



Singing to the Trees: *Bāul(s)* Recasting *Barṣā Maṅgal* amid Climatic Dissonance

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Abstract

Barṣā Maṅgal, the traditional festival celebrating the monsoon, has long been entrenched in the cultural and agrarian life of Bengal, representing the deep interdependence between seasonal cycles and human existence. This paper explores the multifaceted significance of the monsoon, encompassing its historical, religious, literary, socio-cultural, and ecological dimensions, within South Asian thought and practices. Central to this inquiry is the *Bāul* tradition, a mystic-heretic folk tradition from Bengal, whose philosophy venerates *prakṛti* (nature/ female self) as sacred and inseparable from the ‘self’. For the *Bāul(s)*, the monsoon is not merely a meteorological event but a metaphysical metaphor that animates their *deha-tattva* (body philosophy) and spiritual world view. Against the backdrop of contemporary ‘ecoprecarity’ and escalating climatic dissonance, they are recasting *BarṣāMaṅgal* as a site of vernacular environmentalism and resistance, transforming it into a platform for ecological engagement through innovative ritualistic interventions, i.e., singing to trees, leading plantation drives, and organizing day-long events that promote coexistence and harmony with all living and non-living beings. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates textual analysis, ethnographic observation, and ecocritical discourses, this study critically examines how the *Bāul*’ scosmo-poetic engagements with rain and rhythm foster a grassroots environmental imaginary, where the festival becomes both an archive of indigenous eco-wisdom and a performative protest against planetary collapse.

Keywords: *Bāul*, *Barṣā Maṅgal*, Monsoon, Ecoprecarity, Vernacular Environmentalism



Introduction

BarṣāMaṅgal, the festival marking the arrival of the monsoon, is one of the oldest seasonal observances rooted in the cultural and religious life of Bengal. Anchored in the agrarian substratum of South Asia, a seam of intimacy exists between seasonal cycles and human experienceempowering this tradition. Throughout the centuries, the monsoon has been celebrated as a bringer of fertility and renewalbut also feared for its ability to disrupt and destroy. This primal ambivalence — nourishing and tearing, grace and grief — deeply informs South Asia’s aesthetic, literary, and religious traditions. From manifold religious philosophies and literary traditions, from the cryptic stanzas of the *Caryāpada* to the classical poetics of Kālidāsa’s *Ṛtusamhāra* or Hindustani classical music, the monsoon has consistently represented more than a climatic reality, a metaphor, mood, and metaphysical register. Within these dense symbolic connotations, the *Bāul*(s) offers a unique intervention into the contemporary celebration of *BārṣāMaṅgal*. For them, nature is not merely an external reality but a vital source of knowledge. They cultivate an eco-spiritual outlook that perceives *prakṛti* (nature, alternatively the femaleself for her reproductive capacity) not as a passive backdrop to human existence but as a living, sentient presence, an active, nurturing force within which the seeker drives toward *monermānuṣ*, or the Divine. In their cosmology, monsoon is not just a seasonal event but a sonic and spiritual moment, indicating the time of dissolution and grace of ecstatic union. In this regard, the *BarṣāMaṅgal* festival is not just a ritual of thanksgiving for agricultural wealth; it is a site of ontological encounter where the body, soil, and spirit intertwine.

Amid escalating ecological crises, climate collapse, deforestation, and, most crucially, the anthropocentric valuation of nature, the *Bāul*(s) have begun to reimagine *BārṣāMaṅgal* as a site of ecological engagement, reinterpretation, and resistance. The tree-planting rituals, the rain-invoking congregations, and the rite of ‘singing to the trees’ are indicative of Indigenous environmentalism that does not emerge from an institutional addressbut rather fromlived experience and intimacy with the soil. These performative interventions are not nostalgic returns to a lost past; they are insurgent gestures that reimagine folk spirituality as a grammar of ecological care. This article aims to critically explore how *Bāul* philosophy, ritual, and music



as practices recast *BarṣāMaṅgalas* an active site of ecological consciousness. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary methodology of textual analysis, ethnographic observation, and ecocritical discourse, it reframes the *Bāul* praxis within larger debates on indigenous knowledge systems, vernacular resistance, and folk eco-ethics.

