

Fakir Lalon Shah: Love, life and liberation



ONE cannot decisively introduce—much less sum up—the life and work of Fakir Lalon Shah (c. 1772-1890). An extraordinary figure known for orally composing thousands of songs in Bengali—

one who had no formal education and came from the poor peasant class—Lalon is variously celebrated, canonised, even commodified and corporatised in Bangladesh today. He has many disciples and numerous listeners and admirers in both rural and urban areas in the country.

But we do not know exactly when and how where Lalon was born. Yet a place called Chheunriya, near the town of Kushtia in Bangladesh, remained the consistent site of Lalon's life-practices at a juncture when Bengal was colonised by the British. And today it is widely known that Lalon died on October 17, 1890 (the Bengali date is Kartik 01, 1297). Following his death, the November 1890 issue of the *Hitaikari* magazine—published from Kushtia—maintained that it was difficult to find biographical material on Lalon, and that both he and his disciples remained silent surrounding the questions of his birth and even his overall identity.

And, indeed, that silence is not by any means pointless. That silence rather bespeaks Lalon's radical opposition to—and even his deeply emancipatory predilection for abolishing—all forms and forces of identity politics which deepen oppression predicated on caste, religion, class, and gender. Yet we continue to find many “communally” motivated, speculative, and sectarian accounts of Lalon's birth and identity. Of course, Lalon was not a political activist in the contemporary sense. Contrary to popular characterisations, Lalon was not even a *Baul*, as he never identified himself as one, nor was he a *Sufi* in the strictest sense. Nor was he a metaphysician or a mystic or a spiritual guru or even a musician in the Western sense of the terms. He was a *Faqir* in whose musical universe—rooted as it was in his

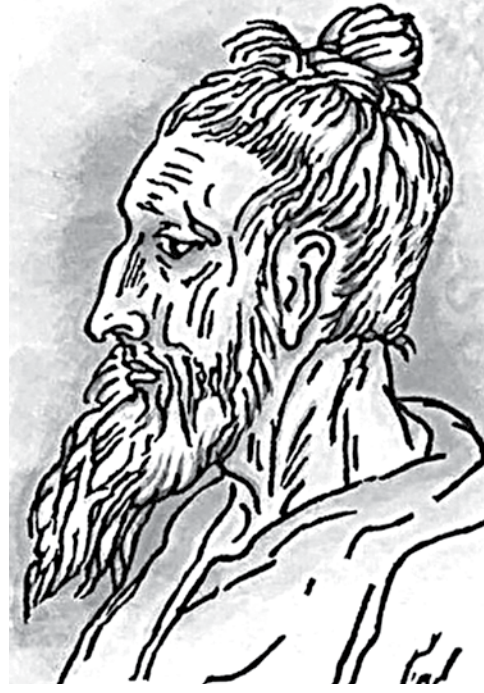
class and community—the poetic and the philosophical and the political profoundly intersect in the interest of love, liberation and life.

Further, Lalon belongs to a homegrown tradition of *sadhana*—an indigenous constellation of rich and rigorous practices that combine the elements of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Jainist traditions. As I argued elsewhere, Lalon's songs and practices embody and enact deep interactions among certain aspects of the Buddhist *Shahajija path*, Guadia *Vaishnavism*, and even the *Kartabhaja*, while, however, Lalon resists and ranges beyond either eclectic epistemological zodiacs or syncretic closures as such.

Speaking of the homegrown tradition of practices, then, it is customary in certain circles to invoke such radical figures as Kabir (a 15th century saint-poet), Chandidas (a medieval poet of Bengal), Nanak (the founder of Sikhism), and even Tukaram (a 17th century Marathi poet) as the philosophical predecessors of Fakir Lalon Shah. One may trace certain intriguing and even instructive correspondences among them. Yet Lalon is strikingly and constitutively different from his so-called precursors.

