THE HONEY GATHERERS

Travels with the Bauls: the wandering minstrels of rural India

Mimlu Sen

RIDER
LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND JOHANNESBURG

To Rati Bartholomew: my English teacher and friend;
To my children: Krishna, Diya and, last but not least, Duniya;
To my grandchildren: Aniya, Arthur and Iskandar.

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Note from the author: the line illustrations are based on sketches drawn by Hari Goshain in the author's 'little green Chinese notebook' in 1991, when the guru was visiting a literary festival in Aix en Provence. The author and publishers are also grateful to quote from the translation of Shakti Chattopadhyay's 'Abani, Tumi Bari Aachho?' copyright © Arunava Sinha.

I

BEGINNINGS: A LIFE ON TWO CONTINENTS

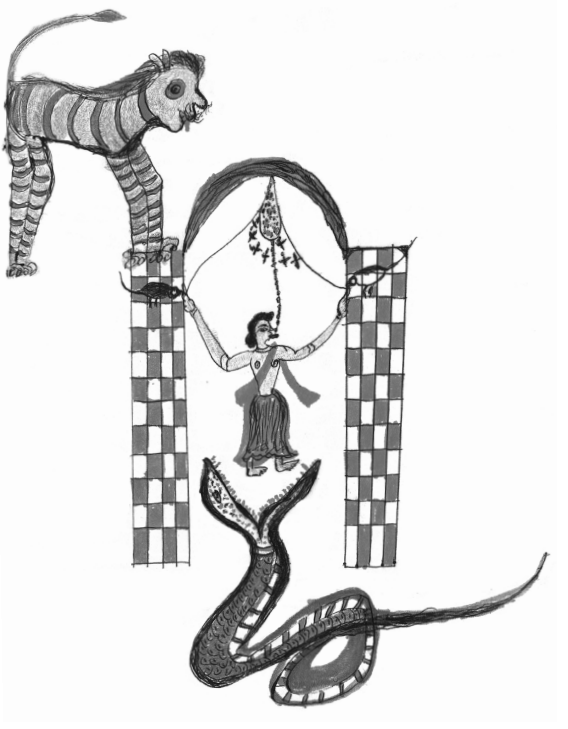

Illustration overleaf: The Vault of Existence No 1. The Vault of Existence No 1 and the Vault of Existence No 2 (see page 235) describe the human condition. This first Vault represents a human being in a state of unawareness, feeding on honey from a beehive, unconscious of the bees buzzing around, ready to sting him. The man is framed by two chequered pillars of time, which represent the span of his life. A white rat, Day, and a black rat, Night, nibble at these pillars. Our man keeps feeding on honey, ignorant of the snake which has opened its jaws wide to swallow him and blind to the tiger which waits for him on an upper branch to devour him.

I SAT AWAKE at the barred window of my prison cell after lock-up, my mind buzzing with a thousand thoughts. It was hard for me to go to sleep with the lights on, but this was the rule in Presidency Jail, Kolkata. There was no breeze and the June night was sweltering hot.

Crickets chirped steadily in the darkness outside. Occasionally I could hear the high-pitched whistle of a mole scurrying across the floor to feast on the remains of food on our plates, stacked by the cell door. The two other female prisoners who shared the cell with me, still young girls, lay sleeping peacefully, shrouded mysteriously in their white prison saris and blankets, resembling giant root vegetables.

This prison was nothing more than a replica of the society I'd left behind me in the city. The Female Ward was a jail within a jail. And the Political Ward was a jail within a jail within a jail … here I was thrice removed from freedom. Outside the barred window an austere phalanx of prison guards separated us from the city, segregating us from the world of men. A bright clear moon covered all with silver.

Close by, hardly a mile from where I sat, the bass siren of a giant trawler on the River Hooghly blared a heraldic note as it left the Kidderpore Docks for the Andaman Sea. How I wished I were on one of those ships, sailing that river, to the great waters.

Nearby roared the caged Royal Bengal tigers in Alipur Zoo, just across the road from Presidency Jail. Behind my cell, the general ward hummed with the night sounds of women, coughs, curses, wails, moaning and mourning. I longed for silence.

Then miraculously, at midnight, a mellow contralto feminine voice rose slowly in song, loud, proud, clear and melodious. Suddenly all other noises faded out. A dancing lilting percussion

played on a pitcher, sounding like giant drops of falling water, and a drone instrument, its single note played repetitively on a single string, spread aerophonic vibrations in a great spiral web, accompanying the arias, rising and falling like the waves of a deep and tranquil sea.

> On the banks of this river of life,
> My heart swings and my life swings,
> I drown and gulp in the currents
> Beyond the reach of grand thought
> My heart swings and my life swings …
> No one will stay with you for ever,
> We will all go down the same path
> Old or young.
> Who are we? Where are we from?
> Where will we go to?
> We deceive ourselves, Bhaba the madman says,
> Exulting in moments of laughter, tears and play.
> We'll drown in endless waters
> Caught in this earthy mandala of illusion and desire.
> My heart swings and my spirit swings. [1]

The words of the song, premonitory, prophetic, calmed me down at this moment of utter despair. It was as though a cooling fluid coursed through my veins as my body surrendered to the music.

I knew that I was listening to a Baul melody. I had some idea of such songs from my mother, a passionate singer and music lover, and I was obsessed by a Baul track on an album called *Indian Street Music*, which had been published in America two years earlier, in 1970, and played often on the radio. It was sung by Lakhon Das, brother of the famous Purna Das Baul.

> O mon amar,
> Shajo Prakriti
> Prakritir shobhab dhoro, sadhan koro
> Dekhbi urdho hobe deher goti
> Mon amar shajo Prakriti …

O my spirit, dress like nature,
Learn to be a woman,
Acquire spiritual knowledge,
You'll find that the pace of your body
Will quicken again,
O my spirit, dress like nature.

My mother had told me that the Bauls were wandering bards who travelled by foot from village to village, to fairs and to festivals. The word 'baul' derived from the word 'vatula', meaning one who is possessed by the wind; it referred to the windblown, errant character of a Baul. The Bauls sang in buses and trains. Their melodies were poignant, their texts enigmatic. Clothed in long, flowing, multi-coloured robes called alkhallas, often living in pairs, they played their frenetic rhythms on strange, handmade instruments of wood and clay, miming the contradictory moods of nature and of passion.

To the poor, they offered the wealth of the human spirit; to the blind, the divine light of inner vision; to the sick and the ageing, they gave the comfort of faith and cured them with songs, natural medicine and yogic practice. The rich and the arrogant, the selfish and the mercenary, were all subject to their provocative mockery. To women, they offered parity in sexual relations, the possibility of exploring their own bodies, and of leading men to a greater knowledge of theirs. They decried the male-dominated society around them, caught in the shackles of the caste system, and exposed the fanatic parochialism of the mullah and the pundit. These were men and women after my own heart.

Here, in the female ward of Presidency Jail, Kolkata, the haunting Baul melody spoke to me of a freedom that could not be curtailed. Liberty, in fact, was power over the self and not over others. The body could be shackled but not the spirit.

Every night, after lock-up, other voices would lift in song too. I never found out who all those women singers were, voices from among the prisoners in the common ward. Some were prostitutes from Kalighat, some petty criminals, pickpockets, rice smugglers, bird catchers and snake trappers. Their songs were lively, direct and full of spirit, unlike those of the political prisoners who stood in a

row every evening resolutely to sing the 'Internationale' and the 'Red Lantern', treating their fellow prisoners with contempt, calling them the 'lumpen proletariat'. They did not talk to me because I chatted with everyone, class enemy or not, especially Bijoya, the formidable warder, who wielded her stick hard and free on everyone, but who came to sit by me each night after lock-up, smoking her chillum, coughing and spluttering, and narrating stories and fables: of Bon Bibi, the forest mother and how she had killed a tiger, of Manik Pir, the Sufi saint and how he had met the Hindu god of artisans, Viswakarma, on his way to the Haj.

