

# Baul Lingoes: An Enigma

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Baul songs, stuffed with enigmas and codes, sum up the existential philosophy of *deha tatta* (Truth in the Body), probably the central theme of Baulism, outlining the aphoristic concept according to which 'whatever is in the universe is in the receptacle (the body)'. Bauls hold the view that the body is the microcosm of the universe, and since everything is contained within it all worships should be centered round the body. Like snails, they have a nature of

difficult for others to realize the meanings of their lingo. Not only did they use their own terminology, they also assimilated lingoes from the Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi and Vaisnab *sadhaks*. They have veiled the words of their meditation under various images and symbols. Therefore, to understand an andro-centric Baul song, conscious efforts should be made to decode it which is filled with riddles, using imagery from daily life-activities, such as

organs, etc., which has nine or ten openings or *doors* which are ears (2) nostrils(2), eyes (2), mouth(1) anus(1) and sexual organ(1). In the Baul tradition, the tenth door may refer to the female sexual organ or to a lotus with two petals located between the eyebrows. The second form is also an invisible subtle body, called *sukma sarfra*. The Baul conception of the subtle body for the most part resembles that of the Hindu tantras and of other yogic texts. They adopted it from the Hindu tantras - the system of *chakras* (centers) arranged along the spinal column from the perineum to the top of the head. These *chakras* are visualized as lotuses of varying number of petals and are often referred to in Baul songs by the number of petals.

The seven principal *chakras* in an ascending order are as follows: the *muladhara chakra* at the base of the spinal column, with four petals; the *svadhithana chakra* in the region of the genitals, with six petals; the *manipur chakra* at the level of the navel, with ten petals; the *anahata chakra* at the level of the heart, with twelve petals; the *visuddha chakra* in the region of the throat, with sixteen petals; the *ajna chakra* between the eyebrows, with two petals; and the *sahasrar chakra* at the top of the head or above the head, with a thousand petals. Muslim Bauls also describe the body in terms of *mokams* (Arabic *maqamat*), "stations" or "stages." The Sufis of Bengal equate the four *mokams* with the *muladhara*, *manipur*, *ajna*, and *anahata chakras*. In addition, they include another *mokam*, the *la mokam*, equivalent to the *sahasrar* or *ajna chakra*. *La mokam*, literally meaning "no place," is termed so because it represents the transcendent space where all dualities are reintegrated into the Supreme.

The subtle body contains a network of numerous channels or naps that serve as conduits for breath. As in Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, three naps are of prime importance in *sadhana*. Bauls refer to them by the Hindu tantric terms *ira*, *pingala*, and *susumna*: The *ira* is on the

left of the spinal column, the *pingala* on the right, and the *susumna* is in the middle. These naps are identified with the holy rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Saraswati*. The place where they come together in the *muladhara chakra* is named the *Triveni* which is an important locus in *sadhana*.

The aim of the Baul *sadhana* is to reverse the cosmic process, which is to return to the *Sahaj* state - the original condition of non-duality that existed before creation. Male and female principles, *Puruja* and *Prakerti* or *Sakti*, are contained within the microcosmic body of each person, mirroring the macrocosm. The male principle, equated with semen, resides at the top of the head in the highest *chakra*, the *Sahasrar*. Here the Supreme exists in a state of perfect unity without any tangible qualities or form; here He is the *Atal Ishwar* (the motionless Lord). Since in the *Sahasrar* everything is integrated into the motionless Lord, there is no duality between the enjoyer and the enjoyed, between God and the devotee. For the *sadhana* to be successful, it is necessary to bring under control the six enemies (lust, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity, and envy) and the ten sense organs (the five organs of perception and the five organs of action). Unbridled lust (*kama*) personified by the god *Kama* (also called *Madan*) is man's worst enemy. In order to affect the transformation of lust (*kama*) into true love, *Prema*, the male practitioner, imagines himself as a woman. By "becoming a woman," it is felt his union with a woman will no longer be motivated by desire for physical pleasure. The active form of the Supreme, called the *Sahaj Manush* or *Adhor Manush* becomes manifest in the lowest *Chakra* i.e. the *Muladhara*, during a woman's menstrual period. It is at this time that the Bauls perform their *sadhana* to "catch" Him.

Sexuality plays an important part in the Baul search for *Adhor Manush*, the ultimate truth. Like the tantrics, Bauls believe that the means to experience

divine love is through the union of the physical forms of man and woman.

