10 Music as Epistemic Bulwark in West Bengal

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Abstract
Colonial powers have often sought to establish their moral authority and political legitimacy by replacing local religious traditions with their own state-sanctioned worldviews and value systems. Chikowero (2015) characterizes attacks on musical tradition as epistemicide, and celebrates the innovations of subaltern populations in resisting such efforts. Contemporary West Bengal is under the crosshairs of right-wing Hindu nationalism, which seeks to stamp out traditions of tolerance and interreligious harmony. This chapter explores whether music in West Bengal can act as a bulwark against imposed ideologies. West Bengal has musical and religious traditions that draw from both Muslim and Hindu worldviews. Krakauer considers how the practice of music and dance can serve as an affective defense, an epistemological inoculation against anti-Muslim bigotry.

Keywords: epistemicide, affect, artistic expression, Hindutva, Muslim minority

Preface: Music and the joyful dissolution of social divisions

When I attended Baul-Fakir musical gatherings in West Bengal between 2009–2014, other participants often assumed that I was there to learn more about myself. In the words of Lalon Shah: "āpan gharer khabar hoy nā, bānchhā kori parke chenā" (Before understanding your own house, how could you possibly understand someone else?").[1] The song's composer had

1 From *āmār ghorkhānā ke birāj kore* by Lalon Shah, as sung by Mallika Akar of Jalangi, Murshidabad, West Bengal in February 2013.

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wisdom for me, melodiously conveyed one evening by the singer Mallika Akar at her family's ashram in Murshidabad district. I was to receive this message through the mercurial medium of my own body, perhaps while bobbing an ankle or swaying my shoulders, according to my own state and the state of the other listeners present. If I imbibed the composer's words, I'd learn to recognize the divine as a palpable material presence in myself, and thereby recognize the divine in all others, as well. This was a radical proposition, because it demanded casting away socioeconomic biases and embracing the preciousness of all other human beings as "one's own" (*āpan*, a dear one or family member). The message was in direct contrast to the subtle and divisive messages I and the other participants were bombarded with in our daily lives, whether in the United States or South Asia. But this message made a particular impact when experienced through an emotionally immersive shared musical experience. And the message held additional power for other participants who had grown up hearing these words while surrounded by loved ones in their community.

Introduction

Colonial powers have often sought to establish political authority and moral legitimacy by replacing local value systems and worldviews with their own. This dynamic applies not only to colonies of the imperial past, but also to contemporary neocolonial settings. In a country as religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse as India, both state and non-governmental authorities reproduce the strategies of colonial administrations in order to maintain control over a heterogeneous population.[2] Since the nineteenth century, Hindu and Muslim political elites in India have sought to replace local religious practices with hegemonic, centrally sanctioned forms of religion.[3] These campaigns have accelerated in recent years, facilitated in part by the ubiquity of online social media networks, where public sentiment is easily

2 Contemporary politicians strategically reify "Hindu" and "Muslim" as essentialized and diametrically opposed categories, building on the divide-and-conquer strategies of the British Raj. See also Sen (2017).

3 I refer specifically in this essay to the spectrum of local religious practices in Bengal variously labeled as *Baul* and *Fakir*. Like most religious practices, these draw from a variety of sources. Baul-Fakir religion probably began to resemble its contemporary form around the sixteenth-century Bhakti movement, with the intermingling of Sahajiya Buddhist, Sufi, and various Hindu beliefs and practices (Urban 2001; Haq 1975; Lorea 2016). For the political tensions between local and "localized" (3) Islam in South Asia, see Mohammad (2013).

