



‘Today I shall see within’: An Analysis of the Character of the Blind Baul in Tagore’s *Phālguni*

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Abstract

In his play *Phālguni* (1915), a paean to spring, rejuvenation and youth, Tagore through the delineation of the character of the blind Baul engages in a unique discourse of spirituality, disability, music and theatre. Interestingly, in this image, Tagore conflates two identities—one physical and the other religious—both of which occupy marginal positions in society in such a way that they function as complementary metaphors. In the present paper, through the analysis of the figure of the blind Baul, I shall explore how the blindness of the Baul and the Baul beliefs of the blind man negotiate with/substantiate each other in order to endorse Tagore’s brand of humanism and spirituality, and his ideas of theatre and dramaturgy. I shall also attempt to establish a connection between these vertices by placing them in the larger context of Tagore’s ocular/visual politics.

Keywords

Baul, blindness, ocular politics, disability, music

In his play *Phālguni* (1915), a paean to spring, rejuvenation and youth, Tagore engages in a unique discourse of spirituality, disability, music and theatre through the delineation of the character of the blind Baul. Interestingly, in this image, Tagore conflates two identities—one physical and the other religious/spiritual—both of which occupy marginal positions in society in such a way that they function as complementary metaphors. Through my analysis, I shall explore how the blindness of the Baul and the Baul beliefs of the blind man negotiate with/substantiate each other in order to endorse Tagore’s brand of humanism and spirituality, and his ideas of theatre and performance. I shall also attempt to establish a connection between these vertices by placing them in the larger context of Tagore’s ocular/visual politics.

Tagore’s preoccupation with the syncretic culture and traditions of the Bauls, a liminal religious sect/community of Bengal, is reflected not only in his literary and musical output, but is also prominent in his ways of self-fashioning. He was particularly impressed by the lyrics and the music of these subaltern artists and encouraged research on them in Visva-Bharati. He also created space in the *Paush Mela*, an annual festival in Santiniketan for the Bauls to perform at (Mukhopadhyay 8-9). A review of the existing academic work on Tagore’s engagement with the Bauls reveals that this relation was reciprocal in nature. Their influence on him was largely a conscious one. It is remarkable that according to the common understanding of his transactions with Baul culture in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, he is the “discoverer” of Baul songs, who by his “discovery” contributed greatly to the diversity and richness of Bengali literature (Dimock 34). His keen interest in the mystical and humanistic aspect of the Baul beliefs is perhaps most clearly manifested through his conscious use of diction, symbolism and imagery. As indicated by scholars like Charles H. Capwell, Tagore’s engagement with Baul philosophy and culture was primarily (if not only) on the level of the exoteric (Capwell 255-64). Keeping in view the scope and tastes of the literary and cultural ambience in which he emerged and grew, it would perhaps not be unfounded to state that Tagore deliberately avoided the ritualistic, physiological and sexual aspects of Baul practice.

I focus now on the blind Baul in *Phālguni* and the play’s general engagement with the politics of visibility. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., in his “Rabindranath Tagore: ‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’”, by way of commenting on Tagore’s depiction of Baul culture in his dramatic output, writes: “In many of Rabindranath’s dramas there are characters obviously typed on the Bāuls. Often these characters are not structural to the play, their only function apparently being to sing appropriate Bāul songs” (Dimock 35). This fleetingly-made generalised statement is rather simplistic and is clearly aimed at belittling the significance of the characters¹ “typed on the Bāuls.” It completely overlooks the fact that in many of the plays of Tagore which Dimock indicates, the “appropriate Bāul songs” not only constitute the structure of the work but also function as its driving force. Tagore himself explains it when he, in the Prologue to the play *Phālguni*, makes the poet say: “The door to each of its [the play’s] acts will be unlocked with the keys of song” (Tagore, Vol.1, 881). I shall return to the discussion on the songs of the blind Baul

¹ We are compelled to think of the Thakurdas and also characters like Bishu Pagol and Dhananjaya Vairagi.

later in this paper. Moreover, when Dimock says that “these characters are not structural to the play,” he is most likely thinking of a conventional, unified dramatic plot from which Tagore was deliberately attempting to move away in his twentieth-century plays. Interestingly, this spirit of non-conformity is at the core of Baul philosophy and practices. In Dimock’s own words: “...all those who go by the name of Bāul seem somehow to come as strangers to the world. They accept no tradition or custom of society” (Dimock 38). It should also be pointed out that Dimock’s phrase “characters obviously typed on the Bāuls” is akin to the comment of Upendranath Bhattacharya who goes to the extent of stating “The blind Baul is but another avatar of Thakurda” (Bhattacharya 286). Statements like these only reveal the tendency of creating/imagining certain homogenous sets based on a few points of similarity.

