

The aesthetic asceticism of the mad: A look into Baulism and the Bauls of Bangladesh

by Nazia Binte Mahmud

The Bauls of Bangladesh, West Bengal, and other parts of India are a distinct ascetic sect that practices spirituality through songs, music, and poetry that were passed down orally from a teacher (*Guru*) to a disciple (*Shirsha*). Their ideology is a mix of yogic-tantric practices of Buddhist Sahajiya, Vaishnavism Sahajiya, and later Sufi thoughts. Bauls are often called a heretic sect because of their rejection of institutionalized religion, consumerism, society, and, for many Bauls, even marriage. Baul songs and spirituality emphasize the search for the connection between man and the Divine and love and symbolize the Bengali folk identity.

In this paper, placing Baulism within the Anthropology of Art vs. Aesthetics discourse, I show how Baul songs, and their lifestyle can be both. I discuss the rising appropriation of Baul folk music and aesthetics by modern media and in capitalist spaces and how it started to gain traction when the elite society started to acknowledge Bengali folk music. Baul *giti* (song) is an established genre of music, and they tend to mediate between both art while providing aesthetic appreciation. With the rise of village core aesthetics and romanticization, their music, style, and philosophy have found new spaces in media, fashion, and business.

Baulism or the Baul sect is a distinct group of people who follow the ideology that the divine is inside humans and the soul requires true love and freedom. Therefore, Baul seeks an ultimate escape from this materialistic world. The term *Baul* means ‘mad’ or ‘crazy’. Baul’s nonconformist way of living, their strange clothes and wild hair, and their total rejection of society and its institution may have earned them their name. Originally, they come from spiritual wandering minstrels. Bauls have their own genre of music now, and the modern Baul artists are well associated with the music and entertainment industry. Baulism is associated with traditional village life of rural areas and symbolized as folk art and aesthetic in Bangladesh and in parts of India, specifically West Bengal. In this paper, I will talk about Bangladeshi folk culture, specifically of Bauls and Baulism in order to

discuss how this Bangali folk mediates between the fine lines of art vs aesthetic debate.

The discourse between the anthropology of art and the anthropology of aesthetics has been a long parley (Flores 1985). The anthropology of aesthetics now has established itself as a stand-alone field and anthropology of aesthetics can exist without considering the anthropology of art (Flores 1985; Macquet 1971). Macquet (1971) states aesthetic or the “aesthetic quality” is something he believes to be universal to humanity. Focusing on aesthetics rather than just art allows a broader and more intimate knowledge of culture and its epistemology. Dundes (1975) in his work shows how focusing on the aesthetic in folklore reveals “native cognitive categories” and “worldview paradigms”. It is very important to look at aesthetics, in this case, in folk, which will allow for a “deeper, underlying patterning mechanism in human life” (Flores 1985: 28). For clarification, be it art or aesthetics, both are not limited to intentional material creation. It can be

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metaphorical, hidden in everyday life and ritual, and also be poems, songs, writings, clothes, animals, designs, etc. An aesthetic can be something even broader, a setting, a shape, or a lifestyle.

Approaching Baulism through anthropology of aesthetics allows us to grasp their cultural, philosophical and contextual significance. Through Gell's (1998) approach to anthropology of art as theory of social relations, we see that Baul's songs and lyrics are a depiction of their philosophy and ontology. It serves more on aesthetic appreciation rather than just being art. I argue that the rise in the appreciation of Baul aesthetics in general and Baul genre in the music industry today led to the commodification of their style as themes in restaurant decors and events, their distinct style as fashion and further appropriation of their music genre in the music industry. All of which reduced Baulism to mere art products and created a detachment from the original spiritual and philosophical elements within. Moreover, I demonstrate how this rise in the appreciation of folk art and music is an example of the phenomena that Bourdieu (1984) called "slumming", a phenomenon that happens when upper-class people start to appreciate art that is associated with lower-class art. In this process, not only this puts a label on folk art but also automatically creates a notion that there are "lower-class arts". This is highly problematic and further shows how social class hierarchy is still present and still has a strong hold over all social phenomena including art. Therefore, not only are Bauls losing their agency over their creation and how their philosophy is being reduced to mere products but also branding folk art and aesthetic as essentially backward and traditional.