Monsoon Motifs in South Asia

South Asian epistemologies have long embedded the monsoon within religious, literary, and musical traditions as a potent symbolic force that shapes theological vision, poetic sensibility, and ritual practices. Across Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic doctrines, the arrival of the rain has been interpreted as a cosmic moment of renewal—a descent of grace that irrigates not only the soil but also the soul. The monsoon is thus embedded within a cultural sensorium that conjoins ecology with metaphysics and weather with worship. In early Vedic literature, for instance, the rains are invoked in hymns to Indra as the bringer of rains and life. In *R̥gveda* 1.32, Indra slays *Vṛtra*, releasing the pent-up waters to fertilize the Earth (Jamison & Brereton, 2014). In *Vaiṣṇava* literature, the rainy season is the temporal backdrop for Kṛṣṇa's divine play with the *gopīs*, symbolizing both longing and ecstatic union (Bryant, 2007). Buddhism ritualizes the monsoon through *VarṣāVāsa*, a seasonal rain retreat observed by monks, which aligns natural cycles with meditative withdrawal and ethical discipline (Harvey, 2013). In Sufi metaphysics, rain becomes *raḥmat*, divine mercy, reviving the desiccated soul with love. Annemarie Schimmel (1998) notes that classical Sufi poets and theologians portray rain as an expression of God's compassion, paralleling Qur'anic verses that declare, "We send down rain as mercy" (Qur'an 42:28).

The motif of the monsoon also finds sustained expression in South Asian literary traditions. Kālidāsa's *R̥tusamhāra*, a classical Sanskrit lyric composed around the 5th century CE, devotes an entire canto to the *varṣā* (rainy season), weaving vivid images of swollen rivers, cloud-choked skies, dancing peacocks, and impassioned lovers. Here, the monsoon is not merely a seasonal backdrop but an agent of emotional upheaval and erotic intensification. The rains both reflect and catalyse inner states, embodying a poetics of transformation that bridges sensual experience and philosophical insight:



“May this period of the rain-giving clouds. Charming with its many attractions. The dream of delight of romantic maids. Unselfish friend of trees and vines. And the breath of life of animate being, Grant you your heart’s inmost desires! (Kālidāsa, 1947, trans. R.S. Pandit, p. 41)

An early precursor to this symbolic ecology can be found in the *Caryāpada* (9th–12th century CE, the earliest vindication of Bengali literature), a corpus of esoteric vernacular verses attributed to Buddhist tantric practitioners, often retrospectively affiliated with proto-*Bāuls*. These poems are rich in elemental metaphors—storms, clouds, rivers, and thunder evoke the seeker’s inner turbulence and yearning for liberation. In this mystical register, the monsoon functions both literally and allegorically, signalling the disruption of illusion and the possibility of transcendence in verse 30 attributed to Bhusukupada:

“Clouds of compassion dispel; The mist of being or non-being. Bhusuku, look at the wonder rising in the sky — Shahaja in the true self.”

(Open Knowledge Foundation Network, 2013)

In medieval Bengali literature, particularly the *ManasāMaṅgal*, the riverine monsoon is ritually staged through the goddess’s descent on *Śrāvāṇa Saṅkrānti*, underscoring her merciful intervention through water (Chakravarty, 2012). Similarly, broader studies of *Maṅgal-kāvya* suggest that narrative progression often hinges on the arrival of the *varṣā*, casting seasonal inundation as both a plot catalyst and metaphor for collective well-being. South Asian musical traditions further echo this profound entanglement between rain and emotion. In the Hindustani classical music tradition, the *Malhār* family of *rāgas* — *Miyān ki Malhār*, *Megh Malhār*, and *Gaud Malhār*, etc., are acoustically calibrated to the monsoon. These pieces aim to reproduce the sounds, textures, and sensations of the rainy season; their tunes imitate the patter of rain, the rumble of thunder, and the shiver of desire (Jairajbhoy, 1971). It is commonly held that these *rāgas*, when properly played, can bring rain, as a testament to a cultural faith in the elemental properties of music as an intermediary between the cosmos and consciousness. These reflections in religion, literature, and music validate the monsoon as the Cosmo-poetic metaphor in the South Asian world. Here, the rain serves as an intermediary between the human



and the divine, the intimate and the infinite. Within this wider cultural grammar, the *Bāul(s)* of Bengal narrate their entangling ecology of monsoon that interweaves physical desire, metaphysical exploration, and environmental sensitivity. Their songs do not merely describe the monsoon; they inhabit it, performing rain as revelation, rhythm, and resilience.

