



Parvathy Baul and her Kathak guru Smt. Srilekha Mukherjee. Photo: Shubhrojyoti Talapatro

Parvathy Baul

The Garland of the Guru

*aññānatimirāndhasya ññāññjanaśalākayā
cakṣurunmīlitaṃ yena tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ*
Salutation to the Guru

Salutations are due to that Guru who, with a needle coated with the ointment of knowledge, opened the eye of one who was blind from the darkness of ignorance.

Who is a guru? Guru is a Sanskrit term for a ‘mentor, guide, expert, or master’ in a certain field of knowledge. In pan-Indian traditions, a guru is more than a teacher. Traditionally, the guru is a reverential figure to the disciple (or *shisya* in Sanskrit), who is literally a seeker or student of knowledge or truth, with the guru serving as a counsellor, who helps mould values, shares experiential knowledge as much as literal knowledge, is an exemplar in life, an inspirational source and who helps in the spiritual evolution of a student.

Gurus are as numerous as lamps in every house, but, O Goddess, difficult to find is a guru who lights up everything like a sun. Gurus who are proficient in the Vedas, textbooks and so on are numerous, but, O Goddess, difficult to find is a guru who is proficient in the Supreme Truth. Gurus who rob their disciples of their wealth are numerous, but, O Goddess, difficult to find is a guru who removes the disciples’ suffering. Numerous here on earth are those who are intent on social class, life issues and family, but difficult to find is a guru who is devoid of all concerns. An intelligent man should choose a guru through whom Supreme Bliss is attained, and only such a guru and none other.

Kula-Arnava (an ancient Indian Tantric text)

Gurus who touched and turned my heart into gold

Maa

When I sit here in the coldness of Denmark, I travel deep inside my heart to remember my mother who gave birth to me with great effort, fed me, gave me unconditional love and all the wisdom that I could hold with my little hands.

I remember my first learning from her: she taught me to learn to love being alone. One evening I was reluctant to do my homework, my mother, who was never usually cross with her children, was very upset with me. There were four of us children, so perhaps she had had a very long day. She took me outside to a small shed, which had no lights. It was a popular place for us children and we

called it a ghost house. My mother locked me in this shed and said: “Stay alone!”. At first I struggled, tried to open the door, and felt afraid of the dark. Later I saw that there was an air hole in the wall, and I could see the beautiful moon through it. I started to feel that the moonlight was gradually entering the room, and I could sense everything in the room. The silence was beautiful. I sat on the floor and immersed myself in that silence. My mother was anxious, so she came and opened the door. I said: “Maa, why did you open the door?”. I remember this as my first experience of meditation.

Didi

She made me feel my feet.

I started to learn Kathak dance at an early age from Srilekha Mukherjee, a renowned classical dancer and teacher who lived in Kolkata. I stayed at her house whenever I had a vacation from school. She would make me practice my footwork for eight hours a day. We students had to concentrate on placing our feet correctly to the beat of sixteen. We continued while she cooked, took care of her dog, had her bath and received sacred offerings. She would greet the guests too, but if any of us made a wrong beat, she would be there immediately, catching the person who made the first mistake. Now when I think back, I feel so grateful to her, and I am in awe of her attention to minute details. In our ancient texts it is said that the true guru is the one who is constantly thinking about the good of the students. Today, whenever I dance, I offer my feet as flowers to her.

Phulmala Di

Who taught me to walk in the path of the Guru.

Many years later, when I went to study in Tagore’s university, I became familiar with the Baul tradition. I was deeply touched by the Baul songs and wanted to learn them. Phulmala Di was a strict Guru with many stipulations. One day, when I was assisting her cooking, my eyes fell on the bag she carried over her shoulder. The bag had a particular shape. I asked her, “Why does this bag have four corners?” While stirring her moong dal curry, she replied: “This bag is called Siddhi Jhola. The four corners symbolise the four stages of Sadhaka: Sthula-ordinary; Pravarthaka-the seeker; Sadhaka-the practitioner; and the highest stage Siddha-the master, perfected one.” I asked, “What stage am I?” She said, “You are a seeker”. “How can I become a perfected one?” She replied that the first step is to become a Sadhaka, and, in order to become a Sadhaka, I must find my Guru.

Her words led me to seek for my Master. All my journeys to find my Guru ended when I reached the final station of my life, at the lotus feet of my Guru, Shri Sanatan Das Baul. I have written about him on several occasions and also about Shri Sashanko Goshai.

Ravi G

My Guru of life lessons. The hidden mentor.

Ravi means Sun. He was indeed a sun for many. He was a mentor to many, and he called himself the ‘hidden mentor’. Under the guidance of Ravi G, twelve years

of non-stop practice led me to the presentation of solo Baul in a modern context. The work took shape without diluting a single bit of the tradition. It is not only Baul but comes from the most difficult ritual-theatre tradition of Kerala. Ravi G could manifest this in modern theatre spaces. He was a mask and puppet maker. He worked with his hands as a wood carver. I asked him why he chose wood as it would be easier to work with papier-mâché, clay, or other materials. There are risks in working with wood and it is impossible to change anything if you make a mistake. He replied that this was exactly why he chose wood as his medium. It was a great spiritual process for him to be able to see the face in the wood, and to carve away 'what was not needed'. He said that to arrive at the true Self it was essential to cast away all the inessential elements in us, be that in performance or in life.

At my first presentation and talk at the Transit festival at Odin Teatret, I was asked to talk about my 'family tree'. I said my tree is my family of Gurus. Sixteen years have passed since then and there are new branches in that tree as my family continues through my students.

*You handed over the saplings
I planted them
They all bloomed in spring!
With the flowers from my garden
I made a garland of Love for you
My beloved Master!*



Phulmala Di and Parvathy Baul in Bolpur Suripara in 2005. Photo: Ravi Gopalan Nair