I had always hoped for a just and egalitarian Indian society and my experiences had already confirmed for me that rural India desperately needed to be transformed. It had been my impulse to meet the leaders of the banned communist Naxalite party that had led to my arrest at the age of twenty-two in June 1972, and to my year in jail.

Ironically, by the time I was imprisoned, I knew that the Naxalites were not the group for me. I had found their leaders to be misguided, power hungry, caste conscious, sexist, suspicious and insecure, advocating terrorism when their party was banned to maintain their power over the young people, who were raring for change. More inspired by the romanticised guerrilla ideals of Che Guevara and *Django* (a popular spaghetti western) than by Marx and Lenin, these young people were taking to guns and knives, fabricating homemade bombs, fighting the police in the streets and reciting to each other parrot-like from their new Bible, the Little Red Book of Mao Tse Tung.

When I was arrested, I had declared to the Special Branch police on Lord Sinha Road who had interrogated me that I was a Marxist, of the Harpo tendency, influenced by the Situationists of May 1968 in Paris. (Harpo, after all, was a kind of a Christic figure, a fool and clown, an inspired madman rather like the Baul singers. Only the Bauls had ancient method in their madness.)

As I sat listening to the last verse of the Baul song fade into the prison night air, I knew I was still searching for the right path.

*

I was born a bawling baby with a rebel heart, in 1949, in Shillong, in the crater of a long dormant volcano which rumbled under us from time to time, like a slumbering old dragon. My mother, to calm my tempestuous spirit, sent me to school at the age of three, to a Catholic convent run by Irish nuns. On weekends, she would send me to my grandmother Aasmani, who tied my ankle to a bedpost to prevent me from climbing all over her house. Because of my non-stop chatter my grandmother called me Kathar Sagar, which meant literally 'a sea of words' (the *Katha Sarit Sagar* being an ancient collection of stories). At home, my mother tamed my restlessness by training me to sing devotional songs, and took on a dance master to teach me an acrobatic dance form which mingled masculine and feminine movements.

Outside school hours, she let me run wild and free on our estate, which spanned an entire hill. She taught me to sniff the perfume of the raat ki rani, a flower which bloomed only at night, to watch a myriad stars in the clear night skies once the monsoon rains were over, to read fables – she told me endless stories: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. She had a circle of literary friends and, like all of them, read widely. My father, a patriarch, came from the plains of Sylhet, now in Bangladesh. He doted on me and would try to discipline me like any other girl from the Sen family, but to no avail – I was a tomboy, preferred trousers to dresses, and kept my hair short. I would run away, out of his earshot, into the hills and forests above our Tudor-style bungalow, scaling trees and launching my catapult, clambering over the rocks in the mountain stream which cascaded down to the valley below.

When I reached puberty, I ran away from home for good. However, this lasted only a day, because a Marwari family, merchants from Rajasthan, picked me up at a petrol pump on the main road out of Shillong and informed the police, who had received a call from my alarmed father about his missing daughter

In 1967, at the age of eighteen, an adult at last, I left my parents, who had moved to Kolkata. I dropped out of my English Literature course, finding it hard to concentrate on studying Shelley's 'pathetic fallacy' in the great colonial classrooms with their groaning fans

swirling slowly high above our heads, while just next to us crowds shouted slogans and tear gas bombs sizzled and fumed on College Street, as a massive student movement gained momentum.

I left my parents to do voluntary social work for victims of famine in the village of Kowaikala in the drought-stricken Bodhgaya district in Bihar. With the exception of myself, all the volunteers were British and American, some of the Americans draft resisters from the war raging in Vietnam. I heard news of the world through them, and all the new music coming out of America and Britain: Otis, Janis, Creedence Clearwater Revival. I would return home on the Gaya Mail from time to time, covered in dust and soot, and tell my mother my own stories: about the lack of food and water, the shocking violence of the caste system in Bihar, the villagers shackled to this age-old system, the beauty of the Buddhist temples in Bodhgaya, the magenta and purple sunsets, the Tibetan monks who droned 'Om Mani Padme Hum' in their deep bass voices, and of course stories about my new friends in Bihar: Steve Minkin of the Peace Corps who wandered the Bihari countryside like a latter-day prophet, Jill Buxton, the half-crazed English lady who carried medicine to remote villages in her Land Rover, the dying writer Mulk Raj Anand and the fervent Gandhian Dwarko Sundarani, who led the relief projects in the area from the Samanvaya Ashram where I was based.

I pleaded with Mother to join me. But arthritis had pinned her to her bed, and it seemed that she was overpowered by the city. She would not come with me, and I could not drag her away from her sedentary, oppressive city life. She would listen to me in excitement and encourage me to be independent, all the while warning me of dangers which might befall me if I was on my own.

Father was baffled. Had I gone off my head? To pacify him, Mother pleaded with me to return to college, so I did, this time to Indraprastha College in Delhi. After my year of hanging off trains and walking about remote, impoverished Bihari villages, it was difficult to adapt to the regimented life of an undergraduate in residence.

So, about a year later, when the opportunity came to join an expedition of British students returning to London along with a

dozen Delhi University students – travelling mostly by land across the Middle East, in a long, most unusual journey through Europe – I jumped at it. At last, the world would be mine. En route, we had to fly over Pakistan and join the cavalcade of buses in Kabul, driving on to Herat, Meshed, Tehran in Iran, to Erzurum in Turkey; to Trabzon on the Black Sea over the Zo Digli mountain passes, on to Ankara and Istanbul; through Thessalonica in Greece to Zagreb, Belgrade, Salzburg, Munich, Bruges and finally on to London.

After two months in England, I ran away from the group of student delegates who were representing India, aided and abetted by two friends: one gave me her overcoat, and the other stole my passport from the group leader for me, accompanying me to Waterloo, from where I caught a train and ferry to Paris, with five pounds in my pocket. It was a Paris still on a high, on the last bubble of effervescence left by the student revolt of May 1968. My Air India return ticket was valid for twelve months; I stayed on that whole glorious year.

Jean Claude Fortot and Leo Jalais, French social workers I'd met in Bihar, gave me a roof over my head till I found a room as an au pair, and introduced me to Jharna Bose, who befriended me and took me to visit the painter Paritosh Sen and his wife Jayasree. All three took care of me, provided me with the occasional meal and a sympathetic ear.

It was the Paris of sex and drugs and rock and roll, of Eldridge Cleaver lecturing at Maubert Mutualité and of the Black Panthers discovering their African Islamic roots, The Who breaking their guitars on stage; the Paris also of feminism, psychoanalysis and existentialism. I would stay up all night, going from café to café, meeting the architects of the revolt, philosophers, painters and film makers.

When I finally returned to Kolkata in October 1970, Mother was terminally ill and it appeared that parts of India were in the throes of a Maoist revolution led by the Naxalites. It was then that I became entangled in politics and imprisoned.

Once I was released, I spent a year on parole in Kolkata, having signed a bond that obliged me to stay at Father's house there. As soon as parole was lifted, I left for New Delhi, where my friend

Renee from Shillong welcomed me into her apartment in Nizamuddin. Then I found an apartment of my own in Nizamuddin West, near the tomb of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya, and would spend evenings listening to qawwalis, Sufi devotional music.

