Sacred Arts: Poetess and Minstrel, Parvathy Baul Lives and Dances in her Belovedâ□□s Divine Heart
Category : January/February/March 2013
Published by senthil on Nov. 29, 2012

S A C R E D A R T S

Poetess and Minstrel, Parvathy Baul Lives and Dances in her Belovedâ□□s Divine Heart

Bengalâ□□s Mausumi Pairal heard Baul songs at age sixteen and was transformed. Initiated as Parvathy Baul, today she takes her Gurusâ□□ songs to the world.

Bengalâ□□s Vaishnava bards, the Bauls, form a distinct community, living a life of self-imposed poverty, dedicated exclusively to worship through the yoga of song. Once considered an auspicious spiritual asset in their rural farming society, they were supported by alms. But Indiaâ□□s green revolution has robbed small family farmers of their independent livelihood. Todayâ□□s Bauls have very few to beg from. So, like many of Indiaâ□□s artists, the Bauls must find new ways to survive. Here follow the stories of one Baul woman and her husband, a Kerala master puppeteer, whose lifeâ□□s work is to express and preserve the ancient Hindu traditions.

BY RASHMI SAHAI, HONG KONG

HER HONEY-SOAKED, VELVETY VOICE is soothing to the ears; while talking, she often bursts into innocent laughter. Looks are deceptive. This beautiful, petite, saffron-clad woman with ankle-length hair boldly abandoned established society to join Bengalâ□□s mystic wandering poets, the Bauls. A singer, painter and storyteller, born Mousumi Pairal and now known as Parvathy Baul, she broke the umbilical cord with West Bengal and traveled to far-flung Trivandrum in Kerala to fulfill her spiritual calling. She now travels around the world to spread her Baul gurusâ□□ message of divine love. Parvathy Baul is now well known for her masterful solo rendering in the oldest style of Baul song and dance, using three traditional

instruments, all played at the same time. I was fortunate enough to have her answer my questions, letting her tell her own story of life in the Baul world.

Immersed in bhakti: Parvathy Baul at the 2011 Nagur Sufi Festival in Jodhpur
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What attracted you to this path? I was first exposed to the Baul path as a 16-year-old art student in Viswa-Bharati in Shantiniketan. Phulmaladi, a Baul singer, would visit our campus and fill the atmosphere with her songs of prema [love] and bhakti. I was trained a bit from childhood in Hindustani music, but the voice of Phulmaladi was entirely different. There was a kind of unknown longing in her song and an indication of an inner path less traveled. This was my first attraction. I started visiting the Baul ashrams and learning from Phulmaladi. After a year, Phulamadi suggested that if I wanted to be a true Baul, I should get initiated. One day I witnessed a performance by 80-year-old Shri Sanatan Das Baul from Bankura village of West Bengal. I was so moved by the complete devotion and surrender of a sadhaka.

As a student of artistic expression, I had been searching for a true and unpretentious path. Baul gave me all of that, and it also gave me the inner world of freedom. This is what I was looking for.

Once you decided to follow the path, how did you proceed from there? I went to Sanatan Baba in his ashram in Khoirboni. It was a spring afternoon and he was standing on a small porch, tall and dark, with his hair tied in a top-knot. He was full

of compassion in the face of my curious questions. The first thing he asked me was if I had my lunch. I was then served delicious warm lunch by his daughters-in-law, Gita and Moni. He promised to talk to me later. The next fifteen days were spent on the same small porch. He didnâ□□t even ask my name. On the fifteenth day, on the way to the market, he started singing. I didnâ□□t know what to do, so I remained quiet. He looked at me and lovingly chided, â□□Stupid girl, why donâ□□t you also sing?â□□ Joyfully, I started singing. This was my first lesson.

Sanatan Das Baul became my diksha guru. He initiated me in the same way he was initiated by his own guru, Nitai Khepa. The term khepa refers to a mystic fully immersed in celebration of Divinity, completely abandoning the things of the world, to the point of seeming to be â□□mad,â□□ just like Siva. Siva is a khepa, having abandoned his golden abode in Kashi and becoming an ascetic, ever immersed in Divinity, sitting in the funeral grounds, detached.

