ALON is known for a legacy of innumerable songs he had left to us. Known as a Baul, a mendicant singer. Lalon seems to have reached a comparatively large audience in the rural areas of Bangladesh; though, now-adays, it is not difficult to see a surge of interest of the middle class in Lalon's lyrics and songs which, however, tend to remain confined to a kind of investigative curiosity on the one hand, and to a cultural formality, on the other. One of the reasons for a greater degree of Lalon's prominence. in the rural areas lies in the fact that his songs are deeply rooted in a society tellingly characterised by an agricultural mode of production. Farmers, fishermen, daylabourers, boatmen, mendicants, can locate their time and space effortlessly in the images and idioms Lalon used, drawing them from an essentially rural, agricultural ambience : ."the soil once tilled. once watered/ensures gold/ make your plough of sagoo wood./ says Lalon, keep tilling. o farmer/ ploughing you never

Fakir Lalon Shah, as he is known, was born in 1774 in the neighbourhood of Kushtia. now a district in Bangladesh. His date of birth cannot be ascertained with accuracy owing to a glaring lack of biographical material. However, recent researches on Lalon at least tell us that he died at the age of 116 on October 17. 1890. Following his death, Hitokori, a weekly then published from Kushtia, featured a brief but a significant post-editorial on Lalon. Rai Charan Das, the writer of this post-editorial, maintained: "He (Lalon) was unlettered, yet one cannot but find a profound pundit in him after listening to the numerous songs he had composed and sung. No shastra did he read and consult; but, dialogues with him on religion would inevitably reveal him as one well-versed in shastras. Indeed, as a consequence of sadhana, nothing of the essence of religions was left unacquired by him Lalon himself did not subscribe to any established religious belief: yet, every religious community knew him as one of them, as one close to them.

leave".

Das's remarks, thus, indicate the range of appeal Lalon is capable of commanding by virtue of his knowledge and wisdom he so often unassumingly lyricises in his songs "who floats the flower in the river of love?/The flower is a marvel eternal". Received with a great deal of fervour, as if what he has to say is of direct concern to audiences remote from him in their directions and destinies. Lalon is, however, not an easy lyricist, despite the transparency, simplicity and the almost Jimenezian nakedness of diction Lalon uses. What Paul de Man says about Rilke, the German poet, can be applied to Laion as well : "His work resists translation

Lalon Fakir: The Politics of Secular Mysticism

by Azfar Hussain

The Daily Star takes this modest opportunity to present this article to mark the 104th birthanniversary of Lalon Fakir which fell on October 17. A major figure in the nineteenth-century cultural, secular struggle against colonialism, feudalism and religious institutionalism, Lalon, here, is re-evaluated not only as a lyricist, but also as a political mystic remaining both close to, and much ahead of, his time. Lines quoted from Lalon are translated here by the writer, who teaches English at Jahangirnagar University, and has remained involved in alternative readings of Lalon.

his themes are intimate, and his discourse often oblique".

In fact, one can go on to say that even far more than a Blake or a Frost, Lalon is deceptively simple. Meaning in him is always a play, a gamble, agonisingly indeterminate, yet endlessly enchanting, as Lalon himself says: "How does the strange bird /flit in and out of the cage". This metaphor of the "strange bird", evoking a kind of Derridean free play, tends to point to the indeterminancy of meaning in Lalon which can further be lost in the "dark, labyrinthine forests" an image Lalon often uses. evoking for us Barthes' writerly texts as it were! Indeed, interestingly, more than one hundred and fifty years ago, an unlettered Baul like Lalon was hinting that texts are dark, labyrinthine forests with numerous networks of entrances, thus anticipating in a way some of the clues and concerns which tend to impinge on contemporary poststructuralist, post-modernist projects pursued by such radical French philosophers as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida! To traverse the textual

labyrinths of Fakir Lalon Shah is, understandably, no easy

contemporary and modern.

task. However, the present

piece, admittedly, is limited in

scale and scope, and is in-

tended to identify only a few

areas of Lalon's significances in

our life — political, cultural,

Though born in the eigh-

teenth century, Lalon actually

worked in the nineteenth cen-

tury — a period noted for the

blossoming of certain anti-

colonial cultural projects

launched by the middle class

coming into an active contact

with Western, secular educa-

tion. The written narratives,

hitherto conventionally known

as 'history', still have their

spotlights unswervingly fo-

cused on the 'progress' of the

middle-class enhanced by a

series of cultural, political and

aesthetic initiatives usually and

justly attributed to Rammohon.

