

Krishna Raj Fellowship 2025

*Gender Equality in Baul Philosophy: Examining the
Contemporary Status of Baul Women in Bolpur Shantiniketan*

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between Baul philosophy of gender egalitarianism and the lived experiences of Baul women in contemporary Bolpur–Shantiniketan. Centred on the Baul conceptualisation of Purusha and Prakriti as complementary, interdependent principles, the study examines how metaphysical ideals of balance and unity intersect with the everyday social realities of women practitioners. While Baul thought frames gender as a spiritual continuum rather than a hierarchical binary, the position of Baul women within present day communal, familial, and ritual settings remains underexplored. The research responds to this gap by situating Baul women's experiences within a changing cultural landscape marked by tourism, performance economies, and shifting community structures.

Guided by qualitative ethnographic methods, including unstructured interviews and participant observation, the study focuses specifically on family-oriented (grihi) Bauls. It seeks to address three principal questions: How does Baul philosophy conceptualise gender equality? To what extent do these philosophical claims find expression in the everyday practices and roles of Baul women in Bolpur–Shantiniketan? And how do contemporary Baul women negotiate the distance between spiritual egalitarianism and existing patriarchal norms in akhras, households, and performance spaces? The research objectives are therefore to map the philosophical foundations of Baul gender thought, document the lived experiences of women practitioners, and analyse how metaphysical ideals translate or fail to translate into social practice.

By bringing philosophical discourse into conversation with ethnographic realities, this study aims to contribute to broader sociological inquiry on gender, embodiment, and religious practice in South Asia. It offers a context-specific understanding of how an egalitarian spiritual tradition adapts within modernity, where continuity, constraint, and reinterpretation operate simultaneously. In doing so, the research highlights the dynamic interplay between ideology and lived experience that shapes the position of Baul women in contemporary Bengal.

Keywords - Baul philosophy; Gender equality; Baul women; Bolpur Shantiniketan; Ethnography

Introduction

The Bauls of Bengal constitute one of the most intriguing and philosophically complex mystic traditions of South Asia. Emerging in the rural heartlands of Bengal, the Baul represents an unorthodox spiritual movement that resists rigid religious boundaries and social hierarchies. Their songs, metaphors, and practices articulate an inclusive worldview that weaves together strands of Sahajiya Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Tantrism, and Sufism into a distinctive synthesis of embodied spirituality. The term *Baul*, derived from the Sanskrit word *vatula* or *vyākula*, means “possessed by the wind” or “divinely mad,” signifies their rejection of conventional rationality and their embrace of ecstatic devotion. The Bauls itinerant way of life, their emphasis of direct spiritual experience over scripture, and their songs of love and realization make them both a distinctive cultural community of Bengal

Historically, the Bauls have functioned as both spiritual seekers and social critics. In a society stratified by caste and religious segregations, they articulated a radically humanist vision grounded in the inherent divinity of every being. Through their music and performance, Bauls have continuously questioned the hierarchies of religion, class, and gender, prioritizing the sanctity of the human body as the true site of divine revelation. This philosophy known as *deho tattva* (the doctrine of the body) is central to their worldview. The Bauls perceive the human body not as a vessel of sin or impurity but as a sacred microcosm of the universe (*brahmāṇḍa* within *bhāṇḍa*). The divine is realized through the disciplined awareness of the body, its energies and its desires. Spiritual attainment therefore is not achieved through renunciation but through *sādhana* an inward journey toward the “*moner manush*” means the “person of the heart.”

At the heart of Baul metaphysics lies an egalitarian principle that collapses dualisms between spirit and matter, self and other, male and female. The Bauls believe that divinity manifests through the union of *Purusha* (the masculine consciousness) and *Prakriti* (the feminine energy). This dual principle represents a cosmic balance rather than hierarchy, where neither aspect is superior nor independent. The realization of this unity is the essence of *sahaja* or natural state, an experience of harmony with the divine. Within this framework gender is not conceived as an opposition but as a complementarity communion, an interdependence necessary for spiritual

completion. The Baul path in its pure philosophical sense thus implies an equality that transcends social and biological categories.

This vision of harmony between masculine and feminine energies is ritualized in “*jugol sadhana*” the spiritual discipline of dual practice. It involves the meditative union of man and woman as co participants in the realization of the divine within the human body. Such rituals are deeply esoteric, emphasizing the transformation of desire (*kama*) into divine love (*prema*). The Bauls regard the body as the temple and sexuality as a sacred medium, not for procreation but for now transcendence. June McDaniel (1992) observes that the Bauls’ theology is one of the few in world religion where “the woman’s body is sacred and the dwelling place of a deity which is neither male nor female, but includes aspects of both” (McDaniel, 1992, p. 27).

The Baul’s egalitarian vision however is not merely metaphysical. Their social philosophy is anchored in the idea of universal human equality. I will discuss the Baul philosophy and about the ritualistic practices in the next section in detail there I will describe their philosophy and their practices .