This Bengali folk aesthetic and identity being associated with village life are being sold at large amounts of profits as themes in restaurants,

clothing, and lifestyle. The appropriation of the aesthetics of the Baul life in this modern world is another marker of how globalized industries strategically remove the agencies from the people who create the art and then go on to recreate that art in economically profitable spaces and profit off of and reduce it to mere materialistic items. Hence, the modern economy itself is also one of the reasons that distinguishes and creates a separation of the aesthetic of Baul from their art. Their songs are being commercialized while their aesthetics are sold in high-end restaurant décor and clothing stores to bring in the feel of 'true Bengalingness'. Looking at Baulism through the art vs aesthetic discourse will help us understand why their songs are much more than just art and the broad umbrella of anthropology of aesthetics provides a window to their way of knowing.

A Brief History and Significance

The history of Baulism as it evolved, to put it simply, is complicated as no records of their trajectory or origin was recorded. Their philosophy was influenced by different ideologies within the Indian subcontinent. Capwell (1988) traces the link to the history of Siddhacaryas, a spiritual group that wrote poems of the ultimate release called caryapadas. The caryapadas are said to be one of the oldest written forms in the Bengali tongue. The caryapadas were carefully recorded in a manuscript because of their use of tantra. According to Capwell, tantra,

Teaches the individual to pursue his own release from phenomenal existence through direct, empirical means, through the manipulation of his own physical and psychical constitution, and these means are learned viva voce from a preceptor who also demonstrates the necessary techniques. (123)

Tantra is a meditative practice routine where the oral recitations of poems provide an out-of-body experience. The tantras were orally transmitted from teacher to student. Even though the Siddhacaryas group rejected all forms of comfort and material satisfaction, it was evident that they came from upper-class families and were learned scholars. This is because the texts of the Siddhacaryas were found to be in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was not spoken and written by the masses and only was used by upper-castes Brahmins. Bengal went through considerable religious changes during that time. In time, the Saivites and Buddhists among these groups were also being converted to Muslims during a particular period. One of the conversions to Islam happened in masses in Bengal because many of the lower classes wanted to break free from their societal oppression and low caste status within their community (Ahmed 1988, Haq 1975). Slowly the Buddhist monks gave away celibacy and started families in order to survive, they continued to shave their heads and became known as a particular caste called Nera. Slowly the Vaishnava ideology of eternal truth and the play between love and self-realization entered the Buddhist Sahajiya thought during the Sena Kingdom (Datta 1971). The tantric-based songs and structure are found not only in Buddhist Sahajiya but also in Vaishnava Sahajiya. Thus, Bauls emerged from this broader group and later took on Sufi mysticism during the 14th century (Dasgupta 1994).

Capwell (1988) notes that there is no clear evidence of the direct linkage between the Siddhacaryas group and Baul. The only link was both of them were the earliest users of the Bengali language. Bauls having a deep root in Bengali identity and culture, uphold the classical tradition of simple village life filled with intimate struggles and a sense of familiarity that every Bengali feels whenever they hear a clear tune or

melody. All their poems and songs, irrespective of the theme, have discreet messages of love in them. The search for and the merging of the human and the divine. Their songs are filled with riddles and metaphors. Their existence is outside of caste, beyond religion, material culture, and all other kinds of institutions. Though they do not belong to any particular religion, there are Muslim Bauls and Hindu Bauls. The term Baul in the strict sense refers to Hindu Bauls and the Muslim Bauls are generally known as *Fakirs*¹.