Vidyasagar, Madhusudan and

Rabindranath: Yes, the anti-

philosophical, textual

colonial struggle committed to the secularisation or historicising of the cultural life of the middle-class is still glorifyingly narrated to the extent that this period comes to be known as 'the Renaissance of Bengal'. But, then, this narrative has undersides, voids, blanks, margins, unidentified spaces. constituting what may be called unwritten history - a territory of silences.

And it is to this history, to

this territory that the Baul

community in the nineteenth century belongs, as certainly does Lalon Fakir alongwith other Bauls and fakirs, such as Madan Baul, Gagan Harkara, Bisha Bhuimali, Pagla Kanai Gangaram. Their contributions the contributions of the subaltern classes from which came most of the Bauls — to the cultural enlightenment in the nineteenth century are often lost sight of, though unlettered Bauls like Lalon were very much involved in a cul-

It would be no exaggeration to say that, more effectively than the middle class itself

and even lying ahead of this

class, the subaltern classes --

the Bauls and the Fakirs -

were opening up spaces of

possibilities in the struggle

towards secularisation, to-

wards freedom of mind and

body. True, despite their re-

markable contributions, Ra-

mmohon, Vidyasagar, Madhu-

sudan and Rabindranath yiel-

ded in varying degrees to

class-limitations at least at

certain points of time, but

Lalon did not. His is an

unswerving, devoted, inspired

struggle in the shape of sad

hana and siddhi: "Seraj says,

'Ealon, you/Hold the Earth your

his kin" is what characterises

Lalon's mysticism which, how-

ever, resists any label as such.

But, the fact that Lalon's mys

ticism is essentially earthy.

worldy, charged with what

Eckhart calls isticheit (is-ness)

or Scotus calls haeccettas

Indeed, holding the 'earth

tural struggle aimed at chal-

lenging conventions and estab-

lishments enforced by the rul

ing colonialist ideologies, reli-

gions and shastras.

We see more agony than ecstasy, more questions

than assertions, more processes than 'progress',

more flux than fixity, more humility than

heightening, and of course, more earth than heaven

in Lalon's songs which, thus, remain very much

(this-ness) is not difficult to miss, given the rhythm of Lalon's movement which is very much earth-bound, thingsbound.

But, here is an interesting paradox one should not ignore. True, the semantic space in Lalon, as we would see, is very much airy, ethereal, slippery, full of pitfalls, as Lalon himself says; "Oh, see, the mind is a game of air," or "the airy room is open" (this open, airy room in fact metaphorizes the textuality of Lalon), thus reminding us of Hopkin's "O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-manfathomed". If this is the nature of the spiritual, psychological semantic in Lalon, his settings are, however, quite earthy, located in the familiar world of farmers and fishermen, labourers and mendicants — the class(es) to which Lalon himself belongs.

One can fairly easily see that Lalon in his songs does not yearn for romantic flights to heaven, flights to the remote and the distant, as has been the case with other mystics. Rabindranath himself exhibits a burning thirst for the remote, as he says: "O, I am restless, I am thirsty for the world beyond", or "not here, not here, but somewhere else". Even, Eliot, in his mystic phase, says: "Not here, not here in this twittering world". Also, William Blake's mysticism allows a certain amount of movement upward; the poet intends to have wings to touch the clouds as it were. The Persian mystic Maulana Jami even goes on to dismiss this world', the here and the now, so as to reach the ahistorical. atemporal arsh (throne, place) of Khuda, rising above the mogam-e-mahmuda and mashuda. But, such a dismissal of the historical and the spatio-temporal - such a form of earthtranscending transcendentalism — is virtually absent in Lalon's songs. In fact, he does not have to leave this earth, or for that matter, even his homestead, for a flight to heaven so as to seek spiritual salvation; for, Lalon tells us that he hears the "voice" near him, or that the "unknown mirror-city" is just adjacent to his "hearth", or that he is yet to know his neighbourhood well. In one of his songs, Lalon puts the case convincingly : "you do not know what happens near you/why then go to

