

Fakir Lalon Shah: A Lighthouse in the Unreal Bazaar of the Blind

Lalon was not real. A man who had more than three birthing stories and was reborn more than once can't be real. He was either Hindu or Muslim, or both—or neither. Nobody knew who he was, where he was from, or how old he was. The average life expectancy from 12th to 19th century was fifty five, but this unreal man is believed to have lived an impossibly long life—covering the life span of two people. He was rumored to have either walked on his 100 years old feeble feet to visit the dashing zamindar Tagore (who was in his early thirties), or sat still for God knows how long for the other Tagore brother to draw a sketch of him.

BY FAYEZA HASANAT

He spoke of women on equal terms at a time when women were not even people in the country where he lived (and they still are not—neither in the land of Lalon nor in the world that we proudly claim as ours. The world still belongs to men and will be so until they destroy it with their 'manly' hands. This however is a separate issue, which is why I have kept it in the veil of parenthesis here). Lalon not only avowed respect for women but also took his ideas beyond gender binaries. And the most unreal thing about him is that he valued human existence more than he valued religion specific rituals and conducts, and was inclined to find the God/Good in every human soul. He could neither read nor write, and yet he was the one who knew. I find it simply impossible for this man to be a part of a reality that fed on willful blindness and discrimination of all sorts. And yet, there he was, a centenarian, standing stout against all odds, in defiance of all the androcentric and egotistic superficialities of religions and social customs, singing his songs of the soul.

There was not one but at least three popular stories regarding Lalon's birth and early age. According to one story, he was a Hindu youth, who fell ill with small pox during a pilgrimage and was left "dead" by the roadside. The 'dead' man was brought back to life by a Muslim family, who nursed him back to health. Upon returning home, Lalon found out that his family had already performed his funeral by completing his 'sraddha,' the dispatch ceremony for his departed soul. The dead man Lalon's death sentence doubled up since his second life was given to him by Muslims. The outcast youth left home and established an 'akhra' in a nearby place, where he lived the life of a *baul*, surrounded by his disciples.

In another story, the orphan Lalon was adopted by a man named Siraj Sain, who became his *guru* in the matters of music and spiritual lesson. The third story puts him in Nabadwip of West Bengal, where a youth named Lalon became a foster son of a *Kayastha* woman named Padmabati. In all the stories, he was depicted as a youth with charismatic personality, with the power to win the hearts of anyone who came to know him. This man of many births lived his life in search of the eternal truth and died his



PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

final death while singing his songs of devotion. According to one description (noted by Mobarak Hossain Khan in his *Lalon Shamagra*, published by the Bangla Academy in 2007), he spent his last day on earth singing all night long with his disciples, and breathed his last at around eight in the morning. His last words to his disciples were, "I'm going now." But he was never gone—this unreal man. More than a hundred years after his death, we are still mesmerized by the magnanimity of his humanistic philosophy. He dreamt of a society where there would be no division and difference among people. "When will such a society be created? In which there will be no difference / Between Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists Christians, or race and caste?" Lalon ended the song the following way:

No one will chant for
Religion, race, class, or caste
Lalon Fakir asks in earnest,
'Who will show me such a day?' (author's translation)

Lalon did not let his identity get branded by any religious or sectarian tropes. He rejected everything that

binds and accepted everything that frees the human spirit. He assimilated in his songs the core ideas from the Vedic, Upanishadic, Vaishnavite, Buddhist, Tantric, and the Islamic Sufi philosophy. In hundreds of songs, he dealt with the issues of religion, gender, class, caste, nature, the ontology of human body and spirit, along with the origin of God and/or the Supreme Soul. A man of no knowledge, he became the lighthouse of wisdom, singing for unity, equality, respect, and peaceful coexistence. Even though he was influenced by the spiritual message, the tantric practices, and the stylistic structure of the *Charjapadas*, Lalon refused the overtly sexualized symbolism of the female body of the Tantric tradition. His was a somewhat pangender view in which he glorified the woman as an individual and as an inherent pair of a man's inner self. In many of his songs, he dealt with the image of the devotee as a feminine form of the [masculine] self. Take for example the song in which he sings, "will the guru let me stay by his foot as a maid?" or the one where the devotee

regrets for not having the chance to serve his *guru* as his maid:

"The yearnings of my heart
My hopes were not fulfilled
I wanted to sit by his feet
And serve him as his maid

Impeding it, my Fate made me suffer in the world." (author's translation)

Lalon is always a thing of mystery to me. An enigma. Or maybe a priori to the mystery of all mysteries that we claim as ours for being humans—as *Ashraful Mokhlukat*—the best of all creations, and yet so low. A critique of sectarian convention, Lalon challenged the notion of social superiority in many of his songs. In one song, he sang, "Everyone asks, what is Lalon's caste?"

"I've not seen what caste looks like," Lalon says" (author's translation). In another one, he made fun of those who freak out fearing contamination of race and caste. However, my most favorite is the one where he denounced the world as a marketplace of the blind:

"This is the bazaar of the blind

Blind are the *vedas* and the doctrines
Blind also is my mind." (author's translation)

It is not only the fear of losing caste. It is the fear of losing blindness. It is the fear of light that haunts the blind. Those that are not afraid of light are not real; they can't be, because in this world and time, we are only awakened by death and darkness. We have lost our desire to see each other as equal humans; we fancy ourselves to be the judge of humankind because we are better than others, or because we are men or belong to those that are men. We read the invisibility of God as our sight/site of power and strength, and we use that power to oppress women, nature, and the marginalized people of all genders, races, and ethnicities. In our dying world, we are in need of some light. We are in need of a centenarian singer of the soul named Lalon.