Buddhism, Vaishnavism, and Sufi philosophy had great impact in the creation of *Baul giti* (Baul song/genre) as a separate ideology. Baul genre was used as a political tool as well to mitigate rising tensions within Hindu and Muslims. In the 13th century, religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims began to grow and became more pronounced. More and more Bengalis of the lower caste were converting to Muslims. Being a Muslim made them free of the caste that gave them nothing, it gave them a kind of freedom. The tensions and bloody strikes continued leading to another and final partition in 1947 between India and the east part, later becoming West and East Pakistan. During the political unrest and the events leading up to the partition, authors and poets like Muhammad Monsur Uddin collected more than 100 folk songs in a 13-volume book named *Haramoni* (The Lost Jewels) (Dasgupta 1994). In these songs, Monsur Uddin was trying to provide proof that it is possible for Hindus and Muslims to

¹ *Fakir* has two meanings in Bangali. One means, a darvesh and another means a street beggar (mendicant). Here Fakir is referring to being a dervish, someone who follows Sufi ideology in Islam. However, it is to be noted that not all fakirs who follow this line can be identified as dervish as it is a state that is difficult to reach. Lalon Fakir is recognized as one of the one true Fakir of Bengal. Baul and Fakir are separate but often used interchangeably among the Baul community in Bangladesh. Not all Bauls are Fakirs. A Baul can be a Fakir when they also follow the teachings of Islam.

coexist peacefully. The Baul songs were seen as the merge between two realms. Authors like Monsur Uddin tried to uphold a Bengali identity through their art, while authors like Rabindranath Thakur used Bauls to try and mitigate the political tension between Hindus and Muslims. Nobel laureate Thakur even kept a notebook titled Baul and took inspiration from it in his later works.

The emergence and formulation of the Baul sect has been a long journey. As Bengal itself changed with new kingdoms rising to power and new religious thoughts entered, the Baul philosophy changed with it as well. A look into their lyrics and songs is a mirror of these changes. Despite all these changes, Baul's message has been always the same- that we are all lost souls seeking ourselves in the wrong places when in fact the love is within and so is the Divine. Baulism has a deep intimate connection with the land and the Bengali identity formation. It was important to discuss because it shows how nature, culture, and the environment around us affect our art. The songs written by Bauls paint a picture of eternal human anguish, political tensions, and religious and caste tensions.

A Getaway in Kushtia- Baul Hub in Bangladesh

On a short three-day family trip to Kushtia (a district in Bangladesh) during the summer of 2022, I was able to visit the tomb and institution of the great Baul and Fakir, Lalon Shah. Lalon is the heart and symbol of the folk music genre and the heritage of Bangladesh. He is referred to as a Baul, a mystic, a fakir, a musician, a poet, and a dervish. He is considered to be the one true Baul and even today he is venerated and respected throughout West Bengal and Bangladesh. The great Lalon, though generally thought of as a Muslim mystic, never really thought of himself as

being bound to one religion or one institution of religion. His songs and messages often indicated the body as being the cage and the soul being trapped inside of it. The inner soul and finding God inside were the main message which is what also the Sufi philosophy talks about. Meeting the Bauls in person I learned that they would bring their hands together and touch their foreheads, bowing a little in the process, as a show of deep respect and love. They called him "Sai ji" and never referred to him by just his name. My impromptu meeting with them and the time I spent there talking to them and listening to their heart-yearning music will be an encounter I will never forget. I will remember how Baul Bolai Shah showed me the field where hundreds of people congregate during the *Urs* (death anniversary) of Lalon Shah. Instead of it being a mourning period, they remember him by singing *Baul giti* (Baul music) and holding a trade fair. I will remember Fakir Babu Shah for passing on his wisdom and outlook on life. We ended the day late afternoon by sitting in the roofed courtyard on a big red mat in a circle. Dusk was settling in and the birds started flying back to their trees. The afternoon breeze brought in the smell of wet mud and wood. The Bauls brought out their instruments- *Ektara* (one-stringed musical instrument), Harmonium, *Manjeera* (a brass and metal small hand cymbals), flutes, and *dhol* (a drum) and a *dugi* (a small handheld drum). Baul songs are typically sung in an open, throaty, and slightly broken voice.

