

# The body is my TEMPLE

Lalon Shah, the most illustrious figure in the Baul tradition, died on this day in 1890. In this article translated for The Daily Star, Dr Abul Ahsan Choudhury pays tribute to the rich legacy that Lalon left behind.

IT is said that a Baul is a mystic who is guided by his guru to seek divinity in human beings. The guru is like his guardian angel, and music is his way of giving him guidance. It broadens his mind and illuminates his horizon. And as he masters the language of the body, slowly but assuredly, intractable mysteries that surround life and the universe begin to unfurl before his eyes. Baul music is, thus, a music employed to probe the inherent divinity of the body, search within the self for meaning, and discover *moner manush* (The Man of My Heart) "in the deep, lonely path." But it is also one of awakening for the underclass, of resistance, of class consciousness, and a pursuit of life that is pure and beautiful.

At the heart of the Baul tradition is a seamless blend of these mystical and secular elements. Lalon Shah (1774-1890) was a living embodiment of this school of thought who yearned for spiritual enlightenment, but also rejected blind faith and celebrated the liberating power of reason. In that sense, he was both a mystic and a revolutionary—and it is only through navigating the nuances of this connection does his philosophy truly begin to make sense.

It goes without saying that Lalon Shah was the greatest of all Bauls; the Baul ideology found its most mature expression in his work. His extraordinary musical talent and philosophical theories that underpinned his music were behind a distinct *gharana* of which he was the founder. It should be noted that he was also the man who made Baul music accessible, and acceptable, to the educated class.

Lalon's music, among other themes, revolves around self-examination, tantric meditation, *guru bhakti* (devotion to guru) and humanism. The human body occupies a central place in the Baul ideology. Lalon has variously described the human body in his music—as "abode", "cage", "boat", "Arshi-nagar". The body is a temple, a vessel for the soul and ultimately the supreme being. It assumes greater significance in that way, and exploring the innermost essence of one's being and thereby determining

one's true place in life can lead to the discovery of *moner manush*—that ultimate prize that a Baul spends his life seeking. "Who dwells in this abode of mine / Alas, never saw Him for once in my life," Lalon laments. This quest or longing for oneness with the divine runs through many of his lyrics also.

Another central theme in Lalon's music is devotion to the guru, who initiates the disciple into the Baul tradition and guides him on the path to divinity. In fact, the Baul philosophy is rooted in the guru-shishya tradition. "Lalon deeply believed in guruism," or the guru-centred learning approach, according to an article by the Hitkari magazine, published by writer Mir Mosharruf Hossain, on October 31, 1890.

Lalon lived a long life, having devoted most of it to writing music. The exact number of his songs remains unknown. Experts say it could be over a thousand, although the number of songs known to have survived the onslaught of time would not be more than 700. Lalon was illiterate in the traditional sense of the word. He had no formal schooling. But he was a self-taught thinker, for whom life itself was ground zero for his profound imagination, as his preternatural gift for music spilt unbidden out of his lips.

Lalon freed Baul music from its archaic mode of thought, narrow thematic range, uninspired symbolism and insipid lyrics. For this, he was recognised even during his lifetime, by the likes of Rabindranath Tagore, and afterwards by many others in different countries. It was an extraordinary feat for an illiterate rural poet-musician but he did that in his own right, thanks to his rich compositions and the transcendental quality of his music.

As a musician, Lalon was candid and unpretentious. He stepped outside the realm of conventional Baul music to incorporate non-mystical themes steeped in social messages, including religious bias, communal hatred, caste system, class divides, social injustices, inequality and so on. For his music, he drew inspiration from his own life. In a way, it was a response to the events and customs that shaped him as a person. Early in his life, Lalon was cast out from his society because of his

association with a Muslim family; he also had to go through the agonising pain of being separated from his mother and wife. His first-hand experience of the impacts of the caste system led him to probe the moral nullity of the practice and other such practices that plagued the society of his time. He lived his word and inspired generations to follow suit.