Another thing we need to keep in mind that Baul is not a homogeneous community . There are multiple “Akhras” Akhra is a place for spiritual practices and communication and the spiritual practices in a Akhra can differ from other Baul Akhras as well and the ritualistic practices is heterogeneous based on their location my primary observation was primarily based on Bauls of Bolpur , Birbhum West Bengal. Even within the Baul community of Bolpur the community is divided into "Sadhan Baul" and "Sajon Baul," and the realities and life experiences can differ between these subgroups. I got to know about those inner distinctions from one my respondents Shondhyarani dasi Baul I will explain little bit of the inner division in Baul community in the later sections . Now let's talk about the topic I am going to focus on the research paper about the status and life of Baul woman in Bolpur Santiniketan in contemporary society under the umbrella of spiritual egalitarianism . The lived practices of Baul communities today invites scrutiny into how such spiritual egalitarianism negotiates the realities of patriarchy, modernization, and cultural commodification. The following research engages precisely with this intersection between philosophy and experience, ideal and institution, spirit and society. It seeks

to trace how the Baul vision of gender harmony, conceived as divine necessity, survives, transforms, or falters within the shifting landscape of contemporary Bolpur

Baul's philosophy of Gender

In the dusty heartland of Bengal, where red earth meets wandering song, the Bauls still hum their old heresies. To them, the body is not a cage but a shrine, and gender not a boundary but a current of divine rhythm. The Baul sees no salvation in temple or scripture; the truth lies in the trembling of flesh, in the meeting of breath and love. In this world, man and woman are not opposites they are necessary halves of the same circle. To divide them is to live in illusion.

The philosophy of the Baul, sometimes called dehatattva the truth of the body teaches that God is not elsewhere. He resides in the veins, in the breath, in the subtle pulse that joins seed and nectar, bindu and rasa. The male and female bodies are mirrors, each holding the other's image. Lalon Fakir once sang,

বাংলা -

নারী পুরুষ দুই দেহে রয় এক প্রাণ,
আলাদা করিলে দেখা দেয় মিথ্যা জ্ঞান।

English translation -

In woman and man breathes the same life;
To divide them is to dwell in falsehood.

(Lalon Fakir)

This is not sentimental equality but a metaphysical declaration. To call one body higher than the other is ignorance; both are clay in which the same divine spark burns. Hence the Baul rejects caste, purdah, priesthood, and all other human hierarchies. In the eyes of the sahaja the one who has become natural again there is no male or female, Hindu or Muslim, noble or low.

In their songs, Bauls speak of gender as an inner polarity rather than a social identity. Bhaba Pagla, a 20th-century Baul from Kushtia, sang of this inward union:

বাংলা -

নারী আমার অন্তরে, পুরুষ তারই ছায়া,
দুইয়ের মিলনে জাগে প্রেমের মহামায়া।

English translation -

The woman dwells within me, her shadow is the man;
When they unite, the great illusion of love awakens.

(Bhaba Pagla)

Here the mystical and erotic merge the meeting of male and female energies becomes both spiritual and sensual. The song is not about marriage or social relation; it is about discovering the androgynous self that holds both energies in balance. The Baul sadhak (male practitioner) must learn to honour the feminine within and without, for without her he cannot reach realization. “Without woman,” Lalou says, “no sadhana bears fruit.”

Hason Raja, the aristocratic mystic of Sylhet who turned vagabond, also sang in the same spirit. In one of his most quoted lines he confessed:

বাংলা -

নারী ছাড়া সাধন নাই, নারীর মাঝে মন,
নারীকে না জানলে ভাই, জানবি না আপন।

English translation -

Without woman, there is no practice; woman holds the mind.
Brother, until you know the woman, you will never know yourself.

Hason Raja

The woman here is both real and symbolic she is lover, teacher, mirror. In dehisadhana, the tantric practice that lies beneath Baul thought, the female partner is guru-shakti, the living power through whom the male seeker realizes his own divinity. The act of union is a sacred ritual, not indulgence. The woman’s body is not an obstacle to transcendence but the doorway to it.

Yet the Baul tradition is not confined to men singing about women. Baul women, too, have sung themselves into the story, often transforming the metaphors. In the villages around Bolpur and Joydev, one still hears the songs of Nabani Das's disciple Rina Das Baul, who sings:

বাংলা -

আমি নারী নই, আমি সাধিকা,
আমার দেহে গুরু বাসে, এই দেহই আশ্রম।

English translation -

I am not merely woman, I am a practitioner;
My guru lives in this body—this body is my monastery.

(Rina Das Baul)

In this verse the voice of the female practitioner reverses the gaze. She does not stand as object or energy for another's enlightenment but claims her own deha as ground of wisdom. The monastery is within her body; the divine, internal. Her assertion turns the philosophical ideal of equality into embodied agency.

The Baul path also knows that equality is incomplete until it becomes transcendence. Many songs move from celebration of the feminine to dissolution of all dualities. Pagla Kanai, another 19th-century mystic, sang:

বাংলা -

পুরুষ নারী ভুলে যা, খোঁজ মানুষ ভেতরে,
দেহেতে দেহ খুঁজে দেখ, আলাদা কে কাহারে?

English translation -

Forget man and woman, seek the human within;
Search the body inside the body who is truly separate?

(Pagla Kanai)

This is the sahaja moment, when all forms melt into one awareness. The Baul seeker, whether man or woman, dissolves into the rhythm of existence. At that point gender is not equality but irrelevance the river has reached the sea.

The power of Baul philosophy lies in this lived duality: the coexistence of radical theology and constrained reality. The songs perform an egalitarianism that society has yet to catch up with. When a Baul woman sings that “I, a woman, meet my man within the meeting is inward,” she is reclaiming the inner stage that patriarchal religion denied her. Her voice, echoing through Bolpur’s fairs, becomes both prayer and protest.

To study the Bauls, then, is to witness a gender discourse rooted not in Western liberalism but in embodied spirituality. It is equality born not of law but of breath. The Baul does not argue that women should be equal to men, They argue that both are fragments of the same cosmic melody. Their equality is not a claim but a fact of being.