The moment took me back to my childhood memories of my art school. My classmates and I used to draw many pictures depicting a typical village life in Bangladesh. It was purely based on our imagination as none of us actually grew up in one. It was always a river and a boat, a big sunset, and a small hut with a thatched roof. Occasionally, there will be women in a sari

carrying water *kolshi* (a pitcher for water made of mud or steel) on their hips. In special classes or in competitions if the theme was ‘Bengali spirit’, many would draw a Baul clad in orange and beads, one hand holding the *ektara* and the other swaying with the tune, the hair in tangles or in a top knot. The look was complete with a checkered *gamcha* (cotton long handkerchief) at one side hanging from their shoulder. The Baul would be set in a scenery of green and golden wheat fields and a big sun. This was the Bengali spirit for all of us kids even though our reality was just buildings, traffic, dust, and the age of the internet and globalized media. Personally, I think it is a testament to the fact that we remain connected with our ethnic roots and therefore can feel the spirit that was before our time.



Figure 1. A photo of the Shrine of Fakir Lalun Shah and graves of his disciples taken by N. Mahmud.

A few miles away is the *jomidari bari*² of Rabindranath Thakur (Rabindranath Tagore in English), regarded as one of the greatest Bengali poets and writers. This place is known as the ‘Kuti Bari’. Thakur used to visit and live there often. During his time in Kushtia, he met Lalun three times on three separate occasions. Lalun was quite old by this time. Thakur’s impression of a Baul he saw on the streets was found in one of his works, ‘Religion of Man’:

One day I chanced to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal...What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism.....the song was alive with emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in Man and not in the temple, or scriptures, in images or symbols. (As cited in Dasgupta 2004: 36)

Whether the Baul he heard was Lalun or not is not clarified. However, Thakur was very much impressed with Lalun and Baulism in general.

The Lyrics, the Individual, and the Aesthetics

If we take a look at Fakir Lalun Shah’s work, we get the sense of the “eternal yearning” that Thakur talked about. One of his songs, *Shob loke koi Lalun ki Jat Sansare?* (Everyone is saying, ‘What in the world is Lalun’s caste?’) draws us a

² *Bari* means house. *Jomidari bari* is the house of the zamindari (jomidar in Bengali dialect), meaning the land that Rabindranath Thakur’s family-owned. Thakur used to live there whenever he was in Kushtia. In Colonial times, upper-class Hindu families owned lands and leased them out to farmers, this was known as the zamindari system (jomidari system in Bengali dialect). The families were known as a zamindari house and Rabindranath Thakur belong to a zamindari house. They were operating under the British colonial system.

picture of how caste and religious differences dominate everything a human does, thinks, lives, and loves. Lalon was born into a Hindu family, and during his youth, he started a pilgrimage but, on his way, he fell ill with smallpox. His companions thought he was dead and left him on the road and later rescued by a Muslim family. The Muslim family nursed him and raised him. Lalon after growing up went back to his family but since he lived with Muslims and did not grow up with Hindu traditions, he was not accepted. A small section from the song:

If you circumcise the boy, he becomes a
Muslim -
What's the rule for women, then?
I can recognize the Brahman man from
his sacred thread;
but then how am I to know the Brahman
woman?
Tell me, just what does caste look like?
I've never seen it with these eyes of
mine, brother.³

His lyrics portray the hurt and frustration he felt when he was abandoned by his own family. The song is used to describe the hollowness of having such sectarian differences. The void between two different castes continues to grow yet taking away material differences leaves no such differences visible. Another one of Lalon's songs *kachar bhiton ochin pakhi* (The unknown bird in the cage):

The unknown Bird in the cage...
how does it fly in and out?
Catch it, I would, if I could...
and put my mind's chains on its feet.