Bauls call the divinity by a number of names, reflecting their eclecticism, such as Allah and Ahad ("the One"), Krishna, Man of the Heart. The other names of the divinity are : Uncatchable Moon, Unknown Man, Natural Man (*Sahaj Manush*), Uncatchable Man, Golden Friend, Unknown Bird, or simply Lord (*Shai*).

Whatever ways the divinity has been expressed, the intentional use of enigmatic language, however, poses an impediment to common understanding. Besides, the language of their songs is intended to veil their ritual significance from the unskilled who would find these esoteric practices rather objectionable, and at the same time to reveal to the initiated the ineffable truth which defies logic and cannot be communicated directly through ordinary discourse. And they have made their approaches towards meditation somewhat discreet for quite a few definite reasons: the prohibition of the Guru, a fear of their core ideas being misunderstood, a disbelief in the common comprehension where the efficacy of their practices of ascetic austerities might disappear, and the controversy they might engender meditating on female sexuality.

Paradoxes in Baul songs, thus, are of two types: those that do not seem to have any esoteric significance other than hinting at the ineffable and paradoxical nature of the non-dual *Sahaj* state, and those that when decoded yield a hidden meaning alluding to secret doctrines. And although at times, they may sound vague, their simplicity, vigor and felicity of expression that apply to a specific religious context as well as to everyday life make them some of the best poetry ever composed in the entirety of Bangla literature.

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coiling things within themselves. They do not like to let others know about their sacred whispers, objectives and rituals related to their worship. The techniques associated with their austere devotion, their regrets, suggestions, beliefs as well as their heartfelt appeal and surrender to the Creator are expressed in special terms. Except these Bauls themselves who have extensive knowledge of fluid-gnosis, it is very

fishing, farming, sailing, trade and even robbery, foreclosure, and litigation as spiritual metaphors.

Bauls, like tantrics, locate cities, mountains, rivers, pilgrimage places, virtually everything on the map in the human body. Like other tantric yogic practitioners, they conceive of the body as having two forms: the first form is the material or gross body (*sthula sarira*) made up of the skeleton, muscles,

# On City of Mirrors: Songs of Lalan Sãi

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Lalan Sãi, also known as Lalan Fakir or simply "Lalon" (d. 1890 CE) was a non-sectarian poet and mystical philosopher who lived in the historically undivided Nadia district of Bengal, today split between Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. During his lifetime he experienced the effects of British colonialism in South Asia, as society had become rigidly divided into different birth-groups (*jãt*) according to their adherence to Vedic, Vaisnava, Islamic or Christian doctrines. One major objective of his lyrical riddles was to challenge these rigid notions of cultural, political, and sexual identity, and as a result, his folk songs express a longing to understand the nature of humanity, the duties of humanity, and the ultimate destination of humanity. His songs also contain thinly veiled references to esoteric yogic practices (*sãdhanã*), including body-centric Hãthayogic techniques that can be found in the medieval tantric Buddhist and Nath-Cult literature.

It is believed that Lalan Sãi was born towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. in the environs of Kushtia. It has not been possible to this date to determine the exact date or place of birth of this great sage, or the religion of his family. Nevertheless, it is an established fact that throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century he expressed and circulated his vision through lyrical songs, primarily among lower social classes in different villages of the wider Kushtia and Jessore districts.

Lalan employed an internal dialogue in his lyrics posing provocative questions against the Hindu reformation movements harkening back to a Vedic tradition. He also criticized the *shari'a* law of Islam in its various forms. In doing so he introduced and followed the idea that within a person there is an intellect reached through devotion and love. He desired to transcend society's gender division and he also rejected the social norms of his day that treated women as lesser than men, and instead desired to give them the highest position. As a result, many of his songs are steeped in profound metaphors and symbols that contain his high respect for women.

The songs of Lalan Sãi are also distinguished by another characteristic: within the songs he expresses a lack of

faith in the established religious belief, and instead positions within the human being a "Teacher of People" (*mãnus-guru*), a creator. He eliminated any conjecture (*anumãn*) at the root of the meaning of practice (*sãdhanã*), and expressed the philosophy (*darshan*) of *jãvanmukhã* and *bastubãdã*. Of this he had intimate experience—Lalan Sãi's main inspiration is hidden in secret practice (*sãdhanã*), which is called either experiential knowledge (*marphatijãnã*) or the body-centered practice (*dehakendriksãdhanã*). He resorted to the human body to discern the genesis and root of the creative principle. In his universal practice and at the root of the meaning behind his songs, the human body and respect for human birth are given the foremost acknowledgment. In this he transcended the doctrines of all religions, and in looking deeply it is possible to identify the unity of the Nãth tradition (*sampradãy*) with that of Lalan's songs.