In fact, to make sense of Lalon's work, it is important that we pay attention to the Nadia (now a district in West Bengal, India) school of thought—a social and oppositional movement in its own right—represented by a trinity of radical 15th century figures like Chaitanya (1486-1534), Nityananda (1474-1540), and Advaita Acharya (1434-1559), ones who denounced the caste system and other forms of discrimination. This movement gathered remarkable momentum throughout Bengal during the reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah, whose conception of Islam was resonant with the movement itself. It is also significant that Vijay Gupta—who wrote his *Manasamangal Kavya* during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah—compared the Sultan to Arjuna himself.

In any event, Lalon—in his songs—alludes to those three figures as “tin pagols,” while underlining his deep connections to them. But Lalon carves out his own distinctive space and arguably represents the height of the *tin-pagol* tradition in colonial Bengal by way



Fakir Lalon Shah (October 17, 1774—October 17, 1890). ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

of pointing out—in the spaces of his own songs—the constitutive contradictions and even inherent inconsistencies of oppressive structures and systems like casteism, communalism, and even patriarchy. Lalon, for instance, is famous for raising the question: “If a Brahmin male/ Is known by the thread he wears, / How is a woman known?” and for this question: “A Muslim is marked by the sign/ Of circumcision; but how should you / Mark a woman?” (all translations in this piece are mine). Lalon's interventionist and emancipatory interrogations made him a genuine predecessor to the revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam while Rabindranath Tagore admired and promoted Lalon's work in different contexts. The American Beat and radical Buddhist poet Allen Ginsberg was even “influenced” by Lalon, although Ginsberg ended up exoticising and even Orientalising Lalon.

Space limits here do not permit me to dwell on the entire range of influences Lalon exercises, nor do they allow me to zoom in on the complexities of his relationships with the Nadia movement as such. But I intend to touch on a few more issues that seem generally unheeded. True, Lalon was a *Faqir*—one who produced the kind of music that creatively and even unprecedentedly theorises becoming and being. For instance, Lalon theorises the *koron* which may be taken as *sadhana-as-practice* and the *param* that represents the “Divine” Subject realised in the unity and even indivisibility of the body and the being, imbricated as they all are in the materiality of the here-and-now. I think it is crucial to emphasise that theorising itself remains integral and even organic to Lalon's work, challenging the superficially aestheticist dogma that theory and creativity are incompatible or mutually exclusive.

Lalon even uses the word *tattva* (theory) directly in his songs. And he is arguably one of the most radical theorists Bengal ever produced—one who advances at least three distinct but interconnected theories in his songs: the theory of the body (*dehatattva*), the

theory of the self (*atmatattva*), and even the theory of language (*bhashatattva*). For him, of course, the body constitutes the concrete site of the production of the truth which is the One—the embodied One. Running counter to the Western or Cartesian tradition of the mind/body split on the one hand, and, on the other, to the old tantric traditions in India that characteristically deemed the body to be a means to an end, Lalon conceives of the Body as a totality unto itself—one in which, to use Lalon's own words, “everything resides” (“sobkicchu roy”), including the “adhora” (one that is symbolically or otherwise unrepresentable, one that is more than the Kantian *Ding an sich* or the unknowable thing-in-itself).

To put it simply, for Lalon, then, to know the body is to know the self and nature and even the universe, while the self itself is constituted corporeally, dissolving the borders between the subject and the object, while enacting the embodied One. In one of his mathematically inspired songs, Lalon ardently asserts: “At the end, the One remains.” And the One is not minus the many but with the many. Now Lalon views language as a bodily and spatial and social phenomenon all at once, while also calling attention to its limits and the power of silence. In all this, though, Lalon does not subscribe to any brand of transcendentalism, nor does he endorse any epistemological certitude or closure in the Western tradition. Finally, a word about Lalon's version of “humanism,” which I think is more than anthropocentric humanism as such, given that Lalon's embodied One encompasses not only human beings but also all living beings and life-forms—the entirety of Nature. And, indeed, honouring the legacy of Lalon today is to unsettle and even combat and destroy all those oppressive structures and systems like capitalism and colonialism that continue to hurt the integrity of nature, humanity, and the body, to say the least.

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But Lalon carves out his own distinctive space and arguably represents the height of the tin-pagol tradition in colonial Bengal by way of pointing out—in the spaces of his own songs—the constitutive contradictions and even inherent inconsistencies of oppressive structures and systems like casteism, communalism, and even patriarchy.