There are eight rooms with nine doors,
with lattice-work in between.
On top of that, there's a central yard

and a hall of mirrors.

The unknown Bird in the cage...
how does it fly in and out?⁴

Lalon refers to the mystery bird in the cage as an enchanted soul, flying in and out of a cage constructed of the human body's bones, ribs, and flesh. The soul is a free, unconfined, and untied that is not encased like the other components of a human physically. Lalon says if he had a leash on the soul, he would never let it go on spiritual journeys and would keep it attached to his body forever and always to protect it from emotional suffering and heartbreak. The song speaks of the depths and fragility of human emotions.

The lyrics, songs, and structures of the Baul sect speak more of aesthetics than art, it is much more philosophical than just commodified art. I do not mean to sound controversial when referring to their lyrics as not art as we know it. Baul songs are art that is created with the intention to evoke emotions, a sad song is meant for melancholy or a love song is meant as a letter to a lover while some are, in a way, letters for and to the soul. Therefore, songs and poetry are art, what I mean is that if we approach Baulism similarly to Gell's (1998) approach to the anthropology of art as a theory of social relations, then we can see how Baulism is both aesthetics and art. Considering the deep historical roots of Baulism and how it is related to the social structure of Bengal and its history, Baul songs mirror the history as art while their distinct identity as a sect with distinct philosophical ideology is their aesthetics.

The diversity within Bengal is vast and therefore Bengal's each artistic creation is a visual representation of the particular land and context. Understanding the art or aesthetic within

³ Mannan 2009:451

⁴ Mannan 2009: 767

a cultural context helps us to understand whether the natives intended it to be commodity art or something more. Gell (1998) stresses that art is more about social interaction, in that a group of people belonging to that society will understand the art in a way that the artist meant to or share some kind of native connection to it. For example, Thompson (1989) shows how the style characterized by symmetry in Yoruba aesthetics is distinct to Yoruba. Symmetries can be found anywhere however it is not enough to make cross-cultural assumptions based on certain characteristics because only the people belonging to that art's native land will understand the social interaction associated with it. In the case of Bauls belonging to a distinct sect, a structural approach would allow us to understand their lyrics and the kind of emotions it evokes. Someone belonging to Bengali culture will be able to grasp and feel it much more intimately and feel shared emotions the artist intended. Someone from outside may understand the lyrics when translated and they may or may not feel a connection but the way they take it in and interact will be different. Therefore, Baul songs are not just simple creations of musical and poetic art but a visualization of a community life and struggles based in context.

The Philosophical Asceticism of Baulism

The increase in the appreciation of folk culture is important especially today, as it helps in the conservation of folk history. However, the increase in materialistic consumption of folk songs disrupts its true messages. The philosophical and the 'heretic counterpoint' that it provides to the sectarian scriptures of both Hindu and Muslim religious institutions gets lost (Datta 1978, Dasgupta 1994). The ascetic aestheticism of Baulism is much more than just folk art. It

holds a contested place where it is in between two major religions now in Bengal. Baulism is not against religion, rather it sings that God is within man and not in churches, mosques, or temples. They are the devotees of love and the God within. The Bauls were of lower class both with the Hindu and Muslim communities and they were very prevalent in the villages. They used to travel in groups and put on singing shows along with drama and dance on their road, village to village. These shows were called *jatras*. Bauls were brought to the upper class and appreciated by them mainly because they got recognized by well-known authors and critics like Kshitimohon Sen, Muhammad Monsur Uddin, and Rabindranath Thakur. The word Baul has the Hindi variant *Baur*; the word's origin may vary, it may be from the Sanskrit word *vatula* meaning affected by wind disease, i.e., crazy. It could also come from *vyakula* (impatiently eager). The last form of *aul* can also be associated with the Arabic word *auliya* meaning 'devotee' or 'friend'. All of these derivations nicely sum up the lifestyle of Bauls. Their way of life has been described as *ulta shadhon* meaning 'the reverse path' because they did the opposite of what their society was doing. Dasgupta (1994) writes,

