

# Locating 'Bāuldom' in the Word *Bāul*: A Postscript to the "Problematic Aspects of the Sexual Rituals of the Bauls of Bengal"

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## Introduction

This article is written in reference to the article by Rahul Peter Das on "Problematic Aspects of the Sexual Rituals of the Bauls of Bengal" which was published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (Das 1992). Das' article was a pioneering work on the sexual rituals of the 'Bāuls' of Bengal.<sup>2</sup>

Although the phrase "Bāuls of Bengal" noticeably suggests that the 'Bāuls' are a religious group, the word *bāul* is far more problematic. First of all, the word itself is a syntactic enigma. At the outset, the reader should be

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of my doctoral dissertation on the 'Bāuls' of Bengal which is being supervised by Prof. Rahul Peter Das. I am indebted to him for the late-night brainstormings that we had over this topic. I also thank Dr. Kalyan Panda for his help with translations from Sanskrit. Since words like fakir, yogic, yoga, tantric, guru, etc. are already a part of the English language repertoire, I am not transliterating their Bengali forms except when they feature in quotations, references, etc. The *ba-phalā* of the Bengali script has been transliterated as 'v' (like, *svāmī*, not *sbāmī*). The names of places have been written in common anglicised forms. All the Bengali names (except references) have been written in common anglicised forms. Names of religions are written in common anglicised forms, such as Vaishnavism (but *baiṣṇab/vaiṣṇava*). The word *bāul* exceeds the limited understanding of 'religion' and signifies a composition of faith, beliefs, practices, catechisms and doctrinal philosophy. The word "Baulism" (Ferrari 2012: 32) might have also been used in this aspect, but the suffix "-ism" bears a sense of being canonical. Duddu Sha, the disciple of Lalou, even used the phrase *bāul jīban*, meaning "life of a Bāul/'Bāul'" (DSP: 81). Seemingly, 'Bāuldom' is more than a religion – it is a way of life. To denote post-Chaitanya heterogeneous religious developments in rural Bengal, I have used the word "folk-religion" or *lokadharmā* following Sudhīr Cakrabartī 1997: 81.

<sup>2</sup> By Bengal I am denoting the greater cultural Bengal consisting West Bengal, Bangladesh, some parts of Assam and Tripura.

concerned about the multiple usage of the term *bāul* in Bengali. The literal meaning of the word is “mad”, the subtleties of which will be discussed later in this article. The problem occurs when multiple syntactic usage of the word significantly influences the semantics. Although the ‘Bāuls’ like to play with this ambiguity of meaning in their enigmatic songs, it is a problem for academic writing. Thus, in this article, I have written the word differently to signify different usage of it. I have written *bāul* to denote the term/word; **bāul** to denote the use of the word as an adjective (meaning “mad”); ‘Bāul’ to denote the use of the word as a proper noun (a religion or a particular group/a member of the religious group/someone or something belonging to a particular group, i.e. ‘Bāul’ song or ‘Bāul’ practitioner); **Bāul** to denote the use of the word as a substantivised adjective or a common noun (i.e. the epithet Bāul). In the transliterated Bengali quotations and their translations, I have not stressed upon any particular meaning of the word and have simply written it as *bāul*.

Applying the writing of the term as defined above, I can put it like this: the term *bāul* is the name of a religious group, having members who are called ‘Bāuls’ (some of whom use the epithet Bāul), who follow the ‘Bāul’ religion (or ‘Bāuldom’) and sing ‘Bāul’ songs, eventually end up having a *bāul* (ecstatic) nature. Evidently, the semantics of the word *bāul* is very crucial, especially for a philological exploration.

The second problem is the signified itself. Even if we take the word *bāul* as the denomination for a religious group, the questions will be: who falls under this group and how can we recognise them? The predicament of anthropological researches reportedly begins at this point. If asked, a common Bengali person is very likely to confer that the most famous or influential ‘Bāul’ practitioner and songwriter is Lalon Sai (Lālan Sāi), who is eventually a Fakir, or *Darbeś* (as his disciple Duddu confirms in DSP: 83). So-called ‘Bāuls’ identify themselves as a part of doctrinal schools or family (*ghar*) of the guru. For example, the *ghars* of Lalon Sai, Panju Sha, Deloyar (Delbar) Sha, Sati Ma and Jaharuddin Chaudhuri<sup>3</sup> are the most recognised schools of the “Bāulsphere”<sup>4</sup> of Bangladesh. Similarly, practitioners and adherents of different schools of post-Chaitanya unorthodox Vaishnavism of Bengal, who mostly identify themselves as *raser baiṣṇab* and *jāt baiṣṇab*<sup>5</sup>, locate themselves in certain *srot* (“currents”) or *dhārā*

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<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this issue elaborately in my PhD thesis.

<sup>4</sup> I have used the word “Bāulsphere” after Mimlu Sen (2011).

<sup>5</sup> See Ajit Das’ phenomenal observations in Dās 1992 [1].

("flows") of their preceptors (cf. Cakrabartī 1989: 15). For instance, the Fakirs of Kushtia (Bangladesh) say that 'Bāul' is the song and the practice, and Fakir is the community. A 'Bāul' is the one who is searching (*ul* means "to search", it also means "knowledge"), and anyone who is searching for the supreme identity within is a 'Bāul'.

The communities are Fakir (*Phakir*), *Kartābhajā*, *Sāheb'dhanī*, *Khuśibiśvāsī*, *Kiśorībhajā*, *Balāhāri*, *Darbeś*, and so on. In fact, the members of the respective groups are very much concerned about protecting the specific identity of their group. A major reason behind this zeal is to maintain financial sustainability and retaining the social capital. 'Bāul' gurus' livelihood mostly depends upon the offerings of their disciples. They usually have a respectful position in the small rural society where they belong. Some gurus are often consulted to provide solutions for different domestic problems, let alone spiritual or ritualistic queries. Hence, a distinct religious identity distinguishes a 'Bāul' guru from others and people come to him. If a broader homogenous identity is gradually accepted by the society, then some gurus may lose their humble earnings from the disciples. Moreover, disciples usually have a family lineage of initiation to a particular guru family. To continue this, a distinct religious identity is highly required. Interestingly, each school or family has some unique tradition or practice which is different from others. Such tradition maybe the blowing of conch shell or offering the first refreshment to the family guru or choice of songs during a *sādhusaṅga*, the gathering of "*bāul*, *phakir*, *sādhu*, *guru*, *baiṣṇab*"<sup>6</sup>.

However, decades of classification, categorisation and inevitable generalisation as the standard academic practice have influenced the fabric of "Bāulsphere". 'Bāuls' are now somewhat aware of the academic discussions on them and are reasonably curious. The academic understanding of the 'Bāuls' actually influences the "Bāulsphere" in a subtle but powerful way. For example, to get the benefit of certain governmental policies of aiding poor 'Bāul' families, usually one has to prove to a committee of educated bureaucrats that he is a 'Bāul'. The selection committees are usually equipped with the available academic knowledge and popular concep-

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<sup>6</sup> This is a common phrase used to address the gathering at a *sādhusaṅga*. Clearly, the word *baiṣṇab* here does not refer to the followers of orthodox Vaishnavism. In general, *baiṣṇab* means followers of different schools or guru-traditions of unorthodox liberal Chaitanya Vaishnavism of Bengal, within which so-called *Sahajiyās* are also included.

tions about the 'Bāuls'. The selection of 'Bāul' artists for a public performance (let alone radio or television performances, foreign travels, etc.) occurs in more or less similar ways. Hence, a common complaint of 'Bāuls' against the prevailing academic practice is: *sab ek kare dijeche* ("[They] have made everything the same"). Interestingly, the antithesis to this proposition is also not difficult to come across. A number of folk-religious communities prefer to be identified as 'Bāuls', and the reasons are more or less the same. Being identified as 'Bāul' ensures their acceptance in public performances and other opportunities. Moreover, the resistance against structured atrocities of religious fundamentalism is reasonably a collective endeavour for the 'Bāuls'. The establishment of the 'Bāul'-*Phakir Samgha* is one of the most important examples of this (cf. Jha 2002).

This dichotomy also caters to the polarisation between performer Bāuls and practitioner 'Bāuls', somewhat accepting the practitioner 'Bāuls' as more resourceful for the academic pursuit. Although scholars like Carola Lorea (cf. Lorea 2016; see also Ferrari 2012 for further observations) have analysed the rubrics of this polarisation and have criticised it, it is not a simple problem. On the one hand, the polarisation between performer Bāuls and practitioner 'Bāuls' undermines certain ethnomusicological aspects of 'Bāul' songs and somewhat pushes the Bāul to a dilemma of choosing his side (which shall have a huge impact on his livelihood). On the other hand, putting the performer (or rather "remunerative performer", as Lorea would say) Bāul in a similar position with the so-called 'authentic' or traditional 'Bāul' remarkably affects the traditional practice and the 'Bāul' song repertoire. Already a number of rare songs with deep esoteric significance are getting lost because most of the performer Bāuls do not prefer to sing unpopular songs (sometimes they do not know such songs). This is also resulting in the eventual forgetting of certain patterns and norms in which 'Bāul' songs are traditionally sung. So there is a problem in identifying 'Bāul' through their music. If one tries to identify 'Bāul' by judging the knowledge of their esoteric practice and catechisms, then he is likely to find a number of academician-gurus like Sri Anirvan who possessed such knowledge, lived an austere life, and called himself a Bāul (see the introduction of Anirvan 1983). Similarly, the illustrious *Śākta* practitioner Bhaba Pagla, who wrote a number of songs on body-cultivation and ritual practice, is admired even by the 'Bāuls' nowadays (cf. Lorea 2016 to know about Bhaba's position in "Bāulsphere"). Clearly, delineating 'Bāul' by a concrete definition is nearly impossible.

