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Rabindranath Tagore and the Bauls: Representation and performance of Bauls as sociopolitical actors

ABSTRACT

*This article reveals the relationship between Rabindranath Tagore and the Bauls against the backdrop of the politics of nationalism between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century in Bengal. Tagore's works – including novels (*Gora *and* Ghare Baire*), plays* (Phalguni), *and songs composed between 1900 and 1920 – are thoroughly influenced by the ideologies of Bauls, whose liminal identities (of being in the world and yet outside of it)*[1] *play a significant part in the formation of his political, philosophical and spiritual identity. Tagore's subsequent popularity amongst the middle-class bourgeois Bengalis, in turn, shapes the representation of Bauls more as* political *rather than merely spiritual, musical or cultural performers of Bengal. From a marginal and 'shameful' social positionality, Tagore's portrayal of Bauls transforms them into political figures and agents of self-reflection, reform and covert resistance to hegemonic powers of control and domination through their world view, performance and lifestyle.*

KEYWORDS

Bauls
politics of nationalism
politics of liminality
covert resistance
anti-imperialism
home-sentiment

1. A song by Lalan Fakir, one of the earliest Bauls on record, talks about '*zinda dehe morar boshon*', literally translated as the living body wearing the attire of the dead. This has several connotations, one of which is the constant awareness of death and the 'other' world while living in this one.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhenge mor gharer chabi niye jabi ke amare
O bondhu amar?
Na pey tomar dekha eka eka din je amar kate na re
(Who will come release me, and break my door, oh dear friend?
My days are hard to spend, not being able to see you for days)
Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore wrote this song in the Bengali month of *Poush* in 1918, appropriating the tune from a Baul song by Gaganchandra Dam, '*Dekhechhi rup sagare maner manush kacha shona*' (I have caught a glimpse of the man/woman of the heart in the ocean of beauty). Gaganchandra Dam, popularly known as Gagan Harkara,[2] was a rural postman working in Sheleidah post office, but his Baul songs had attracted Tagore's attention. Tagore encountered Baul songs while working in his father's estate in Sheleidah,[3] where Gagan would deliver and collect letters. Tagore collected, inscribed and brought these songs back with him to Santiniketan in West Bengal. In 1916, he published some of Gagan's songs in the literary magazine *Prabasi*, popular amongst the middle-class erudite Bengalis (Chattopadhyay 1916).

In 1922, Tagore published his book *Creative Unity*, in which he mentions the considerable influence Baul songs and philosophy, and Gagan in particular, had over his literature and life. While acknowledging the simple veneer of the words, Tagore also mentions the simultaneous profundity of their meaning underneath. In addition, he raises questions of class, education, literacy and caste, describing Gagan as 'almost illiterate' and 'a village postman, earning about ten shillings a month' (Tagore 1922: 69). He adds, '[t]he sentiment, to which he gave such intensity of expression, is common to most of the songs of his sect. And it is a sect, almost exclusively confined to that lower floor of society, where the light of modern education hardly finds an entrance, while wealth and respectability shun its utter indigence' (Tagore 1922: 69). By openly acknowledging the immense spiritual depth in these songs despite their lowly caste and social status, Tagore not only points out the irony of modern colonial education, devoid of spiritual depth, but also establishes the absurdity of caste hierarchy and such classifications that determined social respectability during his time. He adds, '[t]he dignity of man, in his eternal right of Truth, finds expression in the […] song, composed, not by a theologian or a man of letters, but by one who belongs to that ninety per cent of the population of British India whose education has been far less than elementary, in fact almost below zero' (Tagore 1922: 67–87). He unabashedly accepts his debt to the Bauls for his great inspiration, thus challenging preconceived ideas about this sect, of which much had been written in the literary circles in derogatory terms.[4]

This article reveals the relationship between Rabindranath Tagore and the Bauls against the backdrop of the politics of nationalism between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century in Bengal. Tagore's works – including novels, plays and poems – during the twentieth century are thoroughly influenced by the spiritual ideologies of Bauls, whose liminal identities (of being in the world and yet outside it)[5] significantly inform the formation of his political, philosophical and spiritual identity. Tagore's subsequent popularity amongst the middle-class bourgeois Bengalis, in turn, shaped the representation of Bauls as more *political* rather than merely spiritual, musical or

2. In Bengali, the word *harkara* means 'postman', and it was common custom to add the profession to the name, as that also defined the caste to a certain extent.
3. A small town in Kushtia district in present-day Bangladesh.
4. Such as, in accounts of Risley (1891), Wilson (1828) and Jogendranath Bhattacharya (1896). Please see Risley (1891); Wilson (1828); Bhattacharya (1896).
5. A song by Lalan Fakir, one of the earliest Bauls on record, talks about '*zinda dehe morar boshon*', literally translated as the living body wearing the attire of the dead. This has several connotations, one of which is the constant awareness of death and the 'other' world while living in this one.

cultural performers of Bengal. Tagore's influence transformed the marginal and 'shameful' social positionality of the Bauls into political figures and agents of self-reflection, reform and covert resistance to hegemonic powers of control and domination through their world view, performance and lifestyle.

