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## GENDER IN ASIA

# "I Will Not Keep Her Book in My Home": Representing Religious Meaning among Bauls

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Anthropologists have long been concerned with issues of representation and the problematic structures of power that characterize the relationship of researcher and subject. This article takes field work confrontations and anxieties as opportunities through which to examine some of the challenges of representing religious lives in comprehensible and meaningful ways, not simply to scholars but also—perhaps especially—to those from within the tradition we're studying. Drawing on work that emphasizes dialogical processes of knowledge production and its ethical implications, the author considers moments of transformation during and resulting from fieldwork as a model for moving forward.

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**Keywords:** anthropology; gender; South Asia; India; representation; religion

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Ten years after I first met Phulmala, I sat with her in a little mud hut—not much more than a room—on the outskirts of town near the railway station in Bolpur, West Bengal, India. Phulmala had only been living there for a few months, having recently left the household where she had lived together with two sons, daughters-in-laws, and grandchildren. She was the first Baul woman I met in 1997 when I began my research on women members of this tradition. Bauls are best known as musical mendicants who sing songs promoting egalitarianism in a highly stratified society. I had always been a bit uncomfortable around Phulmala: I was impressed—and sometimes awed—by her sense of self-worth, determination, and spunk as a widowed woman who had raised her family alone by singing in clattering trains and in programs dominated by male performers. I was also wary of her periodic demands for money to repair a leaky roof or purchase a mobile phone. But that morning when I sat with her, I was reminded again of her spirit. When I mentioned I had read a recent book about Baul women, including Phulmala, by a Kolkata writer, Phulmala exploded in anger. She cited the negative portrayals of her female Baul friends, whom the author had described as destitute, desperate, and abandoned by husbands and society. "I will not keep her book in my home!" Phulmala insisted loudly.

In this paper, I track a few stages in my research with Baul women and raise questions about how to write or think ethnographically about religious meaning. While Phulmala's critique focuses on how she and her friends were represented in publications, I am also, even especially, troubled by the difficulty in writing about religious lives and meaning. In this essay I begin with a quick summary of who the Bauls are and then discuss my fieldwork, which I divide, somewhat artificially, into sequential stages, culminating in my attempt to grapple with a problem—the focus of this paper—that I had avoided during my fieldwork. The problem I describe did not actually emerge only *after* my fieldwork was complete, but surfaced periodically throughout my research.

## Brief Introduction to Bauls

Bauls are a religious group living primarily in the rural areas of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. They come from a variety of backgrounds, including Hindu and Muslim, and span the castes, though most are low caste. Although their roots extend more deeply, Bauls have been around at least a century.<sup>1</sup> In practice and belief, they have been influenced by local traditions of the more orthodox Gauriya (Bengali) Vaishnavism, the Tantric-influenced Buddhist and Hindu Sahajiyas, and Sufism. Like many other South Asian mystical traditions, Bauls present an alternative to conventional society, and membership is attained through initiation by a guru or *murshid* (Sufi spiritual teacher). However, unlike many other religious groups, Bauls intentionally reverse a number of orthodox practices. For instance, Bauls fiercely oppose sectarianism, the caste system, and all categories that divide people. Instead they argue that the Divine is within all humans and thus people should respect and worship humans instead of going to the temple, mosque, or church to worship something that cannot be seen. Bauls sing and compose songs that critique societal divisions and allude to their philosophy and practice. They spread their messages door to door, on trains, and in performances at large public venues.

Bauls include both men and women, and women also often go out of the home to perform songs. Although there is no uniformity among Bauls in regard to their gendered relations, in general they tend to relegate women to a high ideological status, insisting that all women are Mother and thus worthy of respect. Bauls call women the gurus of men in the context of rituals, and instruct through songs and sayings that the wife in one's home is the true Goddess to be worshipped.

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<sup>1</sup> Historical roots and origins of Bauls are highly contested among scholars, with some claiming Bauls were around as early as the fourteenth century. Recent scholars tend to date the origins of contemporary "Bauls" to the late 19th century, who wrote the Caryapadas in the eighth-tenth centuries. Part of the difficulty in determining any origin is that the term *bāul* has also been used as a descriptive label for someone considered "crazy," and does not always signify members of the sect. While the word Baul today carries both connotations, its current usage almost always refers to the sect.