As one old Baul of Santiniketan told “We sing of woman because we are woman, we sing of man because we are man. When we sing truly, both disappear.” In that disappearance lies the secret of sahaja, the natural state, where body and soul, male and female, form and formless, all become one vibrating note.

To the casual listener, Baul songs may seem rustic or erotic, but beneath the simple rhythms lies a subversive theology of freedom. Their lyrics erase the boundaries between sacred and profane, between gender and divinity. The wandering singer who roams from village to village with his or her ektara is not escaping society but demonstrating another possible world a world where love is worship, the body is temple, and woman and man are two syllables of the same divine word.

Background of the Research

The Baul tradition of Bengal, while deeply philosophical and spiritual, is also a living evolving social phenomenon shaped by the effect of modernity, globalization, and cultural commodification. Historically the Bauls emerged as dissenters against institutionalized religion and rigid social hierarchies embodying an alternative vision of spirituality that privileged direct

experience, love, and human equality. Yet as the Baul movement entered the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its practices and values began to interact in new and complex ways with changing socio economic realities. The contemporary Baul no longer sings only in the courtyards of rural Bengal but also on international stages and festivals. This transition from a mystical community to a cultural symbol of Bengal has profoundly affected both their way of life and their gender dynamics.

In this evolving context, the question of the Baul woman, her role, agency, and status becomes especially significant. Historically, Baul women have been integral participants in Baul philosophy and ritual. The sacred partnership between male and female practitioners, as envisioned in *jugal sadhana* (the dual spiritual discipline), affirms the woman's body as an essential locus of divinity. However, the philosophical ideal of gender complementarity often collides with the lived experiences of Baul women in contemporary society.

This research focuses on Baul women of Bolpur Santiniketan, a region that has long been a cultural hub for Baul activity and intellectual exchange. The area provides a fertile ground to explore how traditional practices are being reinterpreted amidst urban expansion and cultural tourism. The study aims to trace the intersections of philosophy, gender, and lived experience within these communities, examining how Baul women negotiate between the metaphysical egalitarianism of their tradition and the constraints of everyday social structures.

The inquiry is not only sociological but also philosophical it interrogates the distance between ideology and embodiment, between the Baul's cosmic notion of gender harmony and the actual conditions under which women practitioners live, sing, and perform their spirituality. By engaging with understand how spiritual egalitarianism survives, adapts, or fractures under modern pressures. The background, therefore, situates this study within the broader tension between continuity and change—between the Baul's ancient song of unity and the fractured rhythms of contemporary life in Bengal.

This exploration of the Baul woman's position in today's Bolpur is ultimately an inquiry into the fate of an egalitarian spiritual ideal in a changing social world a reflection on whether the divine balance sung by the Bauls can still resonate amid the dissonance of modernity.

Literature Review

Scholarly inquiry of Baul tradition of Bengal has evolved markedly over recent decades shifting from a predominantly theological and syncretic focus to more critical engagements with questions of gender, embodiment, and social practice. The Bauls' metaphysical claims of unity, freedom, and transcendence are now increasingly examined in relation to their tangible social manifestations especially through the experiences of women practitioners who navigate the contradiction between philosophical egalitarianism and lived social hierarchies.

Charles H. Capwell's early works (1974, 1988) occupy a foundational position in the field. His article "The Esoteric Beliefs of the Bauls of Bengal (1974)" depicts the Baul tradition as a synthesis of Hindu Bhakti and Islamic Sufi mysticism that repudiates caste divisions, sectarian boundaries, and orthodox ritualism. Capwell underscores the Baul aspiration to "confront life as individuals outside prevailing social and religious confines," emphasizing the movement's universalist and ascetic ethos. His later monograph, "The Popular Expression of Religious Syncretism: The Bauls of Bengal as Apostles of Brotherhood (1988)" extends this reading to position the Bauls as advocates of spiritual equality and humanistic fraternity. Nevertheless Capwell's formulation of Baul egalitarianism remains underdeveloped in its treatment of gender, leaving unexplored how these ideals operate within everyday interactions and practices, particularly for women.

Jeanne Openshaw's "Writing the Self The Life and Philosophy of a Bengali Baul Guru (2009)" advances the field by situating the Baul tradition within broader socio-historical contexts. Through a detailed biographical account of a Baul guru and his disciples, she traces how Baul philosophy and musical practices were negotiated amid the colonial encounter and the transformation of urban middle-class Bengal. Although not explicitly gender-centred, Openshaw's ethnographic and historical attentiveness provides a crucial foundation for

subsequent scholarship that seeks to understand the Baul tradition in terms of embodied experience, social change, and identity formation.

Lisa I. Knight's "Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh" (2011) directly responds to the gender lacuna in earlier studies. Building on her doctoral dissertation *Negotiated Identities, Engendered Lives* (2005) Knight documents how Baul women, while committed to ideals of spiritual freedom and itinerant devotion, contend with entrenched gender norms that uphold domesticity and social dependence. She characterizes these women as "encumbered actors" participants in a spiritual tradition that professes liberation but whose daily realities remain bounded by patriarchal constraints. Knight's ethnography thus exposes the tension between symbolic inclusivity and structural inequality in Baul life.

Extending this conversation, Kristin Hanssen's "Women, Religion and the Body in South Asia: Living with Bengali Bauls" (2018) conducts a fine grained ethnography of a Baul family to examine intersections of caste, poverty, gender and embodied practice (*sadhana*). Hanssen notes that for women adherents, adopting the Baul path may offer partial liberation from gender norms, yet this emancipation is mediated through socioeconomic marginality and bodily discipline. Her work, while cautiously optimistic, reinforces the complexity of realising egalitarian ideals within materially constrained contexts.

