

Kristin Hanssen, *Women, Religion and the Body in South Asia: Living with Bengali Bauls*

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This book offers a fresh contribution to the small yet growing field of Baul studies, particularly thanks to its ethnographic detail. The Bauls are a heterogeneous community of singers and practitioners of a non-institutional religious movement in eastern India (West Bengal) and Bangladesh. The book is based on extensive fieldwork carried out in the 1990s in a rural neighborhood in Birbhum, West Bengal (10). The author is an anthropologist interested in the everyday life, hopes, and anxieties of Vaishnava Bauls. Participant observation, casual conversations, village gossip, and oral exegeses constitute her main material, gathered while the author was learning from and performing with a family of Bengali Bauls who sing on the local trains, having taken vows of renunciation through the initiation ritual known as *bhek*. The author lived with this Baul family, sharing their one-room hut for nine months, and joining their musical troupe—which allowed her to experience and observe their social context very closely. The book can be a useful and inspiring tool for students of anthropology, religious studies, and South Asian studies, who are interested in conducting fieldwork in rural South Asia or with urban subaltern communities.

The main part of the book is preceded by a glossary and a list of “characters” (xii) with names and social relationships surrounding Hanssen’s main interlocutors. The introduction locates the ethnographic persona of the researcher and enumerates the various themes that the book aims to focus on: caste and gender; begging and performing; the meaning of Vaishnava lifecycles; notions of the body and how they relate to food, song, and psyche; and conceptions of the self and the body enacted in the everyday. While it is such a variety of topics that makes the monograph so rich, this also constitutes the major challenge for maintaining a coherent common thread. Chapters are organized following broad themes (the participants’ life stories, caste and the empowering symbolic capital of spiritual knowledge, esoteric rites, begging and initiation, festivals and performances, death and funerary rites). However, key themes such as gender, constructions of womanhood, and local understandings of the healthy body are distributed throughout the book, rather than being organized into specific chapters.

The choice to study the Baul tradition by living for an extended period of time in one village with a single Baul family has numerous advantages and also some unavoidable limitations. Describing the everyday ethics and pragmatics of being mendicants and singers, the author portrays Bauls not as exoticized minstrels or mysterious esoteric practitioners (as we find in most of the studies that lack a close ethnographic involvement) but rather as human beings deeply interwoven in village society, as family members, neighbors, religious specialists, and mothers and daughters, embodying diverse and multiple identities and negotiating the performance of their roles in response to the expectations of the surrounding society. Focusing on one family of self-defined Bauls also means that Hanssen’s observations are applicable especially to Vaishnava Baul singers and beggars, but do not always apply, for instance, to Bauls initiated with a Shakta mantra, to Muslim Bauls, or to Baul lineages that do not only entail begging.

Hanssen’s representation of caste leaves theoretical frameworks to a minimum. Instead, it gives ample importance to local understandings of caste and untouchability

on an everyday level and as an institution that people embody in their person (2). The body, throughout the book, emerges as an instrument of performing caste and gender roles but also as an instrument to understand, discover, and change the universe that people inhabit, by opposing the rules that define the low-caste body as ritually polluting and by juxtaposing traditional knowledge of high-caste specialists with esoteric knowledge on the body (*debatattva*). However, according to the author, despite the importance placed on learning esoteric rites in order to acquire strong and healthy bodies, her interlocutors were rarely applying that knowledge onto their bodies. They were often plagued by a sense of weakness due to their strenuous singing and begging practices, and they lamented the lack of supportive patrons.

Focusing on Bauls' everyday lives and practices, this study demystifies the iconoclastic and subversive character of the Baul tradition by showing that Hanssen's interlocutors were not opposed to image worship, participated in mainstream Hindu pujas and festivals, and wore exterior signs of Vaishnava devotion. The author suggests that Vaishnava and Baul were used as interchangeable terms (6), hence Bengali Vaishnavism can be seen as "inclusive, . . . an umbrella term accommodating fluctuating, overlapping, heterogeneous groups" (4). While this is a legitimate impression, my feeling is that it lacks a perspective on the numerous tensions, conflicts, and hierarchies at play among contested Vaishnava identities and self-definitions. At the end of the book the author reports that, as part of the funerary rites of one of the main characters/participants, the mortuary banquet was planned on two separate days, one for Vaishnava renunciates and one for Bauls (182). The need for such separation alludes to a mutual perception of otherness. Perhaps the complexity of these modern religious identities could have been examined and contextualized into a more thorough historical understanding of nineteenth-century literature, testifying the emergence of the Baul community against the backdrop of reformed Bengali Vaishnavism. The section dedicated to the historical background of the Baul and Sahajiya traditions is extremely short and based on few references (4–7) in English, while seminal historical, literary, and ethnographic analyses by Bengali scholars (e.g., Manindra Mohan Bose, Sudhir Chakravarty, Paritosh Das, and Shakti Nath Jha) are missing. The depth of content in the introductory part of the book would have enormously benefited from a deeper and updated literary survey on Bauls, Fakirs, Vaishnava Sahajiyas, and other coeval heterodox and esoteric communities in Bengal. References on Bauls stop with Lisa Knight (2011) and unfortunately do not include some important publications that appeared afterward.

The style of writing, intentionally focused on day-to-day experience (16) and driven by narrative rather than argument, adds to the prose a flow of vivacious readability. The only formal weakness of this monograph is perhaps due to the author's basic knowledge of Bengali language. Translations of the Baul songs reported in the book are at times inaccurate or incomplete (e.g., the song *dildarijār mājhe re bhāi āche majār kārkhānā* is quoted as "Dilduria boatman / This is a strange factory of joy"; the translation of the last line—usually "*phuler saurabhe jagat meteche / śudhu tālaner man mātlo nā*"—seems to be missing [85–86]). The original Bengali lyrics of the songs reported in the book are not provided, therefore the reader has to rely upon the author's translation, which can necessarily reflect only one of the multiple layers of meaning inscribed in Baul verses. When Bengali terms and expressions are mentioned in Bengali, transliterations do not adhere to conventional standards, leaving space for

some inaccuracy. For example, *bitare* [sic] for “inside” (97); *motha* [sic] for “fat” (98); *alingdar* [sic] for “a hug” (193); *etap chal* [sic] translated as “cooked rice” (179); *mala candan* (the Baul wedding ritual) translated as “garland of sandalwood paste” (x).

Apart from these negligible lacunae, *Women, Religion and the Body in South Asia* is a very enjoyable and welcome contribution to the understanding of Vaishnava Baul lives in West Bengal, and it strikes one for its genuine and honest ethnographic endeavor. As a further contribution to the field, the author should share on accessible platforms her recordings of the music sessions taken during her periods of fieldwork periods, as a valuable documentation of Baul performances from more than two decades ago, before the “urban slum” came to substitute the “idyllic pastoral scenery” of the village (187).

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