

Lalon, Lalon Geete and Society: A Humanitarian Socio-Philosophical Discourse

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Tradition bound India's heart is its folk culture. Through the folk culture we can observe the breath of real India and its people's psychic graph. Multicultural theme and multi-religious philosophy are the bases of this folk tradition. In Baul tradition of Bengal, a folk tradition cum a folk religion where the songs of Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890) called as 'Lalon Geete', which expounded humanity over all social and religious dogmas. As he has no faith on the religions and society which are based on so many binaries like caste, class, gender, region etc and as his main concern is humanity, his songs are the main weapons against those binaries. To Lalon, 'man' is his main concern and man's heart is the only place where God resides whom Lalon calls as 'moner manus'. Lalon's philosophy is the philosophy of searching the 'moner manus' that has no caste, no religion, no gender bias, after all on realization of which presence men can attain the eternal bills. In my present article I have tried shortly to introduce Baul tradition, Fakir Lalon Shah and his songs as 'Lalon geete'. From Lalon's vast composed songs I have tried to show his outlooks towards caste, class, religion and gender biased society and Lalon's own opinions to that issues. Though Lalon Shah had no educational degree from any institute, as a self-learned philosopher how through his songs he is a time-wining sprit, in my short article I have tried to show those briefly.

Baul songs, 'a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' are approved on 25 November 2005 by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Bengali is an Indo-Aryan language possessing a history and tradition of at least a millennium, with a rich tradition of folklore and folk literature. Baul songs form an important part of this tradition. The origins of Baul songs and rhyme are obscure, but are thought to be of considerable antiquity. Folk songs and rhyme exists in many languages, but is often of secondary importance compared to other forms of folk literature, such as folktales and ballads. In Bengali folk literature, Baul songs, however, rhyme holds a place of equal importance to these other forms. Baul song is not simply an instrument for the amusement of masses but a subject worthy of serious study, bearing most of the essential characteristics of folk tradition: anonymous and collective creation, dynamism, textual variation, and social function. Bauls, a sect of folk religion, constitute a small group in numerical strength but they exceed all sorts of limits and bindings in their age-long effort to propagate their philosophical understandings and deep-rooted modes of behaviour through melodious songs and artful dances. Belonging to the tradition-bound community of Bengal, the Bauls bear a rich cultural heritage of the country which has developed through a long process of interactions and harmonization of different manners, customs and practices pertaining to various socio-religious traditions. A short glance on the origin of Baul tradition may clear us how it is a harmonization of

different manners, customs and practices. Around the middle of the thirteenth century, the whole of Bengal fell into Muslim hands, and the new rulers launched a campaign for the spread of Islam. As a consequence, a great many people who held marginal positions within the structure of Hindu society, many of whom may have been Sahajiyas, embraced Islam. Some, however, became converts in name only, as a survival tactic, and continued to follow their Sahajiya practices. These Muslim Sahajiyas were among the first fakirs of Bengal. At the same time, various Sufi orders of Islam began to penetrate Bengal. As they essentially practiced a cult of mystic love, their creed was based on self-realization and was found to have many features in common with the Sahajiya tradition. A large number of people became their recruits, including the Muslim Sahajiyas, who found in Sufism a kind of shelter from the oppression of orthodox Islam. This led very naturally to considerable intermingling of ideas. Even the Vaisnava Sahajiyas, who had emerged with renewed vigor after the advent of the great Vaisnava saint Sri Caitanya Deva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, did not escape the influence of Sufi mysticism. Out of this background-Sahajiya for the most part, but somewhat colored by Sufi ideology-emerged the sect of the Bauls, which thus included within its fold both Hindus and Muslims, especially of the lower strata of society. Bauls would seem to have begun to be widely spread in Bengal only around the middle of the seventeenth century and it still exists.

The origin of Baul tradition and the community, at a sense, clearly shows the tensions of their existence, their marginal condition at the society which leads them to their secret 'sadhana' (meditation) for 'Moner Manus' (Man of the heart). As most of the peoples from Baul community are illiterate, they follow the oral tradition and their songs decent from generation to generation only by listening and memorizing process. As they are from the common masses their songs are decorated with simple and rustic allegory and at the same time they shows the contemporary society, its good and evils mainly to the village folks. Fakir Lolon Shah (1774-1890) is the main pioneer and the greatest spoke-person of the marginalized Baul tradition of the undivided Bengal.

Rejecting the religious institutions and their constitutional dogma, Fakir Lalon Shah has created a world which is based on human and humanity. This multifaceted personality was a social minded persona and the-then society's problem had touched him deeply. So through his songs he has raised his voice against class, caste, religious malice and so many social issues which we can still observe in our Pan-Indian society. This self-learned folk-poet's conscious outlook towards society and poetic power was amazing. For the uniqueness of theme, language, music and rhetoric of his songs, it attracts the great minds like Rabindranath Tagore. The main contribution of Lalon Shah is, that, he has given a lower class's folk-religion's songs to the height of a literature. The voice of Fakir Lalon Shah, his songs and philosophy are now not limited within Bengal and Bengali speaking area, rather these have spread all over the world. Now Lalon Shah has become the symbol of world fraternity, humanity, equality and peace.