Complementing these ethnographic approaches Rakesh Chandra's article "The Interpretation of the Baul Songs and Poetry in Bengal" (2022) focuses on the hermeneutic dimensions of Baul texts. Without directly addressing gender, Chandra explicates the symbolic structures of Baul song-poetry, providing insight into how masculine and feminine metaphors underpin its cosmological and spiritual grammar. Such textual interpretation is indispensable for understanding how gender operates metaphorically within Baul discourse, even as social practices diverge from metaphysical ideals.

Recent regional scholarship has also begun reconnecting philosophical syncretism with gendered inquiry. Amaresh Pramanik's "Baul Sadhak Lalan Fakir on Syncretism and Women Liberty A Historical Study" (2021) revisits the thought of Lalon Fakir, one of the most influential Baul icons. Pramanik argues that Lalon's teachings rhetorically elevated women as creative and cosmic forces (Prakriti) within the metaphysical unity of Purusha Prakriti. However the translation of this symbolic reverence into actual gender equality remains uncertain.

McDaniel (1992), in *The Embodiment of God among the Bauls of Bengal* extends this discourse by emphasizing the sacredness of the human body, particularly the female body, in Baul theology. Through the doctrine of deha sadhana (body-centered practice), McDaniel shows how Bauls view the body as the dwelling place of divinity, where male (ksir) and female (nir) principles are spiritually equal. Yet, she notes that ritual and textual narratives are largely composed from the male perspective, leaving women's spiritual experiences undocumented

Research Gap

Despite the growing attention to gender within Bauls, a significant gap endures in the systematic correlation between metaphysical doctrine and micro-level social dynamics. While existing studies have richly detailed the philosophical notion of unity and symbolic equality often theorized through Purusha Prakriti complementarity few have explored how these abstractions manifest in everyday social relations such as household arrangements , spiritual set ups and in akhras . Moreover ethnographic research has tended to generalize across Bengal and Bangladesh, leaving insufficient attention to specific locales like Bolpur Shantiniketan, where Baul culture interacts intensively with tourism, education, and global cultural circuits. Addressing this lacuna requires a context-sensitive analysis that connects Baul metaphysics with the material, gendered realities of contemporary practitioners, particularly women, within defined regional settings.

Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to explore the philosophical foundation of gender equality within the Baul tradition and to examine how these ideals are reflected in the lived experiences of Baul women in Bolpur Shantiniketan. Baul philosophy emphasizes the unity of Purusha (the male principle) and Prakriti (the female principle), symbolizing a profound balance between masculine and feminine energies. This study aims to understand how such metaphysical concepts of equality are expressed through Baul songs, rituals, and practices, and whether these ideas have found real representation in the social and spiritual lives of Baul women today.

Research Questions

This research is guided by a series of key questions that aim to uncover the deeper relationship between Baul philosophy and gender equality, both in its spiritual ideals and its practical manifestations. The central question driving this study is: How does the Baul philosophy conceptualize gender equality, and to what extent is this ideal reflected in the lives and practices of Baul women in Bolpur–Shantiniketan?

To address this overarching inquiry, the research further explores several interrelated questions. It seeks to understand the core philosophical ideas within Baulism that define the unity of male and female principles, the balance of Purusha and Prakriti and how these ideas are symbolically and spiritually represented in Baul songs, performances, and oral traditions.

The study also questions how these lyrical expressions reinforce the concept of equality, not merely as social justice but as a spiritual realization essential to human existence. Another important set of questions revolves around the lived experiences of Baul women in contemporary times. The research asks: What is the present role and participation of women within Baul communities, and do they enjoy equal spiritual and social standing with their male counterparts?

Finally, the study seeks to understand whether the Baul ideal of gender harmony still resonates in modern practice or whether it has been compromised by social realities. By engaging with these questions the research aims to illuminate how the Baul philosophy's timeless vision of equality translates into the everyday lives of women who embody and sustain this mystical tradition in the heart of Bolpur Shantiniketan.

Methodology

The objective of this research necessitated the adoption of an immersive qualitative methodology designed to collect rich, contextual and deep data. This approach was chosen to move beyond surface level observations, allowing for a deep, nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and cultural dynamics inherent to the study group. The core of the investigation was ethnography, involving engagement and fieldwork of two weeks. This method provided the essential framework for observing the research participants within their natural environment, allowing for an appreciation of the social, ritualistic contexts that shape their daily practices and philosophies. This participation was crucial for establishing trust and gaining genuine insight into complex cultural phenomena. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques is being used to collect the Baul subjects and informants. Data collection was primarily facilitated through the use of unstructured interviews. Unlike structured formats, the unstructured approach offered maximum flexibility, allowing the conversation to flow organically based on the participants' narratives and priorities. This technique was vital for uncovering unanticipated themes and subjective interpretations, prioritizing the informant's voice over pre-defined research categories.

The study engaged a total of eight participants, comprising five male and three female practitioners. This small, yet focused, sample was intentionally selected to ensure that the depth of the ethnographic fieldwork and the intimacy of the unstructured interviews could be maximized. Collectively, this qualitative design ensured the generation of detailed narratives. The community of Baul is itself a diverse community, I have focused on Bauls particularly family oriented Bauls (Grihi Baul) to understand the gender dynamics.