It's important to note Lalon's role in the fight against the class and communal divides and the caste system. Some have called it historic, drawing comparisons to the role of the 19th-century reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy. In this regard, writer Annada Shankar Ray said: "Lalon's role in influencing people's perceptions is as important as that of Ram Mohan Roy's in the reawakening of Bengal." Historian Amalendu De also acknowledged the importance of a comparative study of the role of Lalon and Ram Mohan Roy in socio-religious reforms.

A comparative study should provide us with valuable insights into Lalon's historic role as a reformer and his impact on the society of his time and in the subsequent periods. Lalon's influence was primarily in the rural communities but many who lived in the towns were also deeply moved. Secular humanism, which underpins Lalon's philosophy, was also a cornerstone of the reawakening movement; it's remarkable that such messages should come out of a rural poet with no formal education and a society so deeply divided along religious lines.

Lalon believed in a humanity stripped of the pretence of religion, class division or the promise of an afterlife—beliefs that pervaded his entire gamut of work, and shaped his thoughts on the internal (mystical) and external (non-mystical) transformations that he believed human beings were capable of achieving. But this has to be done in this life—for "will there be another life like this? / Do what pleases you in this world soon"—and through searching within ourselves for strength and meaning.

Dr Abul Ahsan Choudhury is a professor of Bangla at the Islamic University, Bangladesh. The article was translated from Bangla by Badruzzaman Bay, a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

## WORLD FOOD DAY 2018

# The goal of 'zero hunger' in Bangladesh



MD ARIF HOSSAIN

THIS year's World Food Day is not a happy occasion. After many years of continual progress, the number of malnourished people has begun to rise again. Today, there are 821 million hungry people in the world, a shocking outrage on a planet where there should be plenty of food for everyone.

The key theme of World Food Day 2018 is Zero Hunger, and the need to achieve this goal by 2030 at the latest. According to the United Nations, all of us have a part to play in achieving this goal—governments, NGOs, farmers and individuals.

reflects the state of chronic undernutrition, has decreased from 55 percent in 1996-97 to 36 percent in 2014.

Although Bangladesh has achieved a lot over recent decades, a third of children in this country are still classed as "stunted" because of chronic malnutrition. Figures from 2014 suggest that about a quarter of the total population is food-insecure, which translates to 40 million hungry people, and 10 million of those suffer from acute hunger.

According to the World Food Programme, Bangladesh's progress is too slow for it to meet its current targets. For example, stunting will need to decline by 5.3 percent per year if the government's target for the year 2021 is to be achieved, but the rate at which it has actually declined in

healthier diets with more varied fruits and vegetables.

One of the recent success stories has been the rapid adoption of Bt brinjal by Bangladeshi farmers. Brinjal, or eggplant (or *begun*), is an important culinary vegetable but has historically suffered from severe pest infestation and resulting in high rates of pesticide contamination. Since the Bt brinjal was deployed by Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), some 33,000 smallholder farmers—about 20 percent of the nation's total brinjal farmers—have begun to grow the crop. Overall, they have reportedly experienced a 61 percent reduction in pesticide use and a six-fold increase in income.

In addition to more varieties of Bt brinjal, public-sector scientists in Bangladesh are also engaged in



It is time to leave the arguments of the past behind and focus on improving the situation for farmers in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

**Stunting will need to decline by 5.3 percent per year if the government's target for the year 2021 is to be achieved, but the rate at which it has actually declined in the recent past is only about 2.5 percent. According to the 2014 Global Nutrition Report, Bangladesh is not on course for meeting any of the 2025 targets agreed upon at the World Health Assembly in 2012.**

Bangladesh has come a long way from being a chronically food deficit country in the 1970s. In the last three decades, even as its population has more than doubled, food production has more than kept pace with the population growth. There has also been a rapid decline in poverty, which has fallen from 56.6 percent in 1991-92 to 31.5 percent in 2010.