All the predicaments mentioned above arose just from the use of the word *bāul* as a denomination of a group. If the other usages are consid-

ered, this problem gets monumental. Without delving in that, I have discussed the multiple semantic usages and etymological variations of the word *bāul* in this article. My purpose of the discussion is to find out how the doctrinal history of 'Bāuldom' is ingrained within the very word. Hence, I am more or less heuristically using the word *bāul* as an umbrella term (discussed later) which incorporates the post-Chaitanya folk-religions of Bengal. It does not construct a homogeneous category, but it loosely delineates a heterogeneous group consisting of small religious communities who eventually perform similar ritual practices and share a common socio-religious ideology. Most importantly, they all use the huge body of innumerable 'Bāul' songs as a common knowledge repertoire. And last but not the least, they share a common doctrinal history to define their origin, evolution and transformation in due time.

### Addressing the Problem

'Bāuls' may be loosely identified as a collective of a number of alternative folk-religious communities of rural Bengal, who are heterogeneous, non-conformist, egalitarian and recusant. They radically challenge the mainstream religious doctrines based on imaginary gods.<sup>7</sup> The 'Bāuls' believe that the human embodiment is the abode of the supreme and the process to realise this does not require mechanical worship rituals assigned by the scriptures of mainstream religions. As they do not have written scriptures to follow, their songs contain all the esoteric knowledge and catechisms of 'Bāuldom'. These mystical polysemic songs may be considered as religious discourses which often have multi-layered sets of meaning, reportedly designed for audiences having different levels of spiritual progression. Bengal's folk-religions are essentially guru-centric. The 'Bāul' spiritual masters or gurus are usually renouncer mendicants whose livelihoods (*ākḥ'ṛās* or modest cloisters) are mostly supported by the offerings of the disciples.

The 'Bāul' doctrine has traits of Vaishnavism, tantric Buddhism, Nāth Yogic tradition, Bengal-Sufism consisting of "Islamized forms of Tantric-yoga" (Hatley 2017: 351) and overall Bengal's inherent tantric<sup>8</sup>-yogic prac-

<sup>7</sup> They only adhere to *bartamān* or existent, hence some of them call themselves *bartamān panthī* (cf. Openshaw 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Panchkari Mukhopadhyay contends that *tantra* is an indigenous religious tradition of Bengal, which has been subsequently influenced by mainstream reli-

tices and philosophies. However, it is their *tattva*<sup>9</sup>, namely the *bāul'tattva*, which includes *tattvas* of the self, the guru, the body, the prophet, Chaitanya, etc., that make 'Bāuldom' distinct. In general, *bāul'tattva* may be delineated as a unique system of religious understanding based upon different principles of spiritual philosophy and esoteric knowledge which are used to explain as well as sublimate one's corporeal experience in the organic meta-universe which is subsumed in the microcosm of the human body. Their practice incorporates different types of body-manoeuvring through yogic processes and religio-coital ritual practices that reportedly lead the practitioner towards a trans-physical apotheosis. Some key practices of the 'Bāuls' are body-cultivation through controlling of breath and manoeuvring the flow of body-humours; administering of different excretory and sexual fluids in the body; and conducting prolonged sexo-yogic ritual union with female consorts through seminal retention.

Clearly, these sexo-yogic corporeal ritual practices are perhaps the most intriguing and confusing part of 'Bāuldom'. In his article, Rahul Peter Das has dealt with such complex ritual practices with a deep analytical method. After providing a basic idea about the process of the sexual ritual practice, Das has selected some of the foundational components (Das 1992: 390) and pointed out different significances those components carry within 'Bāuldom'. To do so, he critically explained multiple meanings, all the semiotic

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gions (such as Buddhism or *Śākta* religion or Islam). He has also noticed that *tantra* does not conform to social religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity (Mukhopādhyāy 1942: 124, 130 & 133). Similarly, Shashibhushan Dasgupta remarks, "Tantricism is neither Buddhist nor Hindu in origin: it seems to be a religious under-current, originally independent of abstruse metaphysical speculation, flowing on from an obscure point of time in the religious history of India" (Dasgupta 1946: 27). Prabodh Chandra Bagchi concluded that there were both orthodox and heterodox *tantras* (Bagchi 1939: 45). This understanding clarifies the *heterodox* nature of the tantric system that might explain why *tantra* has been so pervasive in folk-religions of Bengal.

<sup>9</sup> The term *tattva* literally means "true form" or "exact meaning" (*svarūp* and *yāthārthya*; in Bandyopādhyāy 1933: 1015). In religious or philosophical contexts, it means the core knowledge or the theory or proposition upon which a certain doctrine or concept is built. The word *tattva* also refers to the cause of creation or the creative principles (Kaviraj 2006: 86). For example, the *tattva* of an urn is the clay or the *tattva* of an earring is the gold (Vedāntatīrtha 1927: 115f.). However, when the 'Bāuls' use the word *tattva*, all the given significances of the word are somewhat taken into account.

and etymological significances and varied usage of certain representational words in the oeuvre of 'Bāul' songs. By going through this meticulous process, he has detected how a particular component of 'Bāuldom' is associated with the prevailing traditions of ritual-practice in Bengal and beyond. Thus, he concludes that a "comprehensive knowledge" (Das 1992: 395) of the 'Bāuls' maybe acquired by mapping the enigmatic and often vexingly overlapping sets of meaning, not by trying to mould the multifariousness of 'Bāuldom' in a comprehensible scientific system or model.

Although Rahul Peter Das has thoroughly delved into certain problematic aspects of the complex ritual practices of 'Bāuls', he has not addressed the preceding problem of situating 'Bāuldom' in the religious context of Bengal. He has associated different 'Bāul' practices and catechisms with elements of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic *tantra* and yoga along with various religious developments and schools of post-Chaitanya<sup>10</sup> Bengal. However, one may ask how 'Bāuldom' is connected with all these religious developments. Is there any historical or doctrinal basis to compare certain practices of 'Bāuldom' with those of other religions? How has the doctrine been constructed incorporating such inconsistent and diverse fragments of esoteric knowledge? Charles Capwell has observed, "the kernel of the Bauls' belief seems, chameleon-like, to be able to adapt itself to its religious surroundings so that it has acquired external resemblance to other beliefs" (Capwell 1974: 259). Alternatively, it is also important to note that 'Bāuls' are constantly belittled for being degenerate, for lacking concrete historical connections with the predominant paradigms of the mainstream religions.

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<sup>10</sup> Chaitanya (1486–1533 AD) is the pioneer of the Krishna-bhakti movement in Bengal, which has subsequently propelled the development of the *Gaurīya* school of Vaishnavism. However, his own practices were very simple, egalitarian and a reflection of the devotional love of Radha (Rādhā), the mythical lover-consort of Krishna. The Chaitanya movement had a huge impact on the religious fabric of Bengal. His teachings and activities instigated the sporadic development of different *Vaiṣṇava* doctrinal schools and theological systems throughout Bengal, which could be loosely called Bengal Vaishnavism, within which the *Sahajīyā* Vaishnavism (comprised of tantric-yogic ritual practices) is also included. 'Bāuldom' and a number of similar folk-religions, which may come under the umbrella-term *bāul*, follow the teachings and lore of Chaitanya and his close companions at the core. To learn more about the nature of pre-Chaitanya Vaishnavism in Bengal, cf. Cakrabartī 2014; critical discussions about post-Chaitanya Vaishnavism might be found in Cakrabartī 1996 and Gosvāmī 2000.

Hence, the 'Bāuls' demonstrate an ardour to establish that they are deeply rooted in the mainstream, but they do not identify themselves with the mainstream. They say that 'Bāuls' are not *par'gāchā* ("a weed without seed") or *bijāt brkṣa* ("a tree of unidentifiable genealogy") (BFP1: 581). Their solid seed will only be visible after careful observation. For example, they clearly say that Chaitanya and all his associates were 'Bāuls' (BFP1: 581). Similar connections are also made with Islamic metaphysics. This is a complicated matter to understand. On the one hand, 'Bāuls' need to depict their rootedness with the mainstream so that they are not strategically repudiated from the religious habitat of Bengal. On the other hand, they need to dissociate themselves from the mainstream so that they establish their criticism of the theology of the imaginary and propose a new mode of religio-spiritual pursuit. The primary objective of this article is to understand the peculiar nature of association of 'Bāuldom' with such "other beliefs". This line of examination will explain why the word *bāul* may be identified as an umbrella-term, encompassing a number of local religious developments of post-Chaitanya Bengal.