They avoid all forms of institutional 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 and other Sahajiyas call their path *ulta-sadhan* (the reverse path) and denote the process of their spiritual advance as the method of proceeding against the current. (73)

This reverse journey is the ultimate object to return to one's own nature, an inborn nature. The

search for peace and the search for oneself. The self that is not dictated by the apparent hypocritical false projection of the material world. They have the goal to reach self-realization that is devoid of all religious sincerity and artificiality (Dasgupta 1994). Through the adopted syncretistic traditions of Vaishnavism and Sufism, they formulated their own characteristics and aesthetic grace. The Baul song 'Man of My Heart' is greatly studied by Dasgupta (1994) and he concludes that it is a kind of heretic movement with the philosophy of syncretism. Bauls hold a place in the heart, and it is a contested place in face of continuous reforms that Bengal has seen and is continuously seeing. They are subject to harassment and onslaughts by Islamic leaders and *Mullahs*⁵ because of the way they drew in Islamic philosophy. There is contestation there as well about whether Lalon belongs to the Muslims or the Hindus. This directly goes against the Baul philosophy, but it says a lot of human nature is obsessed with labeling and securing. The fact that he has a shrine and a small museum to his name is something that is not what he preached. Despite these clashes, the sincerity and the aesthetic devotion to oneself and the country have not been lost to those who truly understand the important place they hold. Tagore's review introduction to Muhammad Monsurudin's book *Lost Jewel* sums it up really nicely,

The elites in our country who call themselves educated have been exploring tactical measures for Hindu-Muslim amity out of their own compulsions. They have taken the training of history in schools which are alien to us. But the real history of our country bears testimony to the devotion for synthesis which has been

shared by the common people as the innermost truth in their emotional depth...The inspiration for the higher process of civilization has been relentlessly at work in the depths of the village milieu of Bengal, unnoticed by the institutional educational system of schools and colleges. This innermost inspiration has prepared the basic ground for a common anchorage for both Hindus and Muslims. The Baul songs spring from this deep-rooted anchorage. (82)

Another philosophy that the Baul sect upholds is the sacred relationship of the *guru-shishsho* (teacher-student). The need of having someone to guide you in your path. Someone who has already taken the journey and therefore can lead their students to the Ultimate Truth. This is an old philosophy found before the times of tantras. The Guru stands as the representative of God and through that Guru, God gives instructions (Datta 1978). The students therefore after initiation give themselves completely to the guidance of their Guru. Lalon therefore writes:

Guru, put good thoughts into my mind
So that I do not forget you
Guru, the person to whom you show no
mercy
Is always beset with evil thoughts
You are the charioteer of my heart's
chariot;
I go wherever you drive me
Guru, you make from me the strings,
Guru, you make from me the music,
Guru, you make from me the
instrument;
If you do not play upon me, how can I
sound?
My mind's eye has been blind from
birth; You are ever conscious

⁵ Mullahs are learned scholars of Islamic theology.

While the increase in the appreciation of Baul songs and poetry is important. It is also important to uphold its history and to preserve its scriptural teachings as well. As Bauls are more than artists, it is a spiritual journey they take and so their philosophy needs to be preserved in a way that does not reduce it to themes and products as commodity art.

Is it Art or Aesthetic or Both?

The emphasis on the separation of art and aesthetic is important to delve into because each culture and society has their own meaning and interpretation of what is art and what is aesthetic. A particular creation of a society may be considered or popularized as art by the West but may not be so within that particular society.