Tagore's Revival of *BarṣāMaṅgal*

In 1928, Rabindranath Tagore, the polymathic Nobel laureate, revitalized the *BarṣāMaṅgal* festival at Śāntiniketan, transforming it into a profound cultural and ecological statement, not only as a nostalgic homage to Bengal's agrarian past but also a consciously aesthetic and political intention to reconnect the modern urban Bengali society with its ecologies and spiritualities. Reconfiguring *BarṣāMaṅgal* in poetry, music, dance, drama, and performance, Tagore offered an alternative to the static image of the monsoon as a dynamic force of rejuvenation, self-reflection, artistic exploration, creativity, and cosmology. Drawing from diverse influences, including *Bāul* mysticism and Indigenous ecological discourse, here fashioned a multivalent festival that was more than a mere celebration but a political act of positioning eco-ethics at the core of Bengali socio-cultural identity (Som, 2018). He also wrote a series of poems and songs called *BarṣāMaṅgalas* a spiritual and emotional response to the rainy season. He depicts the monsoon as an agent of inner awakening, aesthetic vitality, and living expressions. For example, one of his songs, "Ābār Āshāṛḥ" in *Kshanika* (1900), embodies this temperament:

“Once again, monsoon comes, cloaking the sky,
The scent of rain drifts on the breeze's sigh.
This ancient heart of mine today
Sways with rapture stirred to play,
Gazing at the deep new clouds drawing nigh.”
(Tagore, 1900; self-translated)

Tagore's imagination of *BarṣāMaṅgal* thus served as a cultural re-enchantment of the monsoon as an affective aesthetics where rain becomes a medium of expression, identity, and sensibility. Inspired by the *Bāul(s)*' characterization of *prakṛti* as a divine consort and rain as a



purgative force, he envisioned the monsoon at a prospective edge, a strategic estuary in which affective, artistic, and ecological currents came together. This sense was consistent with his broader teaching and philosophical vision at Viśva-Bhāratī, where seasonal festivals were integrated into the fabric of daily life to cultivate ecological consciousness and spiritual sensitivity.

Nature in Bāul Discourse: Rain and Monsoon

In the *Bāul* knowledge system, nature (*prakṛti*) is not an external entity to be revered or controlled—it is a living, experiential co-extensive with the body and consciousness. The rhythms of the natural world are not merely reflected in *Bāul* song; they are internalized as forms of discourse, desire, and disclosure. Among all seasonal phenomena, the monsoon, its rains, rivers, clouds, and tides, occupy a prominent place in the *Bāul* thoughts. It serves not only as a climactic cycle but as a metaphysical threshold, where the divine becomes perceptible, and the seeker becomes porous. Rivers, rains, and other fluid elements in nature are understood not as metaphors but as mediums through which the sacred pulses. The river, in particular, recurs as a potent symbol—simultaneously geographical, corporeal, and cosmological. It courses through *Bāul* lyrics as an image of life’s impermanence, the seeker’s spiritual passage, and the erotic energy of *prakṛti*. The body, often likened to a *nāo* (boat), must navigate this river not to transcend it but to become attuned to its shifting flows. In one evocative verse, Lālan Fakir, one of the most prolific and revered *Bāulguru*, sings:

“I am afraid of the divine sport:
the boat carrying the river, marching on the land.”
(Bhattacharya, 1999, pp. 133, 153)

This inversion defies both natural and theological lucidity, articulating the *Bāul* embrace of paradox, inversion, and ecstatic fluidity. Here, the river is internalized; *bahihprakṛti* (outer nature) mirrors *antahprakṛti* (inner nature), collapsing the boundary between cosmos and consciousness.



Monsoon rain, in this framework, is not a seasonal backdrop—it is an ontological event. It is received as *kṛpā* (grace) and felt as *bhed* (separation), intensifying the seeker’s longing for the *monermānuṣ*—the elusive ‘man of the heart’. The popular motif of the *chataka* bird—said to survive only on raindrops—embodies this deep, aching desire. One of Lālan Fakir’s popular lyrics puts it poignantly, “*cātak-o prāyaharniśiceyeāchikālo śaśī*” “Like the *chataka* bird, I gaze endlessly for the blackmoon in hope.” (Salomon, 2017, pp. 462-63). In another of his verses, “*Rākhlesāīkūp-jalkare*,” the rains are awaited with near-desperation:

“O Master! You’ve kept me like well-water in a desolate pond.

When will the rainy season come? I am waiting for it.

If your grace does not descend this time, how will I endure again?”