engineered, inflamed, and strategically directed. Particularly striking are the recent gains of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party under the leadership of Narendra Modi, which has scapegoated Muslims and manufactured popular support for a militantly chauvinistic brand of Hinduism. In addition to targeting local religion head-on, colonial and neocolonial regimes have also aimed to weaken local worldviews through attacks on musical practice. Both colonizers and colonized have recognized music and dance as epistemic bulwarks, which strengthen and sustain ways of understanding and experiencing the world. In his 2015 study of colonial Rhodesia, Mhoze Chikowero characterizes certain attacks on musical tradition as *epistemicide*,[4] and describes the innovations of subaltern populations in resisting such efforts. Contemporary West Bengal is in the crosshairs of right-wing Hindu nationalism, which seeks to stamp out traditions of tolerance and interreligious harmony in Bengali Hinduism, and to direct Bengali Hindu sentiment against Bengali Muslims. In this chapter, I explore whether music in West Bengal can act as it has in resistance movements elsewhere, as a bulwark against imposed ideologies and worldviews. West Bengal has many musical and religious traditions that draw from both Muslim and Hindu heritage, and which critique the very idea of a boundary separating Hindus and Muslims. I consider how embodied musical practices across socioeconomic divides in West Bengal can serve as an affective defense, an epistemic inoculation against anti-Muslim bigotry.

Epistemicide

Discussing colonialism in the global South, Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes that "dominant epistemologies have resulted in a massive waste of social experience and, particularly, in the massive destruction of ways of knowing that did not fit the dominant epistemological canon. This destruction I call *epistemicide*" (2014, 238). Elsewhere he asserts: "The destruction of knowledge is not an epistemological artifact without consequences. It involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledges" (153). This destruction of "social practices" and "disqualification of the social agents" is very much the aim of epistemicide; through such work, it enables colonial authorities to import new practices, worldviews, and legitimized political structures.

4 See Santos (2010) and Santos (2014).

Ramón Grosfoguel cites various examples of epistemicide from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with "the rise of 'modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal' power structures" (85). In particular, he notes the burning alive of

> millions of women … accused of being witches in the Early Modern period. Given their authority and leadership, the attack against these women was a strategy to consolidate Christian-centric patriarchy and to destroy autonomous communal forms of land ownership. The Inquisition was at the forefront of this offensive. The accusation was an attack to thousands of women whose autonomy, leadership and knowledge threatened Christian theology, Church authority and the power of the aristocracy that turned into a capitalist class transnationally in the colonies as well as in European agriculture (85–86).[5]

Similarly, Chikowero writes about musical practices in Rhodesia in the 1960s, when "African families that held onto their *chivanhu*—indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, and ways of being still endured continuing epistemicidal missionary crusades, campaigns to exterminate or subvert such knowledges and ways of being" (2015, 1). Colonial missionaries specifically targeted certain musical practices, recognizing that "in Madzimbabwe and related cultures, the musical context encapsulates the people's shared cognitive forms and societal values, and their associated behaviors and underlying moral codes and concepts (Ngugi 1997, 11)" (Chikowero). Furthermore, certain Madzimbabwe musical forms facilitated communication with the ancestors and thereby provided a special fount of spiritual and social fortitude.

> It is therefore not surprising that music became deeply involved in the battle of cultures that characterized the colonial encounter, with the colonists seeking to conquer indigenous knowledge in order to disarm a people who had deployed their cultures not only to resist evangelization, but also to fight the imposed alien political order (1–2).

The colonial Rhodesian authorities were not unique in recognizing musical practice as a site of resistance. Instances abound of religious and political

5 Grosfoguel also writes that "epistemic privilege and epistemic inferiority are two sides of the same coin" (2013, 74–75). He illustrates this with the example of the Western academy: "In Westernized universities, the knowledge produced by other epistemologies, cosmologies, and world views arising from other world-regions with diverse time/space dimensions and characterized by different geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge are considered 'inferior' in relation to the 'superior' knowledge produced [by canonic Western intellectual authorities]" (75).

authorities targeting music as part of larger epistemicidal campaigns. Examples include the suppression of music by the Khmer Rouge, the Taliban, and Boko Haram, as well as by slave codes in the United States.[6]

Music and epistemic fortitude

Music *is* a potent force for preserving cultural values, ethics, and worldviews. Inderjit Kaur theorizes the ways that listening to Sikh devotional music is "a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics" (2016b, 89), "an epistemic site where ethicality is experienced as embodied sensation rather than as mentalist reasoning" (2016a, 1). Kaur states that "sabad kīrtan [Sikh devotional music] listening and participatory singing … are multisensorial, synaesthetic, affective, cognitive and somatic all at once, and they are engendered in an intersubjective setting" (18). Quoting Thomas Csordas (1993), she writes that sabad kīrtan listening and singing "are 'about cultural patterning of bodily experience, and also about the intersubjective constitution of meaning through that experience'" (19).