Delhi and Lahore?", thus un-

derlining the need for con-

fronting the unknownness that dwells not in the faraway territories, but resides in the familiar and the dear. The foot of Lalon's mystical-epistemological and agnotological anguish lies in his own land, in the historical here and now. Lalon says: "I didn't have a glimpse of him ever for an instant,/ Close to my hearth is the mirror-city/ Where lives this neighbour of mine". Noticeable as it is, here, Lalon's historicised rootedness accompanied by his search into the self and the reality precludes any possibility of the kind of vertical movement demanded by the Buddhist Nirvana. Even the "strangebird" of Lalon does not wing heavenward in any dramatic alacrity and ecstasy; but, it only flits in and out of the cage. generating more an earthbound, horizontal movement than a vertical one. Perhaps, this is the cage of home, or history, or language, or body, which Lalon locates only to

come to terms with it. This rootedness as well as the historicity of Lalon brings out an essentially secular character of his mysticism which we find more anthropocentric than theocentric, more committed to man than to God. Interestingly, there is virtually no or little mention of "Allah" or "Iswar" in Lalon's songs. The Spanish mystic-poet Jimenez once said, "mysticism is possible even without God". Whether God is absent in Lalon or not, may constitute debates and pose questions; for, in Lalon, there is mention of Sain which provides semiotic equivalent to 'God', though Sain may also mean guru. However, this may safely be said that in the very essence of this Sain, man remains far more than God. Here, one can certainly look into the nature of Lalon's verbal emphasis brought out in one of his songs

"This man resides in that man/That in this". The movement, as indicated, is from man to man. And that is perhaps the source of "the light from the light", to use Eckhart's words.

Laion's emphasis on, and commitment to, man also involves him in a radical polities of mystic deconstruction of sorts, leading him to dispense with religious institutionalism and communalism jazzed up by the ruling colonialist and feudalist ideologies, and also with all the monolithic centres dictated by shashtras held to be



personal life, Lalon did not have any guru or a pir to follow blindly; he did not go to mosques to say prayers, nor to temples to offer puja. Perhaps, like Rousseau, writing he regarded with a distrust as a somewhat debilitating mode of expression. In fact, during his life-time, he did not want his songs to be written, with his fear of the logocentric role that writing may play in immobilizing or freezing the free play of meanings. He himself says. "Let my songs flow like cascades. Let them not be frozen in writing". In fact, Lalon evinces a characteristic distrust of logocentrism though not of writing itself the concept of writing underwent radical changes in recent times, attributable to the deconstructionist project of Derrida), for Lalon's singing was another way of writing 'politicised to the extent of dismantling those settled semiotic stereotypes encouraged by religious institutional ism and scriptural logocentrism. It is interesting to observe that more then one hundred and fifty years ago. Lalon

was capable of providing a text

redolent of politically decon-

structive mysticism: "Every-

one says what's Lalon's caste or

creed, or identity in the

world?/ Lalon says, forms or

signs he cannot fix/lf cir-

cumcision is the mark of a

Muslim/ what happens to a

woman?/ If the Brahminh as a

sign of a sacred thread/ what

about a woman?/ Some sport a garland, while others amulet, Does that alone make any difference?" Questions posed here are rhetorical, but they go on to surface ironies and contradictions inherent in the conventional signifiers imposed by institutional religions, caste-system, and even patriarchy.

In fact, Lalon's mysticism turns out to be radically political, when he begins to embark on a semiotic deconstruction by putting under erasure all those divisive, frozen, self contradictory signifiers of religion and caste — perpetually encouraged by colonialism and feudalism. Interestingly, we find Lalon also opposed to socalled 'nationalism'; Lalon implies that nationalist pride only undermines and divides man. And it is to man, the mystery and the masterpiece. and not to any metaphysical Being with its B prominently capitalised, that Lalon turns endlessly, but always with epistemological angst and anguish.

This angst, as indicated earlier, stems from a burning sense of semantic indeterminacy which, in fact, turns Lalon's mysticism into a continuous struggle with the prison-house of language. Lalon's ceaseless enquiry into the self, into the labyrininths of man's being, brings out the intensity of the struggle which does never assume 'meaning' as a stable, fixed entity; meaning slips and slides, it has twists and turns, never enabling the mystic to rise to a

so-called transcendental level of epiphany and ecstasy where the truth is suddenly revealed. or where the reality is suddenly accomplished. Indeed, a genuinely modern characteristic mark of Lalon's mysticism lies in the fact that nowhere does Laion exhibit any sense of accomplishment and revelation. While Mansur Al Hallaz could at least indicate the supreme, epiphanic moment of spiritual ecstasy by saying "Anaal' Haq" (I am Truth), or while Buddha could signify the moment of Nirvana by such an utterance as recorded in The Vinaya: "I aim the only one who is fully enlightened/ I am tranquiliset/ I am now in Nirvana" Lalon Fakir stays far away from such assertions and accomplishments by singing: "I have not yet seen him even for an instant". In other words, Lalon is continuously involved in the struggle for meanings and knowledge, and as is evident not only from this single in stance but also from numerous songs he had composed; this struggle does not mark any early or middle phase of Lalon's mysticism as such: but it is a continuous process