Ethnographic data collection

The field I have selected i was familiar with , Bolpur Santiniketan in Birbhum. The place is one of the most significant place of Bengal not only for its incorporation with Rabindranath Tagore but also it is the hub of Baul community but entering into the field the most challenging task was to find women Baul as my subject to study . The famous tourist locations like Bank of the kopai river and Shonajhurir hat was dominated by male Bauls and another challenge also I have faced during the field work to distinguish between shajon Baul and Shadhon Baul , Shajon Bauls are Baul singers but they haven't taken formal teachings from a guru and Shadhon Baul , who follows the path of Baul philosophy and have taken talim from gurus. Somehow from a local people I got to know about a female Baul who lives in Shurupara Shondhyarani dasi Baul . The house of Shondhyarani Dasi Baul was bit interesting she had a pakka big house but there was a small cottage there a mud house she mentioned it as her “Ashram” , her sadhan griha though I did not get the scope to get into the cottage . Shondhyarani dasi was married . I will share her life experiences in the first case study . In the report I will broadly cover two case studies and I will also mention other datas as well which collected from other short interview sessions in a paragraph after this two broad case studies then I will come up with my analysis part

Case Study 1: Shondhya Rani Dasi Baul , Shuru para , Bolpur santiniketan

Shondhya Rani Dasi, aged 57, is a paramparik Baul a hereditary practitioner belonging to a lineage where both her natal and marital families have followed Baul philosophy and rituals for generations. From as early as the age of three, she was introduced to Baul songs and spigeru l practices that shaped her understanding of the world and the self. When asked about the meaning of Baul in her life, she profoundly articulated, “Baul holo mon” “Baul is the heart.” To her, being Baul is an inward journey, a process of self-realization, of discovering one’s moner manush (the person of the heart), which lies at the core of Baul philosophy. Her spiritual journey deepened when she began visiting the Jaydev Mela, an annual congregation in Jaydev-Kenduli where Baul sadhus and sadhikas from diverse regions gather to share songs, discourses, and spiritual insights. There, she encountered different akhras (spiritual communes) and gurus she felt an inner calling to immerse herself in the unfathomable ocean of Baul spirituality. Through

these experiences, she realized the pivotal role of the guru in a Baul's life as a guide and pioneer who illuminates the disciple's path toward self realization and union with the divine within.

In response to a question about whether the guru is exclusively male, "Guru ki shudhu purush hoy?" Shondhya Rani clarified that Baul tradition also recognizes Guru Maas, who are female spiritual counterparts. These Guru Maas often serve as sadhan sanginis (spiritual partners) to male gurus. The bond between a guru and a sadhan sangini can be formalized either through marriage or through ritual partnership, reflecting the complex intertwining of spiritual and social relationships within the Baul community. Discussing the gender dynamics within akhras, Shondhya Rani noted that despite the presence of talented female practitioners, women often occupy a secondary role. During her visits to various akhras, she observed that Guru Maas were frequently discouraged from singing publicly in the presence of male gurus. Their roles were largely confined to maintaining the hospitality of guests and disciples, and when allowed to perform, they were often restricted to dichoral or percussive accompaniments rather than solo performances. However, she emphasized that within ritual practices especially during dehasadhana (the spiritual discipline involving the body) women play an indispensable role. In these esoteric rituals, the union of the male and female principles is essential to achieve spiritual realization, symbolizing the unity of the human and the divine. Yet, even in this sacred sphere, gender asymmetry persists. According to Shondhya Rani, the agency of women in choosing their sadhan sangi (spiritual partner) is limited by community norms. Men often enjoy the privilege of choosing multiple sadhan sanginis, sometimes even beyond their marital relationship. Although consent from the wife is traditionally required, it is, as she observed, "largely symbolic." In many cases, refusal can lead to the dissolution of the marriage or social pressure on the wife to comply. Conversely, married Baul women are not permitted to seek multiple sadhan sangis, and their choices are further constrained by societal expectations of fidelity and modesty. Unmarried Baul women may exercise greater freedom in spiritual partnership, but once married, they are expected to uphold conventional gender roles and maintain their social image within the community. She mentioned "parar loke ra chi chi kore ! Shwami tokhon bole amar bou er choritro kharap tai take Shadhon sangini banano jabe na " means if a married girl involves with another man in jugol shadhona she is labelled as "character less" by the society and her husband will justify his action for not selecting her as his sadhansangi because of her character

Reflecting on familial and social roles, Shondhya Rani explained that Baul rituals and practices can coexist within the framework of family life. However, she acknowledged that gender roles within the family often mirror mainstream societal structures. Both she and her husband fulfill domestic responsibilities before undertaking spiritual journeys to the guru griha (the guru's residence). She said that "Baul ra biye kore songsar kore , keu keu bongsher dip o jalay , tarpor jokhon mone kore songsar chere brohmochorjyo palon kore "Bauls can follow an ascetic life path after marriage even . They fulfill their munden responsibilities first then they can also follow the Baul philosophical path .

She added that her experience may be somewhat exceptional, as her generational Baul lineage has provided her with familial support for her performances and travels. At times, her husband accompanies her to performances, while at other times, she travels with her musical team.

