CHAPTER VI

Meaning of Madness

Section I

General Comments

The title of the whole of this current work is ‘meaning of madness’ while the title of this chapter is also ‘meaning of madness’. Uses of the word ‘meaning’ in these two contexts are a little different. When we talk about the meaning of an entity or of a concept, we imply two different things. First, by the meaning of an entity or a concept, we imply how we identify the entity or what we understand by the concept. In other words, we imply the description of the entity or the concept. In the second case, we imply what kind of special meaning and significance we derive from the entity or the concept. To give an example: to the question “what do you mean by sea?” there can be two different answers. One answer is “sea is a huge mass of water, forever moving and rolling to the shore in waves” while the other answer may be “sea is beautiful and wondrous and makes me calm and contemplative”. In this current work, till now we have been engaged with the ‘meaning of madness’ in the first sense; trying to understand what we understand by madness. In this chapter we shall try to grapple with ‘meaning of madness’ in the second sense; we shall try to see what kind of special meaning and significance are woven or can be woven around the concept of madness.

Throughout recorded history humans have been fascinated by the insane and the mad. Society is fascinated with madness and mental patients. Scientific interest in normal is less common and less interesting than interest in the abnormal and the pathological. Normal means ordinary. Normal is common and less dazzling. Of all the non-normal experiences, the experience of
madness appears most fascinating. It is the oldest; been there from the beginning of most experiences and of civilization. It is also the most difficult; it negates our fundamental attempts to derive meaning from social experience. The phenomenon of madness tends to subvert the significance of social life. For a long time society has tried to weave a network of meanings and significance around madness in order to place madness within the social network of meanings. An individual experience is here given a communal meaning to generate new ways for society to look at itself. Society’s perception of madness always included both negativity or lack and a positivity in terms of unusual experiences; the network of meanings and significance in turn always includes both ends of this spectrum of perception.

Historically these attempts to build up meanings and significance have followed three main themes. First is to understand madness through the lenses of religious beliefs; to view madness as resulting from divine intervention and madness marking man’s relation with God. Second is to associate madness with creative work; madness seen as a special endowment. Third is to see madness as a mirror to reflect social power game and as indicator of limits of social order; madness as representative of social pathology. These three obviously are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Literature available on these is endless and it is not our intention to go into them; rather, our modest aim here is to open a few new windows, within the existing tradition, through which ‘man’s search for meanings’ through madness can be seen in new lights.

Previously, in our discussion on Foucault, we mentioned his concern that medicalisation of madness, reducing madness to illness will deprive madness of other possible social meanings and significance. Being reduced to illness may deprive madness of its ability to ‘indicate the limits of social order and discourse’. This concern is genuine but not necessarily overwhelming. Such reductions may have different aspects and different meanings. Even for indubitably physical illnesses, creative geniuses have built up similar meanings and significances on the experiences of these illnesses. Thomas Mann’s novel The Magic Mountain, considered to be one of the most significant novels written in twentieth century, is woven around the experience of tuberculosis and life in a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. Fyodor Dostoyevsky himself suffered from epilepsy and kept meticulous records of many of his attacks. Many characters in his novels suffered from the same disorder and the author developed the characters with special literary
significance and as portals of insight into human predicament through building up special meanings and significance of epileptic experience. Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* readily comes to mind.

In the chapter on Foucault we discussed the madness-creativity connection, especially through his views. Here we shall take a look at the madness-religion connection.

**Section II**

**Madness in Devotional/Ecstatic Religion**

> Religious beliefs prepare a kind of landscape of images, an illusory milieu favorable to every hallucination and every delirium.  

