



By Renu Ramanath

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## A rootless singer met a puppeteer

Greenery, Leftist movements, highbrow cinema, literature.... Kerala and Bengal have for long shared many commonalities. Now, an artiste couple from the two states adds a new dimension to it, notes Renu Ramanath

It was during one of her vagabond trips fuelled by a "spiritual quest" that Moushumi Parial reached a small central Kerala town far away from her moorings in rustic West Bengal that had groomed her as a Baul musician. That was in 1997. There, in Irinjalakuda off Thrissur, she was to meet a multi-faceted Malayali artiste. Ravi Gopalan Nair has been a photographer-turned puppeteer, mask-maker and, most importantly, a performer-trainer. And it didn't take long before Moushumi married Ravi and got re-christened as Parvathy Baul.

The 'Baul' tag to her first name only reaffirms what Parvathy is still up to: singing the earthy Bengali of the mystic minstrel. The Baul, ideally, searches for the path with the heart. For the Baul, the journey is as vital as the end.

Figuratively, it was a rail trip that brought Moushumi to Kerala. Earlier too, it was a train journey that served another defining moment for her. Barely 16, Moushumi was travelling in a coach when she saw a blind Baul. The light and vision in the music of the artiste was one moment of illumination. The Santiniketan student from a respectable middle-class Bengali Brahmin household thus chose her path in that flash of a second.

The word 'Baul' has many meanings, she soon learnt: the mad one, the rootless. That intrigued young Moushumi, the rebellious student at the Rabindranath Tagore-founded institution. Soon she joined Phulmala Dasi, a female Baul, in begging in crowded compartment of trains. Her teachers and classmates were shocked.

Moushumi subsequently quit the academic stream of studies, engrossed by a deeper quest for enquiry. Sanatan Das Baul of Bankura village in West Bengal (he is 86 now) laid her track onto the path of Bauls. It led her to Irinjalakuda's Ammannur Gurukulam that teaches Kudiyyattam.

### kerala's glove puppetry

Ravi's journey had already begun by that time. Much like Moushumi, he also has had a childhood in a village — one near Nedumangadu near Thiruvananthapuram. Ravi grew up in 1970s Kerala, soaking up the discourses and dialogues that defined a society in transition. He was trained in professional photography by his father, Chittoor Gopalan Nair, also portrait painter. Parallely, Ravi was drawn to performing arts: theatre and Kathakali. Then, Kutiyattam performances by late maestro Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, who taught him the nuances of the ancient Sanskrit drama. At the Ammannur Gurukulam, Ravi's elder brother G Venu was already engaged in resuscitating the ancient tradition of the Ammannur family — along with Madhava Chakyar. Simultaneously, Ravi got trained as a puppeteer, specialising in Pavakkathakali, Kerala's glove puppetry form. Venu's Natana Kairali, a research and performing centre for traditional art forms, was working with the old masters of the Pavakkathakali those days. Ravi had been living in Irinjalakuda since 1984.

His induction into the world of physical performance happened unexpectedly, in 1992, when Ravi joined Parate Labor, a work project to redo the Para Theatre of Jerzy Grotowsky in France. The venue was a village, Dommpierre-Les-Ormes. For three years, he was trained in the techniques of European theatre, but the experience only left a deep dissatisfaction within him. "In European theatre, the director-performer relationship has a lot of dictatorship." But the Indian performing tradition gives much freedom to the individual performer, says Ravi. "Only during the training does the guru behave very strictly to the disciple — to make sure the training is perfect. Once that's over, he or she is the master of one's own body." Even from his European training days, Ravi was enamoured of the Baul tradition. To him, it's the "only phenomenon where true voice flows out, and the performer is least dependent on accompanying musicians, notations or song book".

### discovering baul

After meeting Moushumi, Ravi decided it was time for him to enter the world of Baul. Also, the path of performer-trainer. Post-wedding, they shifted to Ravi's native Nedumangad. Her new name came in line with the Baul traditions of initiation. Since 2000, Parvathy had been performing in India and abroad. She continues the training, having been taught by Sanatan and Shashanko. Every year, she travels to Bengal to attend the village Baul festivals. She also participates in Sufi festivals at various places in India. Only last week, she performed at Urs Festival of Hazrat Inayat Khan Darga in Delhi — a rare honour for a woman artiste.

Parvathy has kept alive her flair for painting and drawing, incorporating the singing-story-telling with paintings. In 2003, she created a new story-telling performance with painted pictures based on 'Hamza Nama', a classic collection of Mughal-period paintings, at Museum Rietberg, Zurich, Switzerland. Her own nine big paintings made for telling the story of Radha Bhav. Last year, at the Brooklyn International Toy Theater Festival, the couple came on stage together — Ravi moving the puppets with music support from Parvathy. Clearly for them, partnership means more than marriage. It is being companions in a quest — mutual as well as individual. There 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. — renuramanath@hotmail.com (The writer is an art critic-journalist based in Kochi)

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