To connect my discussion of the blind Baul with the preceding remarks on songs and deviation from conventions, I quote again the poet in *Phālguni*. When the king (in the Prologue), by way of enquiring about the preparation of the play to be staged, specifically asks about the usage of backdrops/painted scenery, the poet promptly clarifies: “Painted scenery is not needed. Rather, I need the canvas of the mind, on which I shall create pictures only with the brush of music” (Tagore, Vol.1, 881). It may be useful to note that these words are an aphoristic echo of what Tagore had declared in an essay titled “*Rangamancha*” (1902), where he had theorized his new approach to theatre, written more than a decade before the composition of *Phālguni*. Tagore wrote:

In the *Natyashastra* of Bharata is a description of a stage, but no mention of scenes. It does not seem to me that this absence of concrete scenery can have been much of a loss ... To my mind it shows only faint-heartedness on the actor’s part to seek their help [of scenery]. The relief from responsibility which he gains from the illusion created by pictorial scenes is one which is begged of the painter... Why all this paraphernalia of *illusion to delude* the poor trusting creatures [spectators] who have come with the deliberate intention of believing and being happy? (Quoted in Lal, 29, emphases mine)

Despite these observations of Tagore, it must be admitted that as an astute theatrician and dramatist he could not be (and in reality was not) oblivious to stage effects and other formal demands of plays—an audio-visual art form. However, what attracted him most was suggestive artistic scenography, not realism. For instance, he writes in a letter to Gaganendranath Tagore, by way of giving suggestions and instructions about the production of *Phālguni*: “Both *eyes* and *ears* must be well fed. It is more necessary to make them [the audience] feel engrossed than to explain [the meaning] to them...with *Phālguni* we shall try to set the *stage* on fire. You take care of the *stage effects*, and we shall take care of the songs and acting” (Tagore, Vol. 1, 1046, emphases mine). This reaffirms the fact that Tagore’s ideas always resist any simplistic reception and must be understood and interpreted contextually with all their nuances.

I wish to return to the excerpt from “*Rangamancha*” in which Tagore gives expression to his revolutionary thoughts about dramaturgy, and focus on the idea of illusion. When read in the context of the character and symbol of the blind Baul, this takes up new meaning. In the Prologue, the poet says about the Baul, “Because he does

not see with his eyes, he sees with his entire body, mind, and soul” (Tagore, Vol. 1, 881). Using a slightly different phrase, the Baul himself expresses the same sentiment: “I hear with my entire being and not only with my ears” (Tagore, Vol.1, 902). Also Chandrasah, towards the end of the play, echoes these words when he says: “I have not seen with my eyes... I have seen with my entire being... Had my entire body and mind been my voice, I could have expressed it” (Tagore, Vol.1, 911). Thus, Tagore’s idea of the stage and his intention behind the delineation of the blind Baul converge. For him, mere dependence on the physical senses and the perceptions produced only by them (“concrete scenery” in case of the stage and physical eyes in case of the Baul) are illusive and misleading. In the words of Upendranath Bhattacharya: “The meta-sensory, spiritual mystery cannot be perceived with the physical, worldly sight. It has to be seen with the inner vision. In this respect the external/superficial sight is meaningless. Hence the Baul is blind” (Bhattacharya 286). Interestingly and ironically, the only person in the play who confidently shows the right path to the group of young men and even leads them is the Baul: “He does not have to search for the path. He can see from within” (Tagore, Vol. 1, 901).

Let us consider the following two quotations (the former from “*Rangamancha*” and the latter from *Phālguni*) to understand what Tagore puts forward as the alternative(s) to the dependence and reliance on purely sensory experiences and perceptions.

The stage that is in the Poet’s mind has no lack of space or appurtenances. There, scenes follow one another at the touch of his magic wand. (Quoted in Lal, 29)

Once I had eyesight. When I became blind I got scared by the loss of my sight. But with the waning of the sight of the sighted, rose the vision of the blind. After the sun had set I saw light in the heart of darkness. (Tagore, Vol. 1, 902)

Thus, when read carefully, it becomes evident that Tagore’s aesthetics and spirituality are but two sides of the same coin.