Bauls dress a certain way not particularly because of personal style but to express freedom and simplicity, however, this gradually turned into a distinct fashion itself. For Bauls, this visual style was not art for them but was made to be art. Coote (2006) stresses that art as we know has been dominated by the art world of the West. The stamp of approval of what is an art and what is not has been highly influenced by them. For example- when body decoration was reclassified as art. For Coote, it is important to ask whether the group of people doing the body decoration considers it art or not. Anthropology of aesthetics for Coote is thus a matter of perception that is heavily dependent on cultural factors. The factors

taken into account can be “qualities of the form” like the appearance-shape, texture, color, proportion, etc. And how those are perceived within society- like through poetry, dance, body decoration, painting, etc. Hence, visual aesthetics is about how a particular society sees it. In the case of Bauls, we have seen that they have a distinct style that sets them apart within their own society. The appearance is an orange or white cotton cloth (Muslim bauls, the Fakirs, tend to wear white garments while Hindu bauls wear orange garments)⁶, like a simple shirt and pants/wrap-around cloth, simple beaded jewelry, their wild and unruly hair, and their companion the one-string ektara, all these with a flair of asceticism. They have a far-away look. Evidently, they have a visual aesthetic to them.

Bauls have a distinct style that sets them apart within their own society. The appearance is an orange or white cotton cloth (Muslim bauls, the Fakirs, tend to wear white garments while Hindu bauls wear orange garments)⁷, like a simple shirt and pants/wrap-around cloth, simple beaded jewelry, their wild and unruly hair, and their companion the one-string *ektara*, all these with a flair of asceticism. They have a far-away look. Evidently, they have a visual aesthetic to them. Within their own society, they are immediately recognized, and as we have discovered, they are very much seen as part of a Bengal heritage often romanticized nowadays for cultural capital. Coote's theory of visual aesthetics helps us understand how the Baul's characterized mad look is an aesthetic of its own and is perceived so by their own community. Within the local culture, their aesthetics in many

⁶ It is not a strict apparel within the Baul community. They can wear any garment they like. Modern Bauls today are seen wearing *kurtis* or *punjabis* with blue jeans. They also often wrap the *gamcha* around their head as a bandana.

⁷ It is not a strict apparel within the Baul community. See above.

cases will be seen as a choice of lifestyle rather than art. However, today this visual aesthetic turned into fashion style which again turns their aesthetics as commodities for appropriation.

The heartfelt lyrics written by Bauls are not only wrapped in enigmatic metaphors for pleasure's sake. They carry a generation of weight to them; it tells stories of journeys taken by people. The innermost yearnings of a person's heart. Moreover, it also speaks about how the environment-social, economic, political, and institutional- shapes those experiences and hurts the soul. Even though what they create is a literal art of its sort, it is also aesthetically heavy. Hence, just like how in the cattle keeping societies like the Nilotes that Coote (2006) studied aesthetics play a heavy hand while having no "art object" as perceived by those people. In Baul's case it is a bit of both. The context here matters, Bauls performing would be art considered by them while their lifestyle, matter of dressing, and their philosophy would not be what they consider as art. People outside Baul community, however, might consider all of it as folk art. So, the context matters.

Morphy (2006)'s addresses and engages whether aesthetics as the Europeans define it is similar to the way Yolngu define it. In the Yolngu culture, there is an aesthetic or intention to produce aesthetic effects. The effects that are evoked from their art may be what Europeans would call aesthetics. They do not describe or criticize their creation or art as a European would. They focus on the senses, in that whatever they produce is part of their ancestry. A direct link and power that comes from the ancestors and allows them to create. Those creations are important because they are used in rituals.

An aesthetic effect may arise out of the way some other purpose of the object is

achieved, for example, through the perfect functional utility of a chair, the simplicity of an idea, or the elegance of a solution to a problem. (302)

The way Yolngu perceive paintings is different as well since their ability to create is manifested in their ancestors, and the things they draw are inspired by natural powers like the power of light from the sun. Yolngu paintings that are created are part of the ancestral designs and those designs contain spiritual power. The fascinating part of Yolgnu art is how sacred it is and how it is used to beautify the thing it is painted on. The religious and spiritual power carries through the painting in a way that creates a sort of aesthetic feeling. The Yolgnu may not see it as art as the way art is perceived in a European context, here it plays both a utilitarian function as well as a display of color and skillful and religious appraisal.

