

Singing the Self and the Soil: Ecological Thought in Baul Folk Narratives

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Abstract

The Baul tradition of Bengal is generally approached through the categories of mysticism, humanism, anti-caste thought, religious syncretism, and spiritual liberation. Yet Baul songs also contain a significant ecological imagination in which the human body, soil, plants, animals, rivers, rain, and the wider natural world are understood as interconnected forms of existence. This paper examines ecological thought in Baul folk narratives through the concepts of *prakṛti*, *deha-tattva*, ecocentrism, interdependence, and vernacular environmentalism. Drawing on some unheard ecological songs associated with Baul Taskir Ali and Baul Vijay Sarkar, alongside Lalon and other Baul traditions, the paper argues that Baul ecological consciousness is not simply a modern environmental interpretation imposed upon an older folk tradition. Taskir Ali's songs, particularly "Nature is the Center" and "I in the Forest," explicitly establish nature as teacher, mother, and spiritual guide, while Vijay Sarkar's song about 'leaving the earth' articulates an early vernacular ethics of intergenerational sustainability. The paper further considers the contemporary performance of Barṣhā Maṅgal Utsav, and ecological activities at Shyam Sakha Ashram in Birbhum as examples of how Baul ecological philosophy moves from song into embodied cultural practice. Through an ecocritical reading, the study demonstrates that Baul folk narratives offer an alternative to anthropocentric modernity by imagining the self not as separate from the environment but as a part of an interconnected ecological body.

Keywords: Baul Ecology, *Prakṛti*, Soil and Nature, Vernacular Environmentalism, *Barṣhā Maṅgal Utsav*

1. Introduction

The Bauls of Bengal have traditionally been represented as itinerant mystics, singers, spiritual seekers, and cultural outsiders. Their songs challenge institutional religion, caste hierarchy, social convention, and materialistic desire. The Baul's search for the *Maner Manush*, or the "Man of the Heart," is generally understood as an inward spiritual journey. However, this inwardness does not necessarily imply a separation from the external world. On the contrary, Baul philosophy frequently understands the human body and the natural world as interconnected manifestations of the same creative principle. This ecological dimension becomes especially important when Baul songs are read through contemporary ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Such a definition makes it possible to approach oral and folk traditions as spaces in which communities articulate relationships with land, animals, forests, rivers, rain, and seasonal cycles. The ecological significance of Baul thought has recently received greater scholarly attention. Golam Rabbani argues that Lalon and Radharaman Dutta's songs contain an eco-centric vision in which the earth

is understood as a mother and nature as an interconnected system rather than a resource existing exclusively for human use (195–206). Similarly, Rabbani's study of Baul Taskir Ali identifies a strong eco-centric dimension in his songs, particularly his emphasis on forests, animals, rainfall, and the ethical responsibility of human beings toward nature.

This paper therefore asks: (a) How does the Baul tradition connect the human self with soil and ecological life? (b) How do Baul songs imagine nature as a spiritual rather than merely material entity? (c) And how can contemporary Baul performance transform this ecological philosophy into cultural practice?

The central argument of this paper is that Baul ecological thought is based upon relationality. The Baul does not imagine the self as an isolated individual standing outside nature. Instead, the body is itself a miniature ecology, while the surrounding natural world becomes an extension of that body.

2. Research Methodology

The methodology is primarily qualitative and interpretive. The study uses close reading of translated Baul songs, ecocritical analysis, textual interpretation, and contextual study of Baul performance. Particular attention is given to Taskir Ali's songs as documented by Golam Rabbani, Vijay Sarkar's ecological song reproduced in *Bauls on Sustainability*, and selected Lalou songs available in Deben Bhattacharya's *The Mirror of the Sky*. The research also draws on secondary scholarship concerning Baul ecology and environmental humanities.

As Baul songs are transmitted orally and exist in multiple versions, textual attribution and wording may vary between performers and collections. Therefore, this paper uses published scholarly transcriptions and translations rather than treating a single written version as definitive.