In 2017, Oxford University Press, New York, USA had published a book of translated songs of Lalan Sãi with original Bangla versions. The book titled *City of Mirrors: Songs of Lalan Sãi* was actually translated by the US scholar Dr. Carol Salomon, and edited by Keith E. Cantú with me. This book title is very significant in recording and understanding Lalan's philosophy and is the result of nearly thirty years of work by Dr. Salomon. She also exchanged letters and stayed in the company of adepts (*sãdhu-sanga*) at the homes of some of the most famous artist-adepts (*sãdhak-silpi*) of Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. It is important to keep in mind that the performances of Lalan's songs have a natural place among the company of adepts, because it is in this company that the Lalan-panthã adepts share knowledge and perform their individual practices.

From the 1980s to 2008 C.E., Carol Salomon was invited to visit the homes of many different Lalan-panthã adepts throughout Bangladesh. Aside from this, in March 1981, she participated in the Lalan Academy of Kushtia's folklore conference and Lalan festival. During this time Carol remained close to the artist-adepts with her audio recorder and notebooks, compiling music lyrics, song meanings, and differences in

versions. Furthermore, she photocopied the notebooks of Lalan-panthã as well as the manuscript of Rabindranath Tagore's compilation of Lalan songs held in Santiniketan. Then she set to her own work on establishing authoritative versions of Lalan's songs and translating them into English. It is important to mention that she would begin her work of translating and assessing versions of the songs by handwriting the song, and then she would make emendations using pen and paper. She would then type up her notes using a typewriter or computer. She deeply engaged herself working alone as a translator-researcher, and through limitless patience and consistent effort she applied to her work of translating the songs of Lalan Sãi!

It can be ascertained from Carol Salomon's various files and papers that as early as 1984 she was requested by American and British publishing houses and university publishing societies to continue with her translation work on the songs of Lalan Sãi, and that she sent some of her work off for publishing that included translations of a few songs along with a contextual proposal. As far as can be known Carol did not receive a positive response, and yet she continued her work of translating the songs of Lalan Sãi. Neither feeling dejected nor deterred, she continued her work with diligence and affection.