### **Stage 1: Entrance**

Had I known in 1997 the kinds of challenges involved with researching Bauls, I would have pursued a different topic. At the time, I knew that Baul women were neglected in the pretty vast number of publications about this small religious group from West Bengal and Bangladesh, and that seemed like good enough reason for a research topic. In fact, hearing from Bengalis, including well-known scholars, that Baul women did not exist only made me dig in my heels: I knew there were Baul women, and I was absolutely certain their voices were worth listening to. What I did not realize, however, was how much my own research would be affected by the countless researchers, tourists, foreigners, sponsors, and journalists Bauls regularly encountered, even long before my fieldwork began. These encounters meant that Bauls were acutely aware of their positionality not only in their villages but also in the wider world, much beyond the reach of most of their non-Baul neighbors. Bauls *knew* what outsiders were interested in: songs, philosophy, and secret sexual rituals. They understood that outsiders often sought authentic Bauls who were ritual adepts and were driven to divine madness in their spiritual quest. Bauls knew how to modify their behavior to match expectations. Outsiders also expected Bauls to be men.

That's where I decided I would fit in: unlike previous researchers, I was not interested in songs, rituals, philosophy, or divine madness exhibited by unencumbered Baul men; I sought the lived experiences and perspectives of Baul women.

### **Stage 2: Navigating the Field**

In those first 18 months of work, I carefully framed how I presented my research to my interlocutors in order to avoid the usual pitfalls of my predecessors, such as having to exchange money or prestige for information, taking initiation, or losing integrity in my research methods in other ways. Many of my predecessors had questionable reputations among Bauls: a few women, for example, had been initiated by a Baul guru, some learning sexo-yogic rituals and living with Baul men as a second wife. These incidents had caused scandals in the villages.

For the most part, my approach of focusing on Baul women as opposed to men worked for me. This is not to say it was always easy: plenty of times when I approached

a new household, the man of the house would greet me, and after learning of my project, would invite me to sit down so that he could tell me everything I wanted to know about Baul women. In some ways, this wasn't an outrageous claim. Bauls in fact have a lot to say about women, though mostly about the elevated spiritual qualities of women and women's important role in rituals. There are also plenty of songs that address women in these ways. Because previous researchers had aimed to learn about songs, philosophy, and rituals, the assumption that I only needed to talk with the Baul man wasn't so much a reflection of a patriarchy that renders women mute, but a reasonable response to previous research trends.

But because women had long been mute in the literature about Bauls, I navigated through male arenas and found women to talk with. Still it was not always easy to interview women or to respond satisfactorily to their agendas. A few women avoided me. One woman, despite several attempts by Baul friends to arrange a meeting, explicitly refused to see me. Several others I sought, following various leads, for days in different villages and regions. Many asked me to arrange musical programs in America, while others asked that I financially contribute to their household in exchange for speaking with them. Once, when I hired Phulmala as an assistant for a short while, she completely controlled with whom I could and could not talk. Baul women, like anyone else, have their own concerns and agendas.

### **Stage 3: Attending to everyday lives**

Overall, though, my questions and interests seemed to resonate with the women I met, which reassured me that my agenda was worth pursuing. Most women seemed happy to share their experiences and pleased that outsiders might approach them instead of their husbands. I followed the philosophy of other feminist ethnographers<sup>2</sup> who sought not merely to recover silenced voices but to recognize women's agency and resistance to dominant ideologies. I found many examples of how Baul women see themselves as actors within a field of ideologies and expectations that appear to impinge upon their choices. As I discuss in *Contradictory Lives* (2011), Baul

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<sup>2</sup> See especially: Abu-Lughold 1990; Gal 1991; MacLeod 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994.

women described to me how they negotiate different—and sometimes conflicting—expectations. On the one hand, they feel pressure from their non-Baul neighbors to act like modest wives and mothers. On the other, they feel pressure to meet outsiders' expectations of Bauls to behave in carefree, mad ways—thus in ways not at all modest. Additionally, Baul women strive to become more Baul, to enact the ideals of egalitarianism, to defend those who are discriminated against, and to sing boldly to people in need of societal and spiritual transformation. While we all find ourselves playing different roles and struggling to meet opposing expectations at times, Baul women are particularly challenged by the ways in which their own behavior can never conform to *both* spiritual and societal expectations. Yet, I have argued that Baul women use the tools of their encumbering to craft meaningful lives and contribute to societal changes (Knight 2011). I think I explained the challenges of being a Baul woman well, and I hope Phulmala will not refuse to have my book in her home.