3. Baul Philosophy and the Ecological Self

One of the most important foundations for an ecological reading of Baul songs is the concept of *deha-tattva*, or the philosophy of the body. The Baul spiritual practice does not necessarily seek liberation by rejecting material existence. The body is the principal site through which spiritual knowledge is experienced. The Baul tradition therefore repeatedly uses images of rivers, boats, seeds, flowers, trees, birds, earth, water, and seasons to describe the human condition. Deben Bhattacharya's collection *The Mirror of the Sky: Songs of the Bauls of Bengal* demonstrates the extent to which natural imagery structures the Baul poetry. The collection contains 204 translated Baul songs and presents natural images such as earth, rivers, flowers, boats, and seasonal phenomena alongside spiritual and bodily symbolism.

The ecological implication is significant. If the human body is itself a manifestation of nature, environmental destruction cannot be completely separated from the destruction of human life. The soil outside the body and the bodily “soil” within it belong to the same continuum. This perspective challenges the conventional Western opposition between “human” and “nature.” Instead of positioning nature as an external object that can be possessed, measured, or exploited, Baul philosophy often treats nature as an active participant in human existence. This is particularly visible in the Baul understanding of *prakṛti*. Nature is not simply scenery. It is a creative, generative force. The Baul seeks knowledge through participation in this force rather than through domination over it.

4. From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism

Anthropocentrism places human needs at the centre of ethical consideration, whereas ecocentrism understands human beings as one component within a larger ecological community. Rabbani's study of

Lalon and Radharaman explicitly identifies their poetry with eco-centric traditions. He argues that their songs celebrate the earth as mother and recognize nature as an ecological system that should not simply be subordinated to human requirements (195–206).

This principle also appears strongly in the lesser-known songs of Baul Taskir Ali. Unlike the internationally popular image of Baul poetry that concentrates primarily on mystical love and the *Maner Manush*, Taskir Ali's repertoire directly addresses ecological relationships. In “Nature is the Center,” he presents nature as a spiritual guide:

“Mother nature is your forever truth.
Your spirit and your spiritual selves
Make your complete
If you let mother nature lead.
Both Nature and God

Fulfil your *shadhana* (spiritual meditation). (Ali 2014, 71, from the song “Nature is the Center”)

The song is important because nature is not described merely as beautiful. Nature is given epistemological authority. It can “lead” the seeker. In other words, nature becomes a guru. Rabbani observes that Taskir Ali's songs portray nature as “the leader, the guide, the earthly provider.” This reverses the conventional hierarchy in which humans consider themselves masters of the natural world. If nature is the teacher, then human beings become students within an ecological system. The ecological consequence is an ethic of humility. The human being cannot exist independently of soil, water, plants, animals, and climate. Spiritual completion therefore requires ecological awareness.

One of the less frequently discussed Baul ecological songs is Taskir Ali's “I in the Forest.” The song is particularly valuable because it moves from spiritual recognition to ecological responsibility:

“Nature nurtures our soul
As it nurtures its forests and animals.
As her children, we must nurture
Her support systems.” (Ali 2014, 73, from the song “I in the Forest”)

This is a powerful ecological formulation. The forest is not simply useful to human beings; it possesses its own life and value. The animals are also part of the same moral community. The phrase “her children” establishes a familial relationship between humanity and the natural world. If humans are nature's children, exploitation becomes a violation of kinship. The ecological relationship is consequently reciprocal: nature nurtures human beings, and humans must nurture nature. The final lines are equally significant:

“Empathy and sympathy for the wild
Will bring you the kindness of mighty mother.” (Ali 73)

Here ecological responsibility is founded upon empathy rather than regulation. The song does not begin with a scientific explanation of biodiversity or a governmental policy. It begins with an emotional and spiritual transformation of the human subject. This is what makes Baul ecological thought particularly relevant to environmental humanities. Environmental destruction is not represented merely as a technical problem; it is also a crisis of human consciousness. Rabbani notes that Taskir Ali repeatedly connects forests, animals, rainfall, and vegetation, particularly drawing upon the ecological landscape of Sylhet. His songs therefore preserve what may be called vernacular ecological knowledge—knowledge embedded in local experience, memory, landscape, and oral performance.

