



Transcending the Sacred Boundaries: Invoking Fakir Lalon Shah and the Baul Movement

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Abstract

Aim: *This research paper aims to study Fakir Lalon Shah, a 19th-century Bengali saint who preached syncretic values and spread his message of peace through Baul songs to redeem his society from the ills of religious bigotry, caste and class divide. Lalon, considered a misfit by his society, questioned the status quo and essentialism of different socio-religious institutions of his time. He espoused the idea of human beings as divine and godly creatures deserving respect and dignity irrespective of their religious affiliations. His songs reflect a profound influence of Sufism and Bhaktism and are a living example of social syncretism challenging religious reductionism in times past, present and future. Considering the contemporary socio-cultural divide and the rampant violence and bloodshed, this paper explores the significance of Lalon and his musical oeuvre in our time.*

Methodology and Approach: *The author has used qualitative research methods such as content and narrative analysis to closely study the songs of Lalon Shah to understand the philosophy of the 19th century Baul movement in Bengal, and the wider social climate that favoured its rise.*

Outcome: *This paper concludes that the socio-political divide originating from religious bigotry and rigid caste/class segregation paved way for the rise of Baul singers such as Lalon Shah who challenged the prevalent socio-religious divide and reductionism in the 19th C. Bengal, and instead propagated equality and harmony by educating masses about human divinity and spirituality through songs. Therefore, bridging gap between people of different identities and enabling peace and development.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *This research suggests that invoking the philosophy of Baul movement and its pioneers like Lalon Shah in the contemporary times when the human civilization is at the brink of a nuclear flashpoint, will save lives by providing a timely reminder about the common identities human beings share and the futility of rampant violence and bloodshed.*

Keywords: Baul, Lalon Fakir, Bengal, Syncretism, Sufism, Bhaktism

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The origin of the word "Baul" is debated among scholars. According to some sources, it originates from the Sanskrit word Vyakula, meaning "confused", or Vyatula, meaning "mad". However, others believe that it is close to "Aul," the

derivative of "Awliya," an Arabic word referring to a 'saint' or a holy man. Its initial usage dates back to the 15th century Bengali texts where its literal meaning is "mad" (Salomon, 1995; Mondal, 2015; Bhattacharaya, 1981; qtd. in Urban, 2001). According to Muchkund Dubey, the word "Baul" is a Bengali version of the word "Bawara" or "Baula" used in North India for people who are possessed or crazy (Dubey, 1997, p.141). Although with all possibility, the Baul movement could have existed many centuries earlier, there was no mention of it in historical records until 1870 when Aksay Kumar Datta published *Bharat Barsiya Upasak Sampraday* (Indian Devotional Traditions) (Salomon 1995, p. 189).

Being a mystical sect, Bauls have no set religious doctrine/s to follow. Instead, it is a Sadhana (a path) or a quest to attain self-realisation. They are against all forms of discrimination practised by the orthodox socio-religious institutions. They look down upon religious scriptures, mosques, temples, etc., as only hindrances in their way to self-realisation, which is possible only by revering and worshipping the human body, a temple wherein dwells God. The Baul songs, in general, and of Lalon Fakir, in particular, greatly influenced the concept of love or devotion upheld by the philosophies of Vaisnavas and Sufis. According to Rajeshwari Datta, during the early 12th century A.D when Bengal came under the rule of Sena kings who were the strict Vaisnavas espousing the path of spiritual love and devotion, the Buddhist Sahajiya practices, which had held sway earlier, came under their influence resulting in an emergence of a new sect called Vaisnava-Sahajiyas.

