

# Lalon: A Non Sectarian Man and Reformer in Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the personal life of the remarkable non-Sectarian philosopher, reformer, and musician Fakir Lalon Sah, who opposes caste, class, gender, and all forms of socioeconomic hierarchy as well as identity politics based on race and nationality. He rejected the notion of class, patriarchy, religion, nation, "path" (hierarchies and the partition of social space that determines who is allowed to accept food and water from whom), and "Jat" (caste). This article reveals spiritualism, mysticism, and human love as a non sectarian man and reformer in his Philosophy. Additionally, this study is a remarkable display of Fakir Lalon's incredible abilities. Nearly all of his songs, which have a very subtle and concealed significance that lingers with philosophic thinking, showcase his powerful talents.

**Keywords:** Lalon, Non-sectarian, Reformer, Philosophy, Divine love, Religion, Folklore

## INTRODUCTION

Many folk bards in Bengal have enriched the folk songs in its history. This wonderful country of ours had and still has a treasure house of rich and varied folksongs and folk poets. Among them Fakir Lalon deserves a marvellous position in Bengali folk culture and literature. Actually, Bangla folk poetry has been transmitted orally from the ancient time. He was vehemently opposed to caste, all forms of social and economic hierarchies, communal identities or all forms of social difference that might carry slightest potential to breed political division in the society. No wonder, he wrote many songs against caste, family status and hierarchy. He adopted the name 'Lalon', a curious choice – it could be a name belonging to any community and could also be a name of a woman.

## NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Lalon is brilliant in raising very fundamental issues relating to women-men relationship playing on the margin between biological and the social construction of this relation. The famous song 'mayerabhajile hoy tar bapertikana' only mother is able to know the real father. Folk songs affect the common man largely because it voices the very pulse of the vagaries of the suffering and joy of the downtrodden common folk. Sometimes, the popular folksong is used for political campaign and the common consciousness of public interest. Under the tutelage of such popular perspectives, this paper strives to focus on the unique aspect of Lalon's non-sectarian philosophy of human life reflected in his songs. Interestingly, this study will underline an epoch making critical activity in the academy of Folklore and Bengali literary criticism.

When there will be no classification among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians; there will be no race and cast, when this type of society will be formatted.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective is to know about Baul poet, Fakir Lalon Shah's non-sectarian attitude irrespective to caste, religion, class, and gender and any forms of politics of identity based on race or nationality through his life, works and philosophies.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The method of the study is qualitative. Huge amount of study materials was used for Literature Review and Discussion. The materials were examined, evaluated and commented on and a specific concise topic was chosen for the study. The scope of the study was also determined. General findings were noted on the basis of the availability of resources. The materials were approached both chronologically and thematically. The available materials were evaluated properly for their premise, methodology and evaluation. The key findings were summarized and justification for the study was established. Finally, Lalon's non-sectarian philosophies were viewed from different perspectives retrospectively.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is some dispute over the birthplace of Lalon and researchers and historians have curiously endeavoured to shed light on his caste, race and creed even though Lalon himself persistently denied of having any. According to Professor Abul Hassan Chowdhury Lalon was born in the year 1774 CE in Bharara Village along the coast of Gorai River within Chapra Union of Kumarkhali Subdistrict under present day Kushtia District. He was born in a respected Hindu family of the Kayastha Caste and his father and mother were named Madhab Kar and Padmabati respectively.<sup>1</sup> Prominent researcher Upendronath Bhattacharjo supported the birthdates of Lalon as given above. Dr S M Lutfor Rahman has in his research proven analytically that indeed Lalon was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, Friday, 1774 CE and died on the same day in 1890 CE and has lived to be 116 years old.<sup>2</sup> The news of Fakir Lalon's death was first published in the newspaper Grambarta Prakashika, run by Kangal Harinath as well as in the fortnightly Hitokori editorial (1890 CE, 30<sup>th</sup> October, First Edition).<sup>2</sup> The newspaper noted that Lalon died on October 14, 1890 at the age of 116. Based on that article, researchers point that Lalon was born in 1774. The date was 17<sup>th</sup> of October of the first of Kartik in the Bangla Calendar.<sup>2</sup>

