



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ)

Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012

An Interview with Parvathy Baul

Conducted by Aju Mukhopadhyay

Inroducing Bauls

Baul is a way of life, Bauls live the life of sadhana. Singing and dancing are part of Baul-expression, a movement in action. Baul culture, the Baul way of life is unique to Bengal. This wandering music cult has a special place in the history of music accompanied by dance. The word "Baul" has its etymological origin in the Sanskrit words *Vatula* (madcap) and *Vyakula* (restless), used for someone who is possessed or crazy. Similar word in Hindi is Bachul from which has come Baura. They usually do not own properties, innumerable other attachments do not bind them on their way. Neither a recluse nor a family man or woman, Baul and their songs with ecstatic dance is an automatic creation, an offshoot of their religion to live a simple life, singing its glory. It's easy to identify a Baul singer from his uncut, often coiled hair, saffron robe (alkhalla or sari) and necklace of beads made of basil (tulsi) stems. They live on whatever they are offered by villagers in return for the songs and dance and they travel from place to place. But Bauls are not minstrels, they are not just entertainers. They have a deeper base in their performance. With its outward folk tradition it keeps the mystic in its inner fold.

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-2-issue-2autumn-2012/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Parvathy-Baul.pdf>

© www.pintersociety.com

Parvathy Baul

Baul Gaan or song is a unique contribution of Bengal, considered to be at the top of its folk songs. One has to be an adept in lyric poetry-song, dance, narration, music and rhythm- in its overall performance. The love lore of Krishna and Radha, as in Indian Purana, has attracted the attention of all song and tale loving devout Indians for more than 500 years. Narration itself draws large gathering. And a performance with Nupur or anklet, Ektara, one stringed instrument in hands, Dugi, a drumming instrument tied to the waist, with matted hairs down below the knees, her own paintings depicting the tales in cloths- demonstrated by her while making the ecstatic dance with full throated song in clear melodious voice in Kirtan style, reaching to the last hearer in the big hall, playing all the instruments in harmonic order, showing her emotion up to the mystic level, Parvathy Baul, playing the role of Radha (Radha Bhava) quenched my thirst to a great extent in the evening at the Sri Aurobindo Theatre, Pondicherry, on 13 March, 2012. She is at present one of the top attractions of folk music from India. Following the way of the Bauls Parvathy has taken the art to the world stage in a spectacular fashion.

She performed twice more in other parts of the town and around during her Pondicherry tour as Director of the Tantidhatri, International Women's Performing Arts Festival, between 11th and 15th March 2012. Moved as I was, I interviewed her two days later at Aurodhan Art Gallery hall, Pondicherry.

Questions to Parvati Baul and her answers

Q- We greatly relished your solo performance; acting, singing, drumming and dancing, including displaying pictures supporting your story. I understand that you are native of Chittagong. Have you inherited in any way this art form with relevant philosophy, thus living a Baul way of life? If not, how and when were you inspired to venture into this life? Is there or were there one or more Gurus to whom you are intensely grateful?

A- I was born in a Brahmin family of Chittagong, Bangladesh but was sent in my childhood at the age of six, due to riotous condition prevailing there for some time, to Cooch Behar in West Bengal. Born in Assam in 1970, I was fascinated by the Bihu performances and Mahut songs. I learnt Bengali songs from some teachers and Kathak from Shrilekha Mukherjee for a while but as I came in touch with the Baul Gurus I was greatly attracted by this life and art. My first Guru

was Bipad Taran Das. I learnt from Sashanka Gosain of Murshidabad and others. But I am most grateful to Sanatan Das Baul of Bankura who sheltered me in his family and taught me all the paraphernalia of this art form.

Q- Would you tell me where you began learning this art and how you moved to prepare for this life? How influenced and how trained were you at Shantiniketan? Did Gurudev Rabindranath's interest in Bauls inspired you to seek the ambience of Shantiniketan?

A- Shantiniketan was a great influence for me in the ambience of late Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. I remained there for three years and studied visual art in Kalabhavan, Visva Bharati.

Q- May I know the chronology of your movements from Chattagram to Trivandrum?