Both etymologically and doctrinally, the very idea of the word *bāul*, representing the folk-religion 'Bāul', is what Deleuze and Guattari denote as "rhizomatic". According to them, unlike the "arborescent" or tree-like hierarchical structural understanding of knowledge, rhizomes have the "principles of connectivity (any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and it must be) and heterogeneity" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 6f.). To criticise Chomskian linguistic "grammaticality", they note that "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains" and is heterogeneous by nature and function (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 7). This concept may explain the nature and function of 'Bāuldom' in the folk-religious matrix of post-Chaitanya Bengal. More interestingly, the "semiotic chains" can be identified simply in the manifold etymological roots of the word *bāul*. This multifariousness is organically linked with different religious doctrines or philosophies which the 'Bāuls' draw upon. Hence, the question of heterogeneity is important to define "Bāuldom". Das (1992: 395) has addressed the problem of heterogeneity by exploring different aspects of sexo-yogic practice of the 'Bāuls'.

In my article, I shall try to approach this issue by exploring the doctrinal history of 'Bāuldom'. By "doctrinal history"<sup>11</sup>, I mean doxa, cate-

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<sup>11</sup> Without delving into the nuances of terms like "history" and "genealogy", I am using the phrase "doctrinal history". It is the account of the 'Bāuldom' and



chisms and lores which connect 'Bāuldom' with other religious developments. Such elements are carefully engraved within the very word *bāul*. If ever asked, a 'Bāul' will never explain the history of 'Bāuldom' in reference to the 19th century enlightenment, or colonial socio-political conditions, or a quasi-religious national identity. Instead of referring to such "frames", he will rather tell stories, mention some beliefs, refer to certain folk-etymologies, narrate certain lores and draw from local traditions and knowledge. All such things will be engraved mostly in metaphorical songs which have an argumentation pattern of their own. I shall try to trace out those elements engraved within their polysemic language. These may also be called doctrinal connections or links, which are an integral part of the unique nature of 'Bāuldom'.

'Bāuldom' constantly connects with existent (as well as traditional) religious beliefs and doctrines while simultaneously transforming itself into something very unique. Oral interpolations and impositions of new meanings within the discourse design an organic network of knowledge. This knowledge is argumentative, dialectical and deeply observational. It may be called "imaginary knowledge".<sup>12</sup> This knowledge also consists of century-old folk-beliefs and lores, which enables a creative engagement with the semantic as well as the semiotic core of the language. 'Bāuls' also possess a keen knowledge of the doctrines of mainstream religions, with the help of which they construct arguments against the theology of

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'Bāul' community internalised as a part of the doctrine. As Manjita Mukharji has noted, the academic method of understanding the 'Bāuls' of Bengal is to construct certain "frames" (after Erving Goffman), which helps the researcher to understand how the 'Bāul' community engendered under certain socio-political conditions and how they were recognised, rather were appropriated by the non-'Bāul' community (especially the literati) (Mukharji 2009: 22). Frames such as "orientalist" or "romantic-nationalistic" were meant to situate the 'Bāul' phenomenon within the mainstream perceived history of that particular time and space. Academic explorations of the history of the 'Bāuls' are mostly based upon such frames.

<sup>12</sup> There is a difference between practical knowledge and theoretical incoherence evident in folk knowledge. In order to define the type of knowledge that was prevalent in the medieval folk medical practices in Chinese community, Shigehisa Kuriyama coins the term "imaginary knowledge", where experience is rather made possible by imagination (Kuriyama 1996), not by perception. It is to be noted that the idea of "imaginary knowledge" is broader than the notion of "traditional knowledge" (cf. Bruchac 2014).

the imaginary.<sup>13</sup> This practice helps them gain a certain epistemological hegemony over the mainstream. It is like saying to a priest that there are certain secrets of his own religion which he does not know. Such arguments between the 'Bāul' and mainstream religions are often seen in the *bāhās* (argumentative discussion on religion) and *pālāgān* (dialogical song-play). 'Bāuls' do not believe in imaginary modes of spirituality as they believe in *bartamān* ("existent"), not *anumān* ("assumption"). They try to find reason<sup>14</sup> behind every aspect of their religion and practice; as Lalou says, it is not wise not to tread the *āndāji* ("imaginary") path (LG: 82)<sup>15</sup>. This paper intends to trace this reasoning in their songs, which will eventually help the reader understand the nature of the aforesaid connections.

In brief, my objective is to show how 'Bāuldom' is connected with other religious developments of post-Chaitanya Bengal. To do so, my strategy will be to simply explore the word *bāul* as it has been used in different contexts and varied meanings in Old and Middle Bengali literature, not to mention innumerable 'Bāul' songs which can be read as the oral-scriptures of 'Bāuldom'. Clearly this is the method that Rahul Peter Das himself has applied in his essay. But why is this philological-analytical method so imperative for the study of 'Bāuldom'? As per my understanding, this method resists social-science research's inevitable turn to the construction of categories. Although it is true that without constructing some categories, or at least creating some pockets, it is impossible to depict the features or character of a community which is still very much evolving as well as expanding, confusion churns up when such a character is depicted as the identity of the community.<sup>16</sup> This

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<sup>13</sup> Also see Jhā 2010: 9.

<sup>14</sup> "Reason" is a problematic word to put in the context of a 19th century religion, especially for the Western academic understanding. In brief, I can clarify that the "reason" of 'Bāuls' is not the "sovereign reason" (cf. Beiser 1996) which is rather an antithesis of the catechistic tradition of the 'Bāuls'. "Reason" here means *yukti*, an eclectic mode of finding rationale which is often not very scientific, rather based on faith, lore and traditional knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> Bengali original: *yeo nā āndāji pathe man rasanā* ("Do not tread in the path of imaginary, O my mind and tongue"). Similar observations may be found in the annals of Sudhir Chakraborty as he heard people saying that they do not trust the "imaginary religion", *āndāji dharma* (Cakrabarti 2010:49).

<sup>16</sup> For example, *bartamān panthā* or following the existent in spite of pertaining to the imaginary is a certain philosophical aspect of 'Bāul' practice. This does not define a particular community.

method, as it is mostly dependent upon the texts with all the oral variations and semiotic possibilities, reduces the authority of interpretation as well as perpetual categorisation over the subject. The metaphorical narratives hold a semiotic chaos within it, and the *tattvas* try to incorporate all the components of this chaos to form a meaningful discourse. This method will help us understand this chaos. Interestingly, the most predominating implication of the word *bāul* is "mad". Hence, eccentricity in language and meaning is clearly reflected in the practice.

### ***Bāul*: Etymology and Syntactic Variations**

The word *bāul* itself is a sign that may be deciphered in manifold ways. Both the etymology and the semiology of the word depict the essence of the 'Bāul' community, 'Bāul' music, 'Bāul' practice and 'Bāuldom'. This exploration also helps a researcher to understand how the 'Bāuls' codify the language and adulterate it with expedient signification and metaphorisation. One may find crucial links to the evolution of the *bāul*/*tattva* by analysing the etymologies. Along with tracing the connections with other beliefs, in this subchapter, I shall try to depict how different meanings of the word are associated with certain 'Bāul' practices.

*Baṅgīya śabdakoṣ* (Bandyopādhyāy 1933: 1499) states that the Bengali word *bāul* has been derived from the Sanskrit adjective *vātula*.<sup>17</sup> This word also had a Prakrit form *bāul* which has been used in Old Bengali language. Along with recognising 'Bāul' as a post-Chaitanya religious community, Bandyopādhyāy authenticates the uses of the adjective *bāul* to denote a mad/frenzied person. Akshay Kumar Datta explained this transformation from Sanskrit to Prakritas Skt. *vātula* > Pr. *bāula* > Beng. *bāul* (Datta 1911: 175). *Bātul* is the Bengali form of the Sanskrit word *vātula*, which denotes a person who talks a lot or talks gibberish. Turner (1973: 671) states the word *vātula* means one who has been "affected by the wind disease" or "crazy", which has been accepted by Haricaraṇ Bandyopādhyāy (1933: 1499)<sup>18</sup>. In Chaitanya literature, the word *bātul* has often been used in this sense, such as: *caitanya candrer bātul ke rākhiṭe pāre* ("who can resist the madness for moonlike Chaitanya?"; in CC:2:6:40). As we

<sup>17</sup> Another popular Bengali thesaurus *Calantikā* by Rajshekhar Basu (1946: 397) supports this, as it describes 'Bāuls' as a minstrel-mendicant community of Bengal.

<sup>18</sup> Although he thinks another meaning of the word could be *bāt rogagrasta* ("one who has been affected by gout").

discuss the connection of 'Bāuldom' with Chaitanya later on, this reference will deem more significant.

