

Parvathy Baul

In Search of Masters

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I started this journey at the age of fifteen. I was trained in Indian classical music and dance from a tender age. I wanted to learn more so I thought of exploring painting and went to a well known art institution in India. I failed the admission test, so my family asked me to return to normal studies. But in my heart I knew very well that I was destined to be an artist, so I did not want to lose time.

I decided to leave home to practise with the well known master painter Shri Jogen Choudhury. I spent a year under his guidance; he inspired me to learn shapes and forms from nature and daily life. This led me to make very long trips by bicycle with my pencils, brushes and papers to interior tribal villages, forests and paddy fields, also visiting hospitals, bus and railway stations. The outside world was a big opening; I started discovering the tribal way of life. This road introduced me to the world of Baul.

My first memorable encounter with the Baul tradition, which I speak about very often, was on a local train. There I met a blind Baul. He was strumming his Ektara with his long dirty fingers, while the other hand was placed on a Duggi (a small clay drum) tied to his waist. He was dressed in a shabby orange robe and he sung the songs of vision and light. His songs transported me immediately into another world which I had yet to explore.

Through several more meetings with the Baul performers who visited our art school campus regularly, I became a frequent visitor to many Baul festivals. My curiosity grew stronger. I wondered what Baul meant, but I dared not put the question: I felt inhibited to ask because I did not know if it was right to do so.

The second year I was admitted to the art institution, but to return to a space surrounded by four walls did not impress me. For the first time I started realising the gender differences and that for a woman freedom of expression was restricted. I was surprised to discover that there were no women teachers, though there were many women students graduating every year. Even after a decade or more the situation is the same in many art institutions in India.

I decided to practise the Baul way of singing and dancing. I remained under the tutelage of a female Baul performer, Smt Phulmala Dashi, for almost a year. She asked me to pursue the higher level of studies in Baul. This teaching process requires the student to be initiated by a master, so she asked me to choose a master for myself. My search guided me to the far away village in Sonamukhi where the legendary Baul master performer Shri Sanathan Baba lived.

At the university, I had to face many obstacles to continue with the classes. The authorities were not happy with my Baul activities and my parents were called to a meeting by a group of professors which led them to completely misunderstand my work. One of the professors humiliated my mother by saying that she should be ashamed of having given birth to a girl like me. This shocked my mother. She was ill and bed ridden for almost three years after this incident.

In fact, at that point I had to leave my family and friends to begin a long journey. Here I must mention that certain traditional Indian practices demand that the pupil renounces all worldly affairs so that she or he can go through a deep process of learning without much interference. It happened naturally in my case. I should also mention that the traditional teaching is strict about returning to visit people one is close to (only after a certain amount of years; when the practitioner attains maturity) and about the obligation of taking care of one's parents till their last days; it is the same even in the case of the ascetics. Through the years I have become closer and closer to my parents and good friends; now they all support me with their love.

When I reached the Ashram of Shri Sanathan Das Baul, (I fondly call him Baba, father), he was dressed in a distinctive manner with his long hair twisted into a

topknot. He was wearing a long loose saffron-coloured upper garment and patchwork coat and a pair of special wooden sandals. He looked peaceful and relaxed. He had just finished his lunch. My exhaustion after a long journey on foot with no food and water vanished in a moment. I ran enthusiastically to explain my endeavours to him. He calmly asked me, "Have you had your lunch?" Without a word more, I was served food by his beautiful daughter-in-law. I was no longer a stranger there. I felt that I had reached home. I spent fifteen days in silence beside his tiny wooden *khot* (bed). He did not notice me at all. At times questions came to my head: do I really exist somewhere or am I dreaming? My heart felt heavier than a rock.

"Would you like to come for a walk with me to the market?" On the fifteenth evening his voice came from the sky: I looked up and followed him. On the way he started singing a short Baul poem. "Why don't you repeat the lines?" I started following him, after a few minutes he said "enough": we had reached the market.

On the way back, in the same place, he asked me to sing the lines myself and, somehow, I was able to remember them. After his evening meditation he called me close to him, he said that I was ready to be initiated and that this would happen the next day.

The next day was a *Buddha Purnima* (full moon) day. In the Baul tradition we have the custom of *Guru Dakshina* (offerings to the Guru). This can be decided by the master or the student; in my case it has always been decided by my masters. He asked me to go to seven specific houses in the nearby villages, to sing there and collect alms as his *Dakshina*. I was born in a Brahmin family: to collect alms is forbidden. Begging is considered as an utterly undignified custom in my family. It was almost impossible for me to think of

going to an unknown village house, perhaps a lower caste household, to sing for them. First I thought of running away. Then I tried to imagine that I would do it only once as an experience never to be repeated.