Tagore's politics, as I argue, are those of universal cooperation, good will and amicability (resonant with Baul philosophy of universal humanism[6]), surpassing the factional politics of the times. Analysing his political novels (such as *Gora* and *Ghare Baire*) and his play, *Phalguni*, I reveal Tagore's relationship with the Bauls and his vacillating liminal position, in between support for the 'Western-style reform movement' (Copley 2000: 13) and a simultaneous sense of rootedness or anti-imperialism. Tagore evades definitions as he constantly negotiates in between categories, transgressing them to reveal the porosity of their limiting borders. These borders that roughly constitute the binary between the '*inner*' and the '*outer*' (a discussion of which appears often in Tagore's works) can be further subdivided into self (inner) and other (outer); body (inner) and environment (outer); India or the nation (inner) and the rest of the world (outer); East (inner) and West (outer) and the planet or Earth (inner) and the rest of the universe (outer). Tagore's works demonstrate his desire to transgress limiting categories, dissolving the difference between 'inner' and 'outer', which I recognize as a 'politics of liminality'. Partha Chatterjee discusses the separation between the autonomous domain of spiritual interiority that the anti-colonial dissenters had discovered and the 'outer' domain of British colonizers' hard politics (Chatterjee 1993). Tagore unites the 'inner' with the 'outer', thus rendering the spiritual political and the political spiritual. Tagore and the Bauls engage in a dialectical relationship – while Tagore's politics is increasingly defined by Baul philosophy, Bauls constitute an alternative space of political dissent in the history of twentieth-century Bengal.

II. THE INTERVENTION OF BAUL PHILOSOPHY IN TAGORE'S 'NATION' AND ITS POLITICS

In 1905, after the British Partition of Bengal, Tagore published some of his *swadesi* or nation-oriented songs in a booklet called *Baul*. Later, he published some of Lalan Fakir's[7] songs in *Prabasi*. By naming the collection of *swadesi* '*Baul*', he, therefore, likens not only nation sentiments with Baul sentiments but also Baul philosophy with the Bengal landscape, as most of these songs celebrate the *mati* (land) and *nodi* (river) of Bengal. In 1905, Tagore composes songs like *Amar desher mati* ('My Country's soil') and *Amar Sonar Bangla* ('My Golden Bengal') (Dasgupta 1993), the latter adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh during their National Liberation War in 1971. Tagore uses the Freedom movement's existing tropes of resistance till the late 1890s and early 1900s, such as those of the country or Bengal as the 'mother', the needful assertion of Hindus and Muslims being the same, and yet popularizing a Sanskrit phrase '*Vande Mataram*'. The early twentieth century sees a transformation in Tagore's approaches to nationalism or anti-imperialist thoughts. This phase coincides with his encounters with the Bauls in Bangladesh, leading one to believe that the Bauls had considerable influence on Tagore and his political philosophy.

Ashis Nandy categorizes Tagore as one of the 'dissenters among dissenters', who 'regarded nationalism as a by-product of the western nation-state system and of the forces of homogenization let loose by the western worldview' (Nandy 1994: x–xii). Nandy recognizes that Tagore, instead of essentializing

6. According to the Baul philosophy, which was derived from Vaishnav-Sahajiya philosophy, 'Isvara [god] is man in his true or natural state (*sahaja manus*). He is made of love (*prema*), and when he is encountered, the Baul feels a continuous bliss which arises from love. During ritual intercourse, Isvara meets Kulakundalini, who is also believed to be Prakrti and another aspect of the man of the heart. Isvara merges with her, and both return to his home in the crown of the head…The feeling between Isvara and Kulakundalini is called the bliss of union (*milanananda*) and is assumed to be identical to the union of Radha and Krsna in the paradise of the body (*deha-Vrndavana*). To feel this way continually is the state of *sahaja*'. Please see McDaniel (1989: 182).

7. Lalan Fakir is considered one of the earliest Bauls on record. He lived from the late eighteenth till the late nineteenth century in a village called Chheuria, in the district of Kushtia (in present-day Bangladesh). Tagore has self-confessedly acknowledged his creative debt to this mystic poet, musician and social reformer.

the nation as homogenous and singular, perceived the need for tolerance and acceptance of a universal philosophy of humanism, with a plurality of visions and approaches, in the struggle against imperialism. This is what the Bauls provide in their songs and philosophy, which Tagore appropriates into the realm of politics, offering an alternative way to perceive the 'nation' or a sense of 'nation-ness'. In his celebrated work, *Nationalism*, Tagore makes an appeal to reclaim the idea of 'nation' and separate it from the colonial and Western concept of nation state, '[f]orm yourself into a nation, and resist this encroachment of the Nation' (Tagore 1985: 18–19).

