

The Role of Lalon's Followers in Preserving and Propagating His Humanist Ideals

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Abstract:

This research article delves into the pivotal role played by Lalon's followers in preserving and propagating the humanist ideals central to his philosophy. Lalon, a prominent 19th-century mystic and poet from Bengal, espoused a unique blend of spiritual humanism that transcended religious, social, and cultural boundaries. His teachings, deeply rooted in the values of universal brotherhood, social equality, and the rejection of caste and religious orthodoxy, found resonance among his immediate disciples, who became instrumental in sustaining and disseminating these ideals. The article examines the methods employed by Lalon's followers to ensure the continuity of his philosophy, including oral traditions, musical performances, and community gatherings. Through a close analysis of these practices, the study highlights how Lalon's followers adapted his teachings to the changing socio-political landscape of Bengal while maintaining the core principles of his humanist vision. Additionally, the research explores the challenges faced by these followers in a society resistant to Lalon's radical ideas, and how they navigated these obstacles to keep his legacy alive. By investigating the contributions of Lalon's followers, this article sheds light on the broader impact of his humanist ideals on Bengali society and culture, emphasizing the enduring relevance of his teachings in contemporary times. The study concludes by reflecting on the role of cultural transmission in the preservation of philosophical ideas, illustrating how Lalon's humanism continues to inspire new generations through the efforts of his devoted followers.

Key Words: Lalon's Followers, Humanism, Culture, Philosophical Ideas etc.

Introduction

We are currently facing challenging times at individual, societal, national, and global levels, with the situation exacerbated by a growing wave of intolerance. This issue, unfortunately, has become closely associated with religion in our present social context. A potential remedy for this detrimental phenomenon can be found in the traditional Baul cult, which emerged from the soil of Bengal. The Baul tradition is a mystical-religious movement that developed during the early interactions and synthesis of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions. Its deeper origins can be traced back to the pre-Vedic Tantric traditions. The Baul philosophy is deeply influenced by Dehatatwa (body-centric philosophy), mysticism, Sufi-Tantric practices, and Vaishnava elements. Lalon, the poet, lyricist, visionary, and social reformer, played a significant role in fostering the synthesis of these major religious communities during his lifetime, particularly in central Bengal, around the Padma-Garai basin. In this regard, he is seen as a true successor to spiritual figures like Kabir, Rajab, Paltu, Dadu, Chaitanya, Nanak, and Tulsidas. The contributions of several notable disciples of Lalon, including Gagan Harkara, Kangal Harinath, Sarva Kshepi Bostomi, Gonsai Ramlal, Gonsai Gopal, and Mir Mosharrif Hossain, were particularly noteworthy. These disciples played a crucial role in spreading Lalon's philosophy and promoting equal respect for both Hindus and Muslims. In doing so, these mystic followers of Lalon also helped establish a connection between Lalon Shah and Rabindranath Tagore during Tagore's stay in Selaidah.

In the latter half of the 18th century, two significant reformers emerged: Raja Rammohan Roy and the great Baul Shah, also known as Sainji or Fakir. Rammohan Roy is often hailed as the first modern man of India and the pioneer of the Bengal and Indian Renaissance. He was intellectually connected with figures such as Radhakanta Deb, Derozio, Debendranath Tagore, Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen. In contrast, Lalon was a rural figure, uneducated yet profoundly impactful. His deep compassion for the oppressed, lyrical brilliance, profound understanding of Dehatatwa, and equal respect for both Hindus and Muslims marked him as a true reformer, visionary, and leader of the masses. Interestingly, unlike Rammohan, Lalon was surrounded by a group of mystic figures such as Gagan Harkara, Sarva Kshepi Bostomi, Kangal Harinath, Mir Mosharrif Hossain, Gonsai Ramlal, and

Gonsai Gopal. These rural yet truly enlightened scholars played a crucial role in conveying Lalon's ideology and philosophy to their new patron, Rabindranath Tagore, the remarkable landlord of the Tagore Estate in Selaidah.

There has been considerable debate about whether Rabindranath Tagore and Lalon ever met. Lalon passed away in 1890, just a few months before Tagore arrived in Selaidah, making it unlikely that the two ever met in person. However, Tagore did gather information and collect Lalon's songs from his disciples, as previously mentioned. What is noteworthy is that Lalon and Rabindranath shared similar views regarding the Baul tradition, their way of life, and their perspectives on the world and universe. Both emphasized the inner essence of religion, steering clear of external rituals and formalities. Their religion was centered on deep, heartfelt connections among people, characterized by simplicity and sincerity, rather than artificial and formal practices. Influenced by Lalon, the landlord Rabindranath transformed into Rabindra Baul in his attire, habits, and humanitarian behavior. According to the Czech scholar Dusan Zbavitel, Rabindranath might not have achieved such greatness had he not encountered the mystical Bauls of Kushtia.

Scholars have been studying Lalon for over 150 years. This scholarly interest began with the publication of "GrambartaPrakashika" by Kangal Harinath in 1872. Later, Raicharan Das wrote an introductory note on Lalon in "Hitakari" on October 31, 1890. Jyotirindranath Tagore even sketched a portrait of Lalon on the Padma Boat on May 5, 1889. Rabindranath and Indira Devi were admirers of Lalon. Following this period, figures such as Bholanath Majumder, Basanta Kumar Paul, Md. Monsuruddin, Dr. Upendranath Bhattacharya, and Dr. Motilal Das contributed significantly to elevating Lalon to legendary status. Abul Ahsan Choudhury, a scholar and researcher from Kushtia Islamic University, marked the centenary of Lalon Shah's death with his edited volume, "Lalon Smarokgrantha". Lalon's humanistic approach to religion, reflected in many of his songs, brought people closer together, particularly from the two major religious communities. In one of his songs, he says:

O how long are we to wait
For the birth of a society
Where castes and clans and lebls
Like Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist Christian will be forgotten?