My guru used to take me with him when he went from house to house begging for alms of rice and vegetables. He taught me what he had learned from his guru. He then suggested I go out and learn from other gurus to enhance my knowledge. You can have as many gurus as you like, but you can only belong to one gurukula.

A life devoted to â□□spoken truthâ□□: (left) Parvathy Baul with her ektara (one stringed instrument) and her duggi, hip drum; (above) Shri Sanatan Das Baul, Parvathyâ□□s diksha guru; (right) Parvathy with Sanatan Das Baul and his consort, Meera Dasi, in a photo taken shortly after Parvathyâ□□s vragya diksha (initiation)
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What role does the guru play in the life of a Baul disciple? The guru is the most important person in an aspiring Baulâ□□s life. It is the guru who initiates you to the path, which is otherwise not possible. It is the guru who infuses the grace and love in a disciple, transforming iron into gold. It is with the guruâ□□s grace that the

discipleâ□□s heart opens like a lotus flower, to experience pure bliss within. A lotus flower blooms normally in the morning, but it is the sunâ□□s rays that touch the core of the flower, nourishing and nurturing it. The guruâ□□s grace connects oneâ□□s soul to the Divine.

â□□Truely mad was Shiva; He left his golden place, came and sat down at the cremation ground. Always drunk in higher consciousness, intoxicated in divine love and madnessâ□¦â□□

It is through the blessing of the guru that some sadhakas are able to strongly adhere to the path, walking till the very end, while others leave the path in the middle. One needs a guru to get the strength needed to walk on this path.

Do the gurus also impart a formal singing training? No (laughing), no, there is no need of a formal training. This path is of complete love and surrender. Unless a complete surrender of the ego is made, one cannot be called a true Baul. Once you start singing, you abandon yourself in the complete bliss of the moment, you merge with the song, which is a vehicle to reach the Beloved. When you submit yourself to the Divine, where is the need of melody and rhythm?

A fakir used to sing at the door of Mirabai. He had no musical sense. People complained to Mirabai about him being off tune. They asked her, â□□Why wonâ□□t you make him stop?â□□ She smiled and answered, â□□Although he has no raag [tune], his song has no dearth of anurag [love, devotion]. That is why I love his singing and canâ□□t ask him to stop.â□□

What kind of training then does a guru impart to the disciple? My guru, Sanatan Das Baul, taught me Baul songs for seven years. I used to sing with him in all the festivals. He taught me right on the spot while the concert was going on. He used to sing a song to me and I had to repeat phrase by phrase. This is the oral tradition. He was also very particular about teaching me the footwork of Baul dance and to play the duggi, the hip-drum.

Later, when he thought I was ready, he told me to go out and practice. This journey

away from the guru is also essential for the spiritual progress of a Baul. During that time, one day, when I was singing in Murshidabad in North Bengal, a professor and connoisseur of Baul songs told me about another Baul guru, Shashanko Goshai (she chuckles).

What makes you chuckle when you think of Shashanko Goshai? I am reminded of how I forced Shashanko Gosai to take me as his disciple. He was 97 years old and very hesitant to take a female disciple. To dodge me, he kept changing his house, but finally I tracked him down. He was not happy to see me, but I was adamant. Against his wishes, I sang him a song taught to me by my diksha guru. After that he could not say no to me outright, because he knew Sanatan Baba and had sung with him. However, to break my spirit, he made things very difficult for me. He refused me any place to stay in his house, so I slept outside in his courtyard. It was winter and I didnâ□□t have a blanket. On the second day I bought myself a blanket, but in the middle of the night I heard him saying, â□□My God! It is so cold.â□□ So I went in and covered him with my blanket. He didnâ□□t complain. These hardships continued for a month or so. I became disheartened, and one day I decided to give up. That very day, he decided to take me under his tutelage. After this, there was no looking back.

No one has ever taught me with such love and dedication as he did. Some days he taught me as many as 40 songs. He helped me to realize the depth and vastness of this tradition and inspired me to take the path of aloneness shown by great masters, whether in the music form or in the inner search. His patience and faith in me helped me become what I am today.

Can you tell us about your musical instruments? Each sadhaka chooses the particular instruments they will use. I use ektara (or gopi yantra), the duggi (or bama), and the chilambu (or nupur). I started using duggi and ektara because both my gurus also used them; however, there was no formal training.