Tagore's distinction of 'nation' from 'Nation' goes back to the analysis of 'nationalism' by Ernest Gellner. According to Gellner,

> [t]he basic deception and self-deception practiced by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous impersonal society, with mutually substitutable individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. That is what really happens.
>
> (Gellner 1988: 53–62)

Gellner's view is that 'nationalism' is a struggle against that replacement, which, after initial struggling against the 'new alien culture', begins to thrive eventually, but is unable to replace fully the effects of the previously dominant 'high culture', thus assimilating into something new. He affirms, '[i]t eliminates the alien high culture, but does not then replace it by the old, local culture, it revives or invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects' (Gellner 1988: 53–62). Tagore's sense of 'a nation' returns repeatedly to an understanding and appropriation of the 'folk' (specifically Baul) culture, therefore reversing the process of colonialism itself. If colonial encounters necessarily obliterated the folk 'low' culture, Tagore's nation-ness returns the 'folk' into the mainstream, including them in the process of dissent and decolonization.

Nationalism, according to Nandy, came to be defined by a conflicting relationship between the indigenous paternal authority and an exogenous imperial authority, both sharing characteristics in their claims to the 'motherland' or the territory (Nandy 1994: 50). Bauls, however, remain outside the dual Oedipal dialectic that Nandy constructs, as they dissent against even the 'indigenous paternal authority', which is dominated mostly by upper-caste Hindus, therefore also belonging to the class of 'dissenters among dissenters'. Bauls, rooted in their indigenous identities, counter imperialism on the one hand and heavily segregated caste-based Hinduism and orthodox Islam on the other, while not subscribing to the tropes of progress and unilinear time. On the contrary, their own semantic system of language (Sandhya *bhasha* or the twilight language) (Dimock 1966) and codified rituals (*Ulta Sadhan* or reverse rituals)[8] reify the presence of divinity within every human being

8. 'The main principle is that of *ultasadhana*, which involves yogic exercises that produce a regressive or upward movement in the bodily processes. It is believed that in the normal course, the force of *pravrti* or activity and change moves in a downward direction, taking the body along the path of decay and destruction. The aim of self-discipline is to reverse this process by moving it in the upward direction of *nivrtti*, or rest. More specifically, the bodily practices involve the retention of the *bindu* or *sukra* (semen) and prevention of its waste'. See Chatterjee (1993: 195–96).

rather than in an organized system of hierarchical religion, thus denying and subverting existing hegemonic authority.

Amartya Mukhopadhyay points out how Tagore is on a continuum between abstract and concrete or real nationalisms, where nation is both an 'idea' and a concrete geopolitical landscape. In a 1928 letter to C. F. Andrews, Tagore writes, 'I love India, but my India is an Idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world' (Tagore 1939: 145). Nonetheless, Tagore also asserts that to fully comprehend the idea, one has to constantly intervene in the concrete realities of the 'fixed and circumscribed space' (Tagore 1961: 665) that construct that idea. Mukhopadhyay treats these as separate and therefore mutually exclusive categories on a continuum of 'patriotic praxis' (Mukhopadhyay 2010: 103) between which one needs to navigate continually to understand India, but Tagore finds the reconciliation between the two in a subjective perception, recognizing one in the other and invoking the *atmashakti* or 'self-strengthening' (Tagore 1961). In other words, the two views of the nation – as an idea or abstraction and a concrete, experiential reality – need not be mutually exclusive categories, as each contains the other.

It is in this gap between the ideation and the concrete evidence that the Bauls' influence on Tagore's political ideologies intervenes. The Baul philosophy propagates autonomy and knowing the self, which Tagore embraces as a political philosophy and strategy to create a sense of nationhood amongst the colonial subjects. By imagining Mother India as also the next-door, 'half-fed' (Tagore 1961: 665) woman, Tagore dissociates the elitist imagination and association of the country with Vedic tropes and re-attaches it with commonplace 'folk' subjectivity.[9]

III. POLITICS OF LIMINALITY

While against replicating the imperial political model to resist colonialism, Tagore found a solution in the 'politics of liminality' or a kind of threshold position, which connects the 'home' with the 'world', the 'interior' with the 'exterior' and the past with the present. Thus, his affiliation is no longer only nationalistic or internationalist defined by geopolitical borders, but returns to a direct association with the landscape. Tagore defines nationalism as a personal relationship, rather than from a position of power. His relationship to the 'nation' is more *haptic* than *optic*, emphasizing intimacy and closeness rather than the distance between the *seer* and the *seen*, the self and the other.

What Nandy recognizes as patriotism (as opposed to nationalism) in Tagore is what I term 'home-sentiment', where the relationship with the 'nation' is formed with an understanding not of 'self' as opposed to the 'other', but of the porosity of the boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. Just as a home can also become a space for contestation, conflict or difference in opinions, Tagore allows for possibilities of dialogue and differences even within the 'home', instead of treating 'nation' as an unquestioned homogenous ideology. Tagore metaphorizes the nation as a 'home' with a door (a threshold that connects inner with outer) rather than as a territory marked by impermeable political borders. Not only do the perimeters of home keep expanding and contracting for Tagore, the borders also keep dissolving to blur the distinction between categories.