It is interesting to mark that Tagore’s depiction of blindness in his literary outputs have never been consistent. He has exploited the metaphor of blindness on varied occasions with varied and sometimes (apparently) contradictory meanings. For instance, while in the song (in *Arup Ratan*) “When I was blind I passed time in the game of pleasure, but I could not find bliss,” (Tagore, *Gitavitan* 167) blindness has been used as a negative metaphor to suggest lack of true knowledge about life and the divine, the phrase “vision of the blind” (in *Phālguni*) emerges as the spiritualisation of blindness. However, the fundamental spiritual belief remains the same, to which both the metaphorical usages point.

However, when these usages are read through the lens of Disability Studies, both of them appear to be equally problematic. While the negative metaphorical use is conspicuously ableist, the convenient spiritualisation and (even) divinisation² has a strong

² According to Upendranath Bhattacharya, “The Baul has inner vision. He knows the subtle ways of the world. He is a spiritual man. He is the symbol of divine knowledge” (Bhattacharya 286).

subtext of othering and covert patronising attitude towards disability. Yet, this divinisation (or glorification), when read in the context of the colonial period and the colonial attitude towards a disability like blindness, may emerge in a different and even subversive light. Aparna Nair shows how blindness during the colonial regime was not only interpreted as “the inevitable consequence of South Asian ignorance, superstition and backwardness,” but was also seen as a “metaphor for the perceived civilisational inferiority and religious failings of South Asian peoples.” (Nair 181) The following lines from *Phālguni* spoken by one of the young men about the Baul can perhaps be read as Tagore’s poignant reaction to the perceived “religious failings” of the South Asian people associated with the metaphor of blindness: “as if the dawn has broken within him; as if the sanguine sunrays have anchored between his eye brows like a little boat.” (Tagore, Vol.1, 910) This image of dawn is particularly significant in this play and in others by Tagore, such as *Rājā/Arup Ratan*. It is this image (of the transition from darkness to life) that Tagore uses as the starting point and the recurrent motif of the essay “*Chiravinatā*” or “The Eternal Newness”, which encapsulates the central theme of *Phālguni*.

Everyday the dawn unveils a mystery, everyday it tells the same eternal story. But each day the story appears to be new... The dawn standing at the edge of the eastern sky and smiling, gradually removes the cover of darkness like a magician. (Tagore, Vol. VII, 714)

Furthermore, when this image of dawn is juxtaposed against the *presumed* darkness of blindness, the connotation of spirituality becomes too obvious to evade our attention. This juxtaposition (which is visual in nature) is quite consciously extended to the physical appearance of the Baul as well. Tagore, who himself played the role of the Baul in the first production, instructed Gaganendranath to “dress the Baul in white from head to toe.” (Tagore, Vol.1, 1046) The significance of white can be understood at least on two levels: it is conventionally associated with spirituality and purity; and the stark contrast between white and darkness (associated with blindness) would create an extremely powerful stage effect.

Thus, on multiple levels (imagery, language, song, theatre etc.), Tagore used the blindness of the Baul to create a unique visual effect and to make significant artistic, cultural, political and philosophical statements through this effect.

To move further with this argument, I shall discuss the songs and their role in shaping the image of the blind Baul. In this context, the two phrases to which I would like to particularly draw readers’ attention are “the brush of music” and “the keys of song.” Clearly songs and music form an integral part of the play. The Baul sings six of the numerous songs of this play, and his being is almost synonymous with music. This is perhaps best captured in the Baul’s own words: “Let me go singing, you follow me. I cannot find my way if I do not sing songs...My song transcends me. It moves ahead, and I follow it.” (Tagore, Vol. 1, 902) His six songs in order of their appearance are as follows:

1. “Slowly, my friend, slowly lead me to your lonely abode.”
2. “The one to whom everyone gives their all, to the same one will I give away all that I call mine. Before I am told and before I leave, wilfully I will spread out my innermost self.”