One question may be aroused that how this illiterate man's folk has attracted the master minds like Rabindranath Tagore, a son of a Zaminder, as we already observed that Baul tradition is a tradition of the homeless nameless village folk's. If we have a small overview on Bengal Renaissance and Tagore's family's relation with it, that will be clear

to us. The concept of the Renaissance in Bengal posited in the context of British colonial rule is based on the fundamental premise that the western education and political infrastructure disseminated a sense of rule of law and justice and fostered "an intellectual development of the people on an entirely new line"¹. And historians of differing ideological persuasions have accepted the concept of renaissance as some kind of awakening of the people especially in the cultural realm. But, as has been elaborately discussed in his article on Indian renaissance by Barun De², a model based on the European experience is unsuitable in the Indian context. The deliberate endeavour by the British to prevent the growth of entrepreneurial strata among the Indians forced the 'new elite' to concentrate on land business. Finding themselves unable to put up any fight against British rule they diverted their energy and power to cultural and social reforms. The compromise which the reformers of the 19th century tried to make was between their personal pecuniary position and liberal western ideas. That resulted in a contradiction between thought and action. The most significant phenomenon of the 19th century was the Brahmo movement. It was an anti-idolatrous religious reform movement. The movement was in the main a call to trim Hindu religious thought though it was not anti-Hindu in character. Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, one of the great figures of Brahmo movement gave the movement a theistic character. Under his leadership young Brahmos were prepared to go in advocating some social reforms such as intercaste marriage, and discarding some Braminical traditions. They challenged the righteousness of the Brahmo preachers who used to wear the Brahmin symbol the sacred thread.

Folk-religion Baul is deeply based on songs, of which most of the familiar songs are composed by Fakir Lalon Shah and his followers. Those songs which are composed by Lalon Shah are known as 'Lalon Geete'. As Lalon used to stay at a hermitage of a rural area of Bengal, he was well concerned about the down-to-earth people and his songs convey the personal, social and cultural matter of the-then society which is still modern in the present social context. 'Man' is the first and final concern of 'Lalon Geete'. Greek thinker Protagoras says, "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not."³ Those who blindly believe on god and religion do not allow men's supreme position rather their religious dominance, abstract philosophy and scriptures force men to go through the religious, cultural and socio-economical differences. By the concept of rebirth and heaven they try to control human beings which make men a helpless doll of the fate. Through the folk-materialistic outlook the Bauls preach that if this world is created by the same Creator, if this world is His cosmic enblame then why this caste system, why so many religions, why this gender discriminations, why this class dominations and the Bauls try to create a 'man' based society and culture. According to Lalon the source of Truth and Knowledge is not an abstract one rather it is a 'man-guru'. One of his songs Lalon says:

"Dube dakh dekhi mone kirup lilamay.

Akash-patal khujish jare ai dehe se roy."

This means if we think deeply the existence of the God or the source of eternal bliss, we need not to roam here and there, it resides in our body. This reminds us Vasavanna's comment that rich people build temple and poor people make their body as temple⁴.

Thus, here we can observe the direct realization of creator into creation which Underhill has described in his essay 'Science of ultimate' as "on one hand as a temperamental reaction to vision of reality, on the other as a form of prophecy."⁵

Lalon has no faith or support to the showiness of the religious rituals. To him 'dharma' is a belief which keeps a man's qualities intact within himself and it resides into human heart and men as human being its 'dharma' is humanity. One of songs where Lalon says-

"Matir dhibe kather chobi;

Bhoot bhabe sab deva-devi

Whole na se esob rupa

O je manus-ratan chene.

Jinn-fereshtar khela

Pecha-pechi alavhola

Tar nayan hoy na vhola

O je manus voje dibyagayn ea."

The meaning of this song is that those who know human and humanity (manus-ratan), they cannot be lured by any idol (matir dhibi) and supernatural things. Those men, who keep believe in human and humanity, to them man is God and humanity is his way. Here in this song we can hear the echo of the main tenets of the Brahma Samaj.

The most profound theme we can observe in 'Lalon Geete' is Lalon's reaction against class and caste system of Indian society and the religious conflicts. His age old songs are still modern in the context of our present society. When the lalonite Baul singer sings the song:

"Jat gelo jat gelo bole eki ajab karkhana

Satya kaje keu noy raji sab dekhi tana na na.

Jokhon tumi bhobe ele

Tokhon tumi ki jat chile

Jabar belai ki jat nile

Ea-kotha amai bolo na.