The association of the word *bāul* with Sanskrit *vāyu* (Beng. *bāyju*) or "wind" pertains to another ascendant *bāyur* (Skt. *vāyura*) (Turner 1973: 673). This root indicates the importance of air or wind in the yogic ritual practice of the 'Bāuls'. The word *bāurā*<sup>19</sup> or *bāorā* or *bāv'rā* is also a Hindi word meaning "mad, insane or crazy" (Thompson 1884: 458). Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay has noted that the assertive prefix *la* which has been added with the root *bāyju* ("wind"), asserts the presence of something. Thus, the word *bāul* (as from <*vāyula*>) literally means "someone having wind". According to him, this *bāyju* is actually the flow of energy through nerve channels as a yogic mechanism. Therefore, the practitioners who try to control and manifest that energy are called 'Bāul'. Bandyopadhyay is also familiar with another perspective contending that *bāyju* is the breath coming in and going out through the nostrils which is the source element of existence. Through yogic practices, the 'Bāuls' control the breathing to have a prolonged life (Bandyopādhyāy 1932: 497). The second analysis is much relevant in our context because the complex yogic process of controlling the breath (Das 1992: 392) to gain eternal life is not only practiced by the 'Bāuls', but it has also been a part of different yogic folk religious ritual practices in South and South-East Asia from ancient times. In Bengal, such practices were evident amongst the *Nāth* yogic<sup>20</sup> practitioners, tantric Buddhist practitioners and Bengal's Sufi yogic<sup>21</sup> (cf. Hoq 1995 for popular Islam) practitioners before the emer-

<sup>19</sup> The probable feminine form *bāurī* is the name of a so-called 'tribe' of Bengal (Basu 1946: 397).

<sup>20</sup> *Nāth* (Skt. *Nātha*) is a yogic tradition in India. Different texts of *haṭhayoga* (the oppositional yogic practice) are replete with the description of the importance of the wind in the body and how it should be controlled and channelised. The controlling of *vāyu* ("wind") and *rasa* (body "fluids", especially sexual "fluids") has to be simultaneous. *Hār'mālā* says: "O goddess, wind saves the semen and the semen keeps the wind / when both are united the lifespan is increased" (*bāyju rākhe bindu debī bindu rākhe bāi / duije ek haile pare bāre paramāi*; in Cakrabartī 1955: 33). Cf. Briggs 1970 and Ghosh 2011 to know more about the *Nāth* cult.

<sup>21</sup> Sufism in Bengal was shaped by internalising the yogic-tantric practices in the Islamic framework, which produced a number of texts in 17th-18th century (Śarīph 2003: 14). In the *Āgam* written by Ali Raja (alias Kanu Fakir), we find the importance of wind in the psychosomatic system of human body: "Wind is body wind is mind wind is the absolute / [...] Wind is the servant and wind is

gence of the 'Bāuls'. Lalon Fakir (Lālan Phakir) asks, "without the knowledge of the wind how can one become a fakir?" (*hāoṃyār khabar nā jānile kiser phakir tāj*; in BFP2: 451). As the 'Bāuls' practice *damer sādhan* or the yogic exercise of holding and controlling breath, they utter: "if you want to catch the uncatchable moon (*adhar'cāḍ*),<sup>22</sup> practice holding breath with complete dedication" (*adhar'cāḍ'ke dhar'bi yadi kaṣe dam sādhan kar*; in BBG: 345).

As a unique method of codifying their secret beliefs in language, 'Bāuls' often ascribe new meanings to certain nomenclatures by construing expedient folk-etymologies. For example, the name of the first mythical man *Ādam* (Adam) and his consort *Habā*<sup>23</sup> (Adam and Eve in biblical reference) is a riddle for the 'Bāuls'. The word *Ādam*, as the 'Bāuls' say, is a conjoined form of *ā-dam*, where *ā* denotes a calling<sup>24</sup> and *dam* means "breath"; on the other hand, *Habā* is actually Urdu/Hindi *havā* (Beng. *hāoṃyā*) meaning "wind". Hence *Ādam* means "to call the breath" and *Habā* is "air" or "breath" itself. The 'Bāuls' thus emphasise the importance of breath in their practice, which is significantly associated with the first man created by God.<sup>25</sup>

Another example could be derived from the word *bātul* (Skt. *vātula*) which may be divided in *bāṃju* and *tula*, *tula* or *tulā* (*tolā*) meaning to "lift up" or "raise" (Das & Thielemann 2003: 9). As the yogic practice of the 'Bāuls' is to lift the wind upwards in the channels through deep breathing (the yogic exercise of *prāṇāyāma*),<sup>26</sup> this significance of the word *bātul* gives a subtle hint to that.

Upendranath Bhattacharyya accepts the Sanskrit word *vyākula*, which means "impatient" or "eager", as another source word for *bāul*. 'Bāuls'

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the God" (*bāṃju tan bāṃju man bāṃju Nirāñjan / [...] paban sebak hae paban īśvar*) (*Āgam* in Śarīph 2003: 213).

<sup>22</sup> It is the prime accomplishment of 'Bāul' ritual practice (see Salomon 2017: 282 who calls it "Bāul's supreme").

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, this myth of the first man and woman is taken from Islamic theory of genesis.

<sup>24</sup> Basically, in Hindi/Urdu; sometimes in colloquial Bengali *ā* is derived from *āṃ*, similar to "come here" in English.

<sup>25</sup> Who is eventually God himself and an embodiment of God, as Lalon argues in many songs. For example, in LG: 285 he says: "Whether God had not been Adam, the ritual prostration would have been a sin (*Āllā ādam nāhale / pāp hata chej'dā dile*). Also see Jhā 2010: 421ff. for a discussion on *Ādam* in 'Bāul' discourses.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Das & Thielemann (2003: 10f.) for a discussion on *prāṇāyāma*.

also accept this meaning, which describes their eagerness to meet the *maner mānuṣ*<sup>27</sup> (“man of the heart”) or *sahaj mānuṣ* (“the man born-with”). Dasgupta (1946: 183) joins Bhattacharya in presuming the Sanskrit root to be *vyākula*. Another meaning of *bāul* is “enchanted” or “bewitched” if the noun is turned into its feminine form *bāulī* (Bandyopādhyāy 1933: 1482). Not unlike the Sufis, ‘Bāuls’ also state that they are enchanted by the passion of their divine love.

### Defining ‘Bāul’: The Chaitanya Connection

*bāul haīla dekha svayam mahāprabhu [...]*  
*bāul haīla yata Śrī Caitanyer bhakta*<sup>28</sup> (BFP1: 581)

Undoubtedly, Chaitanya (Caitanya) or Gouranga (Gaurāṅga) is one of the central figures of ‘Bāul’ universe, who is considered the secret champion of ‘Bāul’ practice. ‘Bāuls’ frequently consider Chaitanya the propagator of their religion (cf. Datta 1911: 231). The very concept of embodiment of a purely devotional love along with its (trans)corporeal representations is solely the contribution of Chaitanya and his teachings. One may say that this particular concept singularly distinguishes ‘Bāuldom’ from core tantric groups. In 1888, Akshay Kumar Dutta (Datta 1911: 218) categorised ‘Bāul’ and other folk religions of Bengal as ramifications of the Chaitanya<sup>29</sup> sect in his acclaimed anthology *Bhārat'barsīya upāsak sampradāy* (Engl. title: *The Religious Sects of the Hindus*). Although later researches have shown that ‘Bāuls’ are a distinct community with a unique belief system and set of esoteric religious practices, a close connection between ‘Bāuls’ and the post-Chaitanya *Baiṣṇab* sects/schools of Bengal is evident. As I have mentioned earlier, not only Chaitanya and his teachings have immensely influ-

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<sup>27</sup> As in the famous song, Lalon waits eagerly for the union with the man of his heart: *mīlan habe katadine / āmār maner mānuṣer sane* (LG: 362). This *maner mānuṣ* or “man of the heart” may be called “the Supreme of ‘Bauls’” who has both active and passive forms (Salomon 2017: 520 & 540); or “the supreme soul” or *paramātmā* (often translated as “the Absolute”) who is hidden inside the human body and organically connected with it, necessitating the transcendence of the corporeal into the metaphysical realm (Bhaṭṭācārya 1967: 340–356).

<sup>28</sup> “Look, Mahāprabhu (Chaitanya) himself became *bāul*. [...] All the devotees of Śrī Chaitanya became *bāul*”.

<sup>29</sup> Dutta even mentioned that Chaitanya has become *bātul* bearing the disposition of the mellifluous love of Radha (Datta 1911: 214).

enced 'Bāuldom'; his own life turned to be an esoteric legend that has been metaphorised and interpreted in expedient ways. Moreover, the evolution and transmutation of Chaitanya's Vaishnavism in the hand of his disciples and companions has created the social as well as doctrinal background of 'Bāuldom'. Understanding the Chaitanya connection will not only unfold the doctrinal history of the 'Bāuls', it will also show how the multiple meanings of the word *bāul* find their way into praxis.