(*ibid.*, p. 206)

The *Bāul*’s own body is cast as the arid landscape, yearning for the monsoon not merely as agricultural rejuvenation but as spiritual saturation. Rain is not simply metaphorical, it is phenomenological; it is a seasonal sensorium that activates receptivity, devotion, and dissolution. In the *Bāul* world, the monsoon is both an ecological event and a sacred descent—a divine timing that aligns the cosmos, the body, and the ‘self’. This sacred ecology finds its most intimate expression in the *Bāul* reverence for the *sādhansānginī*—the female partner in *sādhanā*, embodying *prakṛti* as fertile and divine; her menstrual flow is not considered impure; rather, it is a cyclical surge of sacred energy (Openshaw, 2004). This inner tide is aligned with monsoonal rhythms, lunar cycles, and the rivers of the Bengal region. The doctrine of *Trivenī*—the convergence of the three vital subtle-body currents (*idā, piṅgalā, suṣumnā*)—is seen as the internal counterpart of nature’s great confluences, as Bhattacharya (1957) notes, the appearance of the *Matsya* (fish, a metaphor of the God) in the sacred waters of the body signals a moment of spiritual convergence and receptivity (p. 373). It is not merely poetic—it is ontological; the fish swims not in the Ganges but in the flow of inner *prakṛti*, just as grace descends not only from clouds but from the body in rhythm with the cosmos. From the descent of rain to the surge of menstrual flow, from rivers swelling with monsoon tides to the trembling heart of the seeker, *Bāul* cosmology is shaped by an embodied eco-centric epistemology. Nature is not abstracted—



it is sung, touched, danced, and bled. The *Bāuls* often affirm: *je dehenāi, se brahmāṇḍenāi*—“What is not in the body is not in the cosmos.” (ibid., p. 371). This axiom captures their non-dualist ontology, in which body and world mirror each other in cycles of transformation. In *Bāul* thought, then, nature is not simply revered; it is performed. Rain is not only praised; it is awaited by the body, absorbed into the flesh, and channelled into spiritual realization. The monsoon is not just weather; it is the rhythm of divine presence. Through their songs, rituals, and philosophies, the *Bāuls* cultivate a sacramental ecology where seasonality, sensuality, and spirituality merge into a singular, embodied practice of devotion.

Contemporary *Bāul* Interventions into *BārṣāMaṅgal*

Amid intensifying climatic dissonance of unpredictable monsoons, accelerated deforestation, widespread biodiversity collapse, and environmental degradation, the *Bāul(s)* of Bengal are reviving *BārṣāMaṅgal* not as a passive monsoon celebration but as a living site of vernacular environmentalism and resistance. Hardly a vestige of folklore, the festival is being resurrected as a site of ecological charge wherein the rhythms of rain, the ethics of care, and the aesthetics of devotion coalesce into a performative grammar of resilience. In this expanding vision, *BārṣāMaṅgal* is no longer a seasonal rite but rather an essential environmental ritual, which is poetic, political, and spiritual at once. The ritual ecology underlying this revival is not symbolic or ornamental; it is conjured through a sequence of embodied practices, such as singing to trees, planting saplings, and holding monsoon assemblies, which perform an affective, spiritual, and ecological response to a planetary emergency. These interventions were documented during recent fieldwork at Shyam Shakha Ashram, Birbhum (Hoque, 2023), where *Bāuls* and spiritual practitioners gather during the monsoon to celebrate a radically reimagined *BārṣāMaṅgal*. Amidst sylvan surroundings, participants plant saplings, perform rain-invoking *bāulgān*, and engage in ecological discourse centred not only on the *monermānuṣ* but on the fragile biosphere. The event becomes a material enactment of spiritual ecology, where metaphor gives way to method, where rain, song, and soil are woven together as a living archive of care. Yet, such practices are not confined to a single location. These innovations are now taking root across *Bāul* communities in West Bengal and Bangladesh, forming a growing network of



grassroots climate consciousness. In rural districts from Birbhum to Kushtia, *Bāuls* are leading tree-planting drives, organizing day-long ecological festivals, and developing seasonal pedagogies that promote coexistence and sacred sustainability.