In conveying the power of sabad kīrtan, Kaur cites Charles Hirschkind's 2006 scholarship on Islamic sermon audition in Cairo: "The 'relaxed attentiveness of this auditory practice invests the body with affective intensities' (82) that draw from the ethical themes in sermons such as humility, awe, regret and fear. These ethical affects get sedimented in the body as 'latent tendencies of ethical response' (82), as a 'substrate of affective orientations that undergird right reasoning' (125). Thus, '[A]nimated or "played" by the rhythms, lyrical intensities, sound figures, echoes, and resonances of the recorded performances, the sensorium acquires a moral orientation'" (Kaur 24–25). Embodied listening then, according to Kaur's reading of Hirschkind, is "a process whereby affective intensities accumulate in the body …. Listening thus engenders dispositions and also action tendencies at visceral levels that are not necessarily tied to deliberate thought" (20).

There are similarities and historical connections between the Sikh devotional music that Kaur describes and Bengali Baul-Fakir music. Both grew from the intermingling of Muslim, Hindu, and other local religious traditions that characterized the Bhakti movement of medieval South Asia. Both involve musical settings of religious poems that advocate a radically

6 Attempts to impose religious views have also taken softer tacks, as in Christian missionaries' adoption of regional musical practices to appeal to local participants (in Bengal one can hear popular forms of Christian kīrtan called *Jishu Kirtan*).

inclusive form of humanism, egalitarianism, and spiritual devotion. Indeed, in both traditions, the songs form the core of the religious canon, and the experience of these texts through musical audition and participation informs their meaning and interpretation. In both traditions, participants engage with the music not only in explicitly religious settings but also in mundane daily environments. The latter form of listening fosters "inattention to ethical values caused by immersion in everyday mundane concerns, and [serves as a] re-sounding of divine moral virtues" (Kaur 23).[7] Kaur notes that "singing (*gāvīai*), listening (*sunīai*) and repetition (*japna*) are believed to be the most effective means for divine worship" (3) in Sikhism. While many Baul-Fakir gurus assert the primacy of other embodied forms of spiritual practice, the influential twentieth-century Baul-Fakir guru Bhaba Pagla famously stated: "*gān-i sarbaśreṣṭha sādhanā*" (song/music is the highest form of spiritual practice).[8] In any case, it is widely held in the Baul-Fakir community that music is a valuable avenue for expressing and experiencing divine communion, as well as for disseminating canonic teachings. And in both Baul-Fakir and Sikh traditions, "the major emphasis [of musical performance] is on affective immersion of congregants. For listening to be effective, it is considered important that the heart be engaged. Listening must be practiced with feeling, particularly love, affection and regard" (Kaur 2016a, 21).

One notable difference between Sikh and Baul-Fakir musical traditions concerns the etiquette surrounding comportment and restraint while experiencing music. Kaur writes: "In accordance with the guideline in sabads of serenity and equipoise … clapping or dancing to sabad kīrtan, as well as large movements of possession and trance, are not considered appropriate, though the clapping of kartāl … is typical in the more participatory genres" (2016a, 7). While some Baul-Fakir communities practice a similar constraint, in keeping with certain Sufi traditions with which they overlap, others famously practice ecstatic abandon through music.[9] Despite these differences, music is important in both Sikh and Baul-Fakir settings as "a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics," (Kaur 2016b, 89), experienced simultaneously within individual bodies and together as a shared communal experience (Kaur 2016a, 23). A

7 Prahlad Tipanya Singh expresses a similar observation about North Indian Kabir bhajans in Shabnam Virmani's 2008 film *Chalo Hamara Des*.

8 See Lorea (2016, 49).

9 There is a broad spectrum of cultural practice encapsulated within the term "Baul-Fakir," and much of it is informed by the local society within which Baul-Fakir communities exist.

final notable similarity between Sikh and Baul-Fakir tradition concerns the importance of "[enacting] divine virtues in this world, the social world" (25). Kaur states that "Sikhism rejects asceticism (and celibacy, for the clergy as well), recommends a householder's life and full participation in the socio-economic arena" (25). Although much popular literature on Baul-Fakir tradition describes Baul-Fakirs as renunciants, this is largely a romanticized mischaracterization. Most Baul-Fakirs exist within the larger social world while striving towards the social/spiritual mandate of serving other humans (*mānuṣke bhajan karā*).

