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## The Influence of Sufism on the Baul Sect of Bengal

There has been an all-pervasive influence of Persian language and literature and culture on varied aspects of Indian life and society including that of Bengal since the establishment of the Muslim rule here in the early 13th century. It will suffice to recall the famous tribute of Hafiz to this land in his following couplet:

شکر شکند نشوند همه طوطیان هند  
زین قند پارسی که بنگاله می رود

We are all aware that the arrival of Islam and Muslim rulers in India did not only bring along with them the Persian language and literature but it also paved the way for the introduction of the liberal and secular tradition of Islamic mysticism i.e. Sufism in India. It found a conducive environment in India for its rapid spread and acceptance among Indian masses irrespective of caste, religion and creed partly because of old cults and movements in India professing similar spiritual devotion and love for a single transcendental entity as GOD in Sufism, but primarily because of the long-standing cultural ties between India and the erstwhile Persia. It has befittingly been pointed out by Prof. A. Mahdi Husain in his article entitled "Persian as the Well-Head of

Research in the History of India from 1030 to 1857 A.D. He writes, "It must be remembered that the Persian language has had the oldest relations with India. it goes without saying that cultural relations between Persia and India had begun sometime in pre-Islamic era; and Persian language has had through the ages a marvelous grip and growth. In fact it has remained for centuries rivaling occasionally its glories in Persia itself. Tracing the seed of Persian language and culture in the soil of India, he further quotes Edward Browne as saying:

'It seems pretty certain that the Indians and Persians were once united in a common Indo-Iranian race, located somewhere in the Panjab."<sup>1</sup>

Turning to the theme of this paper which is the influence of Sufism on the Baul Sect of Bengal, it just aims to highlight the close affinities between liberal Islamic traditions or rather Sufism and Indian devotional traditions represented by various heterodoxical cults and movements which led to the development of a composite culture in the medieval India.

Writing about the Bauls of Bengal, Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta says," Far from the empty noise and busy bustle of urban life, flourished in the villages of Bengal an order of singers, still extant, an institution of immense literary and religious interest; for, the songs of these bards are as much noted for their naiveté and spontaneity of expression as for the spiritual intensity of their content.....when a number of these Baul songs were collected

by revered Ksitimohan Sen, a close associate of the poet Rabindranath Tagore in Shantineketan, and were made public they presented a pleasant surprise to the enlightened public both for the lofty and subtle sentiments they embodied and the spontaneity and nicety of expression."2 He writes further, "Judging from the songs hitherto available to us, it is extremely difficult to ascertain who the Baul poets (the most reputed composers of them being the songs of Lalan Fakir) exactly were. We, for the past few decades, have been influenced in this matter by the ideas propagated by the poet Tagore in his poems and writings, and also by the writings and speeches of his close associate, Pandit Ksitimohan Sen; for them Baul represents more a spirit of unconventional approach to divinity through un-assumed love and piety than any precise religious cult. As a matter of fact, these unlettered village-singers, known as the Bauls, belong to the lower ranks of both Muslim and the Hindu communities of Bengal and they are composed of partly householders and mainly of mendicants. The Bauls belonging to the Hindu community are generally Vaishnavite in their faith and those belonging to the Muslim community are generally Sufistic and in both the schools the emphasis is on the mystic conception of divine love."3

Whatever is the derivation of the word 'Baul' as discussed by Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta in his book (like the Sanskrit word vatula meaning crazy or the Arabic word awliya or



wali meaning 'near' i.e. the one who is near to God), Pandit Ksitimohan Sen and the poet Tagore have emphasized that aspect of the Baul songs where mystery of the infinite being defined in the terms of the finite has been very naively and nicely expressed and the pangs of the human heart for the union with the 'Man of the heart' (maner manus) has dominated 4 as in the famous couplet of Maulana Rum:

بشنو از نی چون حکایت می کند  
از جدائیها شکایت می کند

(Listen to tales of the flute; moaning the pangs of separation)

Strikingly similar to the yearning of a Sufi to ultimately get united with the Supreme Beloved or the almighty, Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta underlines the fact that out of Bauls' doctrines and practices, their search for the 'unknown bird' (acin pakhi) that mysteriously comes in and goes out of this cage of the human body, emerged as the most striking feature. This life-long search for the 'unknown bird' got itself mingled with the Vashnavite and Sufistic devotional approach to the divinity.<sup>5</sup>

As it was a noticeable feature in the development of Sufism in the Islamic world that it initially grew as a deviation and revolt against the rigid and orthodoxical taboos and rituals in Islam, the Bauls have also been called somewhat strange people, peculiar in their manners and customs, habits and practices. They refuse to be guided by any canon or convention, social, or religious. Freedom of spirit is their watch-word and they take to an unsophisticated way of life in which the more natural inclinations

of the mind are not restrained by social institutions. They proceed in a direction opposite to that followed by the general run of people. They avoid all religion in which the natural piety of the soul is overshadowed by the useless paraphernalia of ritualism and ceremony on the one hand and pedantry and hypocrisy on the other. It is for this reason that the Bauls would call their path *Ulta* (i.e. the reverse) and would call the process of their spiritual advance as the process of proceeding against the current. It is said in a beautiful song,-

"Reverse are the modes and manners of the man who is a real appreciator of the true emotional life and who is a lover of true love; none is sure about the how and the when of his behavior.