3. "Spring has threaded my garland of victory. Southern wind, burning like fire, blows over my soul."
4. "With the light of eyes I had seen the exterior. Today I shall see within, when there is no light."
5. "O the brave, fearless one, victory will come, victory will come, victory will come."
6. "To find you anew, I lose you every moment. O treasure of my love! It is only to show yourself that you become invisible."
(Tagore, Vol. 1, 902-912)

Of these songs, the words of the third one are those of Chandrahas being reported by the Baul to the group of young men. The lyrics of the fourth and the sixth songs deserve particular attention in the context of visibility and visual politics. For the sake of convenience the two songs are quoted below in their entirety.

With the light of eyes I had seen the exterior.
 Today I shall see within, when there is no light.
 When you elude the worldly grasp,
 The heart is replete with you.
 Now, in your own light I wish to see you.
 With you I had played in the toyhouse.
 The toys have been broken by destructive storms.
 Then, let that mere game be abandoned.
 Now, let there be a festival of life.
 The stringed *vina* has broken. Now I sing with the *vina* of my heart.
 (Tagore, Vol.1, 909)

To find you anew, I lose you every moment.
 O treasure of my love!
 It's only to show yourself that you become invisible.
 O treasure of my love!
 O you are not veiled.
 You are my eternal one.
 You immerse yourself into the transient course of *lilā*.³
 O treasure of my love!
 When I roam about in search of you,
 My heart trembles in apprehension.
 Waves burst upon my adoration.
 You have no end. Hence you pose like a vacuum
 And put an end to yourself.
 That smile is washed by my tears of separation.
 O treasure of my love!
 (Tagore, Vol. 1, 912)

³ Simply put '*lilā*' is the spontaneous divine play or sport which is without any apparent purpose.

The first couple of lines of the song “With the light of eyes” can be read (literally and quite conveniently) as a direct reference to the Baul’s blindness. But there is more to it which can add to our understanding of the play’s politics of visibility. We find two distinct sets of ideas and images which are consciously and deftly juxtaposed in order to create an effective contrast. On the one hand, we have “the light of eyes”, “the exterior”, “the worldly grasp”, “that mere game” and “the stringed *vina*.” This is what I wish to call the set of the physical or the *rup*/forms (in Tagore’s own language). On the other hand, we have “see within”, “in your own light”, “a festival of life” and “the *vina* of my heart”. This is the set of the metaphysical or the *arup*/formless. If the former is associated with the world of sensory perceptions, the concrete visible world, the latter is in the realm of abstraction and is associated with the idea of insight. These two sets of ideas create a complementary pattern in the system of Tagorean beliefs, where a movement or journey from the former (the physical/sensory) to the latter (the metaphysical/meta-sensory) has always been upheld.

However, this pattern is far more complex than it appears to be. The following three extracts from Tagore’s essay “*Rup o Arup*” may throw some more light on this concept:

1. “Every expression has two sides. On the one hand, it is limited/closed—or else it cannot be expressed. On the other hand, it is open/free—or else it cannot express the Eternal.”
2. “Things that are perceived through the senses pretend to be independent and the ultimate. The *sādhak* wants to remove the veil of pretence and see the true substance.”
3. “*Rup* or the physical is like this gateway. It can be proud only of its own gap. It deceives when it shows itself. It says the truth when it shows the path. In art and literature, as well as in worldly creation, its only function is to show the sublime and to express the eternal. But like a servant with unhealthy ambition, it often attempts to occupy the throne of its master. It would become dangerous if we join it in its audacity. No matter how dear it is to us, our duty is then to destroy it—even if it is our own ego.”

(Tagore, Vol. IX, 522-26)

While the first of these quotations reaffirms the complimentary pattern of the form/the physical and the formless/the metaphysical, the second one focuses on the illusive nature of the former. The blind Baul who is a *sādhak*⁴ (it has been established by now) can “see” beyond the “pretence”, for his vision is not distracted by the visible/physical world. The third quotation not only explains the necessity of the movement or the journey from the *rup* to the *arup* that I have mentioned earlier, but also throws light on the significance of destruction and breakage in the song.

I move to the other song (“To find you anew”), which demands some attention in the context of visibility. In order to understand the pattern of the (apparent) paradoxes that Tagore so deftly deploys in this lyric and also to appreciate its connection with the

⁴ One who seeks spiritual accomplishments.

character of the Baul and the general theme of the play, we need to take into consideration another significant passage from “*Chirnavinatā*.”