On a different set of opinion regarding his origin of birth by Professor Muhammad Abutalib and Dr Khondokar Riajul Haque it states that Lalon was born into a Muslim family in the year of 1772 CE on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October in the village of Harishpur under present day Jhenidah District. His father and mother were Daribullah Dewan and Amina Khatun respectively while Lalon was the youngest of three sons.<sup>5</sup> However, this information has been corroborated by very few sources and is not accepted by most people. Abdul Wali's article written 8 years after Lalon's death have been cited for Muhammad Abutalib's research, whereas, more authentic source of Hitokari Newspaper which published a valuable report only 12 days after Lalon's death have been seemingly ignored.<sup>5</sup> According to Sudhir Chakraborty, Lalon's real identity (both religion and caste) was probably kept a secret by Lalon himself as he vehemently dissociated himself from such ideas. Therefore, it has given rise to many myths and imaginary narratives surrounding Lalon's life. A great number of enthusiasts have written books, stories, novella and plays as well as sketched his imaginary portrait and have disseminated his life stories that are biased or downright full of falsehoods. Researchers have completed thesis work and achieved doctorate degrees based on his life. While the mystery of his

identity still remains, his songs are clearly popular and even sung today by fans and contemporary Bauls spreading the same messages of humanity, secularism and equality. People of the present day and age are responsive to his songs of latent protest against discrimination based on race, complexion and religion.<sup>6</sup>

Lalon's father died while he was very young and therefore he had to face the burden of taking the reins of the family while not fully mature and was deprived of formal education. Lalon got married to help his mother in housework. It has been said that he fell out of good terms with his extended families and he grew frustrated and decided to move to live in the nearby Dashpara village with his mother and wife. From a very early age Lalon was interested in music and attracted a lot of people during his bharara, kabigaan, palagaan and kirtan performances. He used to enchant the audience.

Lalon had once embarked on a pilgrimage to Baharampur of Murshidabad for a dip in the holy Ganges accompanied by Bauldash (his neighbour at Dashpara) and others as a team. It was an arduous journey on foot. During the ill-fated return journey Lalon got infected with small pox. Lalon suffered much as his condition deteriorated causing him to lose consciousness at one point. His companions, thinking he was dead abandoned him, setting him afloat on the river perhaps fearing contagion as well.<sup>5</sup>

The floating near death body of Lalon was sighted by a generous Muslim woman from the Karikar family who saw Lalon twitch his hands and eyelids. Sensing life in his feeble body, she took him in and nursed him back to health. However, the disease left indelible scars on his face and cost him vision in one eye. He was eager to return to his family and home village. After small pox, another tragedy awaited Lalon. Although his family was ecstatic to see him again, alive and well, the village elders had surmised that Lalon had to be banished from the land as the ritual of his death has already taken place according to Hindu customs. Furthermore, they deemed Lalon tainted as he was sheltered in the hospices of a Muslim family. The same journey he made for his religion has ironically turned him away from it and caused him to utterly renounce it along with all forms of identity that could bear the slightest potential of breeding division.

After he left his home village and became a roamer, he met Siraj Shah, a Muslim theologian from the Kahar community. Lalon drew inspiration from his teachings and was initiated in spiritualism transcending all divisions of class, race and religion in society. In his pursuit of higher consciousness, he stations himself, under guidance of his mentor Siraj Shah, in a secluded spot as his domicile (to be known as Lalon's Akhrah) in the village of Cheuria in Kushtia against opposition from the Karikar Community. Lalon's awakening started to reflect strongly in his songs that deeply touched people and a fan following snowballed soon after Lalon's name spread in the nearby districts far and wide in the entire Bengal.<sup>1</sup> Many chose to become his disciple, notably Malam Karikar, Rahim Shah, Lacha Bishshesh, Bholai Shah, Sheetol Shah and Moniruddin Shah.<sup>1</sup> One of Lalon's most decorated disciple was Duddu Shaha who was a very learned man who extensively studied Arabic, Farsi and Sanskrit languages. He offered explanations via detailed investigation of his songs which resonated well with Lalon who was consequently greatly impressed.<sup>1</sup> However, Baul researcher Imamuddin as well as Anowarul Karim and Shonotkumar Mitro have remained skeptics of Duddu Shaha's biography of Lalon as some historical inaccuracies have been found and his attempt at a biography during Lalon's lifetime raises suspicion as he was reputed to conceal his identity and only share his songs.<sup>2</sup> Today, ardent followers of Lalon number in the millions.