Reversing the tide against Sawfish loss from the Bay of Bengal

On this International Sawfish Day, fishers, traders and consumers are being reminded that protecting the species is not just an altruistic idea but can help serve everyone in the long run



ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

BY the fishing villages of Alipur and Mohipur municipalities in Kuakata, things are afoot. A team of conservationists, field workers, researchers, artists and videographers have put their heads together to drive home a crucial message in favour of Sawfish, lovingly dubbed the king of fishes.

They have put together a campaign to help change the conversation around this mystical creature.

Facing a steady decline over the years, this intimidating and strange fish has entirely disappeared from 21 countries that it was historically found in, resulting in an international call for action, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Shark specialist group.

Of the five available species in the world, Bangladesh has a record of three Sawfishes and of them, the most widely reported is the Large-tooth Sawfish, which has gone extinct from 30 of its range countries making the Bay of Bengal population even more crucial.

According to data collected by Alifa Bintha Haque (Assistant Professor at Dhaka University's Department of Zoology) and her team from all over the Bangladesh coast between 2016 and 2018, at least 40 sawfishes have been landed. And now news of more landings keeps coming in but the data remains to be analysed. What is alarming is their death seems to continue.

This is a sharp contrast to the scene from around a hundred years back. Sawfish rostra were reported to be “all over the beach” of Cox's Bazaar in the 1960s. In the early 1900s, sawfishes in general

were reported abundantly in the Bay of Bengal and were considered to be either “very common” or “common” in the estuaries and mouths of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, according to “A Survival Blueprint for the Conservation of the Large-tooth Sawfish in Bangladesh” published by the Zoological Society of London.

And to help kickstart a change in the narrative towards conservation, this campaign with the tagline “Save Sawfish—the friend of the seas” that encourages their live release has kicked off in Alipur and Mohipur.

The team mainly comprising of Alifa, a research assistant Nazia Hossain, field coordinator Shahnurjaman Khan and campaign consultant and researcher Arafat Hossain, spreads the tagline in Bangla “*Shagor er bondhu korat mach*”, which loosely translated means, “Sawfish is a friend of the sea”.

The campaign essentially aims to change the narrative surrounding Sawfish and the idea is to create a relationship with the species beyond its utility as something to be eaten or sold or as a cure for cancer, which is completely unfounded by the way.

It is important to establish the narrative that this fish is also important for the seas and rivers and since it is important for the seas, it is important for fishers themselves to raise awareness on its ecological importance.

There are four components to this campaign, view-exchange meeting with traders, view-exchange meeting with fishers, door-to-door campaign to sensitise consumers and locals who are neither fishers nor traders and wall-art or murals with some key messages and images intended for everyone.

The campaigners are also providing a hotline number to every fisher, trader or boat owner who comes to the meeting and are providing small clips on their mobile phones which try to capture the

message that Sawfishes are important and they need to be saved.

The team is also trying to encourage and train fishers to release the sawfish live if it does get caught in their nets using a live release guide. Another crucial shift in the narrative is the start of a conversation between fishers and traders and consumers that there is actually no cancer curing property in Sawfish meat, which does drive up its demand in the market. Everyone understanding that there is no such benefit will also hopefully make people realise there is really no point in buying this fish at such high prices or any price at all.

The guide has been created from previous research, questionnaire surveys, workshops and interviews with fishers who have previously caught a sawfish and provided their insights on how a live release could be successful. So it is an effort to use their local and practical knowledge to save the sawfish.

During the study period previously, the team always asked fishers how they believed would be an ideal way to release the Sawfish so components incorporated in the live release guide do not come with the preconceived notion that only researchers know best, but it is an amalgamation, a meeting point for both academic knowledge and fisher's local knowledge.

There is also a deliberate effort to avoid telling fishers that they should not catch the fish because it is a punishable offence or it is protected under the law, instead they are trying to drive home a more wholesome narrative—that saving the species will also help the ecosystem to thrive in the long run, or that it does not really have any health benefits. The team are also trying to serve a reminder that fishers too remember catching this mysterious, odd-looking giant of the sea and they risk losing this memory forever.