--Michel Foucault, *(Foucault, 1967. p.204)*

Apart from the concept of the mad person being possessed, different religions have other positive concepts where such an individual is seen as the one who dares to be innovative, original or creative, or attempts to find alternatives to a static and stagnant mode of living and social ordering. This is to be found in various attitudes towards madness in certain mystic philosophies such as Sufism and other ecstatic traditions, where the expansion of self and consciousness has been taken as a rationale to label some devotees as mad and, conversely, some madmen as ardent devotees. The texts of various mystic traditions do indeed reveal the occurrence of psychotic symptoms and much mental suffering in the devotees in their quest for self-knowledge and salvation. Mowlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273), the great Persian poet and Sufi mystic started the ecstatic practice of Sufi whirling and took up the identity of being mad. The English expression ‘dancing dervishes’ has a derogatory connotation of madness and derives from this widespread Sufi religious practice. In India, divine madness is described among the *Alvars* and Tamil *Saiva* saints of South India, the Marathi saints of Western India, and in the genre of
popular biographies of saints and yogis. David Kinsley, in “Through the Looking Glass: Divine Madness in India”, finds the madman to be “a spiritual hero, echoing the behavior of the gods. Gods exhibit madness in their inconsistency, destructive acts, delight in enjoyment, and self-absorption; these actions show their freedom, transcendence of the world, and indifference to order”. (McDaniel, 1989 p. 97)

Divine madness is not unique to any specific religion or to any geographical area. It has been explored in various traditions: in both Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity, among the Hasids of eastern Europe, among the Sufis, in possessions and trance dancers around the world. But divine madness has a historical specificity: it is associated with the devotional approach. Devotional approach occurred within the tradition of theology and religious practices of all three major religions i.e., Hinduism, Christianity and Islam but it also served a subversive role against traditional scripture based religious practices and theories and, in India, became a social reformatory movement against caste based social hierarchy ordered by traditional Hinduism.

Plato distinguished two types of mania in the Phaedrus: one arising from human disease and the other from a divine state “which releases us from our customary habits”. He noted four sorts of divine madness sent by the gods: the mantic, from Apollo, which brings divination; the telestic, from Dionysus, which bring possession trance (as a result of ritual); the poetic, from the Muses, which brings enthusiasm and poetic furo; and the erotic, from Eros and Aphrodite, which brings frenzied love. He states, “In reality, our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, which indeed is a divine gift.” Greek playwrights showed divine madness to be a punishment from the gods, the “disease of the heroes” or sign of the tragic hero, or a realm of illusion and error which may test or purify them. (McDaniel, 1989)

According to June McDaniel, who studied ecstatic madness in West Bengal during 1980s, in popular folk belief and more textual devotional traditions, both the ecstatic and madman have symptoms due to separation; however, the ordinary madman longs for his ancestral home, or money or a wife, or a lost job, while the ecstatic longs for his god. Separation (viraha) causes the same symptoms in both. It is the nature of the desired object that distinguishes the states. There are also differences in behavior, according to informants versed in religious texts and practices --
-- the ecstatic at first appears to be harmful to others but instead ends up helping them, while the madman genuinely hurts people by mental or physical violence. There is also a difference in control of states in folk belief: informants claim that the madman is forced into his abnormal behavior and cannot become normal if he tries, while the ecstatic chooses his states --- he might be lost in trance, but he can emerge at will to argue with persons of different beliefs. Mystical ecstasy and psychopathological states can be distinguished by goal, by adaptation to the social world, and by creativity.

Ecstatic religious and spiritual experiences are often termed madness but a difference between ecstatic madness and ‘true’ or secular madness (McDaniel’s term) is maintained throughout. Still, devotional and ecstatic religious traditions seem to deliberately seek closeness with the social category of madness. Devotional religious theology and practice starts as a split from the former and more traditional systems. These more traditional systems are almost exclusively text (scripture) based and emphasize austerity and asceticism and maintain religious rituals to be of highest value. For traditional Hinduism, salvation was achievable only through rigid caste bound hierarchy and practice of scriptural rituals. Ecstatic devotional movement challenges this tradition; the core of the challenge was the new found emphasis on emotionality, namely divine love and devotion (oishi prem and bhakti). Salvation was now achievable through an emotional tie with God. The emotion, in most cases, was an erotic longing for God. The very human experience and emotion of erotic love sought a validity and valuation by becoming a spiritual experience. The devotional movement in religion ushered in the Romantic Movement in literature, art and philosophy. Too much emotional intensity, towards person or deity, brings accusations of madness. The free and fluid emotionality of intense erotic longing for God naturally found its parallel in the madman’s uncontrolled emotional excesses. The construct of ‘mad due to’ changed to one of ‘mad for’. Mystic saints described their experience of spiritual longing and ecstatic unions with God as a form of madness.