This is the world’s most ancient day; it has to be born anew every dawn. Every day it has to return to the beginning, or else its original tune will be lost. The dawn always reminds it of its eternal refrain and never allows it to be forgotten. Had the day been a single continuous stretch; had there been no momentary shutting of eyes; amidst work and insolence of power, had it [the world’s most ancient day] not intermittently forgotten itself in depthless darkness; and had it not taken birth again in that primeval newness, then dust and garbage would have piled up in layers.

(Tagore, Vol. VII, 714-15).

Clearly, the importance of “depthless darkness” lies in the fact that it is this darkness which makes light discernible and reveals it anew. To understand eternity and eternal newness, temporary closure is essential. This spiritual belief has been expressed in the lyric under consideration but with a different set of metaphors. Thus, pairs like “find” and “lose,” “show” and “invisible”, “eternal” and “transient” are complementary in nature, rather than being paradoxical.⁵ Having discussed the significance of the two songs (“With the light of eyes” and “To find you anew”), it should not be difficult for us to see the Baul’s blindness and his unique spiritual vision as a part of Tagore’s larger philosophy and spiritual belief.

I return now to a general discussion on music and the politics behind its association with blindness in the play. Music has always been very “naturally” associated with blindness, its reality and cultural representations. Nair, in the context of professions pursued by blind persons in the colonial period, succinctly observes:

As scholars have noted for other spaces, the blind were popularly believed to have a peculiar affinity for music. Much the same was true in South Asia too with the blind musician having a purported affinity for particular instruments including the *dilruba*, *sitar*, *sarangi*, harmonium, *tabla* and the flute. Examples of blind musicians appear in colonial and missionary archives; and Hindu temples as well as all manner of festivals offered blind musicians employment and public spaces. Some others also made a living by teaching music or by marrying musical abilities with religious teaching and becoming ‘Kirtankars’ and preachers. (Nair 191)

Thus, the image of a blind musician in a religious space or context has been a stereotype, and Tagore has conveniently employed it in *Phālguni* to give expression to his profound spiritual thoughts.

The discussion on the blind Baul would remain grossly incomplete if Tagore’s own rendition of the part is not taken into account. While recounting and analysing the 1916 Jorashanko premier of the play, Edward Thompson notes in a rather overwhelmed tone, “It was because the poet put so much intense feeling and conviction into *Phālguni* that he acted in it so movingly. *He was his part*, the blind poet whose songs were leading

⁵ It must be admitted that the English translation has not been able to capture the semantic effectiveness and poignancy of these paradoxical/complementary pairings which are reflected in Tagore’s Bengali.

men to the new awakening...the star performance of the evening was Rabindranath's own rendering of the double parts, of Chandrashekhar and, later, in the masque proper, of Baul, the blind bard" (Thompson 242-44, emphasis mine). These words clearly suggest that the blind Baul was conceived and staged by Tagore not merely as another symbolic character of his plays, but as an onstage alter-ego of the poet-dramatist.

To conclude, in this paper, by outlining certain key features of the blind Baul, I have attempted to explore the politics of vision/sight as played out in Tagore's thoughts about theatre and spirituality. I have also endeavoured to locate the image of the blind Baul in a larger socio-political context to show how Tagore reacted to (endorsed and/or resisted) the popularised imaginations about persons with physical impairments and the spiritual perceptions associated with such individuals. Though Tagore had somewhat conventionally used the image of literal blindness to suit his symbolic or metaphorical purposes, his staging and execution of the idea shows signs of freshness, consistency and limpidity. He has been successful in blending visual representation of blindness with the general theme of the play and also its form. What is more, this has been achieved not only at the level of the literary text, but also in terms of the performance of the character, its theatrical implications and ocular conception. Prior to *Phālguni*, there are two occasions where we find blind characters in the plays of Tagore. The blind rishi of *Kālmrigayā* and Dhritarashtra of *Gāndharir Āvedan* are too popular to evade our attention. Although the appearance of blind characters is not new in the corpus of Tagorean plays, what is new in *Phālguni* is the unique fluency, astuteness, and (perhaps most importantly) conviction with which the dramatist merges and complements the figure of the blind Baul with his own deep spiritual beliefs on the one hand, and his formal experimentations with theatre on the other.

Note: The translations used in the article (barring the one from "*Rangamancha*") are all by the author.

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