#### Stage 4: The Problem

The problem I'm having at this juncture is not new to me or to others, but I feel I need to work through it out of respect for those who spent so much of their time with me. To be honest, it has plagued me for a long time. Phulmala brings to the forefront the postcolonial predicament concerning the relationship between ethnographers and "informants," in which the ethnographer collects "data," which is then analyzed and presented for academic scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> I'd like to say this unequal relationship, where the informant is Other, is over, but I keep thinking of a recent episode in class, when, after discussing Malinowski's<sup>4</sup> use of derogatory terminology, typical language for his

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<sup>3</sup> The argument that scholars are implicated, along with colonialists, missionaries, and imperialists, in a process of Othering most notably dates to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), and has preoccupied many anthropologists, among other scholars, since then. See also Brettell 1993; Fabian 1990, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) is known for his systematization of ethnography, his emphasis on participation-observation, and his claim that anthropologists should seek to understand what he referred to as the "native's point of view." My students read "Rational Mastery by Man of His Surroundings," a selection reprinted from Malinowski's famous book *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1955), in which he argues that pre-literate people have rational knowledge of their environment and behavior. Although he emphasized gaining an unbiased understanding of another's culture, he used terms that today would be seen as derogatory—a teaching moment for students.

time, a freshman raised his hand to ask, "What's wrong with calling them 'savage'? It's not like they're going to read this stuff!"

I'm not going to respond to this student's comment here—I don't think I need to—except to say that Phulmala's complaint is clear evidence that even illiterate informants do "read this stuff." Long gone are the days when anthropologists could find "untainted" societies and try to maintain neutrality and objectivity in order to preserve native cultures. Gone are the days when we could write whatever we wanted and not worry about how those we wrote about responded. The publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) is often cited as marking the transition into postmodernism with its epistemological critique. Since then, anthropological movements that seek to problematize and remedy this relationship of Othering have increased, including feminist ethnography,<sup>5</sup> dialogical anthropology,<sup>6</sup> experiential and performative anthropology<sup>7</sup>—various methods and theories that reflect on the researcher's participation in the field and, in some cases, insist that active engagement is ethically necessary—and methods that take a step further by explicitly including collaboration and coauthorship.<sup>8</sup> These approaches are important, even though they do not completely solve the problem of Othering (since in a very basic way anthropology requires an Other to write about). But where I'm particularly stuck is in trying to figure out how to deal with the experiential *religious* lives of those I have befriended and written about. A few vignettes illustrate what I mean by this problem.

First, Rina Das Baul, whom I have known for 15 years, explained to me that many researchers were coming to her for information, and she refused to talk with several of them. Probably for my benefit, she distinguished between long-term researchers

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<sup>5</sup> A few earlier examples that address feminist ethnography include Behar and Gordon 1996; Abu-Lughod 1990; Wolf 1992; and Visweswaran 1992. Many more wonderful feminist ethnographies also exist.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on alterity and dialogism have been influential to many anthropologists concerned with the colonial heritage of anthropology, Othering, and what has been viewed as the crisis of representation. For dialogic anthropology, see for example Bauman 1984 and Tedlock and Mannheim 1995.

<sup>7</sup> For the performative turn in anthropology, see for instance Turner 1986 and the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

<sup>8</sup> Lassiter 2005 provides an excellent overview of the move toward collaboration in anthropology. See also [www.publicanthropology.org](http://www.publicanthropology.org)



and dabblers. For Rina, being a Baul is a serious commitment that involves her total being; it is not to be taken lightly.

Second, according to Baul philosophy, you cannot really know anything unless you experience it yourself. Bauls emphasize the importance of gaining experiential knowledge rather than trusting what others claim to be true. The most notable encounter I had with this belief occurred in western Bangladesh, where I had been traveling with my husband, Ed. We were in a remote village, visiting the home and ashram of a couple named Jamal and Pushpa. As evening approached, and we started to leave, Jamal insisted that we stay and receive initiation, without which, he argued, we would never understand what we were trying to study. Jamal was persistent, and the situation was uncomfortable; immediately afterwards, my husband quit as my assistant, albeit temporarily.

Third, Parvathy Baul, who is well-educated and fluent in English, complained to me that all the writing about Bauls was only concerned with outwardly observable information—songs, instruments, lifestyles, performances—and that none of it captured what it *really* means to be a Baul. She has since written her own book (Baul 2005) that describes her gurus, their teachings, and some songs she has translated into English.

Along with Phulmala's exclamation, these vignettes reveal issues of representation: how to respectfully and accurately portray the lives and concerns of those we seek to understand. But they also point to the problem of religious experiences. How do I describe, or even *understand*, the religious experiences of a Baul woman? After all, *these* experiences are why being a Baul is meaningful to them, not the ways in which they have to negotiate conflicting societal expectations, which I *can* and *did* write about.

