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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BAUL AND VAISHNAVISM IN TAGORE'S UNDERSTANDING

*Disha Mondal

M.A. student, India

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ABSTRACT

"In the infinite dualism of death and life there is a harmony. We know that the life of a soul which is finite in its expression and infinite in its principle, must go through the portals of death in its journey to realise the infinite."- Rabindranath Tagore The entire fabric of Tagore's poetry is woven with the threads of Baul tradition and Vaishnava philosophy. Bauls and Vaishnavas share some common beliefs because the most significant influence on the Bauls has been that of Vaishnavism. In these two sects the dominant note is love. Next to Vaishnavism, Rabindranath was greatly influenced by the Bauls. Many of his later writings had an influence of Vaishnava Philosophy and Literature. In *Bhanusimher Padaboli*, one can trace his literary concepts having an influence of Vaishnava lyrics. On the other hand, in many of his plays such as *Prayaschitta (1909)*, *The Post Office (1912)*, *Phalguni (1916)* and songs we find the influence of Bauls. Both the tradition preach that God resides within man and the simplest way to achieve God is by love. Tagore was mesmerized by their ideas of achieving God. Thus, Tagore never welcomed Emancipation through sainthood. He was against the traditional conception of emancipation or *Mukti* because according to him *Mukti* lies in love. According to him love is the highest virtue. The faith of love which Tagore gets from the Vaishnavas is strengthened by the songs of the Bauls.

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INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath was influenced by Vaishnavism to a great extent. We can say there are striking similarities between Vaishnavic humanism and Tagore's humanism. Vaishnavas were the worshiper of love. From the middle age, the *Bhaktas* express their respect and affection towards Lord Krishna. In Vaishnavism, there are five kinds of devotion, Shanta Bhab, Dashya Bhav, Vatsalya Bhav, and Madhurya Bhav. The faith of love which Tagore has gotten from the Vaishnavas is strengthened by the songs of the Bauls. Next to Vaishnavism, the poet is greatly influenced by the cult of Bauls. Thus when he listened to Lalon's composition, *khachar bhitor ochin pakhi kamne ashe jay* ('The unknown bird flies in and out of the cage; / if I could catch it, I would place / the chains of my mind on its feet') Tagore found himself completely. In search of melody, Rabindranath sometimes adopted the Western music and sometimes has taken the folk music of Bengal. The influence of folk music especially the Baul songs can be traced throughout his musical career. The word, Baul refers to a category of wandering minstrels, mystical seers, and preach it through their songs. These songs are linked by recurrent themes of a love for man and God, critiques of established

religion and caste practices, while retaining deep allusions to cult rites. Most of the Bauls emerged from village laboring classes, who may profess either Hindu or Muslim belief. Only the solitary life, far from home and conventional religion, gives to the Baul the freedom of living entirely in accordance with his own feelings. He understands himself as being "madly in love with the Divine Self", and indeed the Baul denotes "mad" or "crazy". This "Divine Spirit" is called, by the Bauls, "the man of the heart", "the man of the mind", or "the unattainable man." On the other hand, the entire fabric of Tagore's poetry is woven with the fine threads of Vaishnav philosophy. *Madhuri Bhav* (Bridal Mysticism) and dedication to God are the most important elements in it. Rabindranath was moved both by the Vaishnavism and Bauls because, love towards all beings, service to fellow beings, condemnation of rituals and message of universal brotherhood are the important aspects of these schools of thoughts. Rabindranath had gone through a lot of literary awakenings and epiphanies in various stages of his life. In his autobiography, he writes how his first literary awakening came from reading the old Bengali poets, Chandidas and Vidyapati. He writes in his *Reminiscences*, *One noon the clouds had gathered thickly. Rejoining in the grateful shade of the cloudy midday rest hour, I lay prone on the bed in my inner room and wrote on a slate the imitation Maithili poem. Gahana kusuma kunjha majhe ...the line was followed by others and they swelled into poems and were subsequently*

*Corresponding author: Disha Mondal,
M.A. student, India.

published in the magazine *Bharati* under the title of *Bhanu Sihar Padabali*.