Working for a year in New Delhi as a journalist, I tried to come to terms with what I'd lived through these past few years. Father encouraged me to return to Paris in November 1975, when I was twenty-seven, knowing I was completely unadapted to life in Kolkata. He bought me a one-way Air France ticket to Paris. This time, I left with the stipulated five hundred dollars in my pocket.

Some years passed. I was thirty-three. In Paris, I now lived in a ménage à trois. Not like the Mormons, rather like children of the post-Woodstock era. I lived with Terai and his wife, Katoun. Terai is French, born in Papeete, in the middle of the great Pacific Ocean. He was brought up by his father, a French judge of de Gaulle's *force libre*, who subsequently became a dissident theosophist in south India. I had met him when we'd been students of Delhi University. Katoun was his childhood sweetheart, an exquisitely beautiful, upright, uptight French Catholic with a big heart and a *feu au cul* as she bluntly put it. We were dear friends.

Terai was soft, compassionate and tender, and radiantly handsome, knew my adventurous past and loved my rebel heart. Result: I fell desperately in love with him. We were in a fix. I proposed that there was an alternative to forcing Terai and Katoun to separate; all three of us would live together, happily ever after. And after some initial dithering, they both gave in to my quixotic logic. Katoun became the mother of one, and I became the mother of two of Terai's children. Katoun and I squabbled and screeched at each other. We shared our beds with each other, as well as our responsibility for the children.

All three of us were great music lovers. We never missed Bob Marley, the Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan when they came to Paris. Katoun introduced me to Boris Vian, Jacques Brel, Edith Piaf and Georges Brassens. Terai worked in a travel agency and visited India

frequently, bringing back albums of Kishori Amonkar, Gangubai Hangal and SD Burman for me. Whenever I was homesick for India, I'd put on those albums, wrap a sari around myself, village style as I'd learnt in jail, light a joint, and stare at my mother's smiling face, a portrait on my wall, as I hummed the songs of Sachin Karta, as SD Burman was known in Shillong.

Ooo jani mohua keno matal hoyna
Ooo jani bhromor keno katha koyna ...

(I know why the mohua flower is never drunk,
I know why the droning bee never says a word ...)

Terai and Katoun tolerated my nostalgia. We were a family. When, one September day in 1982, I read out a flyer for a concert of Indian music at Alliance Française on Boulevard Raspail in Paris, Terai instantly agreed to accompany me. Katoun would stay at home and look after the children; I'd done my share of babysitting that week, while they had been at the opera with Katoun's father, Clym, a Wagner critic and an enthusiastic supporter of our unusual lifestyle.

I usually avoided going to Indian cultural performances in Paris, but this time I decided to make an exception to my rule. The flyer that had slipped through the slat in the middle of our front door had announced a Baul concert.

Eight rooms
Nine doors
No locks.
It's a house on three floors,
On top, courts and tribunals,
In the middle, merchants,
On the ground floor,
Clerks who meditate
On the room of the spirit,
It's a house on three floors. [2]

I was still haunted by the songs I had heard from within the confines of my prison cell ten years earlier. It was as if those figures, silhouetted behind the bars of their cells in the Female Ward, beckoned to me perpetually, refusing to let me forget them. I had caught a glimpse of the profoundly intelligent souls belonging to women who lived below the bottom tier of society and who possessed a vast female inherited repertoire of songs, stories and earthy bodily wisdom. My heart yearned to return to them.

Then, in 1979, a documentary by Georges Luneau, *Le Chant des Fous*, had given me another glimpse of these itinerant singers of Bengal. Broadcast on French television, Luneau's film showed a quasi-mythical world of mystic minstrels and ecstatic song; a pastoral world of rice fields, banyan groves and forests of teak by the sides of great river valleys, and of monasteries marked by incredible peace and harmony. Here, among a people who tilled the soil and battled with inclement weather, these bards of rural Bengal created joyous, miraculous music. Wild and free, they raised their clamour in the mansions of the rich, and roared in gaiety in the courtyards of the poor.

The concert was like nothing I'd witnessed before. Dressed in saffron robes and patchwork jackets, three Baul singers played the simplest of instruments. The first carried a one-stringed drone; the second strode in cockily, a khamak plucking drum slung in a bandoulière over his shoulder; while the third came tripping in, jingling a tambourine. Each singer had a remarkable face. Sitting in an open circle on the stage, they invoked their ancestors. Their voices sounded so familiar, I felt I knew them already.

Subal Das, the first, and the eldest, sat in the middle, his hair tied in a traditional Vaishnava chignon on top of a fine, tough Mongol face. He bent his head to tune his drone, and then, tilting it back, cried out:

O guru, pierce through the unbroken mandala,
Take mercy on me, show me the light.
(Akhanda mandale he guru nash koro,
Aamarey kripa korey aalo dekhao!)

O guru! Put the salve of knowledge in my eyes!
(Gyana anjana nayaney dao!)

The two singers on each side of him joined in the refrain:

Gyana anjana nayaney dao!
Gyana anjana nayaney dao!

The second singer, Gour Khepa, a handsome man in his thirties, playfully snatched the phrases from Subal's lips. In contrast to the smile on his face, his voice expressed utter grief and distress:

I am a blighted being,
Blundering about in a life of barren domesticity,
Meaning eludes me.

The two others joined in the refrain:

Gyana anjana nayaney dao!
Gyana anjana nayaney dao!

The third singer, Paban Das Baul, graceful, lithe and radiant, came vocally pattering up front, bringing softness, a pleading quality, to the invocation.

I kill myself wandering, my feet are heavy,
Take mercy on me, show me the light.

His peers took up the refrain:

Gyana anjana nayaney dao!
Gyana anjana nayaney dao!

Small, slim and fine, Subal began to dance, as though suspended on an invisible thread, his gestures like those of an imperious lover. His voice, polished like brass, took me down the muddy waters of the great rivers of my ancestral land: the Ganga, the Padma and the Brahmaputra.

> O boatman, I've not found the beginning
> Nor the end of this river.

The urgent push of these waters was palpable in each phrase of his song, warning me of dangerous currents eddying inside me. I was to learn, over time, that Subal was irascible, bulimic, acid, profound – a shrunken sage – and that he had watched his family die in the Bengal famine of 1943.

Even more disturbing and irresistible was Gour Khepa. Mocking, teasing, he sent out a charge of energy through his instrument, electrifying the entire audience. His companions receded into the background as he took over the stage, his khamak howling in rage, his strident voice rising in decibels to a point where it became unbearable, crushing all feelings with the sheer weight of its dissonance. Grinning and grimacing, he had the defiant, paranoiac posture of someone in a constant state of challenge, playing games with anyone whose eyes met his.

I didn't even notice Paban at first, next to these two more forceful figures. Feminine, pliant, with a head of curly locks, he had an innocent face, his bright eyes laughing. He hung about in the background, poking his index finger into his left nostril to clean it, unaware that the French public in the auditorium were chuckling because they imagined his gesture was part of the show. He rose, swirling gracefully around Subal and Gour, striking his tambourine softly at first, then building up, little by little, to a crescendo of thundering rhythm, till at last he began to sing. Transported by the spell of his deep, bass voice and his insistent, steady tempo, the two older singers leaned and swayed, then leapt up to join him in a dance. The three formed an ensemble, turning, dancing, jumping; they began to whirl, commanding space like a cyclone.

They reminded me of a pillar of dust I had seen while driving through the drought-stricken Bodhgaya district of Bihar in 1967, crossing the horizon at its own pace, uprooting electric poles and trees, making cows fly.

