tion of the divine and seeking the spirit within---set to visceral, handclapping rhythms and vocal lines that swoop and twist with passionate volatility.

He carries his songs from serene, hovering introductions to virtuosic euphoria. Long, sustained notes suddenly brake into phrases that zigzag up and down; repeated refrains take on an insistent rasp and becomes springboards for elaborate leaps; quick syllables turned into percussive exchanges with the band— dhol (drum), kartal (a percussion instrument) and ektara (A one-stringed instrument). Each song is a continual revelation: *Maa ke bhojile hoi baaper thikana* (Only the mother knows who the father of the child is). Or, *Manush bhojile shonar manush hobi* (You can be a true human being by serving others).



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

To the audience the songs shimmer like dawn light taking them to an other-worldly intensity.

While the crowd, some of whom sitting on the floor while others standing seem transfixed, Jamil dances to incantatory choruses, heartily intoning his rhythmic lyrics on a repeating note or two and, eventually, twirling like a Sufi dervish. The sheer manic energy of his performance is contagious. As he invariably sings with his resonant and smoky voice---his brown eyes fixed ecstatically upwards, gazing at the heavens, the audience cannot help feeling a little uplifted. To them the songs shimmer like dawn light taking them to other-worldly intensity as the evening turns into night.

As the wandering minstrels of Bengal have plied their devotional music for 500 years, these singers refuse to conform to the conventions of class-conscious Bengali society. Subversive and seductive, wild and abandoned, they have preserved a series of esoteric spiritual teachings on breath, sex, asceticism, philosophy and mystical devotion. They have also amassed a treasury of beautifully melancholic and often enigmatic songs that help map out their mystic path to inner vision. As the night falls, they go back to their homes to their regular lives. Zamaluddin who works as a technician at a university comes here every day to listen. "If we follow Lalon's teachings, there will be no violence and we will think twice before doing something wrong. Lalon sang, "O *mon satya bol, shupothe chol.* (Let my mind tell the truth and be righteous)."

Akil, a businessman, has been coming here for four years. "It's entertainment for my soul. What would I do if I did not come here? Maybe I would go home and watch TV or do something meaningless. I feel like I am a better man when I am here."

The beauty of music is that it is a great equalizer. It's even more so at the *Lalon Charcha Kendra.* Zaman, an employee in the private sector says, "After a hard day's work when I come here, I find solace amidst the maddening chaos of the city. It does not matter who does what for a living. Here we are equals. We share our problems with others and often find solutions."

Although the audience is mostly men---students, professionals, businessmen and so on---you can see a good number of women quietly enjoying the performance. Rahida Binte Islam, a college student says, "Two hundred years ago Lalon dreamed of a society free from prejudices of all forms. Today, standing here we are the dreamers of the same dream. We are happy that Lalon's message of love for humanity is spreading among the young and educated section of the society. They are the ones who will take this country forward. I used to sing Nazrul Geeti and Rabindra Sangeet. But now I feel that Lalon's songs strike a deeper chord in my heart." Rahida's close friend Seema Akhter, a government employee first came here with her. Something made her come back the next day---this time all by herself. She has become one of the regulars since then. "I find Lalon's songs intoxicating. And I sing out of joy"

Today is Thursday; the number of people thronging the venue has doubled. A feast, usually vegetable *Khichuri*, a comfort food made from rice and lentils, will follow the singing and dancing. Talking to them it is not difficult to feel the purity of their heart that knows how to listen to the voice of transcendence (divine) in immanence (human), which may take a lifetime to discover.

If you are there, you got to listen and be silent to hear an angel of humanity dictate. ■