5. The Soil as Spiritual Archive

In Baul philosophy, soil is not merely a physical substance or agricultural resource; it functions as a spiritual archive that preserves the interconnected history of human beings, nature, and existence. The Baul concept of *deha-tattva*—the philosophy of the body—provides an important foundation for understanding this relationship. Since the human body is composed of natural elements and eventually returns to the earth, the distinction between the human self and the soil becomes unstable. The soil is therefore both the origin and destination of embodied existence.

Baul songs frequently use images of seeds, flowers, trees, rivers, earth, and cultivation to express spiritual transformation. The metaphor of the seed is particularly significant. A seed contains the possibility of life, but its growth depends upon soil, water, air, and sunlight. Similarly, the Baul self contains spiritual potential that can only be realized through proper cultivation. The relationship between seed and soil consequently becomes a metaphor for the relationship between human consciousness and the natural world.

Lalon's songs provide an important example of this ecological and spiritual interconnectedness. In “A Holed Boat,” the boat represents the human body while the river symbolizes the journey of life (Bhattacharya 133). The metaphor suggests that human existence is dependent upon an ecological environment that cannot be controlled completely. The body, like a boat, remains vulnerable to the movements of the river. Thus, nature becomes both the medium and condition of human existence.

This understanding can be connected with Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). The Baul song demonstrates that the physical environment is not simply a background to spiritual experience; it is constitutive of that experience. Similarly, Arne Naess's idea of “bio spherical egalitarianism” (95) is relevant because Baul thought repeatedly challenges the assumption that human beings possess a superior status over other forms of life. The soil also functions as an archive of memory. It carries traces of generations that have lived, cultivated, travelled, worshipped, performed, and died upon it. For rural Baul communities, soil is connected with agriculture, seasonal change, rain, food, and livelihood. The earth therefore preserves both ecological and cultural memory.

This becomes especially significant in the context of environmental destruction. When soil is degraded, polluted, or commodified, the damage is not merely economic. It also threatens the cultural memory and spiritual relationships embedded within the landscape. Baul ecological consciousness consequently encourages an ethic of care rather than ownership. The soil, then, represents a profound continuity: the human being emerges from the earth, lives through the earth, and finally returns to the earth. To understand the Baul self is therefore to understand its ecological embeddedness. The soil becomes a spiritual archive because it preserves the memory of life, death, nourishment, and regeneration.

6. A Rare Ecological Voice: Vijay Sarkar

Another lesser-known ecological text is attributed to Baul Vijay Sarkar. The song expresses a remarkably contemporary principle of sustainability:

“We will leave this beautiful earth.

The earth will remain as it is now.”

(Sarkar qtd. in *Bauls on Sustainability* 21)

The song is striking because it expresses an intergenerational ecological ethic. Human beings are temporary inhabitants of the earth. They do not possess the planet absolutely; they inherit it and eventually

leave it to future generations. The idea is close to the contemporary principle of sustainable development: the present generation should not destroy the environmental conditions required by future generations. The importance of this song lies in its simplicity. There is no elaborate ecological vocabulary. Instead, sustainability is expressed through a basic ethical proposition: we must leave the earth capable of sustaining those who come after us. This also challenges consumerist ideas of progress. If the purpose of development is unlimited accumulation, the earth becomes a commodity. Vijay Sarkar's song reverses this logic by reminding listeners of human mortality and ecological continuity. The song converts mortality into environmental ethics. Because we must leave, we have an obligation not to destroy what remains.

7. Rain, Monsoon, and *Barṣhā Maṅgal Utsav*

Ecological thought in Bengal cannot be separated from the monsoon. Rain determines agricultural productivity, riverine life, soil fertility, and rural cultural rhythms. Consequently, the monsoon occupies a special place in Bengali folk culture. The Baul relationship with rain is both ecological and spiritual. Rain is not simply weather; it participates in cycles of renewal. The seasonal transformation of the landscape becomes an opportunity for spiritual transformation.