The magicians on stage charged each other with energy like lightning conductors. Each passed his current to the other, creating sonic waves with their instruments, which transformed into birds: clay-bellied babblers and bamboo-nosed warblers, wood-eared and copper-beaked, gut-eyed and silk-voiced, humming, droning, jingling.

I sat, enthralled, wanting to cry out to them, wanting to break the stunned silence of those who sat around me. The shadowy figures of the women who I'd heard singing in prison were no longer with me. The sorrow I'd felt in being removed from the lands of my origin and in being torn from my beloved mother suddenly left me, like a breath held for too long.

When the concert was over, I walked up to the stage. Paban was seated there alone, looking morose. His face expressed surprise and awe when I addressed him in Bengali. He rushed off in search of Deepak Majumdar, a bearded, bespectacled Bengali intellectual with the traditional jhola bag slung across his shoulder, and the leader of their group. With his consent, we made a date for dinner at my home the next evening.

The next evening, we dined together in the little basement kitchen of our home on the Rue du Moulin des Prés. Deepak and the Bauls seemed as delighted to meet me as I was to meet them, and even more so when they saw what I'd cooked for them: a simple Bengali supper of rice, dal, fried aubergines and some catfish picked up in Chinatown nearby and cooked into a light, watery curry spiked with kalonji, chilli and coriander.

Paban cried out. 'Hari bol! Hari bol!' (Take the name of Hari!)

'Magur macher jhol!' (A catfish curry!) rhymed Gour Khepa, grinning from ear to ear.

'Ghor jubotir kol!' (The lap of a young woman!) Subal Das took up the rhyme *sotto voce*, his thin lips curling slightly on his inscrutable face.

We were old soulmates although we'd only just met, and I chatted with Deepak happily.

Terai and Katoun disappeared after dinner. They had to be at work at nine the next morning, and lived by the rigid Parisian clock. My own clock was more flexible. I had a part-time job as a translator, and often worked from home. So I stayed up with the Bauls till dawn, entranced, listening to them play and record their songs on my little tape player, and chatting with Deepak, who turned out to be a cult Kolkata poet.

He also had an encyclopaedic knowledge about the Bauls, as well as the life and struggles of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, who had first introduced the Bauls to the West, he told me, was ostracised by a strand of puritanical Bengali society because of his friendship with the disorderly, barrel-voiced, hemp-smoking Bauls who flocked to his side in the small town of Shantiniketan in West Bengal, and disturbed the peace of the genteel, anglicised middle-class folk at his newly founded University of Visva-bharati. The very same society received him with adulation when he won the Nobel Prize.

Forgotten things, buried in myself, floated to the surface as I listened to these stories. The texts of the songs that the Bauls sang for me took me back to places I'd almost forgotten. I felt released from the obscurity of the years separating me from a childhood spent with my mother in the northeastern hills of India. At dawn, in winter, we would walk uphill towards the Tripura Castle. We would stand on a stone ledge, below which lay a secret rose garden and a goldfish pond. If the sky was clear, we would glimpse through the mist the snowcapped peaks of the eastern Himalayas. She would sing to me then, songs from the plains of Bengal which lay somewhere in between those peaks and the ones we stood on.

So I knew every word of the song Subal now sang to me. It was a song my mother had taught me:

> I've gone mad seeing the beauty of Gour!
> Medicines have no effect on me.
> Come, friend, let's go to the river!
> The thorn of Gour is terrible

If it pierces you, you'll be destroyed!
Gourango transformed into a serpent
Has pierced my body
Come friend, let's go to the river! [3]

I felt hit in the guts, in the centre of the solar plexus, the manipur chakra, stung by a stealthy serpent. I'd held my breath for too long.

Paban helped me clear up in the basement and load the dishwasher while Deepak, Subal and Gour Khepa smoked their last chillum of ganja, arguing with each other vociferously in the living room upstairs. Wild and abandoned on stage, reincarnating a veritable bhairava baba – a divine lord of the forest – Paban was quiet off stage, seeming overpowered by his articulate, bullying elders. He was twenty-six years old but looked like a stripling, and fell easily into the role of a younger brother, calling me didi – sister. He invited me to visit the Baul Mela, the festival of Kenduli in mid-January, on the day of the new moon, Makar Sankranti. Mela, in local parlance I learnt, meant 'plenty'. It also meant a fair.

Makar, Paban told me, was a crocodile, but when he attempted a sketch on my kitchen wall with a pencil, it looked more like a dragon. I made a mental note to wipe it off before Katoun woke up, as I told Paban I'd try to make it. We stood at the window for a while, as dawn broke over the poplars in our triangular patch of back garden. A blackbird sang on the laurel tree, announcing the sunrise. Like the Magi, the three Baul singers and their guide, Deepak, loaded me with invisible treasures and left to catch a train to Marseilles and La Ciotat.

The house was in a shambles, dishes piled in the sink in the basement and cigarette butts strewn all over the floor of the sitting room. I was past sleeping; I made myself some coffee and began to clean up. At seven, I woke the children; Terai shaved and left for the office; Katoun ran to catch her bus to the school where she worked part-time as a monitor. No one knew about the cyclone that was spiralling inside me, about to carry me off far away from this life.

I spent the morning running through my household chores, listening to my recordings of the night before with the volume turned up. The Bauls' voices – jazzy, mischievous, emotional – inhabited me, squatting like refugees from some third world. They had broken into my house and left with the goods.

Paban's voice bellowed at me through the tape recorder:

> If you want to conquer your spirit,
> Form a gang of bandits
> Use devotion as your pivot,
> And break into the house of dharma.
> Ram Chandra says:
> The day has passed by
> I must dress like a thief now
> The art of robbery is worthwhile
> If you don't get caught. [4]

Feeling like a thief, I telephoned Deepak upon his return from Marseilles. He invited me to watch *Carmen* at Peter Brook's theatre at the Bouffes du Nord, with him and the Bauls.

After the performance, we were invited to break bread with the cast. I sat on one side of the table with Subal, Gour and Paban, while the eminent Mr Brook sat opposite us with Deepak Majumdar and Georges Luneau, who monopolised his attention, not bothering to introduce me or to include the Bauls in the conversation. Gour, restless, itching for a fight, tried to break through the monumental pyramid of words Deepak inevitably built up to explain the smallest little detail. He raised his ogre's voice and began hurling insults at Deepak in Bengali, obviously hating not being the centre of attention. Subal sat by him with a crooked smile on his face. Meanwhile, Paban handed me his paper napkin, on which he'd drawn an ektara (a round-bottomed, thin-necked instrument) with a pair of eyes and a nose and mouth, P – A – B – A – N written under it in squiggly English letters: his first love note to me.

No sooner had I accepted Paban's gift than Gour Khepa flicked my spoon and sent its contents flying in the air, splashing the three men opposite us with milky green watercress soup. I would have stayed on to watch this scene play out, but I had to leave as it was time for the last metro train. I turned back to wave at Paban, who followed me with his eyes while the others continued to argue with each other, hardly noticing my departure.

A couple of months went by. I listened to the Bauls' recordings over and over again. Their voices beckoned to me more and more strongly. If Terai and Katoun were struck by my obsession, they had no notion of its singularity. To them, it must have seemed an aspect of what they knew to be my temperamental nature. But this fascination was too important for me not to share.

My old friend Jharna and her husband Deben, who lived nearby, on Rue Lepic in Montmartre, became my allies. I'd met Jharna on my first walkabout in Paris in the winter of 1969, without a centime in my pocket and with a head full of dreams. She fed me, called me Srikanto, a runaway character in a nineteenth-century Bengali novel, and became my guardian angel.