The syntactic enigma of the word *bāul* has been beautifully used in one of the oldest mentions of the word before the reported historical advent of the community – in a mystic couplet in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* by Krishnadas Kabiraj (Kriṣṇadās Kabirāj).<sup>30</sup> Advaita Acharya (Advaita Ācārya), one of the cult figures of post-*Chaitanya* Bengali Vaishnavism and a close acquaintance of Chaitanya,<sup>31</sup> conveyed a message to Chaitanya (who was then residing at Puri, Orissa) through a riddle in which the word *bāul* played a critical role. The riddle is: "*bāul ke kahiya loke haıla bāul / bāul ke kahiya– hāṭe nā bikāy cāul / bāul ke kahiya– kāje nāhika āul / bāul ke kahiya –ihā kahiyaṅche bāul*" (CC: 3:19:19f.). The first stanza bears an instruction to "tell the *bāul* that people have become *bāul*". Clearly, the first *bāul* may denote a proper noun (i.e. the 'Bāul') or a common noun (Bāul, i.e. "a madman"), while the second *bāul* is either another noun (i.e. 'Bāul' or Bāul) or an adjective (i.e. "mad"). Chaitanya has been called *bāul* for his frenzied behaviour<sup>32</sup> caused by the divine love of

<sup>30</sup> This is one of the most revered hagiographies of Chaitanya. The author was put under the tutelage of some of the direct disciples and companions of Chaitanya (for a brief introduction to the author, see Māiti 1960: 463–473).

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Advaita Acharya has been called *mahāyogeshvar* ("great expert of yoga") by Chaitanya in this regard (CC: 3:19:27), who is also capable of talking in riddles (*tarjāte samartha*). This is an important statement because Acharya is highly revered by the 'Bāuls'. The three madmen of Nabadwip, namely Chaitanya, Nityananda (Nityānanda, Chaitanya's brother-in-arms who also was a tantric practitioner belonging to the *abadhūt* <Skt. *avadhūta*> sect) and Advaita Acharya have been frequently mentioned and metaphorised in 'Bāul' songs (LG: 313). In Indian medieval tradition, yogic exponents were found to be proficient in writing riddles, as the Buddhist *Caryā* songs stand a proof. Even the Bengali word *golak-dhādhā* (i.e. "labyrinth"; *golak* means "circle" and *dhādhā* means "riddle") has been derived from *gorakh-dhandhā*, meaning "the riddles of Gorakh", the propagator of the *Nātha haṭhayoga* tradition. The same applies for the 'Bāuls'.

<sup>32</sup> The early use of the word *bāul* signifying this meaning is found in the Middle Bengali literature of the 14th century. It has been mentioned a number of times

Krishna.<sup>33</sup> The second *bāul* in the stanza denotes that the people (*lok*) have become “mad” in devotion. Most of the commentators have reasonably accepted the second meaning in this context. However, if one reads the second *bāul* as the name of a community, as the ‘Bāuls’ often do, then the meaning becomes more specific.

Chaitanya himself has reportedly mentioned that he is a *bāul* kind of person (CC: 2:21): *āmi to bāul ān kahite ān kahi/ kṛṣṇer mādhyasrote āmi yāi bahi* (“verily I am [a] *bāul*, I say something intending to say something else / I float in the stream of the mellifluence of Krishna”). Here, Chaitanya technically explains another quality of becoming a ‘Bāul’ – which is talking in riddles or hiding the intended meaning by saying apparently something else. However, the common use of the word in non-‘Bāul’ literature is as an adjective. Finally, the last *bāul* (in the fourth stanza) can be both, proper and common noun, denoting Advaita Acharya himself as a Bāul or a member of the ‘Bāul’ community.

In another occasion, Chaitanya is apologising to his mother for renouncing his family and the ancestral (brahminical) religion (CC: 3:19): *tomār sebā chāri āmi karilā sannyās / bāul hāiyā āmi kailā dharmanās* (“I forego your servitude and became an ascetic monk / I destroyed my religion by becoming [a] *bāul*”). Here the word *bāul* signifies both the community and a frenzied mental state. Chaitanya initially became a monk of the *Purī* order which pertains to the Vedānta philosophy of non-dualism.<sup>34</sup> Later on, he left the “path of knowledge” (*jñānamārga*) and embraced the mode of devo-

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in the *Iusuph julekhā* of Sāh Mahammad Sagīr. For example: *sarbakṣaṇ utarol citta asojāsta / niśi nā pohāy tār din nā yāy asta [...]* *bāur caritra hena bhūpati jānila* (Karim 2006: 165), meaning “All the time anxiety and the mind is agitated / His night does not dawn and day does not set [...] The king knew that it is the nature of *bāur*” (Old Bengali form of *bāul*, although Dasgupta [1946: 184] thinks it is the Hindi variant of the word). Evidently, CC: 3:19:30 narrates that after hearing the riddle, Chaitanya tended to become more and more frenzied (*unmād pralāp ceṣṭā kare rātridīne*, meaning “day and night he started talking in delirium”). See Turner (1973: 671, 673 & 705) for the words *vātula*, *vāyura* and *vyākula*.

<sup>33</sup> The term *bāulī* or *bāuli* is the feminine form of the word *bāul*. In the Bengali translation of *Kṛṣṇakarnāmṛtaṅgi*, Yadunandan Das (Yadunandan Dās) says that all the women of the world were not able to hold their patience and became *bāulī* after only hearing [about the beauty of Krishna] (*śruta mātra haila bāulī*) (KKN: 88).

<sup>34</sup> Although it has been mentioned that Madhabendra Purī (Mādhabenda Purī), the guru of his own guru Isvar Purī (Īśvar Purī), practiced pure devotionalism, which gradually affected his disciples as well.



tional love. In CC: 3:14:40–42<sup>35</sup>, Chaitanya identified himself as *mahābāul* (“the great *bāul*”) who forewent the Vedic religions and everyday rites to become a yogi and indigent. Even the description of this *mahābāul* curiously resonates with the common appearance of a ‘Bāul’ renouncer.

As the previous discussions suggest, ‘Bāuls’ and other post-Chaitanya folk religions of Bengal easily presume that there was a hidden aspect of Chaitanya’s practice and he was secretly a ‘Bāul’ practitioner nonetheless. Duddu Sha clearly says that Chaitanya or Gora (Gorā) of Nabadwip, who has received the initiatory chants (*mantra*) of the *Śākta* order from Keshab Bharatī (Keśab Bhāratī, his first guru), later on goes to Ramananda (Rāmānanda) and asks for the *tattva* of ‘Bāuldom’. Finally, by worshipping the “man” (*mānuṣ*, as the ‘Bāuls’ describe their practice as *mānuṣer karaṇ*, “the ritual activities of man”), he acquires the Supreme *tattva*.<sup>36</sup> ‘Bāuls’ contend that not only Chaitanya, but his disciples were also more than just divine madmen – they were ‘Bāuls’ (BFP1: 581). Although no solid evidence of the existence of the so called ‘Bāul’ community in the 16th century is available, ‘Bāuls’ believe that the very essence of ‘Bāuldom’ was nonetheless reflected in the activities of Chaitanya and his companions. That is why spontaneous references to Chaitanya literature are found in ‘Bāul’ songs. Moreover, on many occasions, different aspects of Chaitanya’s doctrines are used as explanatory frameworks of ‘Bāul’ metaphors. Clearly, it is impossible to understand the ‘Bāul’ practice without referring to Caitanya’s Vaishnavism, which has been made abundantly clear in Rahul Peter Das’ article.

### ***Bāul* as Umbrella Term**

The previous analysis shows that the borders of ‘Bāuldom’ are hard to delineate because it is organically connected with a number of doctrines and practices categorically belonging to different religions. The word *bāul*, therefore, in Das’ article has been reasonably used as an umbrella term, within which all folk-religious orders of post-Chaitanya times may be incorporated (see introduction). Even a number of so-called *Sahajiyā*

<sup>35</sup> This whole passage is very telling and discloses certain fundamental aspects of ‘Bāul’ practice. I have discussed this in detail in my PhD thesis.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *na’der Gorā Caitanya yāre kaj / Keśab Bhāratīr kāche śaktimantra pāy // giye Rāmānander kāche bāul dharmer tattva puche / tabe to mānuṣ bhaje param’tattva pāy* (DSP: 59).

*Baiṣṇab* communities find no harm in being identified as ‘Bāuls’.<sup>37</sup> I have also mentioned earlier that a number of folk-religious practitioners express their disagreement on the use of *bāul* as an overwhelming religious identity. However, to refer to practices, beliefs and a huge body of songs, the word *bāul* is conventionally used. Accepting ‘Bāuldom’ as a way of religious life is also not a problematic contention in rural Bengal. As the question of ‘Bāul’ identity does not come into the purview of this discussion, the use of the word *bāul* as an umbrella term is safe.