He further attacks on the constraints of devious religion:

The shape of religion eludes my vision
Circumcision tells a Muslim from others,
But what is the mark of his woman?
The Brahman is known by his thread
How do I tell who is a Brahmani?

In another significant development, Lalon emphasizes the core concept of Dehatatwa by stating:

"My own identity eludes my grasp
Only with self-knowledge can you know the unknown."

According to Baul doctrine, as articulated by Lalon, the human body is the dwelling place of the Achin Pakhi, or Atma (the soul), which continually seeks its ultimate union with the Paramatma, the supreme being. The mystery of creation is also central to this philosophy, particularly the profound phenomena of the menstrual cycle and seminal fluid, which are considered the primordial waters of creation, as well as the five elements that constitute the universe, including the human body, which is imagined to be the abode of the Atma.

One of Lalon's major disciples was Gagan Harkara, who even influenced and inspired Rabindranath Tagore. Gagan, whose real name was Gagan Chandra Dam, worked as a postman by profession. He was known for his lively and enthusiastic nature, often indifferent to his own well-being. His famous song, "Where shall I meet him...", caused a significant stir. Years later, during his renowned speech "An Indian Folk Religion" in France, Tagore recalled, "The first Baul song which I chanced to hear with any attention profoundly stirred my mind... 'The man of my Heart' to the Baul is like a divine instrument perfectly tuned. He gives expression to infinite truth in the music of life." Tagore was deeply moved and enchanted by Gagan's song and the Baul philosophy it embodied. It is noteworthy that Gagan's original melody for the song "Where shall I meet Him" was later adapted by

Tagore for his patriotic song "Amar Sonar Bangla," which became the national anthem of Bangladesh after the country's independence in 1971.

Harinath Majumder, also known as Kangal Harinath, was the author of many Baul songs and a disciple of Lalon. During Rabindranath Tagore's time in Shilaidaha, Harinath was closely associated with him. He led his own group, Fikirchander Dal, and, along with his guru Lalon, stood in opposition to the Tagore Estate during Debendranath Tagore's era. Harinath notably published a series of articles in his "GrambartaPrakashika", accusing the Tagore landlords of mistreating the peasants. This effort led to a British investigation, a significant achievement at the time. As a result of Kangal's actions, Lalon was viewed by the common people not only as a spiritual mentor but also as a friend and advocate for the oppressed peasants. Rabindranath, however, requested Kangal not to publish his 2,000-page diary to protect the reputation of the Tagore Estate.

It had long been believed that only foreign rulers were the enemies of the native peasants. However, Kangal Harinath was the first to realize that even native landlords contributed to the peasants' suffering. Consequently, he stopped sending his articles to Calcutta for publication in newspapers patronized by native landlords. Instead, he established his own Mathuranath Press at his home in Kumarkhali and published "GrambartaPrakashika" to highlight the plight of Bengal's poor farmers during the mid-19th century. Despite this, Rabindranath appreciated his Baul songs and personally collected them.

During his time in Shilaidaha, Tagore developed a close relationship with SarvakshepiBostomi, who affectionately called him "Gour Sundor More." She would visit the ShilaidahaKuthibari twice daily for meals and often brought Gandharaj flowers for Rabindranath. In his essay "An Indian Folk Religion," Tagore wrote about her, saying, "One day in a small village (Selaidah) in Bengal, an ascetic woman from the neighborhood came to see me. She was known as 'Sarva Kshepi,' meaning 'the woman who is mad about all things.' She looked pained and said to me, 'You are always engaged in reading and writing, but you don't know 'Beloved of my heart.' Truly, she represented the spirit of India." Tagore immortalized this pious woman in his short story "Bostomi."

Rabindranath also had two Baul saints as near neighbors during his stay in Selaidah: Gonsai Ramlal and Gonsai Gopal. Although Gonsai Ramlal had a short life, Gonsai Gopal's son, Rasbihari Joarder, noted that Tagore was quite interested in both saints and often called Gopal to discuss the Baul tradition. Bamacharan Bhattacharya, an employee of the Selaidah Estate, assisted Gurudev in collecting Gonsai Gopal's songs.

Mir Mosharraf Hossain was another significant figure in this context. He published his famous lyrical volume "Sangeet Lahari" in 1887, which contained a collection of 91 songs of various moods and styles, including 15 Baul songs. The most famous of these is "Robena deenchirodin; sudinkudinekdin diner sandhya hobe."

In fact, Mir Mosharraf was among those mystic scholars who built a bridge between Lalon and Rabindranath Tagore, allowing the latter to experience the confluence of Sufi, Vaishnava, and Lalon's mysticism in its profound humanistic and monotheistic form.

Conclusion:

The followers of Lalon Shah played an instrumental role in preserving and propagating his humanist ideals, ensuring that his teachings and philosophy continued to resonate beyond his lifetime. Through their dedication, they not only maintained the spiritual and philosophical essence of Lalon's Baul tradition but also expanded its reach to broader audiences, including influential figures like Rabindranath Tagore. By articulating Lalon's messages of unity, equality, and spiritual liberation, these disciples created a bridge between different religious and social communities, fostering a culture of inclusivity and humanism in Bengal. Their efforts highlight the profound impact that dedicated followers can have in sustaining and spreading the teachings of a spiritual leader, ensuring that Lalon's legacy remains vibrant and relevant in the ongoing discourse on humanism and religious tolerance. The study of Lalon's followers underscores the importance of communal efforts in the preservation of cultural and philosophical traditions, and their role in shaping the spiritual landscape of the region.

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