Jharna had come to Paris to write her doctoral thesis on the influence of French symbolism in Bengali literature. She had stayed on when she met the great Deben Bhattacharya, a trailblazing, self-styled ethnomusicologist who moved to Paris in the seventies. He had been the first to point out to the world that the gypsies had originally travelled from Rajasthan across the Middle East, to fan out to Europe and North Africa. Deben had showed me his beautiful photographs of a procession of gypsies in the famous village of Santa Maria de la Mer, in the south of France. He had entered the procession disguised as a gypsy, holding an altar in his hands in which he had cleverly insinuated a tape recorder.

I confided in Deben and Jharna about my desire to explore the world of the Bauls, to begin with a visit to the festival in Kenduli, and indeed to return to India for a while.

Terai, Katoun and I had been drifting apart since the summer. Passion had scurried out of what had become our practical,

established routine of life and love in Paris. There was no space for dream and play. And I was yearning for a deep, familiar breath of India, to share it with my children. I needed them to be known and loved by my family in India, however dangerous and irrational it might be to prise them away from the French École Communale. I needed to mourn my beloved mother, who had died over a decade earlier. I needed to settle accounts with my father, who wanted me to take some responsibility for his affairs in Shillong and in Kolkata, as he had retired from business. Many things had been left unsaid between us since my mother's death, and I felt ready to return to them now.

Deben cheered me on in this impulsive enterprise while Jharna, more sober, advised me to live in Shantiniketan; here my intentions were more likely to be understood than in Kolkata. She handed me the keys of her flat on Southern Avenue, in Kolkata, to use as a transit point. Deben lent me his marvellous book of translations of Baul songs, *Mirror in the Sky*.

The text was accompanied by haunting black-and-white photographs taken by Richard Lannoy of the great Nabani Khepa, an exemplary Baul singer and friend of Tagore, with his sons, the great Purna Das and Lakhon Das Baul, whose song had so haunted me. It was this modest little volume which had brought Allen Ginsberg to Shantiniketan in the sixties, a journey which was to lead to another one. Purna and Lakhon went on to travel to New York, and were befriended by Sally and Albert Grossman, who got them an album deal with EMI. Baul singers entered the annals of modern music history; Purna Das Baul was immortalised on the album cover of Bob Dylan's *John Wesley Harding*.

Terai and Katoun didn't say much when I told them of my decision to leave for Kolkata, and eventually make a base for myself and the children in the university town of Shantiniketan, as Jharna had recommended. They knew me well enough by now. I was stubborn, individualistic, cussed, self-willed and restless. My departure felt to them like the end of our relationship although I swore eternal friendship and love to them. We finally agreed that I would leave with Duniya, who was just a little over two years old. Krishna, who

was older, would come and join me later, once I'd settled down and had a place of my own.

Terai went upstairs, avoiding my eyes. I switched on the radio. One of Bach's fugues was playing. Katoun and I looked at each other and laughed; the word *fugue* in French meant the sudden disappearance of an individual from where they lived. It was time for me to disappear.

December 1982. We woke up inside mosquito nets in my father's house on Jhautalla Road, south Kolkata. Duniya was amazed to find her cousins, Rahul and Kunal, sleeping like sardines next to her. Maya, a very young maid, not more than twelve, came in with a cup of Darjeeling tea for me, specially brewed for me by my brother, Gautam. I sipped it pleasurably, listening to the morning sounds which penetrated the thick walls of the old mansion. The grinding of trams on Amir Ali Avenue, the high-pitched bells of the rickshaw, and clanging of prayer gongs in the house next door, cawing crows, chirping sparrows, and the cries of 'kabadi wallaaaaaa … ' – the call of the tin can man, who bought old newspapers, empty bottles and cans – pierced through the distant roar of traffic on the main road. I heard the rattling of a dugduggi, a kettle drum; Maya came rushing in: 'Didi! Didi! Bandorwala!'

It was the monkey man. He led in a pair of monkeys on a leash, and settled down on the porch. The she-monkey was wearing a miniskirt and a blouse, and a thin red scarf wound around her head. The he-monkey wore an embroidered skull cap and tight black drill trousers.

'Chak a chak!' said the monkey man, rattling his drum.

The two monkeys faced each other, raised and lowered their eyebrows comically.

'Dhak a dhak!' cried the monkey man. 'Kama Sutra dekho!' (Come watch the Kama Sutra!)

The he-monkey mounted the she-monkey and they somersaulted over each other in a perfect wheel. The children laughed and clapped their hands. Then Father entered with a bag stuffed with provisions from the market, handed them out, and chased the

monkey man off. The children were distracted by the gifts he'd brought back: a clay pot piggy bank painted in red, white and green, and some crunchy peanut brittle.

The telephone rang. It was Deepak, returning my call. He proposed that we try to meet at the Kenduli Baul festival, which Paban had told me about in Paris. It was in mid-January, three weeks from now. But I had no idea how to get in touch with the Baul singers, as I told Deepak.

Deepak told me I would find Subal Baba with his wife Sundari Ma in his ashram in Aranghata, in the district of Nadia, and that Gour Khepa could be found with his khepi Hari Dasi in the vicinity of Bolpur station. Listening to him, I remembered that Bauls often use the title 'khepa' at the end of their names, which describes those who are endowed with frenetic energy (literally meaning 'the enraged one'). Khepi is the feminine of khepa and a Baul's consort such as Hari Dasi is called his khepi.

Deepak added that he'd spotted Paban 'hanging about' the TV station in Tollygunge in Kolkata. I flared up, finding him unjustly disparaging. 'You've been telling everyone that each Baul is a walking radio station, haven't you? Is it surprising that Paban should wish to outdo his peers? He's younger, more modern than Gour and Subal. Why are you big machos always after Paban's blood?'

Deepak was delighted with my reaction, and told me conspiratorially, much to my irritation, that Paban knew I had arrived in the city and that he had already given him my address. It didn't take long for the young Baul to ring the bell of my father's house.

He was dressed in a plain cotton kurta and trousers, and looked like any other city kid except for the length of his hair, which hung in ringlets over his forehead, and a snaky earring on his earlobe. Instead of lounging on a cane chair in the hallway under the cool breeze of the fan, as any of my friends would have, he stood petrified in a corner, his small head bowed when he noticed Father. My father lifted his own patrician head, took a good look at him, barked 'Ki he?' – So, sir? – and returned to his Sunday morning paper. I came to Paban's rescue and ushered him into my room. I knew that he came from a world that didn't sit on chairs.

My room was bare except for a mattress on the floor. Duniya lay on a dhurrie, sprawled out amidst her toys. My things were spread out on the floor. Papers, pencils, crayons, books and cassettes were strewn carelessly on a low table. Duniya turned to Paban and studied his face gravely, then silently handed him her fluffy brown bear. Paban breathed a sigh of relief, took his shoes off carefully, and placed them outside the door. Settling down on the dhurrie, he began to turn the cassettes over.

I switched the tape recorder on to play him my recordings from Paris. Subal's voice blared out. Paban listened for a minute, and then switched it off. He picked up his small tambourine and began to sing. Duniya clambered on to my lap. We kept time and listened to him, spellbound.

> Raise the sail, boatman, don't delay,
> Untie the rope, boatman,
> Let's go to Medina
> Prophets of the world have come
> To this scintillating house of maya and meena
> When they weep, a thousand diamonds,
> When they laugh, a shower of pearls!
> O Compassionate One,
> He who has the Murshid as his companion
> Has no fear of crossing the waters,
> The Kabaa is in his heart
> And Medina is in his eyes
> O the light of Noor has illuminated the world,
> The lamp of Noor burns bright in each house in Medina. [5]

Paban's song was an invitation to set off on a journey to wondrous shores. I was enchanted, at once bristling with anticipation, impervious to the world outside.