Out of all these, ektara has a special place in the Baul tradition. It can be traced back to the Sama Veda. Ektara, or gopi yantra, is a traditional one-string instrument, made of dried pumpkin, gourd, wood or coconut shell and plucked with one finger. The ektara is usually held in the right hand and placed very close to the ear, which gives a constant Aum sound to the singer. The sound of ektara is synonymous to the sound of Aum, the anhat naad or unstruck sound. Sanatan Baba used to tell me, â□□We are only the bearers of ektara. It is the ektara which decides

on travels, sings and meets people. We only are carrier of the ektaras. I found endlessness in its one string, enough for me to cross my life with this single string.â□□

Duggi, or bama, is a small bass drum made up of clay and leather, weighing around four and a half pounds, which I strap around my body during the performance. Both ektara and duggi are tailor-made in proportion to the length of the body and arms of the user. I also use the chilambu nupur, anklet bells.

Bauls and both your gurus are in Bengal. Why did you settle in Kerala? For a Baul, the Earth is the bed and the sky is the roof. Bauls feel at home everywhere; they seek a realm beyond boundaries. So Bauls are natural travelers, traveling in search of the masters to seek knowledge. I came to Kerala in 1997 as a young student. I wanted to know our traditions, which are purely derived from the temple culture. In Kerala, temples and other forms of art and music are very well preserved. Here I met Ravi Gopalan Nair, my husband, and together we built up a Baul akhra in Trivandrum and also a space to meet other artists and practitioners. I have been traveling between Bengal and Kerala since then, and also other places, to give performances, interact, learn, teach, share and meet masters of different genres.

Guruâ□□s blessings: Parvathy learned hundreds of songs from Shashanko Gosai, who kept teaching her until his last breath
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Can you tell us about Rabindranath Tagoreâ□□s association with the Baul

community? Traditionally, Baul singing happens in the satsangas in the Baul ashrams or at the yearly festivals held at Baul ashrams, known as mocchab. Bauls also gather for annual melas [fairs]. The most renowned fair is Jaidev Kenduli Mela, which has been held each year in Kenduli village for the last 500 years. This is the village where the saint-poet Jayadeva composed his renowned work, Gita Govindam .

Previously the Baul performances and festivities were only in villages. It was Tagore who introduced the Baul tradition to the urban intellectual society. He started the tradition of organizing the Poush Mela in Shantiniketan. From here the Baul tradition spread far and wide. Tagoreâ□□s own compositions were influenced and inspired by the most celebrated Baul composer, Lalan Fakir of Kushtia (Bangladesh), who lived around 250 years ago.

How would you explain Baul to a layman? Baul is an ancient yogic oral and musical tradition which influenced the Bhakti movement of Vaishnavas. Many believe the term Baul first appeared in Vrindavandasâ□□s 15th-century Chaitanya-Bhagvata. Etymologically, Baul is thought to be from the Sanskrit vatul, â□□divine madness,â□□ a state of lightness where ego is completely transformed in the experience of pure love and true surrender, bhakti. [The colloquial Bengali word batul also means â□□mad,â□□ a person who is open and free, not chained to the mundane.] Elements of Siddha, Tantra, Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Sufism can be recognized in the tradition.

A Baul sings, â□□Crazy! Crazy! Everyone says I am crazy! But often I wonder, is it the world or me?â□□ For the love of their Beloved, the Moner Manush â□□The Man of the Heart,â□□ Bauls surrender and abandon everything to unify with Him. Progress on this path is achieved through annihilation of all emotional, mental, physical and physiological bonds.â□□

Bauls used to be a common sight in West Bengal, especially in the Bolpur districts of Bhirbum of Bakura, Murshidabad and Nadia. They wandered around, never settling down, leading a nomadic life, singing about the love of their Beloved. Social, political and economic changes have prompted the Bauls to settle, and now many ashrams have been set up by the gurus. Many Bauls have comfortably adapted to urban living conditions; some are now even settled abroad. And while Baul performances used to be solo, today we do have some ensembles.

Can you say more about Baul songs and music? A Baul converses with his or her Beloved through songs and chanting, trying to connect with Him in the heart. Baulâ□□s unique songs are carried forward century after century through the master-disciple system. These metaphorical songs, based on mundane life experiences, are composed mostly in simple, colloquial Bengali. Their special language is called sandhya bhasha, â□□twilight language,â□□ and is loaded with cryptic mystical meaning.