"Such a man is affected neither by the weal nor by the woe of the world and constantly realizes the delight of love; it appears that his eyes are floating on the water of delight; sometimes he laughs alone in his own mood, sometimes he cries alone..... .6

Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta further notes that the Sufis, whose influence on the Bauls was immense, were also *Sadhakas* in the 'reverse path' exactly in the same sense as explained above. Thus, as A. R. Nicholson puts it,--" Unification (*tawhid*) is defined as ' the absoluteness of the Divine nature realized in the passing-away of the human nature,' so that 'the man's last state reverts to his first state and he becomes even as he was before he existed.'"7

**The Bauls and the Sufis:** the influence of Sufism on the



general nature of the Baul Sect has been immense as noted earlier. The overall influence of Sufistic thoughts and practices on the Baul Sect could be summed up under the following heads as discussed by Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta in his book:

- (a) The Influence of Sama
- (b) Importance of the concept of Murshid and Murid
- (c) Heterodoxy of the Bauls
- (d) Body as the Microcosm of the Universe
- (e) The Man of Heart

(a) as pointed out by Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta the out-pouring of the heart through songs was an important religious mode with the Bauls; in this we may find on the one hand the influence of Bengal Vashnavism, which attached much importance to music as a medium of holy communion, and on the other hand the influence of the Sufistic custom of 'Sama' (i.e., song and dance). the effect of music, the Sufis hold, helps one much in passing into the fana, i.e. in passing away of consciousness in mystic union with God.<sup>8</sup>

(b) We know well how much importance is given to the Guru-Shishya tradition in Indian religious thoughts. At times in spiritual life God is even replaced by the Guru. The Sufis similarly lay much emphasis on the Murshid or the Shaikh, who is the preceptor or the spiritual guide of his disciple called Murid. Thus while analyzing the 'Murshid-songs' of the Bauls we may suggest

the influence of the Sufistic concept of Murshid and Murid, but as noted above, a tradition of Guru-Shishya already existed in India since earlier times and we may, therefore, conclude that in the 'Murshid-songs' of the Bauls we find a mixture of the Indian spirit with the spirit of Sufism. In the 'Murshid-songs' of the Bauls there is a poignant and 'unconditional self-resignation of the Murid or the disciple, who has accepted the Murshid as a sure mast in the boundless heaving sea of existence'.<sup>9</sup>

(c) The next point to be noted is the heterodox spirit of the Bauls. Although the background of an Indian thought can not be overlooked in this regard, but the influence of Sufism is also not less noteworthy. Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta succinctly points out in this context that "as essentially a cult of love-mysticism Sufism, in spite of the rites and customs that gradually developed around it, breathes a spirit of heterodoxy in general. It is rightly said,-" Transacting as it were directly with the Divine Being, the Sufis throw off the shackles of the positive religion; pious rebels, they neither fast nor make pilgrimages to the temple of Mecca, nay, they forget their prayers; for with God there is no other language than the silent language of the heart. From excess of religion they have no religion at all."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, as is the case with all the mystics in all countries the Bauls were also opposed to the paraphernalia of practices, rites and customs as to scriptures and speculative literature.

(d) The Bauls cherish the doctrine that recognizes the

human body as the microcosm of the universe and that the ultimate reality resides within this human form as our true self or the ultimate nature. This is exactly the view that has been contended by the Sufi mystics too. Maulana Rum sings:

ای قوم به حج رفته کجائید کجائید  
معشوق همینجا است بیائید بیائید

(e) In the songs of the Bauls we hear much of the 'Man of the heart' whose abode is the human body and whose seat is the human heart. Poetically this 'Man of the Heart' has variously been depicted as the Supreme Beloved, the poet himself being the passionate lover. The songs embody throughout the pangs of separation for the 'Man of the Heart' and maddening desire to be united with Him.<sup>11</sup> We witness similar yearning in numerous poems of the Sufi poets like Rumi in the earlier quoted couplet:

بشنوا ز نی چون حکایت می کند  
از جدائیها شکایت می کند

To conclude this paper Dr. Shashibhushan Das Gupta has called Tagore the greatest of the Bauls of Bengal because of his songs and poems which contain similar thoughts and spiritual essence as those of the Bauls, I will not be mistaken if I also call Rabindranath Tagore a great Sufi poet as well.

## References

1. INDO-IRANIAN STUDIES, presented for the Golden Jubilee of the Pahlavi Dynasty of Iran, Indo-Iran Society 1977 p. 111
2. "Obscure Religious Cults" by Shashibushan Das Gupta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1962, p.157.



3. ibid p. 160.
4. Ibid p. 161.
5. Ibid, p. 162.
6. Ibid p. 163.
7. Ibid, p. 164.
8. Ibid, p. 169-70.
9. Ibid, p. 170.
10. Ibid, p. 171.
11. Ibid, p. 174-75.

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