With the arrival of Muslim rule in the middle of the 13th century in Bengal, Islam spread through campaigns. A significant number of people who were facing the oppression of casteism and other discriminations in Hindu society came into the fold of Islam. Among the converts, many had been the Sahajiyas, out of whom some had converted in name only as a survival tactic while continuing their earlier yogic practices. These Muslim Sahajiyas are considered

the first fakirs of Bengal (Datta, 1978). Although the word Baul in generic terms refers to the entire sect of these heterodox nonconformist anti-establishment men with long hair wearing white or saffron robes (alkhalla), singing Baul-gaan and living on alms while carrying ektara (a one-stringed musical instrument) with them all the time, ironically in a strict sense it implies only Hindu Baul. In contrast, the Muslim Bauls are referred to as fakirs despite both being socio-religiously unacknowledged and outcasted (Datta, 1978). Unlike Sufis, the Baul-fakirs are considered heretics in the prism of Sharia law because of their disregard for the fundamental tenets of Islam like religious scriptures, Hajj pilgrimage, Mosque, Azan, etc. and their ascribing god-like status to the Guru/Murshid (Sengupta 2015, pp. 152-153). Moreover, the esoteric sex ritual and the consumption of "four moons" (Bhattacharya 1896, p. 381), known only to the initiated Bauls and hidden from the general public for fear of inviting wrath from the conservative Islamic or Hindu societies, owe their origin to the direct influence of the Tantric and Yogic practices of earlier times, and forms one of the significant distinctions between the Bauls and Sufis.

The present paper aims to reinforce the socio-religious syncretism advocated by Fakir Lalon Shah in his poetry at a time when empires, nations, and civilisations are classified solely based on few mainstream religions overriding innumerable other identities that people of this world share in common.

Fakir Lalon Shah, whose life is surrounded by mystery, is said to have been born in 1774 into a Hindu Kayastha family in the Nadia district of undivided Bengal in British India and died on the 17th of Oct. 1890 A.D (Salomon 1995, p. 188). Many sources have pointed out an unusual but symbolic anecdote in Lalon's early life, which had a decisive influence on him later. Once on a pilgrimage, Lalon contracted smallpox and fell ill. Assuming him to be dead, he was thrown into a river by his companions. After regaining consciousness, he was saved by a Muslim weaver family of Jessore and nursed back into health. The disease

resulted in the loss of his eye. Later, on his return home, he narrated his account of having stayed in a Muslim household to his family, resulting in him being outcasted (Dubey, 1997, p.139; Salomon, 1995, p. 188). As a result, having lost his caste, Lalon became a Baul-fakir, ironically without ever having claimed himself to be a "Baul" or even having mentioned the word in his songs (Salomon, 1995 qtd. in Urban, 2011, p. 1091).

With a total disregard for gender, class, caste, etc. practised by the Brahmanical Hindu religion and the religious fanaticism propounded by the orthodox Islamists of his time, Lalon chose a path of devotion and became a 'Sadhak' (seeker of truth). Throughout his life, he composed more than 300 songs (Urban, 2001), and around 10,000 songs (Dubey, 1997 p.139), known as Lalangeeti, were transmitted to us orally without being written down until the late 19th century. As a result, only a few hundred songs have been preserved and much lost. Moreover, through these songs, we come to form an idea about his persona. Dismantling the essentials of the major religions of his time that fundamentally believed in dualism, Lalon combines the threads of Buddhist Sahajias, Hindu Vaisnavas, and Islamic Sufis and calls for Self-realization in his songs. He emphasises the sacredness of the human body and urges people to worship this abode of God, the only way to catch that 'Maner Manush', 'the man of heart' or Achin Pakki ', the unknown bird' who exists within us (Dubey,1997 p.142). Lalon subverts the concept of God propagated by the dominant religious doctrines of his time as an outsider, above and beyond human reach, to be worshipped in mosques and temples alone, and offered sacrifices to appease Him. He does not believe in the existence of Hell or Heaven that organised religions upheld. He believed in spiritual love as the only saviour of humanity.