Tagore was introduced with Vaishnavism in his childhood and when he was in his thirties he came in touch with the Bauls. The simplicity of the Bauls and their songs had mesmerized Rabindranath. His exposure to the Bauls deepened at Silaidaha, where he had come into contact with Gagan Harkara.

So, it seems that Rabindranath was mesmerised by Bauls and Vaishnavism because in both we get the glimpse of the Infinite in the person whom we love. In all love relation the Vaisnavas and the Bauls tried to feel God. In the magazine, *Sadhana*, he has described God as the Supreme lover and the union between human soul and divine can be possible by love according to him. Thus once he wrote, *Bairagya sadhane mukti se amar noi/ Ashankhya bandhan majhe mahanandamoy lovibo/ Muktir sad* (Emancipation is never welcomed through sainthood. Domestic shackles and responsibilities are there to enjoy the taste of freedom).

Actually, Tagore feels that the simplest and easiest way to react God is by love. Love is the highest virtue. The soul of men will feel most desperate, if he does not meet God. Man is a form of the divine and therefore we must have love towards all human beings. Tagore's love for God includes love for everything, which He has created. Poet vehemently says that if one is indifferent and hostile to the service and welfare of human beings and other living creatures, he can not attain God. In 'Fruit Gathering' he says:

God is not in the king's temple even though twenty millions of gold went to the making of that marvel of art and it was consecrated to God with costly rites, for the temple was built in the year when thousands of people whose houses have been burned stood vainly asking for help at his door.

So both in *Mukti* and *Fruit Gathering* we can trace both Vaishnava philosophy and the philosophy of Bauls.

For Tagore, the truth of man's life is in realizing the eternal in love-in complete union with the supreme, so, man's journey is for the union with the eternal and Tagore has given more importance to this *Abhisara* (quest for the beloved) than to the conception of *Union*. For him to walk on this path is to get the divine lover. This idea of *Abhisara* come from Vaishnavism and predominant theme of his poetry. In one of the poems of *Gitanjali* (Songs offerings) Tagore thus writes *Aj jhorer rate tomar avisar / paran sakha bandhu he amar* (Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend?)

During the stay in Shilaidaha(1891-1901), he became increasingly aware of being part of an intrinsic yet unconscious creative process which was drawing out his artistic potential almost inadvertently, leading to his evolution and growth. There seemed to be an energy source within him putting words to his deepest thought and composing melodies for his songs, making him its involuntary voice. *Who are you in the deep recesses of my inner being?*- he asks in a celebrated song. He goes on to answer: *You are my consciousness and my pain, stirred by an inspired touch*. Tagore wrote in a song that dormant in his life's veena was a melody of nectar, which had no words, rhythm or embellishment. He was being driven in a particular direction and led from "being" to "becoming". He explained in a song:

That is what I seek---I seek most---

*It has never been my concern that my quest will ever over--
-..."*

Rabindranath felt truly blessed to find himself in the midst of life that surged around in the skies, the sun and stars and the earth. He felt connect with cosmic creation which seemed to find a resonance in the blood coursing through his veins. In a song he exclaims:

*The sun and star-studded skies- a world throbbing with life.
In the midst of which have I found my place.*

A sense of freedom was predominant in Tagore's mind in this period which is similar to the Bauls. They do not have any kind of bonding with this *sangsara* (world). They are engrossed in their worship of the unattainable God, "the man of our heart". They preach of liberty through their songs. Tagore was influenced by their philosophy of freedom. His freedom would come not through an ascetic withdrawal but through engagement with the world's delights through the senses. He sang:

*My freedom lies in the dust of earth, in the blades of grass
Beyond the pale of body and mind*

The same spirit that suffuses and rules the universe, seemed to dwell within Tagore, guiding his life and work. There was a communion between the infinite forces and its expression in the finite forces and its expression in the finite form of man. *Within limits you remain limitless*, he sang, *and that is why your expression within me is so melodious*. The concept was in consonance with the Upanishadic ideal of God-in-man, the equation between the larger life force or the *paramatma* and the individual or the *jivatma*,--- each complementing the other in a rich eternal dialogue.