Father's leonine head appeared above us, just then. He stood at the door of my room and questioned Paban, from across the threshold. 'Where do you come from?'

'Mohammedpur in Murshidabad district,' Paban replied.

'Oh, so you are a Mussulman?' my father asked. It was surely Paban's choice of song which had led to this question. My hackles rose.

Paban's tone was low and humble, but firm and proud, as he responded. 'No, sir, my family is Vaishnava. I sing Baul songs. We Bauls make no difference between Hindu and Mussulman.'

Although Father had refused to look at me, he breathed a distinct sigh of relief. 'We are Vaishnavites too,' he said then, surprising me. [6]

Turning to me, Father said warningly, 'Listen, my dear, you know the rules. If you want to do things your way, you must do it on your own, and if you live under my roof, you must abide by my rules.'

'Yes, Father! I'm leaving soon. I've decided to live in Shantiniketan for a while,' I told him. He knew me well.

This had been the golden rule between us since I'd first left home at seventeen, and it allowed us to interact as equals, much to the surprise and jealousy of other members of the family whom my father crushed with his aristocratic glare. But I had learnt to glare back early in life and take on the aspect of Ranachandi, which was his pet name for me, Chandi being the warlike form of the energetic goddess Kali.

Anyone who sets foot in Kolkata quickly comes to know that it is through strict segregation that a status quo is maintained between the village and the city. There was no exception to this rule in our high caste, Westernised, urban family, which depended on a support system of servants; villagers who'd come to the city to find work when they'd been starved out of their villages. This had been going on in Bengal for three centuries, and will probably go on for another three.

As a member of the low caste village world, Paban's presence in my room was an aberration and a shock to the household. His voice, which carried a mile or two in open fields, was an instant magnet, and his instrument, a simple wooden tambourine with two sets of metal clappers, rumbled like distant thunder, annulling the possibility of a private rendition. However, since I had the reputation of being a headstrong rebel with a sharp tongue who had lived licentiously in Paris, as well as that of being Father's favourite, no one complained.

The news of Paban's subsequent visits would spread like wildfire through the neighbourhood, however. Firstly, through the network of housemaids and servants and drivers who systematically spied on everyone and reported back to the saabs and memsaabs about the goings-on in the area; and, secondly, more importantly for me, because Father, on his way back from the market every morning, roared news about his spoilt, wilful daughter to all and sundry. It was his way of placing his umbrella over my head; Bengali culture is oral, and the spoken word invariably carries the most weight.

Paban stayed for lunch. He sat at our immense Queen Anne dining table looking pretty woebegone, especially when Father began to question him about his presence in Kolkata. He explained timorously that he had formed a band with his brother Swapan and some village musicians, and that they were about to leave for New Delhi for a TV show on a national network. He would be back in a few days, with Swapan and the other members of his band, and they were then to go together to the Kenduli Baul mela.

Paban told us that it was in Kenduli that Baul singers drew up their calendar of engagements for the season. All the local producers of Baul music, usually from the coal and iron belt of the Damodar Valley area and from the hinterland of Durgapur, poets and intellectuals from Kolkata, and often small producers of cassettes and 'little' magazines which tried to perpetuate the Baul tradition by printing contemporary repertories, would all converge at Kenduli. Paban and his band were sought-after and extremely popular there.

I invited Paban to lunch with us again on his way back from New Delhi. We could then go together to Kenduli. Father shot me a baleful glance, which I ignored.

He had accepted my life in Paris without giving me too much trouble. When I had been expecting my son Krishna five years previously, I'd written to him making a clean breast of my life with Terai and Katoun. That was another rule between us since Mother's death; to tell each other the stark, naked truth, even if it hurt. He had read my letter out to my elder brother Gautam in a grave voice and bought himself a ticket to Paris to visit us. When he arrived, Krishna

was seven months old and Diya, Katoun's daughter, just two months old. Katoun told him she felt like she had been pregnant for fourteen months, which cheered him up instantly. He got on well with Katoun and her father, Clym, after this. We all went on a marvellous trip to visit friends in Bayonne, in the southwest of France. The local ironmonger in the village of Mirepeix in the Basque country still remembers my father as the Indian raja who bought all his bronze lanterns. They now shine in Kolkata at night, during the frequent power cuts.

But this was different. 'So why now remigrate to the world of the Bauls? You are an uzbok! A dolt!' he said, the minute Paban left.

He was closer to the truth than he knew. The Bauls had emerged from the mingling of early Sahajiya Buddhist and Vaishnava philosophy and practices with Sufism, which arrived in India down the silk route from the Middle East with the advent of Islam in India. 'So Uzbekistan is probably close to where it all started,' I told Father triumphantly.

My father snorted at me impatiently as I explained all this to him, and focused on Duniya, taking her off to nap with him as she always did, sprawled on his big belly.

I had the afternoon to myself. I looked out of the window at the mango tree outside, in our neighbour Ahmed Ali's garden. A kokil warbled, reminding me of the dawn my mother had left us. February 1971, when I'd just turned twenty-one.

'Turn the house around so that I can go out the other side.' So she had instructed me in this very room, as though the house was a Lazy Susan. As she was carried out on a stretcher to the St John's ambulance, she asked for music. She'd long ago chosen the music she wanted to leave the world to, irritating me with her fatalism: 'The Blue Danube', of all things.

'O Danube divine, pam pam pam pam. Such rapture is mine, I ne'er can tell.'

The end was terrible, pipes and catheters thrust into her struggling body. Just before she lost consciousness, she murmured: 'I think I'm falling into a gorge.'

Her eyes opened for a second, and she looked straight at me as

she waltzed into the depths, the clouds lying low, into the fog and the rain of her beloved Khasi and Jaintia Hills; to a heavenly ballroom filled with twirling dancers, finally a star of the silver screen.

In the absence of a feminine presence at home, Father had no option but to ask my aunt to reason with me. My aunt had lived with us in Shillong when I was a child. Unlike my mother, she was a conservative, traditional Bengali housewife.

To reassure Father, I went to visit her before setting out for Kenduli with Paban. I sat for lunch with her husband and his brothers, while she served us. She would eat only once the men had eaten, abiding by laws made by the ancient king Manu some two thousand years ago. Afterwards, we sat on her terrace in Lake Gardens, as she put out bottles of salted lime to pickle in the sun. She looked preoccupied, a sharp little worry furrow on her forehead.

'Whatever you do, mona meye, never take a diksha mantram,' she told me.

'Of course not!' I prevaricated, a little put out at the suddenness of her remark. Taking a diksha mantram meant being initiated by a guru through the transmission of secret words. However, I was moved by her term of endearment, mona meye – sweetie pie; she had used it with me on very special occasions, when I was a child.

'Mona meye, let me tell you a story,' she began. 'My great-aunt, your great-great-aunt, Borthakurma, was widowed in the forties. Your grandfather, as her nephew and the eldest brother in the family, gave her shelter in our joint family home in Sylhet. He ruled the family roost with an iron hand. Your grandmother suffered from asthma and badly needed rest. Borthakurma took over the reins of the kitchen from her, proving herself to be no less of a dictator than her draconian grand-nephew. She ran the kitchen like a factory, which functioned full steam from dawn to dusk. She was always hot and foul-tempered, wiping her face and neck with the end of her sari as streams of perspiration ran down her face. We children were terrified of her lashing tongue and fist, and never went into the kitchen when she was around.