I went to the houses, as my master said. At the beginning it was very difficult as I was terribly ashamed. I couldn't look at the faces of the householders and my voice cracked. An elderly village man told me that I needed more practice and inner awareness. (Later I have returned many times to collect grain from farming families for the yearly Ashram Festival at Baba's place. During those festivals all the villagers and many Baul/Fakir practitioners would be treated to a big feast and Baul music for three days and nights. This tradition gives me enormous joy and a sense of freedom and sharing. I have become close to many families there and now I return to them to sing in their houses and also at their festivals. Sometimes I receive friendly telephone calls from them and we exchange news.)

I returned to the Ashram where my master was waiting for me in the meditation room with sweets and Tulasi beads. I was initiated with sacred Mantras and received his unconditional affection.

Sanathan Baba took great care to make me understand the inner meaning of the Baul poetry. He would say that every word in the song should be expressed clearly. If the Baul sings the song without realising its meaning it fails to appeal to its listeners. He would say that the audience should listen with awareness as well. It is not a question of Raga or technique in order to understand, but to be able to appreciate and enjoy the hidden soul or the *Bhava* of the song. Just like the performer; listeners also have to grow their *Anubhava Siddhi* realisation power.

Baul is the *Nada Upasaka* of Indian Yogic tradition. *Nada* is *Pranava*. OM is the

Pranava of One's own real self; all the musical notes are blended beautifully into this *Pranava*. *Nritya* or Dance that accompanies the Baul songs is an inseparable, sacred movement of the various limbs of the body in accordance with the inner divine *Bhav*. Baul is also known as *Bhav Sangeeth*. *Sangeeth* is not singing alone; this particular word includes playing the musical instrument and dancing while singing: then it is complete. Baul enters *Bhava Samadhi* (a state beyond body consciousness, but not trance) by singing and dancing. The *Bhava* can be brought to a song by the union of the meaning of the poetry and the *Sur* (tune) in the performer's heart. The *Bhava* is the secret of a good song and its singer; it is the inner advancement of an artist.

There are many performers who have perfected the training. When we meet such performers we appreciate the hard work that enables them to present the work perfectly. But a true artist creates such an ambiance - empowered with *Bhava* - that the listener's heart gets shaken up by itself; we forget time and also the words of appreciation; only a sound comes: "Aha". It seems as if the artist has stolen the listeners from their world taking them into another world where only those songs exist.

Baba has a strong dislike of journalists and art scholars. Many of them visit the Ashram, but then he talks about aspects of Baul in a manner that only leads them to more confusion. "Some aspects are only good to experience and not to explain," he would tell me, "my head is getting too hot, take all those recording machines away". Sometimes he yells at the journalists who have just arrived at his Ashram.

When Baba and I sat face to face in our lessons he spoke about many aspects, very profound and intimate, which helped to reveal the secret world of *Bhav Sangeeth* of Baul to me. These lessons were unpre-

dictable: they could be at any time of the day or night or even while taking his bath. He explained that though Baul singers should perfect themselves in all these aspects, once they start singing in a performing situation, they must forget all the techniques, surrender totally to the spontaneity of their inner selves. As my master guided me, the Baul does not sing, the singing arises of itself. The Baul does not dance, the dance occurs. They do not play the instrument, it just springs to life.

Baba sings the stories of Radha, for which he is very famous. This is a story very near to our hearts. At one point Radha sings...

O Shyam (the one with a dark complexion),
Your pot of love
I took and placed it on top of my head
with knowledge,
But it is so heavy
I cannot carry it...

Radha used to love Krishna immensely, yet she was doubtful about Krishna's dedication. One day she complained to Krishna that his love for her was not so sincere. Tricky Krishna told Radha: "I have filled your empty pot with love. You may go home with that". (Filling the pot with love has a hidden meaning: the water pot is carried on the head and it is filled with the unconditional divine love of beloved Shri Krishna. This love transcends the mundane.) After listening to Krishna's words Radha smiled a little and went to lift the pot while thinking to herself: "Though he filled it with love, still it only looks like an empty pot, I will easily carry it home". But when she tried to lift the pot it became very heavy. It was empty but very heavy. She somehow managed to place it on her head but she was unable to stand upright. How could she take a single step?



Sanathan Baba in his evening meditation in a drawing by Parvathy Baul signed by Sanathan because he so much liked the portrait.

After saying this Baba said, "Now you see, love in a simple pot is already so difficult to carry, then how can we spend a lifetime with a single attitude of divine love? To find the love in your song dance and poetry - is it a simple task?"

During this time at Baba's Ashram, my physical condition was failing me; I was unable to keep up with the strict life style and practice. One fine morning I ran away from him and from the Ashram. I was in such a bad state that it was painful for me even to walk slowly. I could not dance any more, my voice also changed. I re-entered the university in Kolkata city and worked with a 'modern' theatre group once again.