Lalon was born 17 years after the battle of Plassey<sup>3</sup> against a backdrop of stringent British rule of "divide and conquer" and his influence might have sowed the seeds of opposition in that era. In those times, superstition and religious fundamentalism were deeply entrenched in the hearts of the people. However, Lalon has inadvertently made many enemies facing persecution by both Hindu and Muslim feudal lords as well as other people in powerful positions who benefitted greatly from the social divide that was omnipresent. According to Abul Ahsan Chowdhury, the Baul religion has faced attempts to be wiped out by

Sharia abiding Muslims and orthodox Hindus. Clerics have vocally censured such songs and ideas.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, Lalon was ranked number 12 in BBC's poll of the Greatest Bengali of All Time.<sup>3</sup>

## UNCONVENTIONAL BIOGRAPHY OF LALON

Lalon's origin is not known. No one knows where he was born, who were his parents, which religious, ethnic or cultural communities he belonged to. So, it is unnecessary to put his date of birth and death. A farmer found him in the Kaliganga river, a tributary of Ganga, used to flow through Kushtia, but now dried out; he was a child of fifteen or sixteen years of age when he was found, nearly dying from smallpox when Malam, a farmer in Cheuria, Kushtia, discovered him early in the morning lying between the muddy edge of the river and the splash of the water flow. Malam called his wife Matijan and took Lalon to their house, treated and took care of him and brought him to life. Then his life began by surviving in between soil and water, in between elemental realities of material being but as a non-being, arouses very deep symbolic meaning among Lalon's followers. That is the reason why the symbolic narrative about the origin of Lalon became integrated.

## LITERARY WORKS

Lalon has been quite prolific in his lifetime composing several thousand Baul songs of which all were transmitted orally until only later in his life when Pandit Manik Shai, Moniruddin Shai and Bholai Shah acted as his scribes. It is claimed by followers that Lalon composed over 10,000 songs but scholars believe that the number is closed to 1,000. His work is now spread throughout Bengal.<sup>6,7</sup>

Some of Lalon's works has been documented by Rabindranath Tagore who was able to collect a manuscript of Lalon's songs from Lalon's Akhrah at Cheuriya and had 298 songs copied from there. He selected 20 songs out of them and got them published in four consecutive issues of the Prabasi, a monthly Bengali-language literary magazine that ran for 60 years.<sup>2</sup> In his written speech on Chhanda (prosody) in Calcutta University in 1341, Tagore highlighted the prosody of three songs of Lalon. Tagore gave an explanation on Religion and Philosophy with quotation from the songs of Lalon in his Hibbert Lecture delivered in France titled "A Religion of Man (1930)", on An Indian Religion. He used quotations from Lalon's song to include in the preface of the book Haramoni of Mansuruddin (Poush 1334). Thus, the authoritative and famed Rabindranath Tagore acted as the mascot to introduce the works of Lalon Shah to the world of educated masses.<sup>3</sup>

The instruments used by Lalon were the ektara, which was a one-stringed instrument mounted on a light wooden or bamboo frame with a v-shaped handle running along the length of the string attached to a hollow can, and the duggi (small drums played by the palm and fingers). These traditional folk instruments have been supplemented or completely replaced with modern instruments to present these songs to the new generation of people in Bangladesh and India. A renowned Lalon singer Farida Parveen said that some of the words are pronounced in a deliberate refined manner to lessen or remove strong influences from regional dialect so that the meanings are broadcast clearly to audience speaking mainstream Bengali.<sup>1</sup>

Among his most famous songs, here is a complete one provided below with a translation prepared for this paper. The scope of this review may only allow analysis of a few of Lalon's works. The words to the song called "I wait here endlessly" transliterated in English as "Ami opar hoye boshe achi" is given.

