

## Chapter 5: South Asia – Bangladesh

### Site: Baul Song from Bangladesh

**First Impressions.** This song has an earnest, earthy feel, and features a full-throated male vocalist, accompanied by a rather strange-sounding stringed instrument and some jingly percussion. The melody is passionate and full of changes of mood, and exhibits much syncopation, which adds to its excitement. Clearly, this is not a “classical” raga, but something much more raw and direct, perhaps expressing the feelings of the down-and-out.

**Aural Analysis.** The song, entitled “Bhana ghare,” speaks to the misery and poverty of India’s rural population. “How long,” the singer asks, “will you stay in a ruined house [by patching it up]? That day the rain comes, it will clean up and leave no trace of you at all.” The concluding lines leave the listener with a sense of hopelessness: “The house measuring fourteen quarters [hands]—within it reside those sixteen people. It is difficult to live in such houses” (Charles Capwell, *The Music of the Bauls of Bengal* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986, pp. 182–183]).

The instruments heard are characteristic of the “folk” or village music of eastern India and Bangladesh, an area known culturally as Bengal. Our recording features the ***gopiyantro***, a single-stringed instrument also called *ektara* (“one-string”), which combines characteristics of both membranophones and chordophones. The base is like a small single-headed drum with a string attached to the “head” at the bottom. Above the base is a flexible split-bamboo frame with a triangular shape (similar to the Eiffel Tower), the top of which supports the other end of the string on a tuning peg. The player can squeeze the flexible bamboo frame to change the tension (and therefore pitch) of a string while plucking the string with the first finger. The instrument is capable of both discrete pitches and gliding tones created when plucking and squeezing occur simultaneously.

In addition, the singer wears on his ankles bracelets called ***ghunur***, consisting of small metal bells similar to Western sleigh bells. While stepping off alternating beats in duple meter, the song progresses in a faster beat pattern that produces a 3:2 relationship with the ankle bells. The technical term for this relationship is *hemiola*.

**Cultural Considerations.** India is home to hundreds, if not thousands, of local music traditions, both in its villages and in larger towns. Among these traditions, few of which are known to outsiders, one has received special attention: The songs of the Bauls, which influenced India’s greatest modern poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and have become known in the West through live performances, recordings, and scholarly studies. The Bauls, who constitute a cultural group rather than an

#### BAULS

A group of itinerant musicians from India, especially noted for their poetry

#### GOPIYANTRO (ALSO, EKTARA)

A single-stringed chordophone with a membrane base found in India and often associated with the Bauls.

#### GHUNUR

A string of sleighbells worn around the ankle, commonly associated with

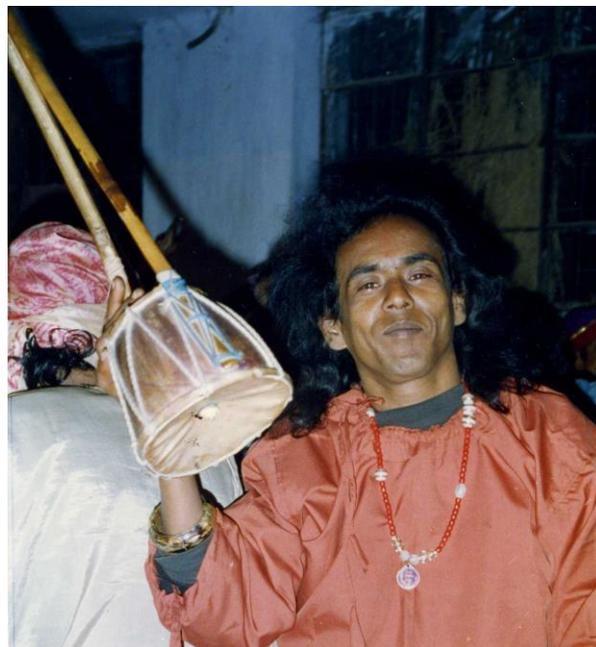


A group of Baul musicians poses after recording in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India, birthplace of R. Tagore and favorite meeting place for Baul musicians. Seen (from left to right): drum, lute, *gopiyantro*, and drum (Eric A. Murray)

“ethnic” group, are itinerant singers and instrumentalists who once wandered among the villages and towns of India’s Bengal and in neighboring areas of Bangladesh, but who today are more likely to be heard in festivals and through the media. Although their songs are usually about universal themes, such as love and brotherhood, they are also expressive of a loosely organized, non-mainstream religious tradition in which nature, mysticism, and spirituality play major roles.

The poet Tagore was not a Baul, but he was deeply influenced by them. Born in Kolkata to an upper-class Brahman family, Tagore was a playwright, songwriter, poet, philosopher, and educator. His works, many expressing thoughts similar to those of the Bauls, remained little known in India until his emigration to England in 1912. In England, Tagore was “discovered” through translations of his works; he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and was knighted in 1915—though he renounced his title in 1919 following the Amritsar Massacre, in which British colonialists killed hundreds of his fellow Indians. Through Tagore, Bauls and their philosophy became better known outside India and these rough-and-tumble artists are forever linked to his work.

It is tempting to draw comparisons between the Bauls and somewhat similar groups in the West. We used the term “singer-songwriter” earlier because Baul singers comment on the life around them through songs that they themselves perform. Their free and nonmaterialistic lifestyle makes them



A Baul musician holds up his *gopiyantro*, a single-stringed chordophone with the body made like a small drum (Eric A. Murray)

in some ways resemble the Hippies of the 1960s (and perhaps even more so the Beatniks of the 1950s). Because of their vague, nonmainstream religious views emphasizing spirituality, Bauls also resemble members of various Western New Age movements. Some writers have spoken of them as “Bohemians”—thus linking them with the intellectual milieu of late-nineteenth-century Europe, and specifically of Paris’s Montmartre area. In a way, they are similar to all of these types but like none of them. They are as “traditional” as traditional musicians can be, and yet they celebrate freedom from tradition, from orthodoxy, and from social norms.