The Baul Lineageâ□□s Mystic Message

Excerpts from Baul songs, translated by Parvathy Baul

The Ananda Bazaar

O the mad one, O my heart
Let us go to the bazaar of Ananda
If you want have the true Darshan.
It is always day there, always shining.

No nights, no darkness.
It is a sacred space full and complete.
The sacred moon rises there.
The space is surrounded with Vindu,
As if the moon has shadowed the moon.
Go to the four-petaled lotus,
Awaken kula kundalini.

Find the stillness inside;
Find the silence in the heart and mind.
At the sacred space between your eyes
The jewel is hidden in the form of Shiva.

â□□Haure Goshai

The Practice of Dying

O my heart, do the practice of dying
It brings freedom from the bondage of
Birth and death; born to die,
Dying to be born again; death, birth,
Nothing but endless suffering.

Ida and pingala two Nadi,
Always chanting â□□Hamsaâ□□
Thru the days and nights.
In the middle, the supreme sushumna,
Piercing all the chakras,
Swings in the two-petaled lotus
In the bhava of â□□I am That.â□□

â□□Rasika Dasa

The Diamond Truth Tale

O my mad heart,
Where do you seek the divine treasure?
Leave all that insanity; be in silence.
If you want to attain the unattainable One,
Free yourself from all that is
Fragile and temporary.

Know yourself. Six thieves live in your house.
Go not to them. Go to the sweet
invisible one that always flows in love.

Who is it awake in you?
And who is it asleep?
Who is it that dreams
While you are asleep in the night?
The One in the middle,
Hold on to His feet.

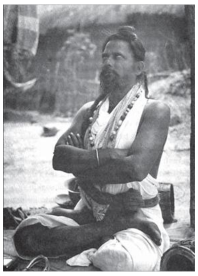
The main door of your house
Is beneath, in the patala.
It is locked. Open that door
By going beyond the conscious self,
The dark sky. And the door will open,
By the grace of guru. Be patient.
You will enter the door
And journey upward.

The truth remains.
It is neither born nor decays.
It can be realized in this body
Only through surrender to the guru.
Rasikadasa says, my mad heart,
Drink only the truth.
By knowing that worldliness is illusory,
Keep faith, my heart,
And the divine treasure will be yours.

â□□Rasika Dasa

The songs are known as shabd jnana [â□□sound knowledge,â□□] or sahaja jnana [as the Baul sadhana is also known as sahaja yoga.] They are deemed Spoken Truth or the Living Wisdom, for they erupt from deep inside the soul of the yogic body, from the understanding and realization of the sadhakaâ□□s heart. The first preserved Baul song was Charya Geeti, composed by 7th-century Bouddha Abadhoti siddha yogis, the wandering Buddhist monks, in the spoken Bengali of that time, similar to Pali.

Baul singing is meditation in motion, as we sing, dance and play the instruments at the same time. When the heart and soul are soaked in the devotion of the song and the body is in continuous motion, the core enters a meditative state, still and silent. A Baul singer transcends mere aesthetic performance, breaking the barrier of the mundane to soar into a plane of sheer inner experience of spiritual seeking. Baul music takes its source and inspiration from the folk music of Bengal. Like Sufi kalam , these songs are speech oriented. We never say âsing a song,â we say âspeak a song,â as these songs are for remembering the spoken truth of realized souls and of pure Love.



More than a music man: This photo of Nabani Das Khepa Baul was taken in 1954 in West Bengal. He was not only a singer but a yoga adept, avadhuta and master of tantra. He was one of the bauls who most inspired Rabindranath Targore. Nabani named Tagore Ravi Das. Subsequently Tagore introduced Bauls to urban society and then the world.

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What keeps you strong on this path, when all around you people leave this path mid-way to tend to the practicalities of life? I am not sure who is more practical: someone who is attached to the Divineâwhen one unchangeable truth is that life is transient and only God is permanentâor someone who is cut off from Divinity and attached to the practical world, which is temporary. As the Baul song goes, âSome are mad for worldly attachment called love; some are mad for glory and pride; some are mad for material benefit; some mad for fame and power. They do not know what they are looking for. Always deluded by their own mad desires, they do not know the difference between the true and false.ââ

Search YouTube for â□□Parvathy Baulâ□□ to listen to her music. Portions of this article are drawn from an interview conducted by Martin Harris. See sufijournal.org/an-exclusive-interview-with-parvathy-baul/.