I draw these parallels to assert that Kaur's theory of Sikh music as "multisensorial, synaesthetic, affective, cognitive and somatic all at once, and … engendered in an intersubjective setting" (2016a, 18) applies to Baul-Fakir music as well. Accordingly, I argue that Baul-Fakir music is a powerful force in maintaining social values, spiritual worldview, and communal memories in "affective, cognitive and somatic" (18) ways. As such, Baul-Fakir music presents a threat to neocolonialist powers that would replace an inclusive Bengali grassroots tradition with imported forms of Hindu chauvinism and communal intolerance.[10]

Baul-Fakir tradition as resistance

The Baul-Fakir tradition has a long history of resistance to religious and social hegemony. For centuries, Baul-Fakirs faced persecution by orthodox Hindus, who objected to Baul-Fakirs' explicit critiques of caste, scripture, and religious authority, and who stigmatized Baul-Fakirs for their ostensibly perverted forms of embodied practice. With the rise of Muslim nationalism in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, Islamic reformists also turned against Baul-Fakirs.

Rafiuddin Ahmed writes that until the late nineteenth century, there was no sense of Muslims as a unified class of people in Bengal, and hence little sense of Hindus and Muslims as two distinct and opposing groups (2001, 5). Ahmed writes: "In the late nineteenth century, improved means of communication, modern education, the printing press, a powerful program

10 While the majority of Baul-Fakir composers have promoted a radically inclusive outlook, it is also important to note some exceptions. Lorea (2018) writes how in the face of 19th-century persecution, some Baul-Fakir composers employed sectarian language to differentiate themselves from upper caste Hindus, orthodox Vaishnavas, and Shariyat theologians. Lorea (2016) also notes that in the wake of geopolitical shifts some institutional followers of Bhaba Pagla have reconstructed his message within the context of a "neo-Hindu reformist landscape" (180).

of Islamization launched by the Islamic revivalists, colonial reforms, and increased political tension between Hindus and Muslims gradually broke the isolation of the villages and brought about a certain degree of rapport between the 'high born' and the 'low born' [Muslims], and induced the mullah to aggressively article a sense of common identity" (6). According to Shaktinath Jha, this sense of urgency in constructing a consolidated Islamic identity was reinforced by pre-independence fears regarding the future safety of Muslims in a Hindu-majority India (2001, 23).

Unfortunately for rank-and-file Bengali Muslims, the campaign to establish a unified Muslim identity asserted that Bengali culture, language, and traditions were un-Islamic (Ahmed 2001, 9), and demanded "absolute conformity with an Arab-oriented Islam" (15). Ahmed observes that there is "an astonishing similarity between the uncompromising attitude of the nineteenth-century 'revivalists' and the ideology of the Islamic 'fundamentalists' of our time insofar as they both promote the concept of an idealized Islamic community distinct from others and they both define the community in extraterritorial terms, rejecting all local variations of Islam" (15). Sufia Uddin attributes this rejection of local Islam to "constant and increasing flow of Bangladeshi pilgrims to Mecca for the hajj" (2006, 176); Ahmed attributes it also to the influence of funding from Saudi and Pakistani governments and "fundamentalist groups" (2001, 22).

In any case, around 1918, there was a coordinated effort to stamp out heterodox Islamic practice in Bengal, and several fatwas were published by influential authors (Jha 2001, 22). These writers argued that Baul-Fakir doctrine posed a threat to Islam and must be destroyed. The aim of these fatwas, however, was not to expel Baul-Fakirs from Muslim society; rather, it was designed to pressure them to assimilate to a reformist mainstream (23). In order to inflame conservatives' anger and disgust towards Baul-Fakirs, these publications gave explicit, exaggerated, and sensationalized accounts of Baul-Fakir's esoteric ritual practices. The ultimate goal of this persecution was not to eradicate heterodox practices, but to consolidate religious and political authority (24).