Tagore gave a name to this original poet within, the life force of his deep recesses, which found expression in his poetry and songs. He called it his *Jeevan devata*- or God of Life. Rabindranath told E.J. Thompson, *When the jeevan devata idea come to me I felt an overwhelming joy -it seemed a discovery, new with me -in this deepest self seeking expression. I wished to sink into it, to give myself up wholly in it...*

The relationship that Tagore saw between himself and his *jeevan devata* was one of friendship, of bantering, where there was a mutual dependence. Tagore was surprised to find a resonance to this philosophy in the songs of the Bauls that he encountered during his stay in Silaidaha.

Tagore realized that the Baul's *Man of my heart* (moner manush) was no different from his *jeevan devata*. The "inner voice" they regarded not with fear or reverence but with ease. The Baul's message of love was inclusive and did not recognize sectarian divisions of religion and so there were Bauls among Hindus and Muslims. Playing a one-stringed musical instrument called *ektara* the Bauls sing and dance in frenzy. So inspired was Tagore by Baul music that he drew on its musical and rhythmic simplicity, earthy wisdom and poetic quality while composing many of his songs. In one such song Tagore asks

*Little Fireflies, with what abandon have
you spread your two wings!*

Tagore eventually came to internalize the music of the Baul so deeply that in many of his later compositions he took inspiration from Baul music while he based his songs on classical 'ragas' and 'dhrupad' structure. This made the inspirational Baul source quite unrecognizable and such songs are best described as 'Rabindra Baul'. Through their songs the Bauls also preach the message of spiritual freedom. Tagore was influenced by this message too. In many of his short stories, and plays we find Baul like characters who do not have any kind of bonding with other human beings. In the short story, *Atithi (Stranger)*, Tarapada is the central character. He is not more than fifteen or sixteen years older. He is the bird of the forest. He says "leave me completely amongst this universe". Nothing can bind him for a long time He leaves his family and also the work places time and again he quest for something new. He is like a Baul.

Similarly in the plays like *Prayschitta (1909)*, *The Post Office (1912)*, *Phalguni (1916)* influence of Baul philosophy of liberty can be traced.

The main theme of *The Post Office* seems to be the liberation of the child from the bondage of various kinds-social, psychological, emotional and spiritual. Amal is depicted as a diseased child in this play but his illness is hardly physical; it is psychological. Amal longs for communication with the Great Beyond. But he has been advised not to stir out of the house. This is kind of slavery, of tyranny. Now, the Royal Physician has perhaps, rightly diagnosed the real disease of Amal, and so advises the doors and windows to be kept open.

In a letter, C.F Andrews, wrote:

Amal represents the man whose soul has received

The call of the open road...

At last closed gate is opened by the king's own physician... (Rabindranath Tagore, p. 30).

The last scene shows sleep, death, silence but all suffused with an aura of Great Liberation. The lamp blows out but the light of

the stars gives us vision of the Great Beyond. There have been several poems and passages celebrating the starlight as a great ennobler. Says Yeats:

A starlight or a moonlight dome disdains

All that man is

All ere complexities,

The fury and mire of human veins." (Byzantium).

Amal dies last but the soul mingles with God. Thus it is evident that Tagore was greatly influenced by the Bauls. On the other hand, Amal longs for the letter from king. This king is the God. As Amal has firm and unshakable love for God he achieves *Moksha* or emancipation. Thus Vaishnava philosophy can also be found in this play.

Throughout his life the quest for *Param-pita* continued and so he said

Apana k ei jana amar phurabe na

Ei janari songe songe tomai chena (To know myself is a never ending process and in doing so I come to know You)

I and You, Individual and the Creator, Jivatma and Param-pita is one and the same in Tagore's philosophy.

Disha Mondal

M.A.

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