



**Carola Erika Lorea, *Folklore, Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman: A Journey between Performance and the Politics of Cultural Representation***

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IN THIS WORK, Carola Erika Lorea documents the life, songs, and legacy of a widely popular, but academically unexplored, songwriter and guru of Bengal, Bhaba Pagla, whose songs are now mostly sung by the well-known mystic minstrels called Bauls. This is the first English book on Bhaba Pagla. It studies song-texts and their lives, not from the usual textual perspectives, but as contextual realities, best understood as performances. Through detailed ethnographic research and a consideration of theoretical literature, especially on performance, the work shows with clarity and deftness what a very close-grained ethnographic work, rather than a textual one, and performance-oriented study, rather than a treatment of texts and traditions as fixed phenomena, can do to our understanding of culture. The work thus critically engages with very important terms that are essential to the discourse of popular culture: for instance, orality, texts, folk, tradition, literacy, and orthodoxy. These are the key strengths of the book.

The work addresses the problem of the absence of Bhaba Pagla in the academic works on Bauls, and tries to locate the problem in much broader discursive questions about the representation of appropriate markers of authenticity of the “folk” and “tradition.” The author discusses the life and migration of Bhaba Pagla, his songs, the varied contexts of their performance, and debates on technology impacting these songs, to critique the discourse on folk religion and culture in Bengal. The work is based on readings of the poet’s texts, including the very rare ones; long ethnographic work with musicians and performers, and practitioners and gurus of Bhaba Pagla’s lineage in various temples and ashrams of West Bengal; in-depth interviews; and participation in a great number and variety of performance contexts. Scholars of South Asian religions, culture, folk studies, and ethnomusicology will find the book helpful in innovative ways.

In the first chapter, the author directly addresses the problem of Bhaba Pagla’s absence in the literature on Bengali folklore. In a very comprehensive way she looks at the history of ideas constituting the image of the Baul in popular culture. Lorea explores a variety of images, such as the defiled body substances used in Baul rituals, Tagore’s romanticized wandering minstrel on one end of the spectrum, to the practitioners of materialism and subversive agents of history on the other end. A significant number of such features have been identified through the centuries as markers of the “authentic” Baul. The poor rural practitioner of religion and music, in most instances, has thus been represented as an exotic figure. The author argues against these fixed definitions of authenticity, and says that Bhaba Pagla went amiss in the literature, since he did not squarely fit the images of authenticity. He followed and espoused both exoteric rituals in public and esoteric practices (of Bauls and other popular religious groups) in private, and acquired a varied following among different castes and classes. She notes that a number of factors, such as sustenance and self-defense, influenced Bhaba Pagla’s strategies of maintaining a fluid identity, which must be analyzed, rather

than being taken as proof of his not being an authentic Baul. Indeed, the author questions the authenticity of categories generally, and instead foregrounds the need to study a phenomenon contextually in order to understand the formation of such categories in the first place.

The second chapter focuses on the persona of Bhaba Pagla, his lifestory constructed from hagiographies and other narratives, and the oeuvre of his songs, to think about questions of genre and the oral-literary divide in studies of popular traditions. The author suggests that Bhaba Pagla's songs are most heterogeneous, and can easily traverse different musical types such as, folk, Baul, *śyāmāsaiṅgīt* (songs addressed to the mother goddess). In tune with the first chapter, she argues that one must not fix the idea of genre, as that in turn would also lead to other essentializations. It is more important to analyze the politics of representation involved in identifying genres. While *sādhansaiṅgīt* (songs of devotion) would be the most appropriate genre of the poet's songs, his patriotic songs are also important. The omission of the latter in discussions and performances reflect the workings of the same notion of authenticity in defining a Baul. The chapter also makes a critical contribution to studies of performance theory and folklore theory, by arguing that the life of a composition is a long one, from the moment of conception to performance, and thus most often, traverses many possible points between orality and literacy. She thus questions the oral-literate binary in folklore studies.

The third chapter has interesting descriptions of very different kinds of musical gatherings (informal/semi-formal/formal, ritual/commercial, staged concerts, festival renditions, fusion music, and so on) in which Bhaba Pagla's songs are sung. The author analyzes how different kinds of song texts, tunes, and modalities are chosen, according to complex relations among performers, audiences, and settings. The author thus suggests that the esoteric-exoteric complex in popular religious traditions of Bengal may also be understood in relation to varied performative contexts. The second theme that the chapter develops is the role of folklore in cohering shared identities, in this case, among expatriated performers from Bangladesh, especially those from the lower castes. Bhaba Pagla becomes not only the religious guru, but also a general cultural hero, whose songs evoke the nostalgia inevitably associated with migration, and who is himself an icon of successful resettlement—with status, popularity, and legacy.

Chapter 4 builds on different themes, such as the need to rethink the oral-literate divide and the tendency to view the singer Baul as inauthentic, to engage critically with another discourse about technology destroying the world of the so-called authentic Baul. In an interesting analysis, the author argues that technology has both negative and positive effects on Baul music. Technology, for example, not only falls short of total intrusion into the Baul song performances and their ritual lives but also facilitates innovation. She also argues that technological vocabulary (such as “mobile phone”) aids in religious expressions. Technical vocabulary associated with modernity is thus creatively appropriated in songs and sermons. In a provocative argument, she suggests that these terms help disciples understand complicated religious issues. In other words, technology and the terminology associated with it now play the role of the best communicative medium in rural Bengal. Given such changes, what then happens to general questions concerning the folk, the popular, and the village? These themes could have been further developed in the book.

Indeed, while the main contribution of the book is that it thinks about categories such as the folk in terms of their form, rather than their content, further analyses could

be developed to critique the nature of relations among the “folk” and the “popular” on one hand and tradition, modernity, heritage (of religious music as a genre), technology, and performance on the other. These themes are discussed in the individual chapters, and often in original ways, but the connections among them could have been made more conceptually.

While Lorea’s theoretical arguments could be pushed further, the book is an excellent ethnography, with original perspectives. It will help scholars refine their folklore research, especially concerning the religious and performative traditions of Bengal, in new ways.

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