Recent research on Baul performances during *Barṣhā Maṅgal Utsav* argues that contemporary Baul communities have begun to reinterpret the festival through ecological practices such as tree planting, singing to trees, and discussions of environmental responsibility. Hoque's research specifically documents such activities at Shyam Sakha Ashram in Birbhum and interprets them as forms of “vernacular environmentalism.” This development is important because it demonstrates the movement from ecological narrative to ecological performance. The song does not remain merely a verbal representation of nature. Singing, gathering, planting trees, sitting beneath trees, invoking rain, and celebrating the monsoon together create a performative ecological relationship. In this context, *Barṣhā Maṅgal Utsav* becomes more than a cultural festival. It becomes an ecological pedagogy in which communities learn to experience the interdependence of rain, soil, trees, agriculture, body, and spirit.

8. Singing as Ecological Performance

The ecological significance of Baul music lies not only in its lyrics but also in its performative nature. Baul songs are traditionally transmitted orally through singing, listening, imitation, memory, and embodied practice. The song therefore exists as an event rather than merely as a written text. This has important ecological implications. When a Baul sings about a river, tree, bird, rain, or earth, the ecological world becomes part of the performance space. The voice interacts with the physical environment. A song sung beneath a tree is materially different from the same words printed in a book. The performance therefore creates what may be called a sonic ecology: the interaction between human voice, musical instruments, listeners, landscape, weather, and non-human life.

The Baul performance challenges the idea that nature is a silent background. Instead, the environment becomes part of the performance itself. This is particularly visible in the contemporary practice of “singing to the trees” documented during *Barṣhā Maṅgal* activities. Hoque interprets this practice as a form of ecological intimacy in which trees are addressed not simply as objects but as living presences. Such a practice transforms ecological consciousness from an abstract intellectual idea into an embodied relationship.

9. Baul Ecological Thought and Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Baul ecological narratives can also be understood as forms of traditional ecological knowledge. Such knowledge is not necessarily organized through scientific terminology. It emerges from long-term interaction with local environments. The Baul's knowledge of rain, soil, rivers, seasonal cycles, plants, animals, bodily rhythms, and agricultural landscapes is embedded in songs and oral narratives. This oral character is significant because ecological knowledge survives through memory even when it is not preserved in formal institutions.

Rabbani's research on Taskir Ali emphasizes that much of the folk poetry of Sylhet remains unexplored, noting the existence of hundreds of folk poets and Bauls whose works have received limited scholarly attention. This observation suggests that the ecological archive of Baul culture is much larger than the small selection of famous songs normally circulated through commercial recordings and popular performances. The recovery of lesser-known songs is therefore an important scholarly task. It can reveal ecological ideas that disappear when the Baul tradition is reduced to a few internationally popular mystical songs.

10. Conclusion

Baul folk narratives offer a distinctive ecological imagination grounded in *prakṛti*, *deha-tattva*, interdependence, spiritual humility, and resistance to excessive materialism. The ecological significance of the Baul tradition becomes especially visible when lesser-known songs are brought into conversation with contemporary ecocriticism.

Taskir Ali's "Nature Is the Center" establishes nature as a spiritual guide, while "I in the Forest" develops an ethic of reciprocal care toward forests and animals (Ali 71, 73). Vijay Sarkar's song about 'leaving the earth' as one found it articulates an intergenerational principle remarkably close to contemporary sustainability discourse (21). Lalon's river and boat imagery further demonstrates the deep relationship between body and ecological landscape (Bhattacharya 133). These songs reveal that Baul ecological thought does not begin with modern environmental science. It begins with a different understanding of the self. The Baul self is relational, embodied, vulnerable, and materially dependent upon the earth.

Contemporary Barṣā Maṅgal practices at Shyam Sakha Ashram demonstrate how this philosophy can be transformed into performance through singing, tree planting, seasonal gathering, and ecological reflection. Such practices suggest that Baul culture can contribute to a form of vernacular environmentalism rooted not in abstract environmental policy alone but in intimacy with soil, trees, rain, animals, and community. The greatest ecological lesson of Baul folk narratives, therefore, is perhaps deceptively simple: to know the self is also to know the earth that sustains the self. Singing the Baul self becomes an act of singing the soil, and protecting the soil becomes an extension of spiritual self-knowledge.

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