A- As I told you, I remained in Cooch Behar for some 12 years, in Bankura for two years, in Murshidabad for some time and at Birbhum for more than three years including my studies at Shantiniketan but before I concluded my studies there I was so drawn to Baul songs and dance, so impressed I was by this art form that I gave up formal education for practical training from the Babajis and Bauls.

Learning from some Gurus I was finally accepted in the family of Sanatan Das Baul as in Gurukul system of the lore, and was mostly taught by him; song and dance and everything, including begging with him at times, as a part of this life. For all this I was almost shunned by my family. Taking part in a street drama, I was called by a director of the drama, Khaled Yochi, to Hampi and being introduced there to Ravi Gopalan Nair of Thiruvanthapuram, Kerala, an expert in performing art, I began visiting him. I received some Ayurvedic treatment there and was initiated to Tantric rites. Eventually I married him. I stayed in Kerala for two years. I stay there sometimes though I am known, quite aptly, as Parvathy Baul of Bengal.

Q- Are you performing this Radha Bhav and related items only or other items of Baul songs and dances too?

Parvathy Baul

A- I have also performed the Persian story of Hamza. (The Adventures of Amir Hamza or the Dastan-e Amir Hamza is a grand epic from the Islamic cultures of the Middle East and beyond. Rooted in the legends of valour of prophet Muhammad's uncle, Amir Hamza, the narrative attracted legends of greater and lesser heroes, considered as an Odyssey of the medieval Persian World, it became a compendium of exploits of the fictional character Amir Hamza and his companions. It was commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in about 1652, a part of Akbarnama.)

Q- How were you drawn to this particular area of Kirtan and Radha-Krishna story as in mythology which is very traditional and attractive aspect of Bengali culture, a great part of Indian culture too?

A- This was a great attraction for me which to my satisfaction was taught by Sanatan Das Baul of Bankura even when he was 80 years old. Learning painting at Shantiniketan I painted the tales of Radha and Krishna, in the style of Pata Chitra. (Pata Chitra of Bengal is the base of some performing art- stories with singing. Paintings known as Kalighat Pata Chitra were sometimes the subject of study and work by the famous Bengal painter of modern time, Jamini Roy.)

Q- When did you begin performing in the stages? In how many Indian cities and towns have you performed so far? Have you gone abroad for further accomplishment?

A- From 1995 I began performing in Bengal stages and gradually did it in other cities and towns in India. From around 2000-2001 I was invited to famous world stages (like Internal Music Festivals) and by now I have performed in most of the famous cities of the world.

Q- What are your plans, how do you want to expand your area of performance?

A- I want to stay in my art, make further experiments and perform in wider areas of the world.

Q- Would you mind telling us something about your personal life, what was your full name before coming into this life? How are you enjoying life with the practices and performances? Are you wife and mother both? Or are you so engrossed in this life living like a yogini that you have no time or idea of leading a family life?

A- My original name was Mousumi Padiyal. Sent out during early childhood, I do not recollect my relationship with my father. I stayed with my mother. Her name was Sandhya. She was a devotee of Saint Ramakrishna. She encouraged me in following my Baul way. I fully enjoy life through my performing arts. I am wife, as I said but not a mother. Though married I do sadhana appropriate to a Baul but I am not a Sannyasini.

Q- Will you tell us something of your personal choice that may be of tremendous interest to us or which is very relevant but I have forgotten to ask you?

A- To establish my work and spread it in the next generations I have the ambition of founding an Akhda, somewhere like Nadia district of Paschimbangla, in accordance with the Gurukul system, through which I wish to impart training to the desiring students.

Q- Tell us something about your partner or colleagues? How do things move about you and what may be the future prospect?

A- My husband Ravi Gopalan Nair is an adept in performing arts of differing varieties, with its base on traditional body language. He has the ability of helping presentation of Indian performing arts to foreign audience without creating complexity. An adept in wood carving, he has been trainer to some performers, presenting some performing art form, appearing for the first time. He has been accompanying the artists to different countries of the world for quite some years, sometimes as Director or otherwise. He is always supportive and usually stays with me. I do solo performance but all my colleagues work in cooperation. I am in touch with the fellow travellers in performing arts in my and other countries.

Aju Mukhopadhyay