Shaktinath Jha documents the ways that the persecution campaign continued throughout the twentieth century. Seeking to intimidate and humiliate Baul-Fakirs, their assailants would call them to public meetings and force them to renounce their views and practices (28). If they refused, they would be boycotted in trade, commerce, and social life. They would also be refused access to public wells and burial sites, and not allowed to walk across others' land (30, 35). In many instances, this essentially resulted in house arrest, and entire families were forced to abandon their villages

in search of new homes. Some Baul-Fakirs would publicly renounce their views, assuming normative worship in public, but would secretly continue their esoteric practices. Others weren't given a chance to renounce, but instead were beaten, had their instruments smashed, had their hair and beards forcibly cut, or were forced to eat beef (29). On those occasions where the police intervened, assailants were typically released after signing a statement that they would not persecute Baul-Fakirs in the future (32, 63). Jha notes that persecution was concentrated in areas where Baul-Fakirs formed a minority, living in poverty in isolated corners of rural society. Where Baul-Fakirs formed a majority, or where they enjoyed the support of powerful leaders, they were left alone (29). Furthermore, assailants targeted Baul-Fakir practitioners and singers whose songs and messages directly contradicted orthodox teachings; they largely ignored those singers who adhered to a less critical repertoire of songs (35).

Despite these efforts to destroy Baul-Fakir practice and to force Baul-Fakirs to conform to beliefs and practices of the reformist religious right, these attempts were mostly unsuccessful. Jha writes that the majority of the Muslim populace held tolerant views (35), and valued Baul-Fakirs as singers, spiritual experts, and healers (52). Although right-wing religious leaders might sway some core followers, their message didn't resonate with the broader rural populace (35). On the futility of trying to turn the public against Baul-Fakirs or music, Jha writes: "Having heard that music is forbidden, the next minute everyone listens to it on the radio, watches it on TV" (35).[11] The protection offered by sympathetic neighbors in the face of persecution had many precedents in Bengal; as Jha has written, the history of Baul-Fakirs is a history of persecuted esoteric sects banding together and finding refuge among sympathetic pockets of the rural populace (1999, 122). Throughout this history, music served as a salve and guide star for Baul-Fakirs, and helped to attract the love and support of neighboring communities, while also influencing their social ethic and spiritual outlook.

Revival and resistance

In contemporary West Bengal, Baul-Fakir music is widely celebrated as Bengali heritage and occupies a central role in the cultural tourism industry. Many visitors record and post YouTube videos of Baul-Fakir musicians performing at tourist events.

11 My translation from the Bengali original.

Audiovisual sample 10.1

In this video, by the Folkpick channel, Lakhan Das Baul performs at the Saturday market near the cultural tourism center of Santiniketan, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrCLs8VtLbs.

Audiovisual sample 10.2

In this clip posted by Purohitmoshay Shibshankar on YouTube, Sumanta Das Baul performs at Jaydev Mela, a large religious festival attended by pilgrims, music lovers, and entrepreneurs, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCXSDzSNt5I.

Elsewhere, I theorize this embrace of Baul-Fakir music as part of a revival movement, in which the middle and upper classes romanticize and appropriate aspects of a subaltern artistic tradition (Krakauer 2015). This revival has a variety of effects on Baul-Fakirs; it affords professional opportunities to some, but elevates the romantic ideal of Baul-Fakir identity to such heights that individual Baul-Fakirs are often met with scorn and skepticism.

The celebration of Baul-Fakir music encompasses not only musical style and repertoire, but also the broadly humanist aspects of the songs. This fascination with Baul-Fakir spirituality by the affluent classes is part of a long tradition inaugurated by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore over a century ago. In response to the 1905 partition of Bengal, Tagore published Baul-Fakirs songs, presenting Baul-Fakirs as an emblem of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony in Bengali culture.