Tagore composed *Bhenge mor gharer chabi niye jabi* in 1918, on the themes of home, house, outside and the inside. Tagore's position is liminal,[10] almost

9. The nation was associated with a Sanskritized ideal of maternal divinity, perpetuated by phrases such as *Vande Mataram* and images of the Bharat Lakshmi, which were difficult to be associated with any religion other than Hinduism. This excluded groups with other religious affiliations such as Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, etc. Tagore himself protested against the use of the phrase '*Vande Mataram*' in the Parliament in a letter to Subhash Chandra Bose in 1937. 'The novel *Anandamath* is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But Parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate [...] Bengali Hindus have become agitated over this matter, but it does not concern only Hindus. Since there are strong feelings on both sides, a balanced judgment is essential. In pursuit of our political aims we want peace, unity and good will – we do not want the endless tug of war that comes from supporting the demands of one faction over the other' (Dutta and Robinson 1997).

10. The word 'liminal' comes from the Latin 'limen', which means 'threshold'. *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged 10th Edition*, HarperCollins Publishers, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/liminal. Accessed 30 June 2015.

precarious, on the threshold of an imagined harmony he creates out of his negotiation of borders between different political factions and approaches during the Freedom movement. One of the recurring poetic images in Tagore's writings during the first two decades of the twentieth century is that of the *duar* or door and his urgent, desperate plea for it to be broken. Although metaphoric and spiritual, it is deeply political, resonant of the Freedom movement, where the boundaries of 'home' and territory are constantly questioned, contested and shifted. This song evokes imprisonment, as Tagore implores the unnamed *bondhu* or 'friend' to break the locked door and release him from the restrictive boundaries of the *ghar* (or home). The door serves as a liminal object that both guards the inner, keeping the outer away, and also marks a clear separation between the two domains – there is, therefore, a sense of both security and imprisonment, as the urgent tone of the plea for freedom is juxtaposed against imageries of the room, which evokes domestic security.

Simultaneously present is the anticipation of the arrival of the one for whom the poet longs, seldom named, but always described as 'the grand one' or the 'enlightened one'. Sometimes, the one to bring liberation is the king or royalty – as in *Rajarshi* (1940) and *Arup Ratan* (1920) – never dictatorial, but loving, generous and benevolent, sometimes representative of divinity. Therefore, sovereignty and spirituality are often equivalent in Tagore's works, offering a model of governance based on love, empathy and compassion rather than autocracy and dictatorialism. It is pertinent that British imperialism was referred to as the Raj, meaning 'royalty' (Metcalf 1979). In contrast, Tagore's kingly figures are not feared, but desired. Tagore uses the existing tropes of hierarchy to refuse, resist and even inverse the meaning of the *Raja*. Replacing the British Raj with the Raja, a royal figure that embodies Baul principles of universal love, compassion and empathy, Tagore creates another liminal character, almost a reflection or creative double of himself. This unnamed figure is again bifurcated into the exteriority of the king and the interiority of the saint that embraces Baul principles.

IV. BORDERS, TRANSGRESSIONS AND CONNECTIONS – REPRESENTATION OF BAULS BY TAGORE AND OF TAGORE AS A BAUL

The 1905 Partition of Bengal was performed along communal lines – the western part populated by majority Hindus and the eastern part by majority Muslims. Tagore resisted this British colonial agenda of divide-and-rule in India (Riddick 2006) through his literary contributions. It is not a coincidence that Tagore composed the song *Amar Sonar Bangla* ('My Golden Bengal') in the same tune and style of the Baul song he heard from Gagan Harkara (*Ami kothay Pabo Tare* – 'Where shall I meet him?') that same year. The composition of this song in the Baul model does two things – first, Tagore includes the non-mainstream, marginal and indigenous art forms that lie outside the purview of the 'respectable' middle-class Bengali intelligentsia, therefore marking a return to 'folk' culture; second, he uses the trope of the land and attachment towards it ('home-sentiment') to counter religious division and encourage solidarity among the people in Bengal. The support of indigenous Baul 'folk' forms (considered 'vile', 'lowly' and denigrated in upper class circles) from Tagore was a statement to bring them closer to the Freedom movements, erstwhile dominated by upper- or middle-class Bengalis educated in the Western system.

