but the new epithets are mere results of the Western media publicity culture. One of these not-yet-forty Bauls has organized an International Forum for Bauls. On the working committee of this Forum are local administrators, the vice-chancellors of two universities in the State of West Bengal, lawyers, two ministers of the State Government, two newspaper magnates, a group of academicians, writers and even a magician. This Forum has acquired a large piece of land and has repeatedly requested Bauls to participate in its yearly festivals but in vain. Only a handful of Bauls have responded to this call. When asked about the reason for this poor response, a veteran Baul replied: "We cannot sell ourselves, a Baul only sells himself to the person residing inside".
13. Cf. Gaston Roberge: *Films for an Ecology of Mind*, op. cit., pp. 82, 138-141; Anthony Wilden: *System and Structure*, Tavistock, London, 1972, *passim*.

* Song translated by Deepak Majumdar.

List of Pictures

1. *Bhaba Pagla, a spiritual guru belonging to the Shakta cult, has composed innumerable songs. He is seen here listening to one of his own songs interpreted by his disciple Baul Subal Das. (May, 1978)*
Photograph by Salim Paul (C) Chitrabani 1979.
2. *Bipad Baran Das Baul at Kenduli Festival, Birbhum, West Bengal, January 1978.*
Photograph by Salim Paul (C) Chitrabani 1979.
3. *Vaishnabi Savitri Dasi singing with accompaniment of Anandalahari, January 1978.*
Photograph by Salim Paul (C) Chitrabani 1979.
4. *Pavan Das Baul, Kenduli, January 1978.*
Photograph by Salim Paul (C) Chitrabani 1979.
5. *A child Baul at Kenduli Festival, January 1978.*
Photograph by Salim Paul (C) Chitrabani 1979.