Brahmin-chandal chamar-muchi

Eki jole ea hoi goo shuchi

Dekhe shune hoi na ruchi

Johm ea ta kauke charbe na...”.

Through this song Lalon is expressing that he is becoming puzzled by the word religion which is uttered everywhere by everyone while very few are agreed to do for the truth. Lalon asks when men take birth, are they remain aware in which religion they are taking birth. And they know at time of their last ride which religion they would have then. He is also confused in thinking that as the same holy water makes both the Brahmin and the outcaste pure and sacred, then why this differences between them in the society.

At Lalon’s contemporary era, which is marked as Bengal Renaissance, The Hindu intellectuals ignored both the Hindu and the Muslim masses. In the agrarian sphere this separation from the masses created a very disturbing situation to the zamindars who were mostly Hindus. The socio-economic interests of the peasants later came to acquire a somewhat religious tone, with the emergence of the Faraizi and Wahabi movements. The Faraizi movement started in 1818. The objectives of these movements were to keep Islam in Bengal beyond the pale of un-Islamic influence. The politico-religious movement of the Faraizi-Wahabie aders was the “reactions, not remedies, to the situation the existing.”⁶ Thus Renaissance had fail to gather maximum mass from different community under one shade and it was not the fruit of the joint venture of Hindu and Muslim and it had failed to bring the both community come close rather these differences, hatred, opposition and negligence’s had increased day by day. In Baul songs, particularly in songs of Lalon we can see a triumph to bring all the community together. The main concern of Renaissance, that is communal harmony, finds its way and becomes prominent into the illiterate but self-learned people’s songs. Rural Bengal’s this humanitarian revolution’s main breath was Fakir Lalon Shah. He has seen that this religious conflict even putting barrier in his way of preaching peace, so annoyed Lalon utters:

“Fakiri korbi khyapa kon raga,

Ache Hindu-Musalman dui vagh ea....”

Which means how will he be able to preach peace here as the Hindu and Muslim , two major religious groups, are keeping themselves on the two separate pole. Lalon also Says:

“Je ja bhabe sei rupa se hoy,

Ram-Rahim-Karim-Kala ek atma jogatmoy.”

This means if men want to see God then they can see Him by any way which they follow, to him Ram, Rahim, Karim, Kala are the same name of the God.

Observing communal tension at his contemporary society Lalon sings:

“Keu mala keu tashbi golai,

Taite ki jaat bhinno bolai;

Jaua kimba ashar belai

Jeter chinho roy kar re.”

This means, for paying homage to the Almighty, different people performs different rituals that don't suggest that man's main concern i.e. humanity is different. When men take birth in this earth, they don't come with a particular religious mark with them. And it is at the time of their death and it is the nature which controls these. So differentiations between men to men by the name of religions have no humanitarian value.

Women have too many images in the society, every religion and society admits that but no religion and society in this patriarchal society may have not given their full respect and their exact position rather they have made some code of conduct to limit the sphere of living. Liberation from their stage is now a well discussed topic which has taken a name as 'women studies'. But it is in the Baul tradition, far age before the concept the 'women studies' they are advocating for the independence of the women. In Baul tradition women have a special importance and value. They consider women as 'prakiti'(nature) and men as 'purus'(man); without 'purus' and 'prakiti' any creation or well deed is not possible. To them men and women possess the equal power as Lalon says:

“Adam bolo kon nure hoy

Ma houa ki sei nure nai...”

means, if Adam is made of light (nur) and Eve is made from Adam, then both share the same thing. Eve is also a mother, so through Eve (woman), the power and love of God is spreaded all over the world.

Sometimes through his sharp allegory, sometimes directly in his songs, Lalon advocates for the independence and the independent thinking of women. Lalon utters-

“Kuler bou hoye mone r kotodin thakbi ghore,

Ghomta fele chol na re mone sadh-bazare.”

This means how long you will stay at home as house-wife, now leave your feminine code and come to your land of your own will. This is still at some of places of our country cannot overtly express.

Bauls are one of the socio-religious sects of the society. As a social sect they cannot keep themselves totally detached from the events which have been going on their time-line. Social events and their experiences with them foreground the theme of their songs. Fakir Lalon Shah, an eminent guru of Baul tradition cum religion, has expressed his views against the social binaries like class, caste, gender and religions through his songs. At the time of Lalon's age his songs had achieved much popularity into the common folks but most of the landed gentry were indifferent to his songs and philosophy. Now at our age, some active endeavours have been seen into the urban intelligentsia of Bangladesh and

West Bengal of India to look back to the songs of Fakir Lalon Shah and his philosophy. But such a limited and regional attempt is not enough for Lalon Shah's songs and philosophy which deals with the great themes as humanity, peace and fraternity.

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