'Every evening, Borthakurma would prepare a big bowl of rice pudding and a mountain of flatbreads, and carry them to your grandfather when he returned from court. He would run through his evening meal in a matter of minutes. Aunt and nephew would then sit solemnly waiting for the four beeps which announced the evening news on the radio. Afterwards, she would plan the next day's menus and the shopping for the family, which often extended to a hundred-odd people.

'Borthakurma also fed fools, beggars and madmen. A true blue Baidya family will always serve sadhus, gurus and Vaishnavas. And so, one day, a sage, wearing saffron robes, with a noble face and streaming white locks, came into the compound. Borthakurma served him with her own hands, in the courtyard in front of the kitchen. We children noticed from our perch in the mango tree that he whispered something into her ear when she bent to serve him. To our amazement, we saw a beatific smile spread over her face. Her angry, lined countenance softened and became smooth.

'The next morning, the household awoke to a bloodcurdling wail, and a terrific clamour from the direction of the kitchen. Borthakurma was kicking cooking pots and pans over, and they clattered and spun like tops on the kitchen floor. When she saw her nephew approaching her, she careered off the track that led out of the compound, mourning and wailing. Your grandma brought her back into the inner courtyard, asking, "What on earth is the matter?"

'Borthakurma looked blank, muttering continuously under her breath: "Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru!"

'It was a while before we children could take in the enormity of what had happened. Borthakurma had been given a diksha, an initiatory mantram, by the old sadhu. She went to sleep repeating the mantram, but when she awoke she'd retained only half of it. She rushed downstairs only to find that the old sadhu had disappeared. There was no knowing where he had gone. From that day on, she flailed about the compound like a headless chicken, her post in the kitchen forgotten, with that half mantram a constant drone on her lips.

'Your grandfather was devastated. Borthakurma was his favourite aunt and ally. He would break down in tears when he returned from court in the evenings to see if she had still not returned to normality. The family, moreover, was deprived of her delectable cooking and her formidable organisation of the kitchen. Little by little, the sad woman lost her grip on the world. She withdrew from the kitchen, forgot to bathe, comb her hair or change her clothes and stopped eating, constantly muttering the mantram; before finally descending into a deep, catatonic trance. After a couple of years of unbearable suffering, she passed away in her sleep.

'After the cremation, the entire family congregated for festivities orchestrated by your grandfather. Mourners sang, weeping and rolling on the floor. Hundreds of visitors arrived. Food was cooked according to the strict rules of the funeral rites: mung bean dal was soaked in water overnight and served with freshly grated coconut and sugar in the mornings; milk was turned into curds and whey; fine-grained pearly atap rice was steamed with mung beans; fresh vegetables were served with ghee for the midday meal. In the afternoon, the younger women and children chattered in the courtyard, cutting reams of white foolscap paper into paper chains and domes and lustres to decorate the courtyard, till it was dusk and time for tea. Calm descended on the family, freed, at last, of a troubled soul.

'But at twilight, Uma, the youngest among us, came running into the courtyard, shivering and sobbing. "Borthakurma is alive! I heard her in the toilet!"

'Your grandfather had been reading his evening paper as usual with his legs stretched wide apart on the wooden slats of his easy chair. He looked at us unbelievingly for a few moments, then ordered for torches to be lit. The toilet cabin was at the edge of the compound under a giant mango tree. Your grandfather headed in that direction while the servants held up the torches to light his passage. We children trailed behind, terrified. A voice could be heard distinctly from the direction of the toilet.

'"Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru!"

'The servants drew back fearfully. Your grandfather snatched a torch and held it high. On a high branch of a fig tree which overhung the cabin sat a pair of blinking mynahs, chattering Borthakurma's refrain.

'"Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru! Siddhi guru!"

'The black birds, disturbed, squawked and flew into our faces. We leapt back in fright. Your grandfather and all the elders, bewildered at first, burst out laughing. A pair of mynah birds had made their nest in the tree above the toilet. They had learnt my great-aunt's mantram while she dropped her turd every day. Hearing your aunt Uma enter the cabin at the very same hour as Borthakurma would have done, they had started screeching her half mantram in greeting!'

Through her story my aunt was transmitting several messages to me. She was warning me, astutely, that no good would come of my truck with Bauls and fakirs. We were a high caste Baidya family. Traditionally, the Baidyas practised ayurvedic medicine and rarely married outside their caste in order to preserve their knowledge of herbal lore and cures. However, Paban was a Baul singer, and the inevitable intimacy which travelling with him to the world of the Bauls was sure to entail, represented a kind of dangerous openness; a loosening of caste bonds and a rupture with family rules, the customs of our Hindu society.

But I was in no mood to listen.

'People will always give you advice. Listen to what they say but do what you really want to. Trust yourself.' So Mother had counselled me early in life. Thank God for Ma!

The next morning, after breakfast, I strapped my rucksack to my back and filled our water bottles. Duniya, who was in my father's arms, watched me with worried eyes, straining to return to me. She did not want to be left behind! We waved goodbye to my father through the window of the black and yellow taxi in which Paban waited for us, and left for Howrah station, to catch a train from Kolkata to Durgapur. Father looked very sad.

Leaving the city was a long and difficult process. Masses of humanity struggled to enter the city and here we were, longing to be free of it. Everywhere around us were cries of alarm, incessant honking of horns, fumes of diesel from motorbikes and scooters which wound their way through the maze of stationary trucks and buses, bullock carts loaded with merchandise; masses of people pulled in by a terrific, magnetic force. Earth city, city of Kolkata, cursed city, city of refuse, city of refusal.

We waited in the taxi, in the middle of choked traffic on Howrah Bridge, watching the swiftly moving brown sludge of the Hooghly River below. Paban plucked the strings of his dotara, a small lute-like instrument, and sang softly, 'Sarbonaisha Padma nodi tor ki ache sudhhai.'

> O Padma, river of disaster, I beseech you,
> Tell me, are you endless?
> I'd hoped to reach the shore quickly,
> But six boatmen have cheated me,
> They've axed down my boat
> And now I have no hope of reaching the shore. [7]

Duniya, impatient, moved from my lap to Paban's. Just a few weeks ago I'd walked with Krishna and Duniya on the banks of the Seine, eating candyfloss and visiting the apiary in the Jardin des Plantes. It seemed so far away, and so long ago.

I looked over and noticed that Paban seemed uneasy. We were on shifting sands now. Paban, years younger than me, was already more mature than I was. It is only now, looking back, that I realise that he was possibly already aware of our impending union and its dangers. I, on the contrary, was quite oblivious to the fact that we were going to develop a life-long relationship. For the moment he was just a young friend with rare, magical qualities who would guide me into the world of Baul songs.

Suddenly, miraculously, the traffic cleared. We entered the giant railway station at Howrah, and soon left behind the huge mass of

steel and concrete that was the industrial suburbs of Kolkata. Duniya had fallen fast asleep in my arms, and Paban was dozing. I took stock of my surroundings as the train plunged us into mile after mile of field and village, dark, heavy clouds hanging overhead, signalling pollution.

To see Kolkata, the economist Ashok Mitra had said, you had to get out of it.

From the window of the train, the story of Bengal was written in unmistakable letters: on the immense junkyards and dilapidated shantytowns which bordered the railway line.

There had been immense technological development here in the early part of the twentieth century, as the Indian Railways transformed life in the Indian subcontinent. The machine goods industry of Howrah serviced the Indian Railways, bringing tea and jute, primary cash crops, to the port of Kolkata.