a. The Baul as a political figure and Tagore as a Baul

Phalguni

Ten years after the first Partition of Bengal,[11] in 1915, Tagore himself played the role of a blind Baul in his own play, *Phalguni* (translated as *The Cycle of Spring*) (Tagore 1943: 333–401). This is a meta-play, with archetypal characters such as a King, a Pundit, a Vizier, a Poet, a Dada,[12] an Old Man, a Watchman, a Ferryman, a Leader and a blind Minstrel (or a Baul). The unnamed characters retain amorphous identities, metaphors rather than actual people. This play reflects Baul wisdom through the songs and the conversations between characters. The characters seek the Old Man, who hides in a cave and 'is more existent than anything else. He lives within the ribs of creation' (Tagore 1943: 363). The Old Man can be interpreted as death ('while you are seeking him, he is after you') (Tagore 1943: 370). Only the Blind Minstrel knows the whereabouts of the Old Man and leads Chandra (the only named character) to his cave. 'Because he does not see with his eyes, therefore he sees with his whole body and mind and soul' (Tagore 1943: 354). The Old Man, discovered at the end, returns as the Leader, but much younger. The play celebrates youth, madness, freedom, play and renewal by the use of their antitheses – stagnancy, death, duty and reason – represented by several characters in the play. But the Baul figure is the central character that leads Chandra to his discovery of truth. The naming of Chandra is also significant. In Sanskrit, '*chandra*' means the moon. The moon plays an important role in the Bauls' body-based rituals, which are termed '*caricandra*' or the rituals of 'four moons'. Chandra in this play, therefore, reminds one of the esoteric significance of the moon in Baul practices. Tagore refers to 'three women', a metaphor used in Baul songs to signify the three nerves in the body that meet at the base of the spine.[13] The Minstrel narrates a dream – 'I dreamt that three women, with their hair hanging loose…' (Tagore 1943: 393) – only to be interrupted. The Minstrel's songs are resonant of a typical Baul song yearning for the beloved or the divine,

> I lose thee, to find thee back again and again,
> My beloved.
> Thou leavest me, that I may receive thee all the more,
> When thou returnest.
> Thou canst vanish behind the moment's screen
> Only because thou art mine for evermore,
> My beloved.
> When I go in search of thee, my heart trembles,
> Spreading ripples across my love.
> Thou smilest through thy disguise of utter absence,
> And my tears sweeten thy smile.
>
> (Tagore 1943: 399)

This play is an example of Tagore's undying optimism in the face of extreme adversity. He does not give up on the potential of human spirit and the significance of renewal and youth.

Tagore's nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, later drew an image of Tagore as the blind Baul, which became a popular iconography in literature and artwork in Bengal. Many book covers, CD covers, books on Tagore, or on Bauls, and even sign boards of tea stalls in Santiniketan now bear that image of Tagore in a Baul robe, carrying an *ektara* above his head, in joyful abandon. Thereafter,

11. Bengal was reunited in 1911 only to be divided again in 1947, after India's Independence.

12. In Bengali, the word *dada* is used to mean a much respected elder brother. In this play, the character of Dada has been represented as one who is pedantic and burdened by duties of life.

13. Sometimes, they also appear as the three rivers in the body and the place where they meet as the Tribeni Ghat. Bauls have inherited these esoteric ideas from the Sahajiya-Tantric traditions. 'Frequent use is made of such terms as *swarupa* and *tripinale* or *tribeni*, the place where three rivers meet, the symbol of the place at the base of the spine where in the Tantric physiology the three tubes or "nerves" come together' (Dimock 1966: 259).

the figure of the archetypal Baul begins to be visually represented as an older, wise figure carrying an *ektara* on one hand and a *duggi* on the other.[14] This iconographic representation is associated with a political figure, advocating the importance of renewal and change in the sociopolitical realms.

Jeanne Openshaw points out that in many ways, the Baul of *Phalguni* – 'this mystical sage-like figure, whirling with half-closed eyes in self-absorbed ecstasy, […] devoid of background or context of any kind' (Openshaw 2004: 41) – was responsible for forming the image of the ideal Baul. This image, she suggests, has been perpetuated in 'a mutually reinforcing pattern' (Openshaw 2004: 41) amongst both the gentry and 'the new semi-professional class of Bauls who mostly replicate this image […] lauded as authentic Bauls and receive further patronage' (Openshaw 2004: 41). In addition, Tagore embodies the philosophy, willingly submitting to representations of him as the blind Baul, in paintings, printed pictures and photographs or even in performance of his own lifestyle. Such performances obliterate the differences and distances between the creator and the created, as he himself transposes himself in the role of a character he has created (in the mould of a Baul figure) for his plays. Tagore at times even signed his own works as 'Rabindra Baul' (Ghosh 2006: 102–03), embodying fully the role of Bauls in his literary life.

In my understanding, the distancing suggested by the Tagore-inspired image of Baul as an introspective ascetic removed from worldly concerns was required at a time that was excessively torn by factionalism and intense attachment to particular affiliations. His Baul is detached and dispassionate and yet involved as an advocate for social change. The blindness is not symbolic of being unaware but rather of an introspective vision that blindness necessitates. Blindness also implies fairness or impartiality to external forms. The Baul is not removed from the social concerns of the time, as he vocalizes the need for a certain distancing from extremist ideologies. By including a blind Baul in his piece, Tagore inverses the outward gaze to an internal one, urging introspection and self-awareness against the backdrop of the reform movements in Renaissance Bengal.

Bauls also embody the Hindu–Muslim concord by retaining traces of rituals descended from both these religions. In their songs, they find equivalences between the human body and the body of the universe, thus creating unity not only amongst human beings but also connecting humans with every other particle in the universe. Tagore utilizes their egalitarian philosophy to engage in discourses of Hindu–Muslim unity against the backdrop of colonialism, while also asserting his world views about the 'nation' and 'nationalism' as one that creates conversations between the past and the present, the West and the East and the 'home' and the rest of the world.