### **I wait here endlessly**

I wait here endlessly,  
O dear, the Compassionate one,

Take me away if you can.

I remain alone at the ravine;  
Insight came to me at last  
As without your presence  
I was in a deep crisis.

This very moment, I indulge no more,  
Nor do I stray,  
I felt your imminent desertion  
And so, I beg earnest pardon.

On this path of mine,  
If you don't grant me nirvana  
Your reputation will be at stake.  
Lalon asks, would you then still be the most merciful?

Lalon's works have themes of openness, acceptance, relinquishment which deeply reflect the true nature of spirituality. Below is another song called "Milon hobe koto dine" which in English translates to "When there shall be meeting?"

*When there shall be meeting?  
O' when there shall be meeting?  
With the person of my liking!*

*The Swallow stays up, for the day-night entire,  
The dark moon too stares.  
Wish to become your servant dear.  
With only destiny, it cannot be happening.  
When may I meet with the person of my liking!<sup>2</sup>*

Passages from his other famous works are given below.

*Without losing caste I find no God  
Why then do you pride caste  
You untouchable.  
Lalan says – if I had it in my hands  
I would put it in flame.*

*All men say Lalan what's your caste  
Lalan replies, never did see the image it casts.<sup>1</sup>*

"Khachar bhiton ochin pakhi kemne ashe jay" - the unknown bird in the cage, how does it fly in and out? This is a phrase from one of Lalon's most famous songs as well as "Shob Loke Koy Lalon Ki Jat Shongshare" - everyone asks among all castes which one does Lalon belong to. Another of his greatest compositions is "Jat gelo jat gelo bole eki ajob karkhana?" - caste is lost; caste has gone missing.

**The unknown Bird in the cage...  
how does it fly in and out?**



*The unknown Bird in the cage...  
how does it fly in and out?  
Catch it, I would, if I could...  
and put my mind's chains on its feet.*

*There are eight rooms with nine doors,  
with lattice-work in between.  
On top of that, there' s a central yard  
and a hall of mirrors.*

*The unknown Bird in the cage...  
how does it fly in and out?*

*Everyone asks what caste of this world does Lalon belong to (Shob Loke Koy Lalon Ki Jat Shongshare)*

*Everyone asks what caste of this world does Lalon belong to  
Lalon says I haven't yet laid my eyes on the visage of caste.  
Someone has a garland on their neck, and someone a talisman  
Hence one can call them different  
But while coming into or leaving this world  
Where does the sign of caste exist?<sup>2</sup>*

**"Caste is lost; caste has gone missing"(Jat gelo jat gelo bole eki ajob karkhana?)**

*What a queer cry all around!  
None is ready to traverse the virtuous path  
All I see is the dithering over 'yes or no'.*

*When you came to this world  
What caste were you then?  
What caste will you be while departing?  
Why don't you say that?*

*Brahmins, slayers, shoemakers and tanners  
All are sanctified by the same water  
No liking on inspection  
Death will spare none.<sup>1</sup>*

## **PHILOSOPHIES**

Siraj and Lalon shared a deep mentor-apprentice relationship. He firmly believed in Siraj Shah, his Guru, and is quoted as paying his respects in these following words.

*Guru, you are the tune of the tantra  
Guru, you're the counsel to the mantra  
Guru, you're the sound of the instrument  
Without you, how will it play?*

Lalon equated his Guru to the Supreme power - respecting one's Guru was paying homage to God. Lalon was rejected by his own people based on ideology of division prompting him to declare a peaceful war

against it through his songs by disseminating the message that our true nature has no form or ego and thus, religion is only the manifestation of thought or the ego personality. Lalon may have insinuated that we are only the witness of this universe including our own actions and even thoughts. Insistence on dogmatic beliefs rising from ignorance of our true core (which does not condemn, identify or judge) triggers violence.