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"No Home or Land, No Country, No Earth": Plight of the Refugees

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

"War is vast. It reaches across the horizon, loftier and older than peace. Killing came before war, but it might also be that refuge preceded war. It got attached to war like a child holding on to its mother's dress with one hand, the other waving to those it does not know. The refugee: a flute weeping over its original image before there was a camp."—Ever Since I Did Not Die, Ramy Al Asheq

"Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country," says a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) report. Very often, the report reaffirms, these people are forced to flee with nothing but clothes on their backs – and there are more than 27 million of them! It is happening right now in Ukraine, among the Rohingyas, in the Middle East and in more places.

Recently, Lesya Bakun, a Ukrainian refugee described how she had to hide from bomb blasts in Kharkiv when the war started. She described the experience in an interview: "You hide in a self-created bomb shelter while the shelling continues. When it stops, you sit there for some time, trembling and unsure; and by the time you get your guts together to go buy some food or supplies ... the shelling begins again, and you cannot leave. You just sit at home, frozen, in the constant state of crippling fear." Lesya managed to flee and find refuge in neighbouring Lithuania and then to Poland. But her cousin who defended the factory of Azvotal is now a prisoner of war; "taken by the Russians." She had relatives in Mariupol and all their homes were erased out of existence.

And yet, there is another group of people in Asia whose land has been taken away – the Rohingyas of Arakans. Technically indigenous, they had been in Myanmar for hundreds of years. In the golden age of Akbar, the second volume



of *Ain-ee-Akbari*, a manifesto written in Persian around 1590, and later translated to English, gives out:

"To, the south east of Bengal is a large country called Arkung (or Arakan) to which the Bunder (or port) of Chittagong properly belongs. Here are plenty of elephants, but great scarcity of horses, also camels and asses are very high priced: neither cows nor buffaloes are found in this country, but there are animals of a middle species between those, whose milk the people drink, they are pied and of various colours. Their religion has no kind of agreement either with the Mahomedan or Hindoo. Twin brothers and sisters may intermarry, and only mother and son are prohibited from it. They pay implicit obedience to the will of their priests..."

Now, the descendants of these people live devoid of a home in refugee camps. The

Rakhine people are said to be "stateless." In her short story, "The Magic Staff," based on her experiences with such camps, writer Shaheen Akhtar describes their plight in the words of a child refugee: "What sort of justice was this? No one would remain – no father or mother, sister or brother, no home or land, no country, no earth. What was his fault? Why did he have to spend his life at a camp – like a cockroach under a tarp?"

The child had been sent to 'safety' by his grandmother, the 'safety' of a refugee camp where he found himself trapped and alone. His plight is no different from Lesya Bakun's. Ramy Al Asheq, the Palestinian-Syrian poet born in a refugee camp, wrote on his own experiences and thoughts in his book, *Ever Since I Did Not Die*:

The camp is necessary, sometimes, for remembering that the lands across the

river dropped off the face of the map when we weren't looking. The map: geography on paper, its borders drawn by the tank and the mortar shell for eternity. The mortar: a tiny cosmic explosion that re-arranges habitats by the whims of whoever launches it. One night, the mortar launcher awakened superstition from its sleep and dragged it away with an F-16 saying, "I cannot exist ... unless there is a refugee."

Al Asheq makes me wonder, are weapons dependent on the existence of refugees?

More than seven decades ago, a war was ended by the deployment of a weapon that annihilated Man and Nature – the atom bomb. Did these bombs create refugees? Or, just destruction? There are survivors – and they recall the horrors and some at least plead for peace, peace so that there are no more refugees. The daughter of such a survivor, Kathleen Hilliker Burkinshaw, wrote in *The Last Cherry Blossom*, about the violence and the horror as well as in a bid to emphasise how Japanese are much the same as Americans, with similar concerns. While her book has been taken up by the UN as part of their peace keeping effort,

Burkinshaw tells us how the scars linger: "I lived with the scars of the atomic bombing during my childhood watching/reacting to the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) effects on my Mom and I still live with it each day with Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (chronic, progressive neuro pain disease that affects the sympathetic nervous system). Doctors have said that the damage to my immune system from the radiation my mom was exposed to from the atomic bomb, attributed to this."

What does such a survivor have to do with refugees? They are perhaps, more scarred physically, than the refugees in camps described by Al Asheq or Lesya Bakun. But are the refugees on the run any better off? It is difficult to ignore the pain and emotional scars of Al Asheq and Bakun for not having homes. They are both comparatively young. But if you lose your home in your mature years – say you are sixty – can you restart a new life in a country where the local residents see you as a threat or a competition for sharing resources?

Then there is a new label cropping up these days – climate refugees or people who have lost their homes to climate change. A report made by the Ecological Threat Register predicts, "Over one billion people live in 31 countries where the country's resilience is unlikely to sufficiently withstand the impact of ecological events by 2050, contributing to mass population displacement."

In a world that finds it hard to accept or tolerate differences, that is still unable to get over the hatred fanned hundreds of years ago by historical divides, how will a flood of such refugees be accommodated? Perhaps, it is time to evolve towards a world painted by visionaries and change our mindsets to become more accepting and tolerant, to paint anew a beautiful world for the future of our progeny.

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