Gora

Tagore's seminal work, *Gora* (Tagore 1997), also begins with an anonymous Baul, who sings '*khachar bhitor ochin pakhi komne 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 1997: 1). The Baul is not further investigated as a prominent character. These figures remain untethered, spectral and anonymous, appearing and disappearing in his plots, just like the 'unknown bird' described in the song. Although this may support Openshaw's claim that these Bauls are unconnected to any context, I suggest these figures serve as the Greek choric figures that are peripheral, yet central, to the plot – they carry

14. A *duggi* is a small kettle drum that is similar to the bass drum of the table pair. It is carried by most Bauls on the left side and played with the left hand, while the *ektara* is played with the right hand. Please see Capwell (1986).

truth and knowledge; disconnected, dispassionate, they serve as a neutral, omniscient storyteller.

Tagore accompanies his parallel between the ideal Baul figure and the ideal 'freedom fighter' with a master-disciple relationship between an older wise figure and a younger student. In *Gora*, the dynamic Paresh babu is a mentor to Binoy and eventually also to Gora. Tagore wrote this novel in 1909, much after his encounter with Bauls in Sheleidah. The central debate is between the orthodox Hindus (represented by Gora, Anandamayi, Abinash and Krishnadayal) and the nineteenth-century reformatory group of Brahmos (represented by Sucharita, Paresh babu, Haran babu and Baradasundari). This debate between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and secularism and form and formless is expressed through dialectical interactions between the characters who represent certain political ideologies. Paresh babu, who gradually transforms Gora's religious rigidities, can be likened to a Baul master, while Gora is a double of Tagore himself. Nandy points out, 'Paresh babu's reformism is "natural" and derives more from his personal morality and spiritual sensitivity than from any ideology' (Nandy 1994: 37). Nandy perhaps overlooks the influence of Baul philosophy that Tagore imbibes in creating Paresh babu, as he becomes a Baul-like figure representing Baul ideas as a form of spiritual and internal reform. Tagore, therefore, offers alternative solutions of dissent to replace a concept of Nationalism derived from Western nation states. When Gora and Baradasundari engage in debates on the significance of 'form' and 'formless', in aggressive polemical rhetoric, Paresh babu interjects mildly, presenting his outlook respectfully,

> In contrast to Gora's belligerent attitude, Poresh Babu's serene self-absorption – a deep tranquility that was well beyond the reach of all argument – filled Binoy's heart with respectful admiration. He told himself, 'Holding or refuting views is no great achievement; it is far more difficult to achieve fullness, tranquility and an inner self-assurance. However much one may argue whether some statement is true or false, the real truth is contained by what has been gained'.
>
> (Tagore 1997: 51)

It is ironic, however, that Gora, though an orthodox Hindu at the beginning of the novel, embodies the dichotomy between the West and the East quite literally, as he is an orphaned child of an Irish couple, abandoned during the mutiny of 1857. This discovery of his Irish past makes Gora acknowledge and 'confront the fact that Paresh babu's religious consciousness is superior to his and so is Anandamayi's practical morality' (Nandy 1994: 39). Tagore recreates in the plot of *Gora* the transformative effect that Bauls have on him during his stay in Sheleidah as Paresh babu is instrumental in bringing about ideological changes in Gora. Nandy confirms, '[o]f the four [Binoy, Paresh, Anandamayi and Sucharita], Paresh provides the metaphysical and moral fulcrum for the story and is the main agent of change in Gora's personality' (Nandy 1994: 40).

Ghare Baire

In 1916, Tagore wrote *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) (Tagore 2004), a political novel set against the Bengal Partition of 1905 and the politics of the borders associated with it, where he delves deep into questions of the 'inner' and the 'outer', the very title suggesting this dichotomy. Tagore sets

up a triangular romantic relationship among Bimala, the housewife with a new-found passion for the Freedom struggle; Nikhilesh, her husband and a mouthpiece for humanistic ideals and Sandip, a selfish, passion-inflicted, patriarchal nationalistic leader who deifies and worships the nation through his masculine and almost desirous incantations of '*Vande Mataram*'. It almost becomes impossible to distinguish between the God that Sandip creates out of the nation and the divinity he imposes on Bimala. Bimala and the nation become transposable in Sandip's masculine fantasies, while Nikhil recognizes the human in Bimala, and the nation not as a whole, but composed of many individuals connected by their humanity (a concept directly resonant with the Bauls). Nikhilesh says,'My Bharatvarsha does not comprise only of bhadraloks. I know that my country gets more and more degraded as the people beneath my station become poorer, and that it gets devastated by their suffering' (Tagore 2004: 131). While Sandip describes Nikhilesh's drawing room as 'an amorphous kind of place where the outside mingled with the inside' (Tagore 2004: 65); he admonishes Nikhilesh, Bimala and their relationship as confined within the narrowness of domesticity – 'Sitting at home for 9 years, they have constantly believed that the outside is but a mirror image of the inside. Today, they realize that the two which had never been one cannot suddenly blend into each other' (Tagore 2004: 195). Nikhilesh, by contrast, resists divisive boundaries, not only in his personal relationship with Bimala ('Our love for each other will be worthwhile only if our relationship is confirmed by the reality outside') (Tagore 2004: 16), but also in his relationship with the nation:

> Today, our thoughts, movements, food habits and dress codes are all in harmony with the rest of the world. That is why I think it is an age which all races are fortunate to be a part of, and there is nothing brave about not accepting it as such.
>
> (Tagore 2004: 25).