In fact, for Lalon, the conti nuity of the process is far more important than any fixed mo ment of progress. This is per haps why we see more agony than ecstasy, more questions than assertions, more processes than any progress more flux than fixity, more humility than heightening, and of course, more earth than heaven in Lalon's songs which thus, remain very much con temporary and modern, even to the extent of anticipating some of the key-clues of mod ernism and postmodernism Yes, Lalon is always in the labyrinth of questions, always in the process that would not let him stop: "Am I what am?/ Had I known the answer I would have risen above impu tations/ And my fumblings and gropings would have ceased

Now, it is obvious that Lalon's anthropocentric, secu lar mysticism committed to man, his struggle and work and body, is itself a massive cultural struggle for man's freedom. Showing that reli gious institutionalism, scrip tural logocentrism, communal ism, caste-system, gender dis crimination, and even national ism can only divide and disin tegrate man, and preclude the numerous possibilities of man's freedom, and of life - which is movement made visible. Lalon does not only de-theologize the Bengali culture as other Bauls also did more effectively than the middle class; he at the same time, brings to the fore a politics of man's equality and unity: "This man resides in that man", where this equals and matches 'that'. Yes to sing a Lalon song is not merely to set words to tunes but is to change life itself; for that matter, society also

ESIDENTS of a leafy region just a short drive from Washinton face a peculiarly American dilemma: which national icon do they revere more. Abraham Lincoln or Mickey Mouse?

The choice has been forced on them by the plans of the Walt Disney Company to build a \$650 million theme park in their midst

The park, to be called Disney's America, would take United States history as its theme, with rides and exhibits and other attractions all designed around the nation's

At 3,000 acres, the park and adjacent resort area would be far smaller than Disney World or Disneyland, the company's other US parks. But it would follow a similar formula and could attract 30,000 visitors a day to the site in northern Virginia.

Despite serious financial problems at EuroDisney, a giant park opened by the com pany in France three years ago. Disney remains a magic name in the US, and the company clearly expected its plan would be met with enthusiasm.

That has not been the case at least not to the extent Disney would like. The plan has plenty of supporters, but has also aroused a depth of opposition that caught the company by surprise. So much so that Disney officials have let it be known plenty of other states are waiting in the wings should Virginians decide they do not want it

Ironically Disney's troubles are rooted in the very history it wants to promote. The park would be located at Haymarket, a small town about 45 minutes from downtown Washington, near commuter roads that are one of its chief attractions.

Critics Dismiss Disney's History Park as a Mickey Mouse Idea

Kelly McParland writes from Washington

Plans by the Walt Disney Company to build a theme park near Washington has won lots of support. But many other people think it is a Goofy notion that belittles the rich history of the area.



It also happens to be at the heart of a region richer in real history than almost anywhere else in America.

This part of northern Virginia has soaked up more of the blood, sweat and tears of American history than any other area of the country," said Yale University historian C Vann Woodward "It has bred more funding fathers inspired more soaring hopes and ideals and witnessed more triumphs and failures, victories and lost causes than any other place in the country

George Washington sur veyed much of the region while he was still a young man in search of career. Presidents Thomas Jefferson James Madison and James Monroe all had homes nearby

The first full-scale battle of the Civil War was fought four miles from Haymarket, at Manassas: more than 30 other battlefiedls are within a one hour drive. Confederate General Robert E Lee led his irmy through here on their way to Gettysburg, the turning point of the war 28 nearby

districts are listed in the National Register of Historic

Opponents say Disney would trivialise all this, putting on a plastic history show in place of the real thing. Mike Andrews. a Texas Congressman and a Civil War buff, argues. "The birthplace and battleground of the United States would be ruined in the name of amusement and unbridled develop-

Much of the alarm derives from the belief that Disney would be just the beginning.