I left everything after a year. I went back to my mother to see her. She gave me one thousand rupees and asked me to leave Bengal. Overwhelmed with fear of the unknown, my eyes filled with tears. My mother - a great Yogini and a pure devotee of Shri Ramakrishna - said: "When you go,



Sanathan Baba and Parvathy Baul.
Photo: Ravi Gopalan Nair

go with a smile. Return only if you can still smile". I became a *Paribrajika* (a wandering woman aspirant in search of knowledge) looking for true Indian theatre traditions and I travelled to many places in India. This search led me to Kerala, in South India.

Here I met my friend and teacher Shri Ravi Gopalan Nair. He already knew about me in advance from his Sufi master, the Master whom we lovingly call Thangal (which means "together"). He once told Ravi: "You will see a girl from Kolkata, her mother is a great devotee, marry her and bring her to me". He also gave a few more personal indications which absolutely matched me. I laughed, not believing a single word of Ravi's, but we went together to see Thangal in a village near Trivandrum. There on a hilltop he stood waiting for us surrounded by rubber trees.

When I met him in the dark greenness of the rubber forest I saw a beam of light fall upon him. I ran towards him to hug him, the only thing I knew was that we had met before too. It was a reunion. I followed an intense routine of practice in the guidance

of these two great men for two years. All my difficult physical sickness disappeared. I could sing and dance again.

Two years later I was sent back to my teacher Shri Sanathan Das Baul to resume my studies with him. After my long absence I thought that Baba would not accept me at all and I reached his Ashram in Sonamukhi with a beating heart. He was there sitting on his tiny *khot*. He looked at me and gave a big smile, "Ah! At last you have come, I was waiting for you! I knew that you would return, I have planted a seed in you that never disappears in vain". My meeting with him is still going strong: I visit him to spend some time together whenever I get a gap in my performance schedules. He still sits on his same tiny *khot* and meditates. Now he is nearing ninety years of age.

There are different schools or *Guru Parampara* (the lineage of the Baul Masters) in the Baul tradition. Singing with the Ektara and dancing is the oldest. This style would have disappeared after my teachers, because none of their students have followed this style which demands tremendous mental and physical effort. Modern electrical equipment like microphones, keyboards, etc. has stolen dance and storytelling from the tradition. Now most of the Baul performances have changed into solely musical events. Most of the Baul students are failing to gain the trust of the great teachers. Modern education in the public school and colleges has brought incompleteness, disbelief and fragility to the minds of the students. Now it is very rare to find a true practitioner.

It is even harder for a female practitioner, I think, to convince a master of her ability to carry on the tradition. A woman has to go through more tests than a man. I am trying not to be partial in the least. Often we see women performers who do not have a good training. It is much tougher for

a woman than for a man to follow the Baul or Sufi path. Women practitioners fail to get recognition on this path unless they are exceptionally powerful. We can see this in all the mystic traditions in the world. There were a few great women Baul in the last century. My masters have acknowledged having learned from them.

The lineage of my masters was threatened too. This style would have stopped breathing with them. I have heard Shashnoko Goshai, (another master of mine), telling me how he strongly wished in his heart to get a good student so that he could pass on the teachings, and the same is true for Sanatan Baba too. They had taught a few students including their sons, but growing economic insecurities are a big threat to traditional art forms and have made them unable to continue with the master's teachings. I have become the only Baul practitioner to follow the old lineage of my masters.

Story-telling is the core of the Bengal traditions. We have different story-telling forms from the Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta traditions, but to find story-telling in the Baul tradition is rare. Sanatan Baba has inherited the style from his grandfather who was a Ramayana story-teller and later from his Baul masters, Shri Krishna Das Goshai and the legendary Baul Shri Nitai Khapa, while Shashanko Gosai inherited from his legendary Baul master Shri Vindavan Goshai.

I have received the style from them, but sixty percent of my listeners are not Bengalis, so to communicate the images I started painting them. This process has been with me for the last eleven years. I know that it will continue, surely I will not be the last to practise it; I will definitely transmit the knowledge to an able practitioner - female or male, before I close my eyes...

I would like to end by sharing the poetry

of the famous Baul composer and practitioner Shri Lalan Fakir; in this poem he explains the nature of a true practitioner.

Amrito meghero bari (Bengali)

*Can you drink the water
Of the elixir-cloud
Just with spoken words?
If one's nature is not of a chataka (rain-bird)!*

*The way of a chataka is
Even if they die from thirst
They won't drink any other water
Anything except the rain drops.*

*The clouds deceive it so many times,
Still chataka is an absorbed
Enjoyer of those clouds.
If one's eyes are as fixed on the goal
as those of chataka,
He is called the Sadhaka,
the single minded seeker of truth.*

*My being is like the passing wind,
Always flying, day and night
Lalan says, my being waits not in
good condition
For the Guru.*

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical; it is the power of all true arts.

PARVATHY BAUL (India) has trained in traditional singing and dancing since she was a child and has developed a deep interest in India's folk culture, specially the Baul tradition and painted story-telling theatre, dance and music. Since 2000, Parvathy has been travelling and performing in various festivals, both inside and outside India.