As Manju Radhakrishnan and Debasmita Roychowdhury reiterate,

> In the novel *Ghare Baire*, Tagore's distrust of extremism is borne out by communal violence. In the history of the Indian national movement, we see a similar episode where communalism entered the Indian political body, its evils affecting the social life of Hindus and Muslims alike.
>
> (Radhakrishnan and Roychowdhury 2003: 32)

In this novel, he creates characters that are mouthpieces for contrary approaches to nationalistic politics while authorial sympathies clearly lean towards balanced figures with moderate views, like that of Nikhilesh and *Mastermoshai*, sometimes clearly representing Baul tenets of compassion, humanism and renunciation. While Sandip creates 'nation' as an abstraction and a God to be worshipped ('I really think of the nation as a God' where 'hatred is also part of worship') (Tagore 2004: 37), Nikhilesh's nation is composed of individual people and divinity within those people, individuation without discrimination ('you should not discriminate between two human beings, and therefore, between two nations') (Tagore 2004: 37). Nikhil adds, 'I do not forbid you to deify the nation, but can the rituals of your worship be performed by simultaneously hating the divinity present in other nations?' (Tagore 2004: 37), therefore complicating 'nation-ness' and questioning, if not blurring, nationalistic boundaries. Tagore also uses metaphors common in

Baul songs, such as that of a caged bird and the cage,[15] when Nikhilesh talks about free will/freedom, confinement/bondage and also the inner and the outer – first at a microcosmic, familial level, then at a broader national level, and finally on a universal plane,

> On seeing him, and before saying anything else, I blurted out, 'Mastermoshai, freedom is the greatest thing for a human being. Everything else is insignificant, almost nothing compared to that.' […] I said, 'One cannot understand anything from books. I have read in the shastras that one's desire is one's greatest bondage; it binds not just oneself, but the other. But words are hollow. On the day I am able to release my bird from its cage, I will realize that the bird has also liberated me. When I keep someone encaged, that person in turn binds me through my own free will; that willful captivity is stronger than any fetters you could tie me with. Everybody thinks that the ritual of purification has to be performed elsewhere. But it is performed nowhere except in the ambit of one's desire.
>
> (Tagore 2004: 206–07)

He employs the Baul metaphor of the mirror and the marketplace to convey the illusory nature of truth (or equivalently, love) – 'Whenever I have wanted to possess the *mirror* and lock it up inside a casket, the image has moved away'; 'I have found her, lost her, and found her again in the crowded *marketplace* of life' (Tagore 2004: 90, 91, emphasis added). In Baul songs, the mention of the Arshinagar ('city of mirrors' – 'I have not seen him even once / my neighbor / who lives in a city of mirrors / near my house') (Salomon 1995: 199) commonly signifies the layers of illusion enveloping the material world.

Tagore's characters also mirror the master-disciple dialectical relationship that the Bauls espouse ('Don't get lost in confusion. / Turn to a *murshid* [master] / And you'll learn the solution') (Salomon 1995: 201).[16] The word *mastermoshai* literally means 'teacher' or 'wise mentor'. Semantically, the word poses an interesting juxtaposition of the English 'master' and the Bengali *moshai*, thus completing the harmonious assimilation that Tagore seeks in the colonial encounter through the medium of the all-embracing Baul. Like the Bauls, he dismisses formal or literature education of the 'Shastra', which comes with upper-class Brahmin privileges, in favour of experiential education of the autonomous self. *Mastermoshai*, on the other hand, in renunciatory Baul-like manner, responds – '[w]e think we have gained freedom when we get what we desire. But freedom is actually to be able to sacrifice sincerely what we desire' (Tagore 2004: 207). *Mastermoshai* is the mouthpiece of Baul ideology, voicing humanistic ideals that go beyond hierarchical and divisive relationalities – 'For me, the only genuine relationship between human beings is one of reciprocal respect; devotion is totally beyond what I deserve' (Tagore 2004: 152). *Mastermoshai*, therefore, becomes a liminal Baul-like figure, maybe even Tagore's own creative double, unafraid to transgress traditional nationalistic boundaries.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is a regular engagement of study and enquiry for Tagore and his contemporaries. Caught in this dance of the modern and the traditional, the 'folk' became a cultural realm needing protection from the rapid changes in the modernizing society. Anxieties of the Gandhian faction regarding foreign infiltration necessitated a divide between the self and the 'Other', leading to a focus on the ethnic, handmade and the

15. 'Within the cage the unknown bird comes and goes. If I could catch him, I would clamp the iron of my mind upon his feet. My whole life long I have nourished that bird, and he still evades me. I do not understand – I have given you bananas and the milk of my breast, O bird, and still you ignore my coaxing'. Please see Dimock (1966: 261).