Indeed, the songs do derive from both Hindu and Muslim traditions and are sung by Baul-Fakirs from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. And the songs do explicitly criticize religious distinction, social hierarchy, and various forms of social and religious intolerance.[12] It is noteworthy, then, that even as the Hindu chauvinist BJP party makes dramatic gains in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir music maintains its position of mainstream popularity. What to make of this? Is this cause for hope that even as communal intolerance

12 One popular anti-sectarian song is "Jat gelo jat gelo bole," commonly attributed to Lalon Shah (in a 2013 email, the playwright Sudipto Chatterjee told me that some Baul-Fakirs question whether Lalon actually wrote this song). The lyrics note that whatever our caste, we all purify ourselves in the same water, and that none of us will be spared our common death. For more examples of anti-sectarian Baul-Fakir songs attributed to Lalon Shah, see Carol Salomon's posthumous book *City of Mirrors* (2017), edited by Keith E. Cantú and Saymon Zakaria.

surges in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir songs will serve as a moral reminder for the public? Will hearing these songs discourage conservative Hindu voters from supporting anti-Muslim policies? Given the songs' directive to respect and revere the other (*par*) as one's own (*āpan*, a dear one or family member), will hearing these songs remind listeners to work towards an inclusive society, recognizing religious minorities as *āpan*?

The answer depends on the nature of the Baul-Fakir revival. Following Kaur, one can view Baul-Fakir music as "a multidimensional composite experience of sound, memory, affect, aesthetics, and ethics" (2016b, 89). But does such a description apply to Baul-Fakir music within a revival context? Kaur is careful to note that "musical sound does not have any objective ability to invest certain affective intensities in listening. Rather it is the overall contextual setting in which these musical genres do their work which is crucial: the processes at play are contextual, cultural and subjective" (2016a, 28). Kaur emphasizes that sabad kīrtan is "effective in deepening affective sensations" specifically when it occurs within what she calls "a Sikh affective ecology" (28).

There are parallels between the intra-community settings where Sikh devotion music and Baul-Fakir music take place. Discussing Sikh congregational settings, Kaur notes the centrality of keeping "virtuous company (sādh sangat)," which is

> a necessary condition for realizing the divine and divine virtues, and recommended as a fundamental component of a Sikh way of life. It is the context for worship and kīrtan [devotional singing] in particular. The divine is itself believed to be revealed in virtuous company, since it is in the company of the virtuous that the love for the divine is seen to intensify … the intersubjective and ecological potential of virtuous company is considered powerful enough to support one through terrifyingly challenging times, and even turn around those immersed in vices (29).

Similarly, the *sādhusaṅga* (gathering of the saints) is a typical intra-community context for Baul-Fakirs music in the villages.[13]

13 I describe sādhusaṅgas as "intra-community" events, but I do not mean to suggest they are closed off to outside visitors. Indeed, one striking feature of many sādhusaṅgas is the extent to which they welcome uninitiated participants. Attending is a great opportunity to learn from spiritual and musical adepts, and to experience the ways that Baul-Fakir practitioners deconstruct the boundaries of sectarian and class identity. When I began attending these events, I was surprised when some people addressed and referred to me as "sadhu"; I soon learned that

Audiovisual sample 10.3

In this clip posted by Soumik Dee on YouTube, the esteemed song specialist Ranojit Gosain sings at a sādhusaṅga at his home in Nadia district, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC4Af-IcmGQ.

At these events, participants sing and play music, and discuss the esoteric meaning of the songs. This is the setting in which the songs accrue the densest layers of affective, somatic, and semiotic meanings over time, as the community of practitioners revisits the songs again and again, excavating them through a variety of experiential, intellectual, and intersubjective means.[14]

Historically, Baul-Fakir songs have helped sustain these communities through long periods of oppression. As Hindu chauvinism grows in West Bengal, surely the songs will remain a source of resistance and fortitude within the communities where sādhusaṅgas thrive. As Kaur theorizes within the parallel example of Sikh devotional music, the songs empower not only through the surface value of their words and sounds, but also through activating deeply ingrained affective and somatic pathways, by engaging embodied ways of knowing and ethical orientations.

But will the songs retain their power within revival settings? How much of their multidimensional resonance is lost when the songs are performed in commercial settings, for listeners who enjoy the sounds and exoteric messages, but who haven't been immersed in the social and spiritual culture surrounding the songs?[15]

As a non-Bengali with under two years of fıeld research experience in Bengal, I am limited in answering this latter question. It is clear that revival audiences engage with Baul-Fakir music in multisensory ways, variously listening, singing, clapping along, playing instruments, dancing, debating, and reading about the music and spiritual tradition. And indeed,

they applied this term broadly to anyone striving to live with a pure heart, without jealousy, pride, and violence—whether or not that person had taken formal initiation.