The lyrics of the Baul also carry a kind of religious and spiritual power through the words. 'Man of My Heart', is a simple song yet a religious expression. For them, these songs are not art, as art is within the Western context. It is like breathing air but we outsiders will see it, hear it, feel it, and consider it to be art and aesthetically pleasing. Religious expression is not heavy with rules or details on how to be a good person by following a certain religion. It spoke of love and goodness.

Temples and mosques obstruct thy path,
and I fail to hear thy call or to move,
when the clerics and priests angrily
crowd around me
For the sake of this love
Heaven longs to become earth
And gods to become a man⁸

⁸ Mannan 2009: 888

Baulism through Anthropology of aesthetics provides a broader umbrella that can take in and consider the ritualistic weight it carries. This can in a way problematize preservation of folk songs as commodity and media art and help in the conservation of folk philosophy not as arts to be appropriated by everyone and give back Bauls their rightful agency over their creation and leaves them space to share their philosophy however they want.

A Matter of Debate, A Matter of Taste

In recent times there has been a surge in presenting and going as far as appropriating folk music and art in the ‘modern’ art world everywhere. It is not just based in South Asia, there seems to be a reform in that old and lost traditions, especially village aesthetics are being brought back to the limelight or romanticized which leads them to be commodified. For example, milkmaid dressing has been gaining traction. Similarly taking Baul aesthetics like their orange garment, and their instruments and painting in restaurant walls to make a village core-themed aesthetic is part of such changes.

These trends and changes in taste and appreciation are not new. The appreciation of Baulism was brought to the upper class's attention only when an upper-class famous artist, like Tagore and Kshitimohon Sen, mentioned them and wrote about them. Similar to how street-style clothes became popular among the middle to higher-income groups only when it was taken up by high-end fashion designers, models, and celebrities. This appreciation of the other classes' art came back again. Amidst the rising globalization and modernization, people are going back to folk songs and the village core aesthetic in order to distinguish themselves from the masses that are glued to pop culture. The more they spiritually talk about and romanticize

the “old days” and the simplicity of village life and sitting under a tree and listening to a Baul, the more they hint that they have a higher taste and knowledge of raw art and poetry. Bourdieu (1984) called it slumming, where the art of the lower class gets appreciated by the people belonging to the top tier of the hierarchy of art. The aesthetics and artistic nature of Baulism were getting their rightful appreciation only when people from the upper class started to recognize them. That is when people belonging to the middle class also started to appreciate them. In a crude way, Bourdieu’s theory reflects the truth of society. Class, status, and money steer the wheel and those who would rather live out of it get crushed. They also do not benefit financially as well and do not get the rightful recognition. Moreover, much like how Coote (1995) tells us that what is art and what is aesthetic depends on whether that particular society sees it as art or aesthetic, what constitutes as art and aesthetic within a society also changes with time. Street fashion was not considered fashion, and milkmaid dresses was not a style in its time, they were made to be a fashion statement in different stages and in different times.

I have introduced and discussed Baulism and the Baul sect throughout this paper. Through anthropology Art and Aesthetic discourse, I have shown how Baulism lingers in between the grey area and that creates a strenuous relationship between art and aesthetics by combining them both. Moreover, in modern times with the rise of village core aesthetics and romanticization, Baulism gained new traction and trend. Their music, style, and philosophy have found new spaces in media, fashion, and business. Whether this attention benefits the Bauls is not something that the capitalists seem to care nor do the appropriators. One of the Bauls I have met shared:

Some of our students now learn Baul giti and then go on to become popular artists. They turn their back to us but there is nothing else to be done. Such are the times. I am happy to see them gain success, but I wish they also remembered us

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