When asked about gender participation in Baul ceremonies and festivals, Shondhya Rani described the Jaydev Fair as a unique space of spiritual communion where gender boundaries momentarily dissolves. Baul sadhus and sadhikas gather, live, and perform together for several nights, sharing songs and teachings that transcend social hierarchies. It is here that individuals meet new companions, learn philosophical lessons, and occasionally discover their sadhan sangis. When I asked her about the increasing number of women Baul artists she remarked that it's true that woman Bauls are increasing day by day but according to her all of them are not Bauls , though Baul folk songs , music is one of the key parts of Baul philosophy Baul music is an integral part of baul culture through music they preach their believes to common people but according to her only singing Baul songs wearing saffron dresses doesn't make someone a "real" Baul to her it is practice , a certain lifestyle that make someone a real Baul according to her though number of woman Baul singers has increased at the present time , also women Baul are getting recognition and popularity day by day , they are performing in big urber set ups not only in India but also in other countries but only few of them follows the core philosophy of Baul community , very few of them follows an ascetic lifestyle. She mentioned them as "Shajon Baul" a performative Baul , they are privileged so they got the exposure still the real ones Ramesh under the shadow. According to her even in akhras there is a huge imbalance in gender ratio and women lead akhra is rare . In recent time Parvati Baul has set up an akhra but she also questioned the authenticity of parvati Baul's "Baul" identity.

Despite the egalitarian ideals of Baul philosophy, her narrative reveals a complex tension between spiritual equality and social reality, a tension that continues to shape the lived experiences of Baul women in contemporary times.

During the field work I also got the opportunity to visit a Baul akhra in shyambati near my guest house at jambuni , Bolpur in the next case study I will be discussing about it

Case study 2 Basudev Baul's Akhra , Shyambati, Bolpur

During my field visit to Bolpur Shantiniketan, I had the chance to explore a traditional Baul akhra situated in Shyambati. The akhra comprised a modest cottage adorned with photographs and idols of various Hindu deities, reflecting the syncretic spiritual atmosphere typical of Baul spaces. The guru of the akhra was Basudev Baul, under whose guidance five disciples were there at the time of my visit two female and three male. The gurumaa Rina Dasi Baul was also present during my interaction. Though gurumaa was not there initially latter guru Bashudev Baul told her to join them she took the seat beside him . I began my interview with Guru Basudev Baul by asking about the significance of deho sadhana (spiritual and bodily discipline) within Baul ritualistic practices. He explained that in jugol sadhana the dual spiritual practice involving both male and female partners the presence of a sadhon-sangini (female spiritual companion) is essential. However, he emphasized that this practice is not rooted in procreation but rather in spiritual realization and balance. According to him, jugol sadhana is a holistic way of life that aims to attain the moner manush (the innerbeing). It seeks both inner bliss and the conscious retention of jiboni shokti (vital energy), integrating physical pleasure with spiritual enlightenment. When asked about the role of women in jugol sadhana, Guru Basudev asserted that women embody shakti (divine energy), and hence, both male and female participants hold equal importance in the process. Nevertheless, when the discussion turned toward consent and agency in choosing a sadhon-sangini, his response revealed a gap between philosophical ideals and lived realities. Philosophically, he stated that both partners must give mutual consent. However, in practice the dynamics often favor men. He admitted that if a wife withholds consent, it becomes difficult for her to “hold the husband properly,” implying that men may still pursue extramarital spiritual partnerships. He also noted instances where husbands leave their

families to live with a sadhon-sangini, whereas women are rarely afforded the same freedom. When asked to explain this gender disparity, Guru Basudev offered a metaphorical response “Nari hocche nodi ar purush holo shomudro, somudro theke jol nile kokhono kome na. Nari hocche mathar moni, shommaniyo.” (“The woman is like a river, and the man is like the ocean. Taking water from the ocean never diminishes it. A woman is the precious gem of the crown she deserves respect.”)

This statement encapsulates the paradox of reverence and restriction often experienced by Baul women being symbolically revered as divine energy while simultaneously constrained by patriarchal norms. When asked about the role of gurumaa within the akhra, Guru Basudev explained that Rina Dasi Baul is responsible for teaching the female disciples the doihik kriya (bodily exercises) associated with Baul practices. To illustrate the spiritual union of man and woman, he sang a traditional Baul song “Meye Ganga Yamuna Saraswati, tar mashe mashe joyar ashe, tai roshik meye gopon thake ghore boshe jogot dekhe, boli shoti hoye dhormo raakhe niye upopoti.”

Through this song, he emphasized the sacred yet concealed nature of feminine energy within Baul philosophy. Specially the lyrics “Shoti hoye dhormo rakhe , niye upopoti” it means a woman can be pure as well while keeping multiple “upor poti” (here upopoti can be understood as sadhan sangis) Later, gurumaa entered the akhra accompanied by two of her female disciples. I spoke with one of them, Shima Dasi Baul, who shared that she had been learning Baul songs for a year. She was married and expressed that her husband was supportive of her spiritual and musical pursuits. She then sang a Baul song she had recently learned, followed by a performance by gurumaa herself, while Guru Basudev accompanied her musically. When I requested that both of them perform a duet, Guru Basudev appeared hesitant, and despite repeated requests, they refrained from singing together.

During a later conversation, gurumaa Rina Dasi mentioned that she used to perform Rabindra Sangeet before marriage. One of Guru Basudev’s acquaintances added that gurumaa spends most of her day engaged in domestic responsibilities, yet she possesses extensive knowledge of Baul songs and their lyrics. She memorizes them by listening to her husband’s singing from the akhra while continuing her household chores.

This observation subtly reflects the persistent gender imbalance within Baul spaces where women are revered as spiritual energy but often remain confined to the domestic sphere, their voices resonating from the periphery rather than the center of the akhra's musical and ritual life.

