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The beads of breath

Parvathy Baul was delighted to connect with live audiences at a recent show

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The philosophical depth of Baul songs combined with Parvathy's infectious energy created an electric atmosphere at an event organised by Emami Art in Kolkata on September 25. Playing the *iktara* and the *duggi*, with her Radha-Krishna paintings in the background (she studied fine arts at Viswa Bharati University), the singer soared to the highest realms of her music. She jumped and twirled as if entering into a trance-like state, while the audience was transported to the soft plains of riverine Bengal and to Birbhum, the land of red soil. The tunes the Bauls sing have stirred the souls of the people of this region for centuries.

Parvathy Baul began the performance by blowing the conch and talking about emerging

from a long period of isolation. "This is not just a performance, it is an auspicious moment when I am back again amidst my *rasikas*," she said.

Born as Mousumi Parial in a privileged caste Bengali family, she assumed her new name when she was ordained as a Baul. The Baul tradition is a philosophy and way of life, showcased through songs by the poet-singers. They are mentioned in literary works dating to the 15th century. A mix of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Tantric philosophies, the Baul

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Soul-stirring Parvathy Baul.
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for Bauls, in Birbhum district in 2019. She now divides her time between Bengal and Kerala, where she has been working with her husband Ravi Gopalan Nair, a theatre artiste and puppeteer, for over two decades in spreading the Baul ideology through their organisation, Ekathara Kalari.

Baul is fluid and agnostic to categories like religion. The same singer might move from a devotional song about Shiva to one by Lalan Fakir. Parvathy's performance reflected this as she moved from song to song seamlessly and in no specific order.

Song on true devotion

"I usually don't decide beforehand which songs I will sing. I prefer them to flow naturally," she said at the event. Parvathy opened her performance with a song by Gopal Khyapa, who lived centuries ago in what is now Murshidabad district. She also rendered a song on true devotion composed by Sanatan Das Baul: '*Kather malay kaaj hobe na, swasher mala jopte hobe*' (wooden beads won't work, pray with the beads of your breath).

The lockdown gave her time to delve deeper into the art. "Music is *sadhana* (devotion). A song composed by Panju Shah, a fakir from Bangladesh, says, *aadhar chand mile murshid aadharo ghuchale* (when darkness dissipates, one can see the unattainable inner moon). This was the first song I sang when I re-entered the stage after the lockdown," said Parvathy. She closed the performance with a song on Durga.

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tradition has strongly influenced Bengal's culture.

Parvathy's first tryst with the musical form was on a train, where she met a blind singer. She was intrigued by the way he seemed lost in a world of his own. Soon she embarked on a journey of knowing the self by taking

lessons from different gurus and through the practice of *madhukori* (seeking alms singing on trains). Eventually, she found the right guru in Sanatan Das Baul, in whose ashram she set out on her path of devotion. Following her guru's advice, Parvathy set up Sanatan Siddhashram, a gurukul