The episodes thus reveal the limits of language, particularly within the confines of scholarly discourse, to describe *experience*. In thinking this through, I find phenomenological approaches to anthropology intriguing, such as Robert Desjarlais's (2003) focus on how shamans' use of multiple sensory experiences can serve to redirect a patient's attention during times of illness toward being present in their body and their

environment, or Tanya Luhrmann's (2012) assertion that Christian prayer is effective in healing not because of *belief* but because of the capacity to shift attention to *experience* God. Describing the role of the body and senses seems like a good step toward translating experiences, such as religious ones, into language accessible to readers. But while such translation is important for sharing knowledge, is it really the best we can do?

Johannes Fabian suggests that instead of seeing the problem as one of representation, we should focus our attention on "presence." Presence, he says, "would stress the processual and productive nature of representation . . . [the process of] transforming, fashioning, and creating" (1990, 755–56). This shifts the focus from trying to find the data or words to represent others' experiences to the dialogical aspect of knowledge production. Drawing on Fabian's work, Goulet and Miller argue that we attend to the "ecstatic side of fieldwork" and recognize that "once engaged with our hosts in their lifeworlds, we could not simply exit the field at a convenient time and declare the experience over and done with" (2007, 4). Quoting Fabian, Goulet and Miller state that ecstasy is "not a kind of behavior" one engages in, but a "quality of human action and interaction—one that creates a common ground for the encounter" with [one's interlocutor], in [her] homeland (Fabian 2000, 8, cited in Goulet and Miller 2007, 5). In other words, "presence" requires us to genuinely recognize those we work with, attending to the ways in which knowledge is produced dialogically. Graham Harvey (2005) suggests we employ a practice he calls "guesthood" in order to be more present with our interlocutors and diminish the tenacious binaries of self and other. He also states that "researchers are neither insiders nor outsiders, but are always participants in processes of change" (2005, 180) and suggests that by affirming our position as guests, we "seek a common ground that recognizes the priority and even the prestige of local hosts" (181). These scholars attempt to close the distance between ethnographer and interlocutor beyond merely considering questions of representation. These are important considerations for the anthropological study of religion, since insider and outsider roles are typically fraught with tensions about ultimate meanings, ethical claims, and conceptions of the personal, social, and cosmic world.

In order to be more than guests who merely inhabit a shared space and then return home, these scholars insist on the importance of recognizing how we are transformed by our experiences. Fabian, for example, argues that ethnographic research should acknowledge that the "kind of knowledge we seek *changes the knower* . . . [as well as] *the known*. . . Neither we nor those whom we study remain untouched by our projects of inquiry" (Fabian 2012, 447). As Goulet and Miller add, the "transformative events lived with others in their world cannot be wished away. . . They expect us to take seriously what we have lived with them and have learned from them" (2007, 7). Jamal, Rina, and Phulmala took time out of their lives to explain to me their circumstances; naturally, they wanted me to take them seriously.

I personally have not had the kinds of extraordinary experiences described by some anthropologists who advocate for attending to transformations in the field.<sup>9</sup> How far am I willing to go into the Baul world to attempt to experience as they experience? I still refuse initiation. It seems ethically wrong to me, even though plenty of others before me have done it;<sup>10</sup> I'm simply not interested. Nonetheless, my fieldwork has involved a dialogic process that has transformed both myself and some of those I worked with. In her research into a Hindu temple in upstate New York, Corinne Dempsey (2006) seems to have had a similar struggle as she grappled with whether or not to write about her experiences of ritual power and miracles. Hesitantly at first, for fear that the academy will accuse her of "going too far," she acknowledges experiencing a "change of heart . . . based upon a series of fundamental and frequently imperceptible shifts in faith and emotion . . . while doing research at the temple" (212). Dempsey describes this shift as a "dramatic . . . transformative ethnographic experience" (212).

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Csordas 2007; Lurhmann 2010, 2012; Turner 1992.

<sup>10</sup> But not for the reason E.E. Evans-Pritchard decided to send his cook to become an apprentice to a Zande sorcerer rather than go himself. Writing at a time when demonstrating scientific objectivity in anthropology was the accepted norm, Evans-Pritchard concluded that taking initiation would lead to a loss of objectivity, and therefore he opted to hear reports from his cook, whom he asked to take initiation in his place. My concern was not about losing objectivity through initiation but rather about misleading my interlocutors about my intentions. Furthermore, I did not want to trivialize the importance placed on a guru-disciple relationship.