Yet, there was more to the spiritual mystics’ use of the category of madness. Central to all the devotional religious movements were the challenge against scriptures, rituals and religious organizations and, especially in India, a challenge against the social hierarchy bound by caste
Traditional institutions and religious organizations met these challenges by making the ecstatic practitioners social outcasts. Social defiance became integral to life for these outcasts and the identity as a madman became a powerful weapon of defiance against the social order. As if they said: “If you refuse to accept and include me, I willingly become an outcast, I become same as the other outcast --- the madman, to defy you. I, being a madman, do not need you.” This is most clearly seen in the **Baul** tradition of Bengal.

Ecstatic love madness of religious consciousness in Bengal is an old phenomenon. At least seven centuries before Caitanya and his Krishna bhakti movement, the *siddhacharyas* of *sahajiya* sect were called mad (*pagol*) and poetically described themselves as intoxicated with the wine of bliss, ‘like a bull elephant maddened from drinking the lotus-honey of the *yogini*’. They wrote of passion for the *Dom* (a very low caste, who lived in cremation grounds and dealt with corpses as their profession) girl or *chandali*. The *chandali* for these poet-devotees was a figure of the lowest social order representing the highest human consciousness, ‘dancing on the water of creation under the lightening sky of the inner cosmos’. (Dasgupta, 1946) Such love united the extremes, violating traditional dictate, uniting persons of the different caste and qualities. The state of *sahaja* of which they wrote implied both love ecstasy and divine madness. Islam entered Bengal at the beginning of the thirteenth century, bringing with it an active tradition of the Sufism. The Sufis sought to be intoxicated with love of god, entering states of passion and annihilation of individual identity (*fana*). They drank the wine of love, becoming so maddened (*mast*) that they could think only of the Beloved. The Sufi majdhub, the “enraptured one” was an ecstatic maddened by the “unveiling of God”. Much later, about two centuries ago, all these traditions, *tantra*—Buddhist and Hindu, Hindu *bhakti* movement, Islamic Sufism etc, merged with each other to crystallize into the **Baul** tradition in Bengal.
Section III

Madness, Bauls and Other Meanings

*Baul* is a word probably derived from *baal* (one free from obligations, a desert wanderer who is madly in love) or from the sect of Buhluliyas, named after their founder Abu Walid Ibn Amre Seirafia Khulfi, who was called *buhlul* for blockhead or crazy (McDaniel, 1989). Another theory traces the word *baul* from the Sanskrit word *batul* which means madman — one who talks nonsense. Khshitimohan Sen relates *fana* or living-dead concept of the Sufis and the similar Hindu *Bhakti* mystics’ concept of ‘living dead’ with the *Bauls’* use of ‘*pagol*’ or mad to denote themselves and explains these as their effort to avoid social reprobation (Sen, 1961). Madness is the highest goal for the *Baul* — the madness of the *ksepa* or *pagol siddha* (the delivered one). He deliberately seeks after madness with a burning eagerness, to be thrown out from the normal social order. The path is to become mad by learning from a mad saint, a *guru* who has achieved ecstatic madness.

Like most mystic religious sects, the *bauls* value the direct ecstatic spiritual experience of self-realization as the sole purpose of religious strivings and they scorn textual knowledge and orthodox rituals. Worldly achievements and mundane social life are futile enterprises for them. For the *bauls*, the distinction between ecstatic madness and common secular madness is unimportant. Madness itself is the way of life and goal of spiritual endeavor for them. Two other closely related obscure religious sects of Bengal, the *fakirs* and *dervishes*35 share the same worldview.

The *bauls’* deliberate attempt to take up the identity of madmen (without really becoming mad in a secular sense or becoming mentally ill in a medical sense, but the difference is not important to a *baul*) reveals two important significance society weaves around madness. First, interpreting the category of madness as uncontrolled intense emotionality validates the philosophical dichotomy

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35 Dervishes are of course a much older and geographically wider-spread sect following the path of Sufi asceticism but in Bengal it has developed some specific local characteristics.
between reason and emotion. This dichotomy becomes central to the challenge by the devotional religious movements directed towards more orthodox theology and practice. The orthodox approach comes to represent rationality and social order while the new devotional approach comes to represent emotionality — an aspiration for transcendental values and consequent disregard for traditional social order. Second and derived from the first, identity as a madman becomes a political weapon of protest not only against the religious orthodoxy but also against the social order of caste based hierarchy. This is probably the only instance where the social category of madmen as outcasts become a weapon of protest; an early example of a marginalized identity becoming a weapon in a political discourse to address a social injustice.