It has been discussed in the previous section that Chaitanya has reportedly called himself *bāul*/a *Bāul*/a ‘Bāul’, who has renounced, or rather destroyed his ancestral religion (*dharmanās*). This anecdote shows how heterodox and dissentient the ‘Bāuls’ are perceived to be. In *Jñān Sāgar*, Ali Raja (Alī Rajā) indicates that *fakir*, *yogī*, *baiṣṇab*, *ṛṣi*, *bairāgī* – all are same and complementing each other in the ritual practice (Śarīph 2003: 260–263). For the mainstream religions, this heterogeneity and a shared doctrinality was a clear trait of being degenerative. Moreover, the esoteric coital ritual practice was also despicable to the general public.<sup>38</sup> Hence, if not as an academic umbrella term, the alternative folk-religious communities were already being socially perceived as a collective. Totaram, the 18th century orthodox *Baiṣṇab* adherent who hailed from a South Indian *drāviḍa* Brahmin family, has warned about thirteen despicable post-Chaitanya religious communities who somehow enjoyed reverence of the common folk: *āul*, *bāul*, *kartābhajā*, *neṛā*, *darbeś*, *sāi*, / *sahajijā*, *sakhībhabakī*, *smārta*, *jāt-gosāi*, / *atibari*, *cūrādhārī*, *gaurāṅga nāgarī* / *Totā kahe ei terosaṅga nā kari* (Dās 1992 [4]: 299). Later on, thirty-nine more sects were added to the list (Cakrabartī 2003: 46f.). These communities were linked with Chaitanya and his Bengal Vaishnavism in many ways. Some were directly linked with Chaitanya or his close companions; the others followed basic Vaishnava principles such as humility, austerity, social egalitarianism, devotionism and singing songs in praise of the Supreme Lord. Especially after the acceptance of *parakīyābād* (the mode of ritual practice with extra-marital consorts),<sup>39</sup> the influence of tantric-yogic ritual

<sup>37</sup> One important reason behind this is the increasing market value of ‘Bāul’ songs. Identifying oneself as a ‘Bāul’ may secure someone a position in a musical concert or a broadcast programme.

<sup>38</sup> This outlook gradually began to change after Rabindranath Tagore started to encourage publishing of ‘Bāul’ songs in literary journals.

<sup>39</sup> Krishna became the lover-supreme of Radha, the legal wife of Aihan (Āihan).

practice increased. This may be called *rāgātmik bhābadharma* (Bīśvās n.d.: 49) or the “dispositional religion (in contrast to ritualistic Vedic religions) of passion-infused nature”. On the one hand, this practice is subjective and personal, and on the other hand, it is organic and inclusive. This combination became popular among the common folk. The orthodox Vaishnava theologians, albeit accepting *parakīyā* as the most reverend and effective mode of *sāadhanā* (ritual practice leading to a higher religio-spiritual attainment), have vehemently warned that the embodiment of devotional love cannot exist outside the mythical Vrindavan as no human body can possess the divine qualities of it.<sup>40</sup> However, these warnings could not hold back the new practices from spreading.<sup>41</sup>

In reality, the gradual sporadic developments of Bengal Vaishnavism propelled the proliferation of alternative religious practices. In many post-Chaitanya Baiṣṇab schools in Bengal, such practices have already begun by the early 17th century. Simultaneously, a number of other newly flourished unique religious communities incorporated this mode of *sāadhanā*. In a collective organic effort by individual groups, a pertinent body of *tattva* was created; relevant lores and anecdotes were gathered bit by bit to provide legitimacy to apparently ‘profane’ practices; cruxes of history were accumulated to form a discursive understanding of an alternative religious universe underneath the mainstream history of cultural Bengal. Likewise, the amalgamation of Islamic theology with local yogic-tantric discourses created a body of Islamic yogic literature which substantially broadened the spectrum of the cumulative doctrinal matrix of post-Chaitanya Bengal. Thus a huge repository of knowledge<sup>42</sup> was created, which contained certain elements of every extant religious doctrines, philosophy, *tattvas* and beliefs. This repository was both oral and written. That is why, along with innumerable ‘Bāul’ songs, quite a number of manuscripts<sup>43</sup> are found that provide a supporting theoretical body of knowledge to the folk-religions. Most importantly, this body of

<sup>40</sup> See commentaries on CC: 1:4:42. Also discussed in *Ujvala nīlamanī* and *Bhakti-rasāmrtasindhu*.

<sup>41</sup> Another important aspect was that these new alternative *tattvas* were mostly being orally transmitted or written in Bengali language.

<sup>42</sup> Within which the previously discussed “imaginary knowledge” is very much included.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Jhā 2013 for some of the rare edited texts; also Jhā 2012: 189–214 for a brief discussion of some of the texts in the academia, which are “mostly classed as Sahajiya texts” (Das 1992: 415). Cf. also Śariph 2003 for similar Islamic texts.

knowledge was organic and very much accumulative. A keen observation will show that most of the folk-religions actually draw from this huge repository and keep on contributing to it. Sometimes they impose new meanings to certain elements of it, and sometimes they add new metaphors to express certain practices. It is to be noted that this repository is not about producing new knowledge; it is rather about finding unique ways to metaphorise and infuse the existent knowledge in newer literary productions. This is the reason why similarities in the ritual incantations, song-narratives, beliefs and practices among the folk-religions are evident (cf. Cakrabarti 1997: 86). Precisely, this is also the reason why an umbrella term is required to discuss the doctrinal aspects of post-Chaitanya folk-religions of Bengal.

Clearly, a process of internalisation of other doctrines through the exchange of knowledge, belief and *tattvas* takes place in a discursive, organic “Bāulsphere”. This exchange mainly takes place in *sādhusaṅgas* or gatherings of the ascetics. The term *sādhusaṅga* may refer to the company of one *sādhu-guru* (“ascetic/spiritual master”) or the religious gathering of practitioners and disciples of different orders within or out of the *bāul* umbrella. Naturally, this *sādhusaṅga* or *sādhur sādhu-bājār* (“wishful market of the ascetics”) has been so much stressed upon in ‘Bāul’ songs.<sup>44</sup> Jhā (2007: 163) mentions an anecdote popular in the ‘Bāul’ community that states: “Accept hundreds of gurus and make the ritual incantations (*mantra*) the essence (of your life) / whoever is going to wash away the darkness of your mind, swear upon him” (*guru kara śata śata mantra kara sār / ye ghucābe maner kāli dohāi deo tār*).

### Exploring Quranic and Buddhist Connections

The commingling of Bengal Sufism with the liberal Vaishnavism of Chaitanya has caused the emergence of many folk-religions of Bengal<sup>45</sup> (Cakrabarti 1997: 82). As Rahul Peter Das has drawn a number of references from Bengali Islamic literature, precisely from the texts of yogic-Islam, a similar philological method may be applied to find the connections between ‘Bāuldom’ and Bengal Islam. Exploring the Arabic/Persian etymology of the word *bāul* along with discussing certain beliefs may

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<sup>44</sup> See LG: 388 or BFP2: 668 & 1001.

<sup>45</sup> See also Cantú 2019 for discussions on the impact of Islamic esotericism on ‘Bāuldom’.

unfold the connections. There is a general notion prevalent among the 'Bāul' community that a hidden esoteric knowledge of the Quran is secretly kept within 'Bāuldom'. Deciphering the coded language<sup>46</sup> of scriptures may unfold that secret. For example, it is a popular belief amongst the 'Bāuls' that when the prophet Mohammad was united<sup>47</sup> with Allah in the night of ascension or *shab-i-mi'rāj* (Beng. *merāj*), the total amount of knowledge he acquired from God was not completely written in the Quran. They specifically state that among the ninety thousand sentences that descended from heaven, only thirty thousand were written in the Quran (*jāher* or "expressed"). Another thirty thousand were given to the close companions of Mohammad.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the remaining thirty thousand were hidden in the heart (*sinā*) of the prophet, which pervaded the hearts of all men. Hence the *del-korān* ("Quran of the heart") must be read carefully to acquire this hidden (*bāten*) knowledge.<sup>49</sup> Only honest and devotional persons are allowed to acquire this knowledge by the grace of the guru or spiritual master.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Lalon says, in the Quranic scriptures, in *maḡnavīs* and *tafsīrs* "everything is written in code and allusion" (*bhed isārāj likhā tāmām*; in LG: 259). 'Bāuls' claim to possess that knowledge.

<sup>47</sup> This 'union' between Allah and the prophet has been given erotico-spiritual significance. Lalon has raised a question asking how a union between a formless entity (Allah) and a corporeal entity (*Nabī*, the prophet) was possible, and who was the man and who was the woman? This question itself is a riddle, intending to state that Allah is not formless *per se*. This is a popular argument by the fakirs against the orthodox *śariyat* followers (LG: 285). Ali Raja has even compared Allah and the prophet with Radha and Krishna (Śarīph 2003: 204).

<sup>48</sup> According to Lalon, four friends (of the prophet) knew that hidden knowledge in form of four types of practices. Generally, the four primary Caliphs – Abu Bakar, Umar, Usman and Ali – are referred to in this regard. However, in another explanation, this also denotes four stages of spiritual ascendancy such as *śariyat*, *tarikāt*, *hākikat* and *mār'phat* (Jha 2007: 116; also see LG: 283). Sometimes they denote the four *mañjils* or spiritual destinations. Sometimes they are assumed to be the four prominent Sufi orders in India, which are Chishtiya, Qadiriya, Suhrawardiya and Naqshbandiya (Salomon 2017: 110).