Given the current socio-religious fragmentation in the Indian subcontinent in particular, wherein unspeakable and unprecedented violence of mob lynching is unleashed on the ordinary people in the name of religion, the message of religious

syncretism and 'man as divine' incorporated in the poetry of Lalon Fakir is but an unavoidable necessity to redeem our society from the deep crisis. Lalon says that the Divine Form resides in the house of the human form:

Behold it.
The description of the human form
Surpasses the jewel of the snake,
For it yokes together the two forms.
The person who possesses pure love
Opens the padlock of love,
And is able to see that divine form.
His means of self-attainment
Is to forget the scriptures,
And to regard love as higher than eternal dalliance.
He is the Lord whose form is unchangeable;
Perceive the truth of that.
The human form never has any eternal dalliance,
The man who worships the physical world
And immerses himself in physical passion
Cannot know the nature of the divine form.
The Divine Form is behind the human form;
The key to the lock of the Divine Form
Is always in the hands of the human form.
One who will be the devotee of the human form
Will find the key to that lock.
Poor Lalon says that such people
Will attain the unattainable. (Datta 455)

This unfolds the irony that modern man, in search of God, has actually killed Him brutally while misconceiving Him as an enemy, taught by the opposing religious

doctrines/scriptures. Lalon reinforced the idea of equality and social justice in all forms among men, thereby challenging the structural violence against the lower castes, ensured by the 'repressive state ideological apparatuses' run by dominant castes and classes, which resulted in the anti-Baul protestations led by Hindu orthodox men in Kolkata, India and 'Baul Dhangsher Fatwa' issued by Maulana Riyajuddin Ahmad of Rangpur Bangladesh, against them (U. Dutta and J. Dutta, 2019). In one of his famous songs, Lalon mockingly unsettles the stereotypes of gender and the mainstream religious dogmas prevalent in his society:

Everyone wonders, 'What's Lalon's faith?'
 Lalon says: 'I've never "seen" the face
 Of Faith with these eyes of mine.'
 Circumcision marks a Muslim man,
 What then marks a Muslim woman?
 A Brahmin I recognise by the holy thread;
 How do I recognise a Brahmin woman?
 Everyone wonders, 'What's Lalon's faith?'
 Some wear a garland and some wear the tasbi (prayer beads)
 That's what marks the faiths apart.
 But what makes them apart when
 One is born or at the time of death?
 Everyone wonders, 'What's Lalon's faith?' (Qtd. in Tripathi 2014, p.28)

Looking carefully at the above poem, Lalon disregards the politics of divide over petty religious identities. People, instead of finding God or attaining self-realisation, have lost their way into the web of elaborate religious rituals and other human constructs, resulting only in the widespread bloodbath. Pertinent to mention here is the partition of 1947 of the Indian subcontinent, in which millions of people lost their lives witnessing an unprecedented rape and killing just because of their differing religious identities. In her book *The Other Side of*

Silence: Voices from the Partition of India, Urvashi Butalia interviews, apart from others, a Sikh survivor named Bir Bahadur Singh. Singh, while narrating the horrors of partition, blames Hindus and Sikhs for disseminating hatred and practising casteism and religious bigotry against the lower castes, which made partition inevitable (Butalia, 1998, pp.220-225).

Not only a mystic poet, Lalon's songs paint a persona of a fierce social reformer who takes pains to guide his brethren out of the social ills. Being himself from the lower caste and having lived the inhuman treatment that his class faced; Lalon derisively looked down at the narrow-mindedness of people mired in the web of caste system. He says:

Everybody is asking what is Lalan's caste
 But Lalan has never seen with his naked eyes the form of caste
 Everybody is wondering whether Lalan is a Hindu or a Muslim
 But Lalan says: that he does not see any difference
 This is a strange situation

For people are saying he has lost his caste (Qtd. in (Dubey 1997 p.144)

Most of the Baul songs are highly esoteric and impregnated with multiple meanings conveyed through different symbols that are only possible with a proper understanding of the Baul philosophy. As a result, the popularity these rural folk songs enjoyed over time after Rabindranath Tagore, "discoverer" of the Baul songs (qtd. in Edward C. & Dimock, Jr. 1959, p. 34), introduced them to the urban Bengali middle-class men, came at a price of "fakelore". The rise of urban fake Bauls who found an opportunity in the salability of the 'exotic' 'baulness' of rural practitioners to the show businesses to serve the image of aesthetic to the colonial Empire, and the tastes of Bengali elite has resulted in the commodification and commercialization of these folk songs in which the essence of Baul philosophy is lost (Lorea 2014).

