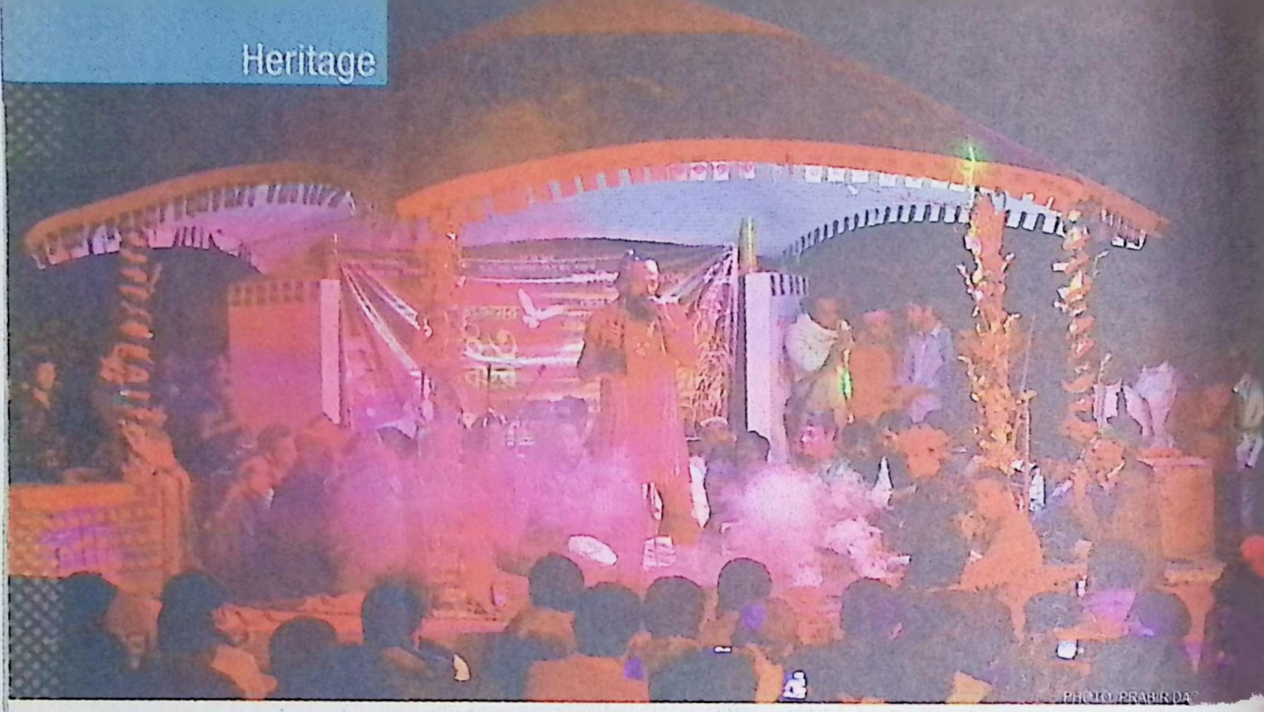


# 'Madness' Within Madness

## A group of young artists and amateurs uphold humanity through singing

**AMITAVA KAR**

Hands wave overhead. Voices shout lyrics and whoop with delight. A father hoists his young boy onto his shoulders. In the tightly packed crowd of a hundred a few dancers make room to jump.

Yet in the songs that Mohammed Jamil is singing, religious tolerance and love for humanity is the central theme. They are songs by Lalon, a nineteenth century mystic minstrel revered by ordinary Bengali men and women as well as great poets and philosophers in the likes of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Allen Ginsberg and Rabindranath Tagore.

> It is not difficult to feel the purity of their heart that knows how to listen to the voice of transcendence (divine) in immanence (man), which may take a lifetime to discover.

The free 4-5-hour 'concert' starts everyday at the *Lalon Charcha Kendra* in the evening around 5:30 to 6. The venue is in the *Suhrawardy Udyan*, a few blocks toward south from *Chobir Haat*, the 'Montparnasse' of middle-class Dhaka. "The performers are mainly a group of about 40 Lalon singers," says Mohammad Zahidul Islam, convener of the artists' forum. "But anyone who has love for Lalon's philosophy and songs is welcome to sing." If you go there on any evening, you may find someone wearing a formal shirt and a pair of slacks—not the typical *Baul* (mad or possessed in Bengali) outfit---submerged in the mystic lyrics of Lalon. No one gets paid—in terms of money, that is. "What we find here is immeasurable," says Zahidul Islam. "It's about brotherhood that transcends politics and religion." The bauls who sing here travel from place to place, as it were, on a vehicle of ecstasy.

Five years ago Pagla Bablu, a wandering baul from Faridpur established the centre that seeks to preach love, peace and tolerance-distant from the turmoil of the present. "I have been practicing Lalon songs for 38 years. If we discern Lalon's teachings, we can find infinity in man." It may be hard to take seriously a man named Pagla, literally meaning the crazy one, but in reality, he has done extensive research with the Ford Foundation on the philosophy of Lalon and performs regularly on national television.

The music's message is one of joyful devotion and improvisatory freedom. Jamil is one of the regular singers here—his songs are about intoxica-