As a modest step, then, and very humble reply to my friend's critique about previous writing about Bauls, I draw on work that argues for acknowledgement of mutual transformation in the field, in the hope that this move conveys some of the meaning-making projects valued by Bauls and the ways in which we are implicated in that process. As Michael Jackson states, "our everyday priorities, as well as our notions of what makes us quintessentially human, are remarkably similar wherever one goes. To participate in the lives of others, in another society, is to discover the crossing-points where one's own experience connects with theirs—the points at which sameness subsumes difference" (Jackson 2010, 47).

Yet, the longer I work on this paper, the more anxious I get. I hesitate to focus on crossing-points that may celebrate sameness and ignore differences, aware of critiques about feminist ethnography that denies the contextual realities that give rise to very different everyday options and realities. Similarly, I am wary of over-romanticizing moments of connection without attending to the implicit power dynamics at play in ethnographic research. Although aware of these pitfalls, I admit that I am humbled by the expectations my friends in the field expressed about my actions and participation—ashamed especially of the numerous times I refused to act out of the false consciousness of an objective observer.<sup>11</sup>

My friends demanded that I not only acknowledge crossing-points but that I also participate in their lifeworlds, that I take a stand not merely in my notebooks, but in their everyday lives. I'll give a few examples.

One day Rina was arguing with a neighbor. Rina claimed that the Goddess Lakshmi does not remedy illness, but rather friends and family care for the ill, thereby asserting Baul ideology about worshiping humans, not gods you cannot see. At one point she turned to me, not merely for an affirmative nod of the head, but

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<sup>11</sup> One example that plagues me still was when a friend in the field brought me to visit a very ill young woman living in her village. It occurred to me that I might have been brought there to give money toward medical expenses, though no one asked that of me. I distinctly recall that my conviction in my identity as objective-outsider-anthropologist wavered, but I refrained from offering more than my verbal concern. I regret the conclusion I made at that time about my identity as an impartial observer. I was already part of village life there, enmeshed in relationships that were dear to me.

to corroborate her statement with evidence: Had I ever seen the Goddess Lakshmi? Who tends to *me* when I'm ill?

Then there was Siuli Aktar, in Sylhet, Bangladesh, who announced to every newcomer that I was researching Baul women and not Baul men. My presence in her room was an affirmation of her own ideology about women's worth, and she was not content that I merely record her words for my benefit. Instead, she dragged me to her neighbors' house to affirm her role as liberator of women, announcing that I was there to record the songs of her female student, who had come out of purdah to sing on stage in front of governmental officials. Dutifully, I pulled out my tape recorder.

Another time, in West Bengal, Rina explained the details of the traditional Hindu marriage that had been arranged for her daughter, and requested my support. She knew I was critical of the traditional wedding with dowry, but that I also understood the challenges rural Bengali women face. A year later, when the marriage was stumbling after parental disagreements about the educational rights of their wedded daughter, Rina brought me to the in-laws to defend the importance of educating women and mothers-to-be.

In these and other ways, the Baul women I worked with expected me to participate in their world, particularly when they knew I shared their views. Although moments of connection have shifted my own perspectives, Phulmala's critiques ring loudest. In demanding that I (and the many Bengalis and foreigners who enjoy her singing) support her, she refuses to let me be a complacent ethnographer. She demands dignity, and she is right to do so. Several years later, her proclamations are forcing me to rethink my ethnographic work and to reveal, as a tentative step, that I have been moved, that I have taken their words and lifeworlds seriously.

I have argued elsewhere (2010) that as they traverse a Baul path, those who take the teachings seriously gradually adopt cognitive and spiritual models that shift their own understanding of the world around them. Thus they learn (or aim to learn) to recognize the ways in which society creates divisions that lead to discrimination, and to recognize the divine in all human beings, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. By listening to their explanations about the micro- and macrocosmos, by hearing

their songs, and by traveling with them, they expected that I too would experience these shifts in understanding. The cultural specifics of their experiences may not carry home, but elements of hierarchy, discrimination, and the inherent value of all human beings are as real and important in my American communities as they are in their Bengali ones. For Bauls, issues of hierarchy and domination are religiously meaningful, and knowledge of these realities constitutes important aspects of their religious experiences.

Maybe language is inadequate to explain religious experience. Bauls would certainly say so, since they insist that one can only trust and know what is personally experienced. Perhaps, then, going back to Fabian, Graham, and Dempsey, I should acknowledge moments of connection, for instance when Rina and I discussed our views of the world, its beauty and faults, and our struggle to make sense of suffering and find ways to improve the lives of those discriminated against. Maybe it's enough for me and my interlocutors to share meaningful experiences and conversations, to be open to being inspired and transformed in the field and also back home, and to be willing to put some of those ideas into action. Perhaps that does *some* justice to my friends, who actively seek such transformation in their religious lives.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

### **Author Information**

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