<sup>49</sup> See a more recognised version of LG: 272 in Khān 2007: 315.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *mursīder thāi ne nāre sei bhed bujhe / ei duniyār sināj sināj ki bhed nabī jāniyeche* ("Go to the spiritual master and understand the hidden meanings or codes that the prophet has secretly kept in the hearts of this world"; in LG: 259). See also LG: 263.

The isomorph of the word *bāul* is *āul*, which is often considered to be the root of the word. *Āul* is also a reported religious community<sup>51</sup> that comes under the *bāul*-umbrella. Bhaṭṭācārya (1957: 50) contends that the word *āul* has been derived from Skt. *ākula* which means “eager” or “anxious” (very close to the word *vyākula*). The term *āul* also denotes a state of madness. The word is closely associated with the *Kartābhajā*<sup>52</sup> order as the name of their chief propagator is Aulchandra (Āul'cād or Āul'candra).<sup>53</sup> Then again it seemingly is associated with the word *āuliyā* that, among other things, denotes a certain school of the Chishtiya Sufi order. This word may have emerged from the Arabic word *awliyā'* (the plural of *walī*)<sup>54</sup> which means close friend (of God). Interestingly, Aulchandra was also called *phakir ṭhākur* or “the lord fakir” (see De 1950: 20 for more anecdotes on him). The close connection of *Kartābhajā* order with Islam is also reflected in some of their rituals. For *Kartābhajās*, Friday (the day of *jumma* in Islamic belief) is an important day for ritual prayers. They sit in the westward direction (the direction of the *Ka'ba*) during the special prayers. They also denote their Supreme as *satya* or the truth as the Sufis utter *haq*. Aulchandra is also believed to be a local Sufi saint (Nandī 1986: 49–56).

<sup>51</sup> Jhā (2010: 115–122) states the difficulties of delineating the *Āul* community. However, he mentions certain rites and characteristics that distinguish *Āuls* from the 'Bāuls'. Datta considered the *Āul* community as *sahaj Kartābhajā* (Datta 1911: 237). Along with Chaitanya, a disciple of Advaita Acharya named Chaitanyadas (Caitanyādās) has also been called *Āuliyā* (Jha 2010: 116).

<sup>52</sup> *Kartābhajā* is a folk-religion which is very closely associated with 'Bāuldom' and falls under the 'Bāul' umbrella (Bhaṭṭācārya 1957: 60f.). Lalon Fakir reportedly recognised five orders (*ghar*, i.e. “house”) of fakirs, among which the *Kartābhajās* were most prominent. Every year innumerable 'Bāul' practitioners and disciples gather in the annual festival of *Satī Mā* of *Kartābhajā ghar*.

<sup>53</sup> Aulchandra is considered as the reincarnation of Chaitanya, or Gaurchandra (Gaur'candra). Some say, after a clash with the priests of the Jagannath temple at Puri, Chaitanya fled and disguised himself as Aulchandra. Aulchandra is also considered to be the disciple of Bircandra or Birbhadra, the illustrious son of Nityananda and his wife Jahnaba (Jahnabā). Cf. De 1950; Deb'mahānta 1990 and Nandī 1984 to know more about the *Kartābhajā* religion and their connection with 'Bāuldom'.

<sup>54</sup> There is also the possibility of the Arabic word *awwal* to be the source of *āul*, which means first or the beginning. In many songs *āul* means beginning, such as in *āul ākhare nabijī hak āllāji jāher ār bātane* (“In the beginning and in the end, there is the prophet and Allah, the truth; present in both is what is revealed and what is hidden.”) (BFP1: 700).

Another legend intriguingly associates Birbhadrā (Bīr'bhadrā) with Sufism. He was the son of Nityananda. On the one hand, Birbhadrā worked as a mediator of Bengal Vaishnavism and *Gaurīya* Vaishnavism along with his mother Jahnabā; on the other hand, he initiated hundreds of low castes<sup>55</sup> into Vaishnavism, which was an immense contribution in the development of post-Chaitanya folk-religions. The 'Bāuls' believe that Birbhadrā was a propagator of the *Darbeś Bāul*<sup>56</sup> community who learnt the *tattvas* from Aulchand and Madhab Bibi<sup>57</sup> (Bhaṭṭācārya 1957: 61; Śarīph 2003: 41f.). Interestingly, Madhab Bibi was a female Sufi practitioner or *pīr*<sup>58</sup> belonging to the *Saiyād* caste. The short text *Mādhab Bibir ka'cā* describes that Birbhadrā "entered *Madina* as (a) *bāul*" to learn ritual practice from Madhab Bibi: "*prabeśilā madināte haiyā bāul*" (MDBK: 210). Even the text says more than once that it was seemingly impossible to identify whether Birbhadrā was Hindu or Muslim. The whole text is replete with blatant connotations of *dehatattva* ("tattva of body") and sexual ritual practices which are an integral part of 'Bāuldom'.

'Bāuls' deliberately rupture the structure of language to create new meanings. This practice took an extremely esoteric turn when even the letters of certain words got attributed with mystic significances. The Arabic word *aḥad*, which means "one" and usually denotes the formless God of Islam, is made with three letters *alif* (a), *ḥe* (h) and *dāl* (d). *Aḥmad* (أحمد), the name of the prophet, consists of four letters – three of the previous letters and *mīm* (m). The 'Bāuls' believe that the letter *mīm* (م) hides all the secrets of creation. If the secret of *mīm* is understood, the secret of the presence of formless *aḥad* in the formed *Aḥmad* will be understood.<sup>59</sup> Another orphic

<sup>55</sup> The *nyārā-nerī*, who were reportedly low caste followers of *Vajrayānī* tantric Buddhism of Bengal. See Bandyopādhyāy 2011: 337f. Lalon has identified himself as *nārī* (the female counterpart of *nyārā*) in LG: 394. The phrase *nyārār phakir* is also common to denote some 'Bāul' practitioners in rural Bengal.

<sup>56</sup> "Birbhadrā knows the tradition of rites and practices of *Darbeś* order of 'Bāuldom'" (*darbeśi bāuler kriyā bīr'bhadrā jāne sei dhārā*; in DSP:83).

<sup>57</sup> *Mādhab bibir ka'cā* (henceforth MDBK) or the "Chronicles of Mādhab Bibi" contends that Birbhadrā learned the doctrine of physical ritual practice from Madhab Bibi in Mecca: *Bīr'candra śikṣā nila mādhab bibir sthāne* (MDBK: 211). We can observe here how the folk-religions do not conform to any mainstream religious dogma and create their own radical religious historicity.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *jātite saiyād morā pīr nām dhari* (MDBK: 211).

<sup>59</sup> See LG: 280 for this explanation. Lalon also says that the lord is hidden in the body of his own servant (Quran 50:16 is to be noted in this regard, when the

explanation says that the shape of the Arabic letter *mīm* is like a vagina (or the united form of vagina and penis, similar to *śivaliṅga* and *yonīpaṭṭa* in *tantra*). Hence, it may be deduced that the secret of the prophet hides in the secret of union between *prakṛti* (“woman”) and *puruṣ* (“man”). This explanation has immense significance in the *tattova* of ritual coital practice.<sup>60</sup> Similar concepts are also found in *tantra* where the letters are contended as seeds of creation. Interestingly, the letter *ma* (the Sanskrit counterpart of Arabic *mīm*) has been described as the seed which is situated in the great vagina (*makāraśca bindurūpau mahāyonau sthitaḥ priye*; in Bhaṭṭācārya 1909: 441). As different gods are attributed to different tantric *varṇas*, the ‘Bāuls’ have attributed the Islamic holy trinity to three letters: Allah in *alif*, Ādam in *lām* and Mohammad in *mīm* (*ālepe āllā lāme ādam mime mahammad*; in Jha 2012: 141). There are twenty-four consonants from *alif* to *mīm*, which has been compared with the twenty-four seed-syllables of the *kāmagāyatrī* chant, which is the secret initiatory chanting of the ‘Bāuls’ (Jhā 2007: 404). Those letters have also been compared with the twenty-four moons that reportedly arrive in the human body. Lalon Fakir has suggested that the mystery of the Quran may be unveiled if the sign-writings of the Quran are explicated by analysing the human body (*iśārā lekhan korānero māne hisāb kara dehete*; in LG 278). This clearly proposes a radical Quranic exegesis in the framework of ‘Bāuls’ *deha-tattva*.

Similarly, Buddhist connections can be traced by analysing a different etymology suggested by S. M. Lutfar Rahaman (cf. Rahamān 1969). He has associated the old Bengali word *bājil* or *bājul* of the tantric Buddhist *Caryā* songs<sup>61</sup> with the word *bāul*.<sup>62</sup> Evidently there is a strong doctrinal

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lord says that he is closer to the man than his jugular bone). This is a common saying among the Sufis.

<sup>60</sup> I came to know about this explanation in a personal correspondence with a fakir of Bheramara, Kushtia, Bangladesh.