A recent cross-country study has concluded that from 1997 to 2007, Bangladesh had achieved one of the fastest prolonged reductions in child undernutrition in recorded history. The rate of stunting (low height-for-age) among children under five, which

the recent past is only about 2.5 percent. According to the 2014 Global Nutrition Report, Bangladesh is not on course for meeting any of the 2025 targets agreed upon at the World Health Assembly in 2012.

This is not sufficient progress, and will not help the country achieve the fully developed country status by 2041, as the government has proclaimed as an aspiration. So how can we develop? It goes without saying that farming needs to modernise urgently and become more environmentally sustainable at the same time. The rate of pesticide use is far too high and is a danger to health. People need to adopt

collaborative efforts to develop local varieties of high-yielding rice enriched with vitamin A, potatoes resistant to the devastating late blight disease, which is currently controlled through the application of fungicides, and pest-resistant cotton that also can help farmers curtail their pesticide use.

All of these can contribute to a better situation for smallholder farmers and improved nutrition. However, many NGOs have spread misinformation about these improved crops because of fears about "GMOs" and suchlike. Again, the interests of farmers are not served by attempts to keep them in poverty without agricultural improvements.

Today it is time to leave the arguments of the past behind and to focus on improving the situation for farmers in Bangladesh, as part of a wider effort to reduce poverty and also tackle malnutrition more widely. With the thoughts of people everywhere on achieving Zero Hunger on the World Food Day, there is not a moment to lose.

Md Arif Hossain is Visiting Fellow, Cornell Alliance for Science, Cornell University, USA. Email: mdarif.hossain@cornell.edu

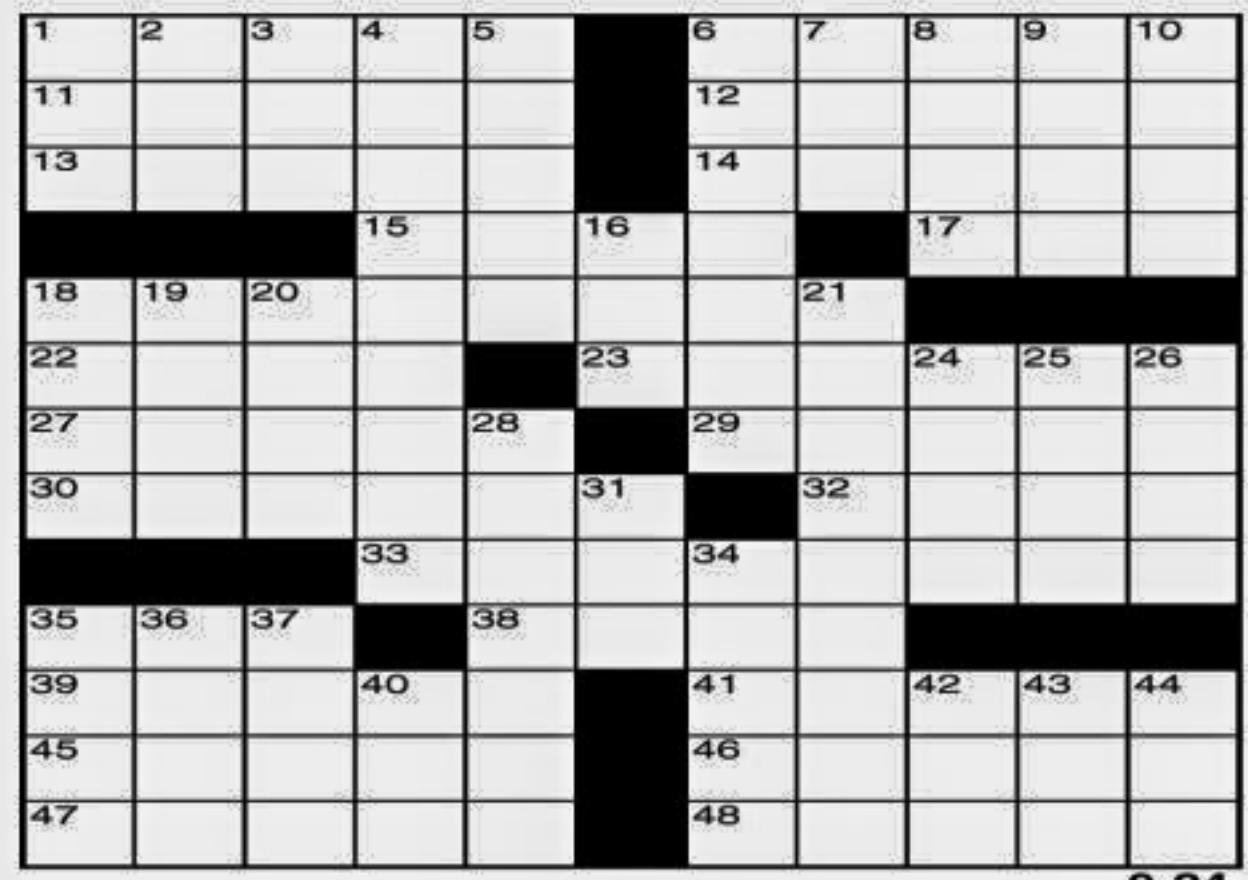
## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Puccini opera
- 6 Marsh croakers
- 11 Radio station
- 12 Open, as a bottle
- 13 -- Dame
- 14 "The Evil Dead" director Sam
- 15 Abel's brother
- 17 Bear's lair
- 18 Like some guitars
- 22 Cry like a baby
- 23 Rival of Athens
- 27 Floor-board
- 29 Sailing boat
- 30 Method
- 32 Give a hoot
- 33 Food critics, often
- 35 Shirt protector
- 38 Like most NBA Players
- 39 Without letup
- 41 Viscounts' superiors
- 45 Flight part
- 46 Worried
- 47 Thick, as fog
- 48 Negligee buy

