Chapter 11

The Baul Tradition in Bangladesh:
Sustainability Activism for a Meatless Dietary Culture

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ABSTRACT

Humans’ foremost desire is to achieve longevity through a healthy body and mind. The Baul philosophers of Bangladesh fulfil this sustainability desire through meatless diets and esoteric physio-spiritual practices. Their mission in life is to pursue voluntary community activism and social sustainability marketing by promoting the sermon of simplicity and that eating meat destroys longevity, personal and environmental health. This chapter analyses the role the Bauls play in guiding the Bangladesh population and counteracting western influences. It uses quotes from the oral wisdom of the Baul songs and orations included by UNESCO as part of the global intangible heritage of humanity.

INTRODUCTION

At 3.3 kg per person per year (0.9 kg beef, 1.2 kg sheep and 1.3 kg poultry), Bangladesh has the second lowest per capita meat consumption in the world (OECD, 2017). With 1.1 percent of its adult population being obese, Bangladesh is also the second (after Ethiopia) least obese country on the globe (The GBD 2015 Obesity Collaborators, 2017). This is compared to 33 percent obese adult population in USA where the annual per capita meat consumption is 97.1 kg, 26.8 percent obesity and 94.8 annual per capita meat...
consumption in Australia, and 1.9 percent obesity and 3.1 kg annual per capita meat consumption in neighbouring India (OECD, 2017; The GBD 2015 Obesity Collaborators, 2017).

With the improvement in living standards, however, meat is increasingly seen as a desirable food choice in Bangladesh, particularly for the wealthier urban dwellers. Not surprisingly, there is also mounting evidence that in Bangladesh obesity “is alarmingly high and on rise amongst certain groups, particularly amongst urban children from affluent households” (Rahman et al., 2014, n.p.). The nutritional changes also explain, at least partially, the recent increases of overweight and obese adult population in Bangladesh associated with higher morbidity and mortality as well as risk of developing non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Biswass et al., 2017). Westernisation of both, Bangladeshi culture and diet (Hossain, 2016), plays a major role in fueling these new emerging trends.

Are there any forces which can counteract the course of events in Bangladesh and is this country going to succumb to the global influences of unhealthy diets? Is there any hope to preserve the good aspects of Bangladeshi culture while achieving improvements in the quality of life of its people?

Among other things, Bangladesh is renowned for the unorthodox devotional tradition of its Baul philosophers, recognised by UNESCO (2008) as part of the intangible global cultural heritage. Influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, Bengali, Vasinavism and Sufi Islam, the Bauls spread their wisdom through songs and public orations attended by numerous followers in rural and urban gatherings as well as through television and more recently, the social media. This chapter explores the role of the traditional community activism of the Bauls for maintaining the low-meat diet of the people in Bangladesh. Some background information about the Bauls is provided first and then their role in community marketing is explained.

INTRODUCING THE Baul TRADITION OF BANGLADESH

The Bauls (also known as Baul Fakirs) “belong to a devotional tradition influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, Bengali, Vasinavism and Sufi Islam, but yet distinctly different from them” (UNESCO, 2008, n.p.). There are both male and female Bauls and they do not identify with any specific religion, caste system, temples or sacred places (Tagore, 1970). By nature, the Bauls are singing mendicants, mystics, saintly and poetic thinkers. They are mostly unlettered, yet full of poetic, musical and philosophical talents. The Bauls are seen as being at the root of Bengali culture with influence over large sections of the Bangladesh population (UNESCO, 2008). As a tradition in the Bengali cultural context, the Bauls are unique in volunteering for socio-religious syncretisation in the culturally pluralistic country.

The significance of the Bauls and their role have been acknowledged by many, including Dimock (1966), Bhattacharya (1971), Haq (1975), Dasgupta (1976), Rajneesh (1977), Uddin (1978), Mitra (1979), Karim (1980), McDaniel (1989), to name a few. In 2003, UNESCO (2008) proclaimed the Bauls as representatives of the global intangible cultural heritage of humanity for their life philosophy and contribution to sustainability. The Bauls manifest their excellent aptitudes and charisma for guiding people towards individual, social, cultural, economic and ecological sustainability by using discourses, mostly in terms of spontaneous songs, which reveal traditional beliefs and practices, spiritual experience, cultural and geo-environmental conditions. They are truly soul-stirring and take the listeners closest to nature and the divine.

The Bauls prefer to live in poverty-like conditions. They deliberately possess nothing beyond the bare necessities because of socio-religious and spiritual mysticism grounds. Glimpses of Baul literature or Baul mysticism reveal a mystical undercurrent in Bengali religiosity (Hossain, 1995).