But the final partition of Bengal in 1947 led to a slump in development. The rich hinterlands, which had provided the industrial belt with raw materials and nourishment, remained in East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh, whilst the factories and technology were located in West Bengal. The three main resources of the state – tea, jute and the machine goods industry – collapsed because of technological decline. Next, the collapse of these industries led to massive unemployment. In this acute situation, politicians of the extreme left became active and joined up with international protest movements. Very aware of the need for change, I had felt compelled to make contact with these movements and to try to meet their leaders, which had resulted in my arrest a decade earlier and the year I spent in Kolkata's Presidency Jail.

Kolkata soon shrank from its international stature to a mere provincial city. In 1970, a Pan Am flight transporting GIs to Vietnam was besieged on the runway of Dum Dum airport by crowds demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Overnight, Pan Am, along with several major international airline companies, rerouted their flights through Bombay and Bangkok. Suddenly, money abandoned the megapolis. Strikes and lockouts continued to paralyse industry. This led to a flight of capital to labour-safe areas such as Delhi in the

north and Bangalore in the south. In the meanwhile, after the war of 1971 and the formation of Bangladesh, the number of people in the city increased to frightening proportions, as massive populations drifted towards Kolkata.

The Bauls and the Vaishnavas, the tantrics, worshippers of Shiva and Shakti, the village yogis, and the fakirs – indeed the entire itinerant world of popular folk tradition – joined this migration. Whereas the Bauls and the Vaishnavas are known for their mendicant and, to some degree, itinerant ways, the tantrics are viewed as being perhaps more esoteric; practising hatha yoga and often devotees of Kali, they carry out rites viewed by other sections of society as repulsive, such as meditating on dead bodies and using skulls for their rituals. The fakirs, on the other hand, are mystics of Sufi origins who sing marfati, Islamic devotional songs, which distinguish between the way of knowledge and the way of law.

These practitioners of folk music, arts and crafts were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Disillusioned with the anarchy and superficiality of life in the city, they retreated deep into the impoverished countryside, living on the edges of the villages and small towns. Somewhere in between these two closed worlds they lived, constantly on the move. The traditional support systems were disappearing. Religious barriers were hardening. The villagers who patronised the Bauls lived themselves in dire poverty and conflict.

The rich, rustic world that was the fount of their inspiration was drying up, as well. The Bauls were essentially rural bards; how were they to survive if that very world was in decay? Paban's attempt to move out of this deadlock was to create a modern band which played traditional Baul music. But not all Bauls managed to do so. Tinkori Chakraborty, who joined us on the train, described their situation well. Tinkori was a thin, wiry man, with fine features and straggling hair, a beard and an intense, ascetic face, topped with an elaborately embroidered fakiri cap. He had left his home and his Brahmin father to follow the Bauls as a young man. He was a brilliant percussionist who played the dubki, similar to a tambourine. When he sang he never knew when to stop, but he knew how to tell stories.

'A Baul singer was going on his round of madhukuri, collecting alms in the villages adjoining his ashram. The villagers who were themselves impoverished gave him no alms. At midday, hot, tired and dejected, our Baul took shelter under a tree. A bird sang on the tree and the Baul went into a state of pure ecstasy, listening to the song of the bird.

'Hare Krishna Radha! Hare Krishna Radha! Hare Krishna Radha!

' "In this world which has forgotten the divine magic of lovers, here is a bird who remembers the sacred names," thought the Baul to himself.

'A fakir was passing by. He saw the Baul sitting under the tree, illuminated and joyous.

' "O brother Baul," the fakir said to the Baul singer, "pray share with me the reason of your joy! In this dismal world of poverty, your face shines like a new coin."

'"O brother fakir," the Baul replied, "listen to this bird. In a world which has forgotten the holy names here is a bird who chants Hare Krishna Radha!"

'The fakir turned his ear to listen to the song of the bird. "O brother Baul," he said, "I do not hear the bird say the names you speak of!"

'"What do you hear?" the Baul retorted.

'"I hear the bird say: Allah Rasool Khuda! Allah Rasool Khuda!" insisted the fakir. "Holy messenger of God!"

'They began to argue vociferously. A vegetable vendor who was passing by saw the two wise men quarrelling.

' "O my fathers!" he declared. "Pray what is the reason of your dispute? If you holy men fight each other, what shall we ordinary mortals do?"

'The two men elaborated the reason for their dispute to the vegetable vendor.

'The vendor, in his turn, turned his ear to the song of the bird. "O my fathers!" he exclaimed. "I do not hear what you hear."

'"What do you hear?"asked the Baul and the fakir.

' "I hear the bird sing of what's in my basket: Piyaj roshoon aada! Piyaj roshoon aada." Onions, ginger and garlic! Onions, ginger and garlic!'

Laughing, we reached Bardhaman Junction, ninety kilometres north of Kolkata, and stopped for a few minutes before the train sped into the countryside. The hinterland looked tired and overused, like an old crone. Skeletal cows grazed in fields empty of vegetation. Hardly any forests anywhere and mile after mile of barren land. The ponds and water bodies next to the railway line glistened with the rainbow colours of grease and pollution.

Gazing at the scenery, I reflected for a moment on the significance of madhukuri, which Tinkori had mentioned in his story. The word refers to the rounds Bauls make in order to receive alms in return for their singing. It literally means 'honey gathering', and has a ritual and sacred significance. When the song of a Baul penetrates the ear, flowers bloom in an inner tree, the kalpabriksha, and honey rises along the stamen to the pistils of these blossoms. It is in exchange for this intangible gift that villagers give alms of rice and lentils, fresh fruit, vegetables and oil to the Bauls.

I woke out of my daydream as the train filled with an older, poorer population. Paban whispered in my ear that I should be careful now because there were, around us, the beggar, the inevitable pickpocket, the conman, the chhintai parties, the snatchers. Vendors ferried their wares up and down the aisles crying out in loud nasal voices, 'Chai! Chai!'

Duniya stood up on her seat and looked around her with great interest. We bought slices of cucumber, muri – puffed rice – tea, boiled eggs, a squeaky plastic doll, a nail cutter, some tiny red boxes of Chinese tiger balm and a cheap edition of Bengali folk tales. Paban listened, enchanted, as I read stories from *Khonar Bocchon* or *The Wise Words of Khona*, and *Malanchamala, the Garden Beauty*, two exemplary heroines. Khona is a vac siddha, one whose power over words is such that whatever she says comes true. Her father-in-law, who fears her powers, cuts her tongue off.

Malanchamala is a stable girl who looks after a winged mare, Harikali. She is forced to marry Chandramanik, an infant prince, only twelve days old. Together, this incongruous couple are banished to life in the forest, to make friends with Bagh, the tiger, and his wife, Baghini, and their little cubs. Under the watchful eye

of Malini, the garden keeper's wife, they live through many adventures. Chandramanik imagines that Malanchamala is his mother. Together, they live through countless episodes which will take them through two cycles of twelve years before he realises that she is his wife, and not his mother!

I had no idea that Paban and I would be living out a similar scenario, soon. Sages, after all, write prophetic tales so that we ordinary mortals can discover the meaning of our lives. Paban told me that the very same story existed as a piece of musical theatre written by the famous saint Shiraj Shah, the guru of the most renowned Baul poet Lallan Fakir, who had deeply influenced Rabindranath Tagore and was the subject of Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, 'After Lalon'. Called *Roop Bhan Jatra*, it was a different version in which Malanchamala was called Roop Bhan and Chandramanik Rahim.

Meanwhile, the landscape began to change outside our train window. Factories and townships gave way to fields in cultivation; shimmering ponds encircled with giant palmyras; small, snaking rivers, and clumps of trees which marked off village settlements. We were heading below the poverty line, the line that separates the world of the urban gentlemen, the babus, to which I belonged, from the world of the Bauls, the world of Paban.