These two significances, however, do not exhaust all that the bauls’ use of the category of madness creates. Bauls are also ascetics and they renounce the worldly ways. They, as already noted, project themselves as innocent of worldly values and social customs. Madness now comes to represent a childlike innocence of good and evil. Bhola is a Bengali word basically meaning one who is forgetful but by a deliberate widening of meaning bhola means a madman too. For the baul, bhola becomes a deliberately assumed identity in its childlike innocence of madness. Madness becomes a signifier of childlike innocence and obliviousness towards social mores. In a surprising parallel, the popular deity of Hindu pantheon Sivā or Mahadev, in Bengal becomes bholababa (forgetful father) representing the same childlike innocence, worldly unconcern and aimless wanderings. In Bengali imagination Sivā is also considered a madman, paglababa (mad father). Siva, epitomized as a mad person, is probably the lone example of such a conception in the pantheon of the whole world. The only other similar use we can think of is again from the same geographical area and from similar religious background: goddess Kali is sometimes called pagli ma (mad mother). A popular Bengali doggerel depicts the sentiment nicely:

পাগল যাৰা,
পাগলি আমার মা,
আমি তাঁদেৰ পাগল জেলে,
মাসেৰ নাম শ্যামা।
Celebration of madness as representing this innocence and free flowing imaginations can be found in the beautiful opening poem in Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol*\(^{37}\). This, with a very lame English translation is given in Appendix II (A).

Lastly, a fourth significance for the concept of madness can be found in the *bauls*’ use of the category of madness. In our day-to-day social life we carry a number of social identities, starting from personal names to our various social, professional and political identities. They give us social protection and sense of belongingness; at the same time they are imposed on us and can often be stifling and counter-productive. At times we want to get rid of at least some of them. A madman appears to have lost or renounced these social identities or the identities appear to have lost significance to the madman. The core of self perception (the sense of ‘I’-ness) is not lost but the more peripheral social identities seem flimsy, superficial and meaningless. Our common perception of a madman is of one who does not have any social identity, often not even a name, and being mad becomes the sole identity of such a person. *Bauls*, in order to declare their renunciation of worldly ways and social values, bring out this significance of madness by their deliberate adoption of the madman identity. Going back to Sukumar Ray and his *Abol Tabol*, we find another poem where he depicts the folly of loosing identities:

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\(^{36}\) *Shyama* is another name for goddess *Kali*. Literally, *kali* means blackness and darkness and *shyam* means a lighter shade of black. *Shayama* is a dark girl.

\(^{37}\) Needless to say, Sukumar Ray and his writings had nothing to do with *bauls* or any religious sects or practices. *Abol Tabol* is a collection of nonsense verse for children.
I can’t be a moth or a horse or a snake,
A bee or an elephant, donkey or drake,
A fish or a frog or a bird or a tree,
A shoe or a sunshade ----
Oh what can I be?38

The anguish of Ray’s nameless creature gets turned upside down by the bauls’ triumph of negating valueless social identities.

Our attempt in this chapter is to examine the overlap between the common social understanding of madness and the religious use of the concept of madness. This analysis shows how some meanings and significance are being woven around madness and how madness comes to assume different meanings in society. The purpose of discussing the bauls’ deliberate adoption of the madman identity is to recognize the power of the web of meanings and significance woven around the concept of madness and we have shown four different and distinct meanings (validating emotionality, subverting social hierarchy, childlike innocence and introspection beyond one’s social identities) being built up to encapsulate the phenomenon of madness. We believe such ‘meanings of madness’ is still salvageable and can coexist with medical view of madness as mental illness. Madness as mental illness is also another meaning of madness along with other meanings. Such attempts to understand different meanings of madness may go a long way towards removing the negative stigma usually attached to mental illness in our society and lessening the burden the ill people have to live with.

38 Translation by Sukanta Choudhury. Full text of the original Bengali version and the English are given in the appendix. Full poem, Bengali and English translation, is given in Appendix II©.