The act of ‘singing to the trees’ is one of the more essential interventions — a sonic act that reawakens a sacred relationality between the human and the vegetal worlds. *Bāulsingers* sit under aged canopies or newly planted saplings to sing *bāulgān* as an invocation to and in thanksgiving of the Earth, for the song is an ecological prayer, addressing trees not as objects but as sentient kin. Singing becomes a sonic ecology, a vibrational offering that helps recalibrate human bodies with the Earth’s rhythms in the sacred descent of the monsoon. Occasions also coincide with *sādhu-saṅga* (devotional assemblies), held in monsoon-soaked jungles or out in the open *āśrams*(hermitages), where the devotional, the ecological, and the pedagogical begin to blur into one another. Spiritual seekers, rural farmers, and cultural observers engage in festivity rooted in *Bāul* metaphysics, which negotiates recent ecological trauma. These places are both liminal zones and climate assemblies — environments in which sacredness is not abstracted from sustainability but literally and performatively enmeshed. These reconfigurations do not come without public consequences. In 2019, Joydev Kendulī Melā, Sādhan Dās Bairagya, and his troupe campaigned publicly for an acoustically sensitive atmosphere, with a call to limit loudspeakers to minimize acoustic pollution. Their intervention reimaged silence itself as an organic ethos, one that insisted that spiritual and ecological alignment necessarily converge in clear and vibrational restraint (Zeenews India, 2019). At this moment, then, the *Bāul* figure is no longer simply a mystic or performer but an environmental activist, articulating a form of climate consciousness rooted in attentiveness, reverence, and relational being. Additionally, more broadly, *Bāuls* are becoming increasingly involved in contemporary environmental movements. Throughout the Bengal Delta, they are involved in sustainability projects, collaborating with the Government, or NGOs and participating in climate outreach efforts. Festivals like Kendulī Melā and Lalon Shah’s Urs in Kushtia have become hybrid spaces where devotional expression and environmental activism overlap. These are no longer religious gatherings anymore; they have evolved into



ritual-activist platforms, where folklore serves as a carrier for effective pedagogy and vernacular climate critique.

In these reconfigurations, *BarṣāMaṅgal* becomes a performative palimpsest, sedimented with the residues of agrarian histories, the urgencies of climate grief, and the potentialities of curated protest. This is not tradition preserved; rather, it is endowed with a contemporary urgency and recast through ecological intimacy. The *Bāul*(s) aren't returning to nature; they're singing it forwardproposing a model of planetary care that's devotional, Indigenous, and deeply alive.

Discussion and Conclusion

The *Bāul*(s) reimagining of *BarṣāMaṅgal*, ritually performed through songs, *sādhanā*, and arboreal intimacy, becomes a locally situated form of folk-responsive toward contemporary 'ecoprecarity'—the intensified insecurity of human and non-human life in the era of ecological collapse, late capitalism, and technocratic modernity (Nayar, 2019). At a time when global environmental discourse is dominated by abstract datasets, extinction metrics, and climate modelling, *Bāul* praxis offers a radically different modality—an embodied, affective, and spiritual perceptive; it is a way of being that values interdependence, tolerance, harmony, and sacred relationality over policy prescriptions or developmental paradigms.

Once rooted in the seasonal rhythms of Bengal's agrarian calendar, *BarṣāMaṅgal* has been transformed by *Bāul* communities into a ritual of planetary resistance. Through intimate and innovative ecological interventions—singing to trees, planting saplings, and invoking *prakṛti* as a sentient, sacred force—*Bāuls* articulate an environmentalism that is not framed by the metrics of emission but by the metaphysics of the *monermānuṣ*, whose presence is sensed in the monsoon's touch, the river's flow, and the body's elemental rhythms. This is not a regression into romanticized nature worship; rather, it is a form of vernacular resistance, where Indigenous metaphors, such as the *chataka* bird's longing for rain or the menstruating *prakṛti* awaiting divine union, serve as symbolic technologies to reframe ecological crisis in culturally resonant terms. Such frameworks echo what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) has called the



‘planetary turn’—a conceptual and ethical shift that displaces anthropocentric and nation-bound perspectives in favour of relational, multispecies understandings of climate entanglement. *Bāul* cosmology, with its non-dualist metaphysics and seasonal poetics, makes a significant contribution to this turn by grounding planetary thought in the vernacular, lived, and ritualistic registers. Gatherings such as those at Shyam Shakha Ashram exemplify this planetary ethics in practice. Here, the *sādhu-saṅga* becomes a crucible of eco-*sādhanā*; saplings are planted not as acts of symbolic compliance but as devotional gestures; songs are not performed for entertainment but offered as sonic kinship—a relational mode of attuning to the more-than-human world through voice and vibration (Feld, 2012). These acts embody what Martinez-Alier (2002) terms ‘grassroots environmentalism,’ a locally rooted, spiritually motivated, and communally enacted ecological engagement that resists the abstraction and depersonalization of technocratic environmentalism.

In this context, *Bāul* songs may be read as climate texts—poetic expressions that register the affective textures of climate crisis while offering alternative imaginaries of care, resistance, and renewal. They do not merely mourn ecological loss; they attempt to sing the world back into being. Through their seasonal performances, the *Bāuls* weave grief and hope, soil and spirit, into a vernacular liturgy of planetary care.



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