To push people towards meaningful change is difficult, even if it happens to be something as important as saving nature. A key difference between other animals and a fish is in case of other animals, humans share a different relationship with them or interact differently, they can see them, they have an aesthetic value or religious value. But with most fish, it is more often than not relegated to the realm of food source, believes Alifa B Haque. And so, she is not wrong in saying just how difficult it is to get the conversation for conservation going.

Traders will also get a gift of a wooden sawfish cut-out to act as a reminder of the importance of Sawfish, to make sure the fish gets etched into their psyche.

The campaign is being piloted in Alipur and Mohipur for now, since there is a dearth of resources and these are the areas where researchers found a large number of landings and a prevalence of prejudice among people about the Sawfish. But that does not mean efforts will be concentrated in just one area and it should not be.

The team is also aware that simply doing this campaign is not going to be the answer. This is just scratching the surface. People will be left with meaningful reminders, but the work must continue to ensure everyone in this network of traders, fishers, boatmen, consumers and stakeholders on a national level do their bit.

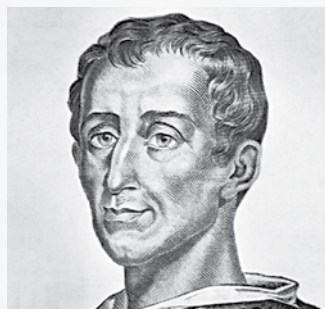
This is merely the start of the conversation. While such sensitisation programmes must continue across the coastline where sawfishes are caught, landed and eventually traded, so must research.

Because without science, it is hard to decide on conservation actions. And without prompt and decisive action from all fronts, nature may have to count more losses.

Abida Rahman Chowdhury is a journalist at *The Daily Star*.

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QUOTABLE Quote



MONTESQUIEU French philosopher (1689 - 1755)

Religious wars are not caused by the fact that there is more than one religion, but by the spirit of intolerance... the spread of which can only be regarded as the total eclipse of human reason.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

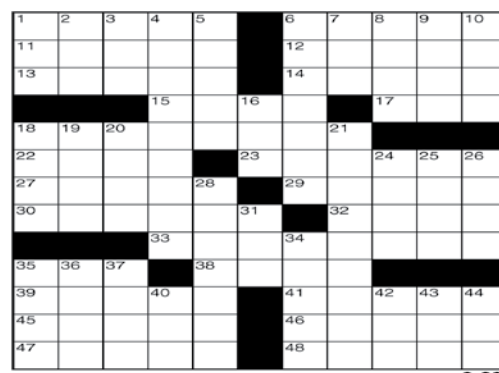
- 1 Start of a Caesar quote
- 6 Encrusted
- 11 Water lily's kin
- 12 Rust compound
- 13 A bunch
- 14 Varnish ingredient
- 15 River stoppers
- 17 Pig's place
- 18 Thoughtful and logical
- 22 Bitterness
- 23 Enjoys the reef
- 27 Lunkheads
- 29 Find darling
- 30 Arrangements
- 32 Sketched
- 33 Very easy
- 35 Gratuity

- 38 Pine or palm
- 39 French farewell
- 41 Modify
- 45 From the neighborhood
- 46 King or czar
- 47 Healer Barton
- 48 Like cacti

DOWN

- 1 Sick
- 2 Pigeon sound
- 3 —loss (confused)
- 4 Confused
- 5 School paper
- 6 Island north of Sardinia
- 7 Chopping tool
- 8 Smooch
- 9 Fix text
- 10 Turn down

- 16 Peaks: Abbr.
- 18 Basics
- 19 Cairo's river
- 20 Bunches
- 21 Got cozy together
- 24 Tedious sort
- 25 Son of Zeus
- 26 Uses a needle
- 28 Kitchen tool
- 31 Knight's title
- 34 Approaches
- 35 Soft mineral
- 36 Reversed one
- 37 Print unit
- 40 Corn spike
- 42 Oscar winner
- 43 Writing tool
- 44 Attempt



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.