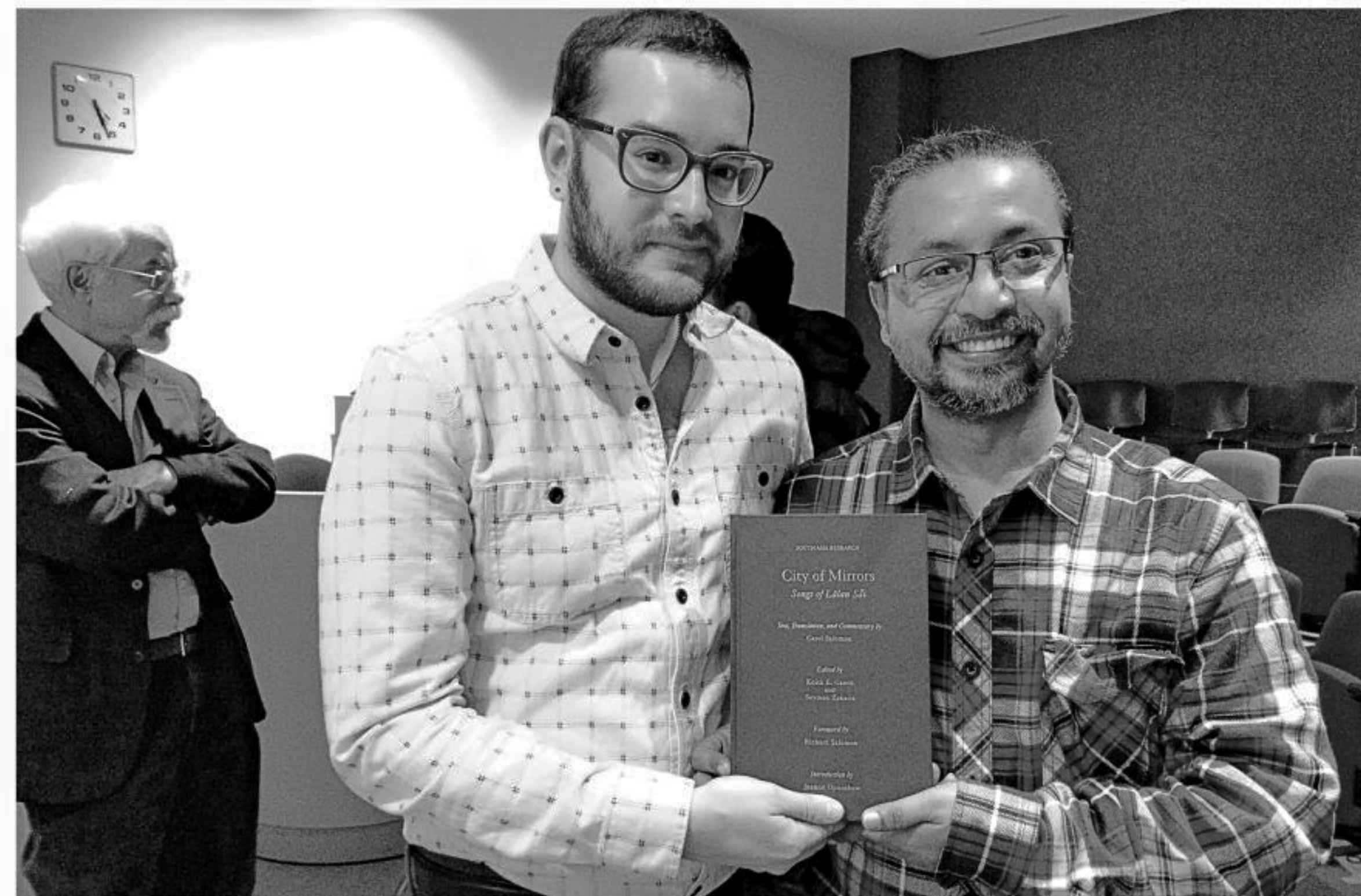
At first Carol's wish was to assess, translate, and annotate one hundred of Lalan's songs, and subsequently the number turned into one hundred and fifty. Interestingly, the numbers kept on increasing and in the end Carol had decided to analyze, translate, and annotate around two hundred of Lalan's songs. In her assessment, Carol held the Lalan-panthã adept-artists close to her heart and communicated directly with them through interviews, exchange of letters, and by recording their songs in their own voice. As a result, the translation of Carol Salomon is also a testament to the continuing practice of Lalan Sãi's songs.

Unfortunately, Dr. Carol Salomon died in an unanticipated accident on March 13, 2009. We did not want, however, for this untimely circumstance to leave her translation work unpublished. So, with help from her

former colleagues and family members as well as the adept-artists, I collected photocopies of Carol's handwritten letters and other kinds of memorabilia. In 2012 Carol's closest friend and dear husband Dr. Richard Salomon invited me to give a lecture at the University of Washington in Seattle for the Department of Asian Languages and Literature entitled, "On the Respect and Admiration towards Carol Salomon by the Adept-Artists of Bangladesh." While staying at Richard's house I was able to exchange ideas with him and we decided to publish Carol Salomon's

Bengali versions of all the songs into Roman script. He also corrected many of the errors in Carol's translations, annotations, and footnotes, and exchanged ideas with Richard Salomon and myself during the process of editing. Here, I must express my heartfelt gratitude to the world famous Bãul researcher Jeanne Openshaw for writing the analytical Introduction.

For assisting this book in various phases of its development, I would like to thank the famous scholar on performing art, Ms. Lubna Mariam, my dear friend Dr. Thibaut d'Hubert at the



book of translations of Lalan Sãi's songs.

The work on editing this book began in 2012. In February of 2013, I gave a speech to the Department of Music in the University of Chicago on Carol Salomon's methods of researching and translating the songs of Lalan. In 2014, the student-researcher and aspirant-artist Keith E. Cantú (now he is a PhD candied of the University of California, Santa Barbara) joined the work of editing. There is no hesitation in mentioning that after joining as an editor he transliterated the original

University of Chicago and his wife Stéphanie d'Hubert, Bangladeshi friend Nazrul Zahid, Nandini Abedin of the University of Washington, Professor Hakim Arif and Salma Nasreen at the University of Dhaka, and literary critic and translator Nurnnabi Shanto.

Finally, we are very grateful to Cynthia Read, who is an editor of the Oxford University press. We are also thankful to Julia Turner and Drew Anderla of Oxford University Press.

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