### DOWN

- 1 Shipping weight
- 2 Lennon's wife
- 3 Plopped down
- 4 Move around
- 5 Provinces
- 6 Root vegetables
- 7 Not -- dare
- 8 Corrosive stuff
- 9 Titled woman
- 10 Whirl
- 16 -- Been real!"
- 18 Rudiments
- 19 Grant of films
- 20 Has debts
- 21 Do the math
- 24 Crowd sound
- 25 Ripped
- 26 Gorillas and gibbons
- 28 Put a tarp over, say
- 31 Farrow of films
- 34 Golf shoe feature
- 35 Honcho
- 36 Fascinated with
- 37 Swain
- 40 Quick taste
- 42 Stoplight color
- 43 Young fellow
- 44 Pig's place



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SCARF GUMUP  
PADUA AMINO  
ATOLL BASSI  
REBELS CON  
TRE ATFAULT  
ASS PEALD  
EARELS  
BARREL TOL  
GELATOS TORE  
LAP SHADES  
UTICA OFAGE  
TUNIS RATON  
SPEAK TREND

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

এক ছাদের নিচে দেশীয় ফার্নিচারের সবচেয়ে বড় আয়োজন!

**১৫তম জাতীয় ফার্নিচার মেলা ২০১৮**  
15th National Furniture Fair 2018  
১৬-২০ অক্টোবর ২০১৮, সকাল ১০টা - রাত ৯টা

ইন্টারন্যাশনাল কনভেনশন সিটি বঙ্গুরা  
গুলনকশা (হল-০১), পুষ্পচাহ (হল-০২)

প্রবেশমূল্য নেই, আছে আকর্ষণীয় ছাড়!

সম্প্রদায়

বাংলাদেশ ফার্নিচার শিল্প মাসিক সমিতি

সম্প্রদায়

সিটি পলিস

একি পলিস

একি পলিস

সম্প্রদায়

বাংলাদেশ ফার্নিচার শিল্প মাসিক সমিতি

সম্প্রদায়

সিটি পলিস

একি পলিস

একি পলিস