Anirban Mondal says that for Lalon, ‘mankind’ is the major concern and man’s heart is the only place where God resides whom Lalon calls as ‘moner manus’. Lalon’s philosophy is the philosophy of searching the ‘moner manus’ that has no caste, no religion and no gender bias.<sup>1</sup>

Lalon believed the source of Truth and Knowledge is not an abstract one rather it is a ‘man-guru’ relationship. In one of his songs Lalon says:

*“Dube dakh dekhi mone kirup lilamay.  
Akash-patal khujish jare ai dehe se roy.”*

This means if we think deeply of the existence of God or everlasting tranquillity, we need not to seek it elsewhere, it resides within us.<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of Vasavanna’s comment that rich people build temple externally and poor people make their own bodies the temple.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, creator has been experienced directly which Underhill has described in his essay ‘Science of ultimate’ as “on one hand as a temperamental reaction to vision of reality, on the other as a form of prophecy.”<sup>2</sup>

Lalon has no faith in the display of religious rituals. To him ‘dharma’ is a way which preserves the true nature of man which resides in the human heart and men as human being is the ‘dharma’ or humanity. One of songs where Lalon says

*“Matir dhibe kather chobi;  
Bhoot bhabe sab deva-devi  
Vhole na se esob rupa  
O je manus-ratan chene.  
Jinn-fereshtar khela  
Pecha-pechi alavhola  
Tar nayan hoy na vholo  
O je manus voje dibyagayn ea.”*

To mean that those who know human and humanity (manus-ratan) cannot be enticed by any idol (clay deities) and supernatural things. Those men, who keep belief in human and humanity, sees man as God Himself and humanity as his path. This song echoes the salient principles of the Brahma Community.<sup>1</sup> This particular song by Lalon Fakir poignantly exemplifies the philosophy of a baul-fakir life is:

*Abandon fraudulent ways and take up “fakiri”  
Fakiri laws shun public interface  
Yet you mad cap what will your “fakiri” be like?  
The Hindus and Muslims are so split that  
One dreams of a “swarga” and the other, “behest”. (Capwell, 2011, p. 25)<sup>2</sup>*

The true fakir does not dream of a “heaven” or ultimate reward. They only crave the connection with the divine (just as a lover would seek the companion of his beloved) which they call “Allah” or “Krishna” He wants only his “Allah” and he craves for him just as a lover would for his beloved.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it is the journey that counts and not any reward or achievement in the end.

Sufism in Arabic means peace and submission at the altar of the divine Allah. Lalon's spiritual growth has relevance in Sufism and could be partly attributed to it as well. In the religion of Islam some laws of the faith or "akida" are compulsory which include kalma (acceptance), roja (fasting), jakat (charity), and haj (pilgrimage to Mecca). A fakir denounces these five "akidas" and goes as far as to make fun of them.

*A five times namaz*

*Who can stop him from obtaining shariyat? (Lalon Fakir)*

So, orthodox Muslims are in conflict with fakirs. The fakirs believe in Gurus or "Murshids", and often to them Guru and God are one, which comes close to the Guru mantra in the Upanishads.<sup>4</sup>

Tagore has adapted the baul philosophy in many of his writings too as in Phalguni, Prayascchitto, etc. His representation of the baul is quite authentic, portrayed as the poet-musician-prophet preserving the rustic vibe and quick wit of the fakirs from that era. The baul prophet is liberated from all disciplines and confronts life directly, without any social, religious, or personal ritual.<sup>4</sup>

According to philosopher and writer Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was famous in the discourse of Eastern mysticism to Western audiences, "as long as the mind has the capacity to measure it will create illusion – naturally. So, they have said that as the mind has no other capacity except to measure, therefore what it measures is illusory. That's a philosophy that exists in India – that all the world is maya, (Sanskrit for "measure") an illusion. But really to tell a hungry man the world is a maya, illusion, means nothing at all to him. What matters is not whether there is illusion or not but the ability to observe it all without any interference of thought, a prejudice, dogma, belief and nationality."<sup>1</sup>

Maya is a Buddhist term translated as "pretense", "deceit" or "illusion" that is identified with various meanings in Buddhism and Indian philosophies.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the illusion is created by the self with the mind's constant commentary. Lalon's ideas share very common ground with Jiddu Krishnamurti.