Analysis of the Case Studies

The two case studies one focused on the life of Shondhya Rani Dasi and the other on the inside observations in Basudev Baul's akhra reveal a gendered landscape that cannot be neatly separated into oppression on one side and liberation on the other. Instead, the ethnographic details point to a spectrum of negotiations, contradictions, and partial freedoms that Baul women inhabit. Baul philosophy with its emphasis on the unity of male and female energies and its critique of rigid social boundaries, provides a discursive framework that gestures toward equality. Yet, the lived realities of Baul practice in Bolpur Shantiniketan show that this philosophical ideal coexists with persistent hierarchies, subtle accommodations, and everyday compromises. These complexities are best understood through two complementary theoretical lenses feminist standpoint theory and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. Each offers a way of seeing how gendered experience is both shaped by and able to question the structures within the Baul community.

From the vantage point of feminist standpoint theory, the insights offered by Baul women themselves particularly those from hereditary or paramparik lineages carry a particular analytic weight. Standpoint theory argues that social knowledge is shaped by one's structural location and that marginal groups often perceive contradictions that dominant groups overlook. Shondhya Rani's reflections exemplify this. Her explanation that women's consent in selecting a sadhan sangi is "largely symbolic" does not appear as a denunciation of the tradition but as an insider's recognition of how ideals are filtered through the pressures of marriage, reputation, and communal expectations. She occupies a position that allows her to articulate the fragility of this consent without rejecting the philosophy that gives her life meaning. Similarly, her insistence that singing Baul songs or wearing saffron robes does not make someone a "real" Baul reflects a nuanced understanding of how authenticity, lineage, and ascetic practice intersect particularly for women whose legitimacy is often scrutinized more harshly than that of their male counterparts.

Her standpoint reveals a world where spiritual egalitarianism is not absent but is continuously mediated by gendered expectations.

A similar complexity emerges in the second case study. Gurumaa Rina Dasi possesses deep knowledge of Baul songs and deho-sadhana practices, yet she remains situated at the margins of the akhra's public performances. Her learning process listening from a distance while carrying out domestic chores—shows how women navigate spaces that are never entirely closed to them but not fully open either. Her consent participation and authority take forms that are quiet rather than assertive, embedded in routine rather than ritual prominence. Standpoint theory helps make sense of these subtleties, revealing that women's experiences are shaped not only by overt restrictions but also by the more understated rhythms of everyday life, where spiritual aspiration coexists with household labor, and devotion exists alongside negotiation.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power provides a second lens through which to understand these layered realities. Symbolic power refers to the ways in which dominance is maintained not through force but through culture, metaphor, and the taken-for-granted logic of everyday practice. The metaphor offered by Basudev Baul "woman as river, man as ocean" speaks to this dynamic. It appears to elevate women spiritually while subtly naturalizing a hierarchy in which women's expansiveness is limited and men's authority remains unchallenged. This is not a simple reproduction of patriarchy but rather a symbolic framing that blends reverence with restraint, creating a space where restrictions feel meaningful rather than arbitrary. In this sense, the metaphor does not merely reflect inequality; it produces a worldview in which inequality becomes intertwined with spiritual expression.

Symbolic power is also visible in the musical practices of the akhra. The hesitation to allow a duet between guru and gurumaa does not emerge from explicit prohibition but from a shared understanding of propriety, modesty, and the gendered aesthetics of performance. Women's voices are not silenced, but they resonate from the periphery heard, appreciated, yet not centered. Their contributions are acknowledged as essential to certain ritual and bodily practices, especially in jugol-sadhana, but this recognition does not translate into equal ritual visibility. Instead, the boundaries of participation are maintained through a mix of affection, ritual order, and long-standing collective sensibilities. Symbolic power works here not as an oppressive force

but as an organizing principle that shapes what is possible, acceptable, or desirable within the spiritual community.

Taken together, the two case studies suggest that gender in Baul communities is not a matter of clear-cut domination or liberation. Rather, it exists in a textured middle ground where women navigate spaces that offer both spiritual affirmation and social constraint. Some women, like Shondhya Rani, enjoy family support, mobility as performers, and recognized spiritual expertise, yet still observe limits to female agency in choosing sadhan sangis or leading akhras. Others, like gurumaa Rina Dasi, participate through quieter channels, carrying deep knowledge that circulates informally rather than through public ritual authority. These experiences are not identical, nor do they fall neatly into categories of empowerment or oppression. They reflect the fluidity that Baul philosophy values, while also revealing the tenacity of gendered structures that mirror broader Bengali society.

What emerges, therefore, is a picture of Baul women's lives that is neither celebratory nor damning. The egalitarian impulses of Baul philosophy are neither fully realized nor entirely absent. They shape the aspirations, self-understandings, and spiritual journeys of women, opening paths that might be less available in more orthodox religious settings. At the same time, gendered norms shape the institutional contours of akhras, marital relationships, performance practices, and ritual authority. These contradictions are not anomalies but central features of Baul social life. They form a shifting, ambivalent terrain where women craft possibilities within constraints, asserting presence in ways that are sometimes subtle, sometimes direct, and often situated in the interstices between devotion, lineage, and social expectation.

Limitation

This research carries several limitations that shape both its scope and its interpretive possibilities. The most immediate constraint emerged from the limited duration of fieldwork. The kind of repeated encounters that allow people to move beyond formal responses and reveal the subtler layers of their lived experiences. Because the field engagement unfolded within a compressed time frame, opportunities for such sustained immersion were necessarily curtailed. Moments of

trust did emerge, but they remained early blossoms rather than fully formed relationships, and this inevitably influenced the depth of narrative detail that could be captured.

