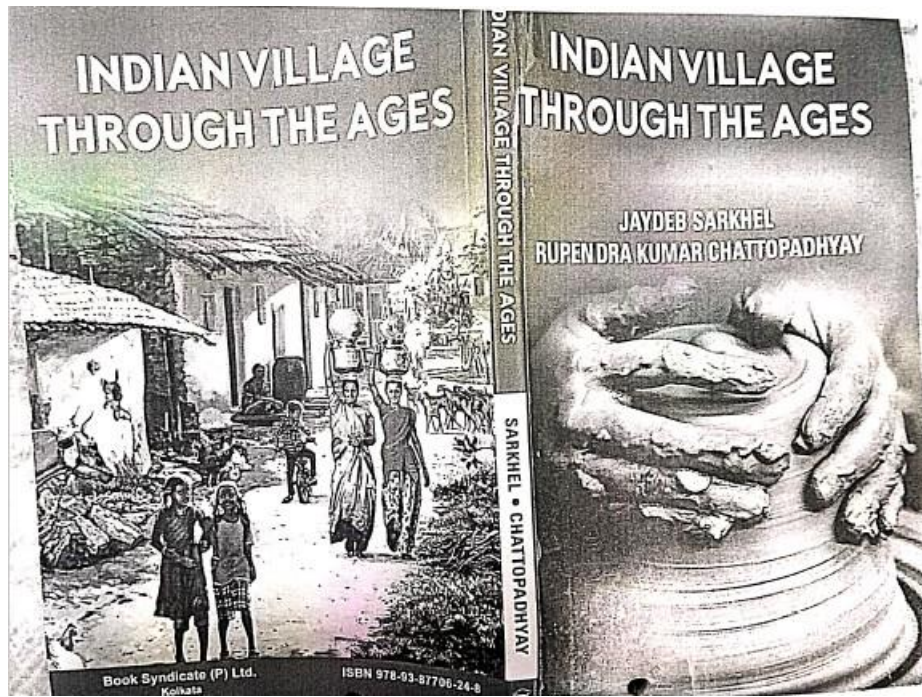


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**Negotiating Music and Identities: Studying the  
"Baul" Identity and their unique musical tradition.  
Aratrika Bhattacharya**

I echo Simon Frith when I say that, music, like identity, is both a story and a performance. Music like identity describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social. Also, the mind in the body and the body in the mind. On the other hand, identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics. (Frith, 1996). In exploring these themes, I consort to a "minor religious sect" in Bengal- who denounces religious orthodoxies despite being assumed to be an unique sub-set formed out of the amalgamation of two different religious lineages, but 'recruited mainly from the lower caste', and 'held in very low estimation by respectable Hindus' (Risley, 1891, pg.347) categorically termed "Bauls" in literatures of the late 19th century. All dressed in long robes, strapped anklets to bare feet, occasionally having beards and long curly hair, traversing a spectrum through idealistic religious songs. In relation to the term "Baul", it was often seen that earlier authors almost used "Baul-Fokir" as a synonym, as we can see in the titles of Sudhir Cakrabarti's book *Baul Fakir Katha* (2009) and Shakti Nath Jha's *Baul Fakir Padabali* (2009). Amongst later authors however it has become acceptable to treat them as overlapping but separate categories. It has been asserted that the "Muslim" Bauls and /or Fakirs form a distinct category which inspite of the overlap with the category of "Baul" cannot be entirely subsumed within it.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while in some studies, the categories "Muslim" Bauls and Fokirs are used interchangeably while distinguishing them from the Hindu Bauls, a distinction is still drawn in some other studies between these Muslim Fakirs and general Fakirs.<sup>2</sup> It was Upendranath Bhattacharya, who, in keeping with the philosophical tenor of his research in to Baul songs, and arguably for the first time in Baul scholarship, suggested that Baul songs were equally indebted to philosophical traditions in Sufi Islam and Sahajiyā Vaishnavism. Since Bhattacharya, most Baul scholars have accepted this twin line of thought. Social historians of Bengali Islam such as Rafiuddin Ahmed have argued that the majority of Bengali Muslim Peasants- those from amongst whom the Bauls were drawn- may not have had much access to the symbolic or philosophical and intellectual traditions of Islam until the turn of the twentieth century. Though Ahmed's contention is still far from being proved and given that the works of authors such as Ahmad Sharif might actually disprove Ahmed's contention, this debate is far from settled. In view of this, what is clear is that we cannot automatically assume a Sufi influence on the Bauls. While there is every<sup>4</sup> chance that such an influence exists, its extent and proper contours still need to be mapped on the firm ground of social history. After all, mystical traditions are available within a number of major religions including for example Christianity which too through the agency of the Portuguese in the Bay of Bengal has had a long presence in the region. Yet, we do not thereby assume that mystic Catholicism has contributed anything significant to the Baul cosmology. The current avowal of Sufi lineage might have several other possible

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