In the song "I wait here endlessly", the last two stanzas are:

*This very moment, I indulge no more,*

*Nor do I stray,*

*I felt your imminent desertion*

*And so, I beg earnest pardon.*

*On this path of mine,*

*If you don't grant me nirvana*

*Your reputation will be at stake.*

*Lalon asks, would you then still be the most merciful?*

These clearly state that the present moment, everyone is innocent and free of sin and holding on to this very moment is the straight path for absolution. On the other hand, when thought occurs it may stem from beliefs or the future (from anxiety) or the past (from memory) that deviates the experience of the present moment which is continuous and not delineated in the mind. Thought is an extremely useful faculty for intellectual processes when consciously focused. Nonetheless, thought is not within any control, it is like a wayward horse without its master. A significant property of thought is its transience; therefore, most thoughts cannot be useful as it has been illustrated by a study that the brain always engage in diametrically opposite neural networks that spawn dissonance in thoughts and emotions.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, we may have strong opinions but we should not necessarily trust them. The occurrence of



thought is natural, however, the adherence to it is a choice that when relinquished yields rebirth; a new opportunity to start again with a clean slate. It is to be noted that any thought, whether it's labelled as good or bad, is still a judgement. To be able to witness the entire thought pass (as well as its judgement, which is simply another thought following its trail) tells us that since thoughts arise and pass (like waves of an ocean) while the observer remains timelessly, this awareness must be much nearer to us than the thought itself. This awareness, when inspected upon closely takes no guise, no gender, no religion, no form and is ageless. No one can find the person or the entity that is aware. Thus, the awareness itself is our true identity. Equality is not simply a way to treat others to be able to live peacefully; it is already established factually waiting to be acted upon through tremendous faith.

Numerous experimental results and ongoing research on consciousness in the modern day by Institute of Noetic Sciences repeatedly validates the existence of consciousness. Cassandra Vieten writes, "is there evidence for a universal consciousness that can be reliably measured and demonstrated in physical reality? From a purely empirical perspective, I'm not sure we have the answer yet, but we see hints in the affirmative."<sup>2</sup> Such is the depth of this song.

## CONCLUSION

Lalon, who was so much the greatest figure in the history of folk Poetry, has thrown all his contemporary into the shed and was born in a time when there was a lot of superstitions, anarchy, suppression and dirty politics in the society. He was not a nationalist, despite the fact the anti-colonial nationalist movement was fermenting in the subcontinent. It does not imply that he is not against colonial oppression, of course he was; he was against all forms of oppression. However, when the oppressed constitutes an identity as a necessary tool to encounter the oppressor, the identity overtakes the universality of human beings. Perhaps he saw the danger in identity politics decaying into fetish. Imaginary identities may appear as real and could become a serious hindrance to resolve human conflicts and cannot move beyond the apparent differences to celebrate the unity of the human beings.

In fine it is clear that throughout his life he wanted to established humanism which he quoted in his songs time and again. He wanted to get the people the world to come under the same flag forming a unique philosophy of life, religion which was universal to all ethnic people of the world forming an indiscriminating society.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitation of this paper is, this paper is written based on secondary sources. Information is taken from books, journal, and research paper etc. Which are given in the references.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is recommended for the people of different quarter like university student in preparing their thesis paper presentation. For the researchers who want know about Lalon's a philosophy, his mysticism and a man as a harbinger of the reformation of the contemporary society. This is also important for Bangla literature to know about him as a literary figure who brought change in philosophy, ideology and in the mind set up of the writer, philosopher, politicians, reformers in the era.

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