A second limitation concerns the scale and composition of the participant group. The study draws on interactions with a small set of respondents primarily family oriented Bauls. While their insights were rich and invaluable, a community as philosophically diverse and internally varied as the Bauls cannot be adequately represented through a narrow sample. The voices included here reflect specific trajectories, social positions, and institutional ties, which means that other experiences particularly those of itinerant Bauls, marginal performers, or those disengaged from institutional akhras may not appear in this account.

Geographical specificity forms a third limitation. The research is situated entirely within the Bolpur Shantiniketan region, a space where Baul philosophy intersects with distinctive local cultural currents, a thriving arts scene, and a tourist economy that subtly reshapes performance practices and gender dynamics. The realities observed here are therefore deeply rooted in a landscape marked by both heritage and commercialization. Baul communities in Nadia, Kushtia, or rural Murshidabad, for instance, may operate under very different social pressures, kinship structures, and spiritual lineages. As a result, the findings of this study should be understood as reflective of the localized ecology of Bolpur Shantiniketan rather than as definitive statements about Baul life across Bengal.

Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the value of the insights gathered but instead help situate them. They remind us that any ethnographic encounter is both partial and shaped by context. The work presented here captures one slice of a much larger and more fluid world of Baul philosophy and practice suggesting pathways for deeper, longer-term engagement in future research.

Conclusion

The exploration of gender equality within Baul philosophy and its lived expression in Bolpur Shantiniketan brings into view a quiet but persistent tension between spiritual imaginaries and social realities. Baul thought places great emphasis on the internal balance of Purusha and Prakriti, the masculine and feminine principles that together form the basis of human completeness. Equality, in this philosophical sense, is imagined as an inner condition, a state where duality dissolves. It emerges not through social reordering but through a personal journey toward alignment and harmony. Yet as this metaphysical vision moves into the everyday lives of Baul practitioners, it encounters the layered influence of kinship, custom, and deeply embedded social scripts that continue to define the ways gender is experienced and negotiated.

The field narratives of women practitioners such as Shondhya Rani Dasi and Rina Dasi make this negotiation visible. Their experiences reveal that Baul philosophy does offer a symbolic vocabulary through which women can be honoured as bearers of shakti, as necessary presences in the pursuit of spiritual completeness. However, symbolic honour rarely translates into structural equality. Instead, women find themselves positioned within boundaries that shift according to context, community, and perception. They participate in rituals, they perform, they teach, but their mobility and visibility remain circumscribed by social expectations that sit just beneath the surface of Baul practice.

Ritual landscapes such as akhras, evening gatherings, and festivals like the Jaydev Mela create moments where the usual gender rules appear softer. In these spaces, women sometimes occupy roles that interrupt the everyday ordering of gender. Their voices, movements, and performances carry a presence that contrasts with the constraints of domestic and community life. Yet these spaces are not free of hierarchy. Permission, legitimacy, and recognition continue to be socially managed, often in ways that are subtle enough to be missed in a brief encounter but clear to those who live within the tradition. The freedom available to Baul women in these settings is therefore momentary real but fragile, visible but conditional.

The picture that emerges from the field is neither straightforward liberation nor unbroken restriction. Instead, Baul women inhabit an in-between ground, shaped by quiet negotiations and ongoing adjustments. Their forms of agency appear not through open confrontation but through endurance, participation, and the steady labour of keeping their practice alive within the limits set around them. They manoeuvre through expectations, reworking the boundaries available to them without stepping fully outside the tradition's social frame. This subtle interplay of constraint and possibility becomes the defining feature of their lived experience.

The cultural environment of Bolpur–Shantiniketan complicates this picture further. The region's longstanding association with artistic life, tourism, and its reputation as a centre of cultural interest introduces new layers into Baul practice. Performance here is not only a spiritual act but also a public one, shaped by the gaze of visitors, researchers, and audiences seeking a version of “authentic” Baul identity. This gaze influences how Baul women appear and how they are interpreted within the community. Their participation is sometimes welcomed and at other times carefully managed, depending on the expectations of both the Baul community and the broader public space in which they perform.

Within this setting, gender equality in Baulism becomes a fluid and continuously shifting process rather than a fixed state. The metaphysical idea of balance persists, but its translation into daily life reflects a collection of negotiations shaped by history, community, and individual circumstance. The experiences of Baul women illustrate how philosophical ideals do not disappear when they meet social structures, but neither do they override them. Instead, they coexist sometimes harmoniously, sometimes uneasily forming a landscape marked by tension, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

The picture that forms is one of complexity rather than clarity. Baul women in Bolpur–Shantiniketan inhabit a gray space where philosophy and practice do not always align, but neither do they cancel each other out. Their lives reflect the ongoing dialogue between spiritual aspiration and social reality, between symbolic equality and practical limitation. In this quiet, shifting terrain, the Baul tradition continues to live shaped by those who carry it, questioned by those who practise it, and continually reinterpreted through the subtle, everyday movements of those who reside within its fold.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Nupurnima Yadav, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and unwavering support throughout the course of this research fellowship. Her scholarly insights have been instrumental in shaping both the direction and the depth of this study. I am deeply thankful to the Krishnaraj Research Fellowship Committee for granting me this fellowship opportunity and for providing the institutional framework that made the successful completion of this research possible. My appreciation also extends to Mr. Shoumik Bhattacharya, whose introduction to the field and sharing of essential leads and contacts significantly facilitated the early stages of this work. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Ankan Sarkar, who accompanied me as my attendant during fieldwork and contributed meaningfully through video documentation, photography, and data collection.

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