Lalon Shah is revered as one of the greatest Bauls and is popular among the people of Bengal and Bangladesh. His poetry has a broader appeal among the masses, for it carries the highly esoteric and complex Baul philosophy packed in a symbolic language called Sandhya bhasa without losing its musicality. A non-conformist, Lalon yearns for a humane world entire of harmony and co-existence where people do not discriminate against each other based on religion, caste, creed, sex, wealth etc. as is clear in this song:

Come be that day,
When Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist,
Divide of caste, class or faith would cease to exist,
Such a reformed humane society,
Oh my mind, when would its creation come to be?
When temptations of greed would hold no sway,
When to take up the shoulder satchel, none will need,
When no one will shove us apart, Calling us 'an unreformed awful lowly
lot!'
Oppressive shackles will not make us feel continually alienated,
Such a reformed human society,
Oh my mind, when would its creation come to be?
The rich and the poor, together, under one common roof would reside,
Each one will get what each one's deserving shares strike.
Over religion, caste, faith or creed,
No one would make an upheaval, no one would fight.
Weeping, says Lalon Fakir,
Who will be there to show me,
Such a reformed humane society,
Oh my mind, when would its creation come to be? (qtd. in Uttaran D. &
Jyoti D. 2019, pp. 15-16)

In his Hibbert lecture series given at Oxford University in May 1930 and later compiled into a book, *The Religion of Man*, 1931, Tagore talks in more detail about the balance between the diction, musicality and philosophy in Baul songs with which he was greatly influenced:

One day I chanced to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal.... What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarefied transcendentalism. At the same time, it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine, which is in man and not in the temple.... Since then I have often tried to ... understand [these people] through their songs, which are their only form of worship. One is often surprised to find in many of their verses a striking originality of sentiment and diction; for, at their best, they are spontaneously individual in their expressions. (qtd. in Edward & Dimock, 1959, pp. 34-35)

The Bauls rejected the authority of the established religions and their holy scriptures such as Vedas and Qur'an. Rather, they considered religious rituals as hindrances to attaining true liberation and laid emphasis on love as the key toward self-realisation.

The underlying premise of Baul philosophy, repeatedly emphasised in the songs of Lalon Fakir Shah, is that human beings, irrespective of their religious belief system, are divine. And it is only by spreading love and looking within themselves that people can attain self-actualisation. Despite being disowned by the established religions of his time as a heretic, Lalon holds great sway in the hearts of his people across the boundaries in West Bengal and Bangladesh today. He remains a powerful force that unites the hearts of Bengali people across caste, religious and political divides. It is pertinent to mention here that during the '1971 War of Bangladesh', the Bengali Muslim population unanimously used him as a

cultural symbol to resist the religious and cultural hegemony of West Pakistan. Therefore, it is only by reinforcing this idea of ‘man as a divine being’ advocated by Baul Fakirs like Lalou that humanity could be restored from the deep socio-religious, and cultural fragmentation without furthering the political divide over religion, caste, class, gender and so on. More importantly, the Baul philosophy has a great potential to inspire and guide the people of the Subcontinent to revisit and restudy their past philosophies and traditions that have fostered the ideals of inclusivity, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence over the centuries. Given the present socio-religious and political climate, marked by widespread violence and conflict, this study concludes that the research and promotion of Baul's philosophy that teaches and upholds syncretic values is the acute need of the hour.

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