Businesses attracted by the huge tourist flow would quickly turn the surrounding region into a ghetto of motels, gas stations, fast food restaurants and

tourist traps, critics say. Disney supporters portray opponents as wrong-headed and elitist, a group of authors and academics who consider history their own personal preserve, suported by wealthy power-brokers who own homes in the region and do not want it disturbed.

"Why don't they spend more time trying to get new roads than trying to shoot down Disney," says Rodney Stringer, owner of restaurants near the site. "Let's think of the living. not the dead all the time. History's great, but why should it mess up the living?"

Stringer and others argue that development is inevitable. It has already crept to the edge of the region. The highway skirting the edge of the Manassas battlefied is one of the busiest in the area, and a strip of motels and burger joints starts less than a mile from the battlefield entrance.

In the end Disney looks ikely to have its way. At Congressional hearings on Disney's plan, legislators over whelmingly pledged not to in terfere if the state wanted the

Virginia governor George Allen said he would not support the plan if he thought it would damage other historic sites, but he insists that it will And the site legislature has

already agreed to spend tens of millions of dollars upgrading roads to carry the cars and buses loaded with tourists. - GEMINI NEWS

KELLY McPARLAND is Washington correspondent of Canada's "Financial Post"

How Rumours Spread on Wings

Thas almost become a second nature of the Bengalees to circulate rumours as soon as one hear them. Sometimes our inquisitiveness and the disrespect for other people's privacy verges on being utterly indecent. But ours is not the only nation in the universe which loves to hear and spread rumours. People all over the globe have a

profound liking for rumours. I have heard it said that once a gueen delivered a child. The doctor whispered to the nurse that the child was swarthy: the nurse whispered to the waiting maid at the door that the child was black; the maid carried the news to the chamberlain and the dignitaries awaiting to hear the good news that the child was as black as a crow'. Next day special bulletin came out with banner headline The queen has given birth to a flock of

It is a case of what the psychologists call 'serial reproduction, in which a fact seen or verbally heard is transmitted from one person to another and during transmission everyone adds or omits certain things from the original fact. according to his wishful desire or interest, till the source from which the rumour originated is lost in the midst oftime. In the case of the rumour

that the queen had given birth

to a flock of crows, no one

could find out the person who

first spread that news. Studies have been carried out to find out the main char acteristics of serial reproduction in general and spread of rumours in particular. Very interesting features have come to light revealing both the by Dr Maliha Khatun

Experiments in serial reproduction consists in telling a tale. Say the story War of the ghosts' to some students and they might be asked in their turn, to tell the story to others who are interested in them and so on. The ghost story, therefore, travels from lips to lips, till at a given time and number of transmissions, the experimenter puts a stop to its further communication. The idea is to find out how a piece of material, written or verbally communicated undergoes changes when serially reproduced by a large number of persons, and how and why

those changes take place. In the case of the above story it was seen that a consid erable amount of interesting changes had occurred both in the context and the meaning. Certain changes were affected in the transformation of the 'unfamiliar' into the familiar', omission of details not connected with the theme of the story as understood by the person; transformation of interesting details in the begin-

ning of the story, etc. Usually in a serial reproduction such as this, the bare idea of the story remains, but details, names of places and dates, if any, invariably drops off. A story connected with England might, in the long run, be attributed to Bangladesh.

The Spread of Rumour

We are all familiar with the common word 'rumour' or gujab as it is called in Bengali and also have heard and relished or have been instrumental, unwittingly, of course, in spreading a certain rumour in

which people have a common interest. The question, there fore, is: how does rumours spread? We all know that from time to time certain rumours gain currency in a society more so in a closed society where freedom of expression and freedom of the press are constrained. Rumours have the characteristics of spreading like a wild fire and after sometime die down as naturally as

they arise. A rumour to be a rumour, in the strict sense of the term. presupposes two things; if one of the two is missing, rumours will lose their currency. First and foremost interest and sec-

ond vagueness of source. At any time, in any given society a number of rumours can find currency. All current rumours, if psychologically analysed, will be found to be based on the dominant inter est of the society at a particular time. We can recall the cropping up of alarming rumours that had found currency in India during the Japanese invasion and consequent occupation of Rangoon and the Andaman Islands, during the

Second World War. If a society or a country is deeply interested in certain matters, rumours connected with that particular matter are likely to gain currency. Such rumours will continue to spread and they will be sustained and fed by the imagination of the people interested in the particular aspects of the thing. As soon as the interest subsides or the source pinpointed, the rumours die

Secondly, there can be no rumour if the source of the rumour can be traced out. The

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