A Kerala Art Masterâ□□s Life and Vision of the Roots and Evolution of Hindu Art

BY G.K. NAIR, KERALA

RAVI GOPALAN NAIR WAS BORN IN APRIL, 1959, in Nedumangad, a small town in Thiruvananthapuram, Keralaâ□□s southern district. He is a master puppet maker, puppeteer, wooden mask maker, performer, trainer, photographer and artistic director for many of the performing art groups of Kerala and the Bauls of West Bengal.

Raviâ□□s career began in his fatherâ□□s professional photography studio. He worked there until 1981, then joined his elder brother, G. Venu, in Irinjalakukuda, Trissur. Venu was working to revive Keralaâ□□s lesser-known artistic traditions. Ravi focused on breathing new life into Pava Kathakali, the glove puppet tradition of Kerala. He received training from the old masters of both puppet making and manipulation.

On the same campus was the Ammannur Gurukulam, run by the late maestro Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, who was working to save the ancient forms of Sanskrit drama, such as Koodiyattam, from extinction. Ravi recalls, â□□During this ten-year period with my brother, I was blessed to interact with masters of almost all the traditional dance, theater, puppetry and other artistry practices.â□□

During this time, the outside world started to call him. â□□From 1984 on, there were occasions for me to serve as the artistic director for groups performing traditional Kerala arts at international festivals. Many of our village artists traveled outside India for the first time with me. I was careful in preparing them so that they would never feel inferior. I made sure our art was presented with the dignity of its lineage.â□□

In 1992, Ravi left Natana Kairali and joined Parate Labor, a work project to redo the Para Theatre of Jerzy Grotowsky in France. From 1992 to 1995 he was trained there in the techniques of modern European theater, practicing over 16 hours a day. In 2000 he worked with the founder of the Bread and Puppet theater in Vermont, USA. Through the coming decade, Ravi was constantly on the move, presenting Keralaâ□□s dance and art through Europe and America. He was an artistic director in many important performances, including traditional Kerala temple dances never before performed outside India: the Thirayattom dance, presented in London, Switzerland, Amsterdam, Belgium and France by the MusÃ©e dâ□□Ethnography of Geneva, Switzerland; and the Theyyam dance form presented by the Maison des Cultures du Monde at the Festival de la Imaginaire in Paris. He also collaborated with the MusÃ©e Dâ□□ Ethnography of Geneva in the production of Sketches of Kerala, a series of three documentary films: The Gods Never Die, The Time of the Puppets and The Three Wise Monkeys.

In 2011 Ravi was honored by the Madras Craft Foundation and Friends of Dakshinchitra with its coveted Virudhu, lifetime achievement award, for his work in preserving Indiaâ□□s cultural arts.

Taking Baul Singers to the World

So how did a Kerala artist get involved with the Bengali Baul tradition? One answer comes from art critic/journalist Renu Ramnath, who told HINDUISM TODAY, â□□In 1997, during one of her vagabond trips, Moushumi Parial (who later became Parvathy Baul) reached Irinjalakuda and met the multi-faceted Malayali artiste Ravi Gopalan Nair, a photographer-turned puppeteer and mask maker. More importantly for Parvathy and other Baul singers, he was also a performer-trainer. It didnâ□□t take long before Moushumi married Ravi.â□□ Meanwhile she received her initiation in Bengal and became Parvathy Baul. By then Ravi had moved into the international world of performance theater. Ravi and Parvathy collaborated, incorporating the Baul tradition in their puppet shows. The couple first appeared on stage together at the Brooklyn International Toy Theater Festival about four years ago, Ravi moving the puppets with musical support from Parvathy. Since 2010 he has been presenting a group of Baul singers led by Parvathy in many of the international and national music festivals in Italy, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland and the US. Thus, Ravi and his troupe, along with Parvathy and other Bauls, have been staging performances in India and abroad every year.