16. A song by Lalan Fakir, translated by Carol Salomon.

local. Tagore surpasses this need to protect borders. He, being a 'liminal' figure, ruptures (or at least blurs) these boundaries that separate castes, classes, ideas and spheres to create a more collaborative and harmonious structure. What Tagore aspires towards is a kind of Turnerian *communitas* (Turner 1979) where each person retains unique individualities but collectively succeeds in subverting the normative social structure.[17]

17. In his book, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology*, Victor Turner engages in the discussion of the distinction between *communitas* and *communion*. Turner explains that in communion, as theorized by Georges Gurvitch, the concept of the individual 'I' is lost in the fusion with the collective. However, *communitas* preserves individual distinctiveness. *Communitas* helps to invert the normative social structure but is also vulnerable to the structural environment. *Communitas* is more inclusive, while social structures maintain their exclusivity in the form of in-groups, communities divided into several structural units.

V. CONCLUSION

As Tagore cannot be constricted in any one specific role, scholars have debated how to categorize and identify him in the context of the nationalist movements in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (1995) categorize him as the 'myriad-minded man' for the breadth of diverse works he has accomplished as well as for the contradictory belief-systems he simultaneously embraces. As Patrick Colm Hogan points out, '[h]e was like his own character, Gora, who defended traditional custom rigidly when in the company of colonial collaborationists and mimics, but who attacked traditional custom when in the tradition-bound villages' (Hogan 2003: 11). Tagore's contradictions are meant to oppose extremism and hegemonic universalism. To lend pluralism and diversity, he supports a universalism that propagates unity and *communitas*, but not communion.

Although Tagore eschews the *dehatattva* aspect of the Bauls in his appropriation of the philosophy, he transforms the Baul into a political figure. He emphasizes the politics of liminality (as in Baul songs, philosophy and lifestyle) as a form of alternative, humanistic and yet subversive method of combating imperialism and social issues. In 1910, Tagore delivered a public lecture on *Brahmotsav* (The Brahmo Festival), where he spoke about the egalitarian and esoteric messages of the Bauls entrenched in humanitarian principles. Santidev Ghosh transcribes in his work Tagore's speech at the festival,

> A few days ago, I met two Bauls of a special community in the village. 'Would you tell me on the speciality of your religion?' said I to them. One said, 'Difficult to say, can't be said aright'. The other said, 'Of course, it can be said. It's easy. We say this: you will have to know yourself at the very outset in accordance with the advice of the *Guru* ("Master")'. 'Why don't you make all people of the world hear the words of your religion?' 'One who will be thirsty', he said, 'would himself come to Ganga'. 'Are you seeing that?' said I. 'Is anyone coming?' With a very peaceful smile, the man said, 'Everyone will come. Everyone will have to come'.
>
> (Ghosh 2006: 102)

First, here, we witness that Tagore's dialectical relationship with the Bauls is literal and not just historical. Tagore's knowledge and eventual appropriation of their philosophy are a result of many such conversations with the Bauls regarding faith, rituals, world views and practices in daily life. Second, by openly delivering a public lecture about the Bauls to the middle-class Bengali men, Tagore also retrieves them from their position of marginality and social ignominy and demonstrates the depth of their esoteric faith to the public. Third, we also see that the context of the speech is a Brahmo festival, celebrated mostly by upper-class literary circles. Tagore's endorsement of Bauls amongst the Bengali literati confirms his regard for the group and

demonstrates his disregard for class-based divisions. That the Bauls were by this time regularly performing in the urban-middle-class-frequented *Poush Mela* (essentially a Brahmo festival established by his father, Debendranath Tagore) speaks to the erosion of the stigma and shame surrounding the Bauls.

Tagore is responsible also for politicizing the figure of the Baul as a representative of the national identity, local and indigenous, rather than imperial and imposed from the top. Ironically, in the performance of nationalism, Tagore adopts a liminal role of political moderation, achieving a state of fluidity, shifting boundaries, in order to subvert the extremist effects of a hegemonic rule. Bauls become a cultural icon because of Tagore, not only for their performance of philosophical songs but also for the performance of an image of simultaneous poverty and spiritual bliss, of iconoclasm and protest against Western forms of capitalism.

Bruce Jackson (Babcock 1978) analyses the stigmatized roles in contemporary American society and explains the idea of 'double inversion', where one assumes the role of the 'deviant', and also regards that as acceptable and successful. Tagore's appropriation of the Bauls as a cultural symbol and his own embodiment of Baul identity to subvert the dominant hegemony is an example of 'double inversion'. It establishes the importance of *mundus inversus*, which not only subverts the order but also unsettles, recreates, rebuilds and restructures it with the purpose of transformation – 'what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally' (Babcock 1978: 32). This idea of symbolic reversal is significant as it emphasizes the potential of Baul performances to unsettle normative, bureaucratic and sociopolitical orders and stage alternative means of protests and subversion.

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