14 I am aware that some recent neuroscientifıc fındings question the extent to which we can distinguish between the affective, somatic, and semiotic (Feldman Barrett 2017). By using these terms, I do not mean to reify clear distinctions between them, but instead to convey my point about the impact of music on multiple levels of human experience.

15 Baul-Fakir songs contain both esoteric and exoteric messages; while adepts wrestle with the former, uninitiated audiences engage primarily with the latter. Throughout the long history of Baul-Fakir performance practice, both groups have remained target audiences.

even prior to the current revival movement, Baul-Fakir music has always been performed for non-Baul-Fakir audiences, who have appreciated both aesthetic and textual aspects even without accessing some of the songs' veiled esoteric meanings.

The question, then, is to what extent does Baul-Fakir music convey the social and spiritual values of the songs, through multimodal forms of experience, to revival audiences? Anyone listening to a song that critiques caste will receive that message on an intellectual level, but what are the deeper levels on which revival audiences experience that message? Is their listening an "affective practice that also constitutes an epistemic site where ethicality is experienced as embodied sensation rather than as mentalist reasoning" (Kaur 2016a, 1)? It is on this level that the music would presumably function most powerfully to engender resistance to politicized right-wing ideologies.

Despite the explicitly anti-sectarian messages of the songs, many Hindu revival audiences today nevertheless think of "Baul" music as an expression of Bengali Vaishnavism.[16] Through embracing it as such, there is a danger of appropriating it as an art form while rejecting its spiritual and social teachings. Processed in such a way, "revived" Baul-Fakir music—or at least certain Baul-Fakir songs—could be adapted within the larger right-wing Hindutva movement. It is highly conceivable that revival audiences would embrace the music in this way while simultaneously supporting the persecution of the Muslim communities in which many Baul-Fakirs live.

Of course, agency in the Baul-Fakir revival setting does not lie entirely with the revival audience, despite the gap of economic and political privilege that separates them from the performers. Just as Baul-Fakir performers have always presented their spirituality and worldview in selective ways to non-Baul-Fakir audiences, they continue to do so in navigating the varied expectations and conflicting ideals of revival settings (see Krakauer 2015).[17] Through their

16 Some Baul-Fakir performers encourage this conflation of "Vaishnava" and "Baul" as identity markers. During a visit to a *mahotsab* (commemorative concert) with some Baul-Fakir performers, two musicians told me in hushed tones that some of the other musicians in attendance were not really Vaishnavas. This comment reflected an assumption that my research as a "Baul scholar" would be limited to Vaishnava Bauls. Indeed, many scholars of Baul-Fakir music and religion in West Bengal have maintained a primary focus on Vaishnava Bauls. In her 2018 book, Kristin Hanssen uses the terms *Vaishnava* and *Baul* interchangeably, following the example of her primary interlocutors. Carola Lorea (2016) presents a counternarrative by emphasizing the importance of Shakta theory and practice in many Baul-Fakir communities.

17 For related discussions of strategic assimilation, see also Chikowero (2015) and Qureshi (2000). Whereas Chikowero discusses socio-political resistance of Madzimbabwean performers within Western styles of music, Qureshi discusses adjustments made by contemporary sarangi players to carve a niche for themselves within the classical music market.

strategic adeptness as performers, they find ways to deliver both their music and their message to revival audiences, fulfilling dual projects of plying a trade and serving other human beings (*mānuṣke bhajan karā*). While some revival audiences do not treat individual Baul-Fakir performers with a great deal of respect, they are nevertheless captivated by Baul-Fakir performance, and as such are susceptible to the performers' influence. And although Baul-Fakir ideology is distinct from the values of the larger Bengali society, it significantly overlaps with longstanding ideals of communal tolerance and harmony. As right-wing Hindu sentiment rises in West Bengal, Baul-Fakir performers in revival settings may indeed play a strategic role in touching the hearts and minds of their listeners, activating deeply embodied knowledge bases of tolerance, love, and communal unity. And perhaps this spiritual and artistic labor will have a meaningful impact on public action and policy.

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