A life dedicated to sacred art and spiritual goals: Ravi with his guru, Karipoor Muhamad Abdul Salam; carving the wooden heads of Kerala hand puppets.
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For Ravi and Parvathy, their partnership means more than marriage; it is a life dedicated to the traditional performing arts and the message carried therein. Ravi expounds, âThere is a man in every woman, a woman in every man, according to the Baul philosophy. Finding the masculine in the woman and the feminine in the man is part of the practice.â

Spiritual Heritage

Ravi shared his view of a life in which art, spirituality and the guru parampara traditions are not separate realms. Ravi is from a family of Saivite Siddha practitioners. He recalls, âMany of my relatives, both from the paternal and maternal side, chose to live as avadhutas [penniless monks who live beyond name and norms]. My father, a photographer by profession, was initiated by the great Variketti Swami of Manacad, Trivandrum, who always carried a bundle of clothes which he collected from various families. His studio was a meeting place for many avadhutas in those days.â Ravi explained that Nedumangad is in the valley of Agasthyakoodam, believed to be the abode of Maharishi Agasthya. For centuries this small town has been a home for Saiva siddha yogis and avadhutas.

âUntil 1940, many lesser-known traditions of performing art were actively practiced in Kerala. Now people are going toward academic development. Everything is getting mixed up without proper practical, hands-on training. We are different. We refused to go for academic study but stayed with the authentic tradition of personal training from our many gurus. We will not give up our path of

the guruâ□□s kripa (grace).

â□□I met my guru in my fatherâ□□s studio at the age of 17 while I was assisting my father with black-and-white photography. His name was Karipoor Muhamad Abdul Salam, an avadhuta known as the mad man in the street who got beaten by police and others almost every day. He was a siddha. It was a teaching without teaching. He opened an inner eye to see the world. In fact, my guru took care of all my work, including the arrival of Parvathy Baul to Kerala so she could train with my guidance. I took care of his few material needs until 2007, when he left his body.

â□□My deepest love is for the avadhuta gurus, who have such a beautiful practice for handling the body and the world around it. I am touched by the intensity of their silence, love and non-possession. My guru weighed less than 62 pounds. He never performed any miracles, but they would sometimes manifest spontaneously. During the last year of his life, he remained stationary, never walking, as if waiting for something. He even let small ants cover his body. We cleaned him every day, but soon the ants would cover him again. We could see that his intention was to be as if in a coffin, getting ready to leave his body.â□□

Modern Changes

â□□Sadly, the infrastructure of our artistic and spiritual culture in Kerala is decaying. The famous Kodungallur Kovilakam Gurukula, which taught everything from Sanskrit, drama and ayurveda to elephant handling, is no more. The building has been taken over by the electric board, and I was told that even the precious palm-leaf manuscripts of this family were neglectedâ□□some eaten by white ants, and the rest given to people outside India.

A complete set of finished puppets ready to for the show.

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âThere was a time when every Namboothiri Illam and Mana landlord had a theater. A few months back we traveled with our puppets to these old estates. Unfortunately, since their rice cultivating land has been taken away by the government, most of the structures are dismantled or broken because they have no money for maintenance. We did our performance tour to those Mana as thanks for preserving those traditions until the first half of the last century.

âSimilarly, in Bengal, the farmers used to be the patrons of Baul. Modern economic development programs have brought down the farmers, who have lost their dignity and place in society. Today every traditional art practitioner has to invent a new strategy to carry on the gurusâ path.

âI give you one story of Parvathy Baul. She went to meet Shri Shashanko Gosai, one of the oldest known Vaishnava gurus of Baul. Once he took her as a disciple, he started teaching her, at a high speed, all the songs from his memory. Even when they were on the roof of a farmerâs house for fifteen days during a Ganga river flood, he continued teaching, saying, âIf we die in this flood, in our next birth we donât need to learn these songs.â

âHe continued teaching her until his last moment of samadhi, at the age of 100. Three days before he passed, he called her to come to his home and went carefully over all the songs he had taught her. Then he declared: âIt is time for me to

go.â□□ He sat in siddhasana with a smile and left his body. That moment was witnessed by only two peopleâ□□Banamala Dasi [his consort] and Parvathy Baul. He revealed everything to her before he left his body. The karuna [compassion] of the guru never fails and never stops its flow.â□□