<sup>61</sup> *Caryāḡṭikoṣabṛtti*, the mystic hymns of the *Vajrayānī* tantric Buddhists, is commonly called *Caryāpada* or *Caryāḡṭi*. It is the only textual document of Old Bengali language. The manuscript was composed during the *Pāla* and early *Sena* dynasties (sometime between 8th to 12th century C.E.), which was the age of decline of Buddhism.

<sup>62</sup> Skt. *vajrī* > [Pr. *bajjī*] > Ap. *bajjir* > *bajjil* > *bājil* > *bājul* > Beng. *bāul*. Since this derivation does not strictly abide by the laws of historical linguistics, I shall rather like to consider it as a folk etymology. This may shine upon a new avenue of approaching the similarities between tantric Buddhism of *Caryā* and ‘Bāuldom’.



connection between tantric Buddhism of *Caryā* and 'Bāuldom'.<sup>63</sup> Both of these religions have a tradition of metaphorical textual production. Dineshchandra Sen found 'Bāuldom' entirely Buddhist in nature.<sup>64</sup> Although this rigid contention is rejected in later researches, one cannot overlook certain similarities between the two, such as: reverence of guru, the practice of attainment of *sahaja* and refutation of scriptural religions and brahmanical authority. Both the religions share enormous similarity in the sexual yogic practices, which has been seriously discussed by scholars including Rahul Peter Das (1992). The phrase *sandhyā bhāṣā*<sup>65</sup> ("language of the twilight") which is commonly used to denote the obscure language of the 'Bāul' songs, have been borrowed from the *Caryā*. However, I shall only focus on the root word *vajrī* to find out the connections it bears with 'Bāuldom'.

The Sanskrit form *vajrī*, which may have derived from *vajra* ("thunder", "diamond" or "adamantine"), is a key word of yogic ritual-practice. *Vajra* in tantric literature means the semen, which has to be retained and channelised upwards through the cranial column. As the primary ritual practice of both the 'Bāuls' and *Vajrayānī* tantric Buddhists is to retain the *vajra*<sup>66</sup>, one may easily understand the deep significance of this root behind the word *bāul*. In *Ḍākārṇava*, the word *vajrī* is used to denote the god *mahāvīreśvaratathāgata* (Śāstrī 1951: 132) and the goddess *Vārāhī* (ibid.: 133), who is *bhagalingamanodbhavā*, manifested during the conjoining of the penis, vagina and the mind. Although these highly sexual tantric references are very similar to the esoteric sexual rituals of the 'Bāuls', this exploration also denotes the difference between the two religions. Tantric Buddhism essentially became polytheistic – a number of deities were composed within the doctrinal matrix. 'Bāuls' on the other hand do not believe in such deities or imaginary constructs. Hence, the 'Bāuls' cannot be simply defined as a religion having basically a Buddhist nature, as Dineshchandra Sen contended. Again, in *Caryā*, we find the *Prākṛita apabhramśa* form *bājil* in a song (no. 17) written by Binapad (Bīnāpāda), which says that *bājil* dances as the goddess sings in the uncanny custom

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Dasgupta 1946; Bhattachārya 1957 (introduction); Jhā 2010; Dās 1992 for discussion on tantric Buddhism and 'Bāuldom'. Also see Dās 1969: 239–259 for a comparative discussion between the 'Bāul' songs and *Caryā* songs.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Dās 1969: 244.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *sandhyābhāṣāyābauddhavyam* quoted in Dās 1969: 259.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Das 1992 to learn more about the sexo-yogic ritual practice of the 'Bāuls'.

of the drama of Buddha.<sup>67</sup> In the Sanskrit commentary of the song, *bājil* is explained as *vajradhara* or “Vajra holder” (Snellgrove 1959: 168). In tantric Buddhism, *vajradhara* is also a deity, who is “Ādi or the primordial monotheistic God” (Bhattacharyya 1964: 127). *Vajradhara* is also considered the “supreme non-duality” according to *Hevajratantra* (Farrow 1992: 6), which is an attainable yogic state (ibid.: 14). As a concluding remark it can be said that the Buddhist connection, particularly following the form *bajrī*, does not provide any unique doctrinal historicity. However, a deep philosophical connection and similarity between the ritual practices is revealed nonetheless. The only historical link might be the insertion of *nyārā-nerī* in the “Bāulsphere” (see footnote 55), who were reportedly the descendants of uprooted lower caste followers of tantric Buddhism (see Dās 1978: 73 & 75; Dās 1992 [4]: 214; Bandyopādhyāy 2011: 337f.). However, those groups later on came under the fold of Bengal Sufism, from which they were converted to the school of Birbhadra in the 16th century.

## Conclusion

As I have stated earlier, the purpose of this article is to show how ‘Bāuldom’ is connected with “other beliefs” and how such connections have become a part of the doctrinal history of ‘Bāuls’. To meet that end, I have tried to analyse possible etymologies of the word *bāul*. It was also highlighted that different meanings of the word *bāul* eventually represent certain characteristics of being a ‘Bāul’. Here, in fact, lies the basic problem of structuring an academic discussion on the topic. The whole discourse of ‘Bāuldom’ is about ‘being’ ‘Bāul’. It may be achieved by fulfilling certain conditions, pursuing certain practices, re-understanding the world of (religious) experience through a unique metaphoric language or by achieving a different ‘self’ through psychosomatic manoeuvring. The uniqueness of ‘Bāuldom’ is that it is not only a ‘religion’, it is a process which may be understood by addressing three types of being: ‘being’ in the language, ‘being’ in the (doctrinal) history and being in the self and embodiment (i.e. through different ritual practices). The right question, therefore, is not “who is a ‘Bāul’” or “what is ‘Bāul’”—it should

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *nācanti bājil gānti devī / Buddha nāṭak bisamā hoi* (Śāstrī 1951: 30). Interestingly, this reference is also found in *Hevajratantra*. G. W. Farrow observes that “the Vajra family members are the players in the drama of Buddha (Buddhanāṭaka)” and *Vajradhara* is the “fruit” or end result of the practice (Farrow 1992: xix).

be "how is 'Bāul'". This phenomenological quandary makes 'Bāuldom' obfuscated for any so-called 'scientific' academic approach.

Beyond this sphere, a number of underprivileged people, belonging to lower social and financial classes, regularly embrace 'Bāuldom' with ease and simplicity. They equip themselves with the enigmatic language and metaphors; they do not conform to the binary between experience and reason; they situate themselves in the prevailing religious habitus but learn not to belong there; and they do understand that there is no precise beginning or ending point of a religio-spiritual query albeit follow certain stages of spiritual advancement. While the 'enigmatic', 'confusing' or 'ambiguous' is a problem for an academic approach, to the "Bāulsphere" it yields the possibility of multiple understandings of a phenomenon. There is no 'surplus' in the doctrinal economy of the 'Bāuls'. Everything produces certain meanings and every meaning produces certain aspects of their knowledge repertoire. This is why the single word *bāul* can reflect so much of 'Bāuldom'. Consequently, the heterogeneity of 'Bāuldom' lies in radically imposing new meanings to prevalent doctrinal perceptions.

Clearly, not all doctrinal connections can be explored by analysing only the word *bāul*. However, this article does stress upon the fact that a philological analysis might explore how the folk-religions and their unique shared historicity is subsumed in the language. Finally, I consider this article a postscript to Rahul Peter Das' article because he has explicitly compared and analysed certain 'Bāul' practices and concepts in parallel with those of other religious beliefs. This article perhaps justifies his method by proposing that 'Bāuldom' is indeed connected with other religions, colligated in a collective history and knowledge repertoire which is reflected in their esoteric practices. It is imperative to draw from other relevant religious discourses to make problematic aspects of 'Bāul' practices intelligible to the common reader.

### Abbreviations

- BFP1:** *Bāul-phakir padābalī*, Part 1 (Jhā, Śaktināth [ed.] 2000. Kal'kātā: Man'phakirā).
- BFP2:** *Baul-phakir padābalī*, Part 2 (Jha, Śaktināth [ed.] 2012. Kal'kātā: Man'phakirā).
- CC:** *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* of Kabirāj, Kṛṣṇadās (Nāth, Rādhāgo-binda [ed.] 1946. Kalikātā: Bhaktigrantha Pracār Bhāṇḍār).
- DSP:** *Duddu Sā-r padābalī* (Jhā, Śaktināth [ed.] 2012. Kal'kātā: Sahaj'pāṭh).
- KKN:** *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛtaṃ* written by Vilvamaṅgala (Bidyāratna, Rām'nārāyaṇ [transl. and ed.] 1890. Murśidābād; Baha-ram'pur: Rām'nārāyaṇ Bidyāratna).
- LG:** *Lālangītikā* (Dās, Matilāl & Piyūṣ'kānti Mahāpātra [eds] 1958. Kal'kātā: University of Calcutta Press).
- MDBK:** *Mādhav bibir kar'cā* (Jhā, Śaktināth [ed.] 2012. *Duddu Sā-r padābalī: (pariśiṣṭa)*. Kal'kātā: Sahaj'pāṭh.)

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