

Lalon Shah: A Baul Bard of Existential Humanism¹

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Abstract

The article attempts to analyse songs and philosophy of Lalon Shah who is considered one of the greatest Baul singers in the history of Baul tradition. Through textual analysis of some of his songs the article argues that Lalon propounded existential humanism even before Sartre wrote *Existentialism is a Humanism* in 1946 and termed existential humanism “an optimistic philosophy”. It sheds light on the facts that Lalon was well aware of modern technological inventions, and his philosophy on life and the world is deeper and more comprehensive than any other western philosophy. His philosophical message is still relevant in the present world and can lead us to the path of humanity. Finally, the article shows how Rabindranath Tagore became inspired by the devotional songs and philosophy of Lalon and turned himself into a kind of Baul.

Introduction

Bauls are mainly known as wandering bards generally inhabiting “the districts of Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Faridpur, Jessore, and Pabna [of Bangladesh] and associated with devotional songs known as Baul songs.” (“Baul”). They are also found in some parts of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam’s Barak Valley. There are several versions of the origin of Baul tradition. However, according to a recent theory, “Bauls are descendants of a branch of Sufism called ba’al.” (ibid.). This sect appeared in Iran during eighth and ninth centuries and would consider performing music as devotional and spiritual practices. Like other Sufis, they entered the South Asian subcontinent and started spreading their message through their songs. In another version the term “baul” derives from the Sanskrit words “vatul” (mad, devoid of senses) and “vyakul” (wild, bewildered). (ibid.).

After the Bauls came in contact with the tantric and sahajiya practices of Vaisnavism in India, especially in Bengal, they blended vaisnava-sahajiya and Sufi concepts. They do not entirely believe in any particular religion such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, but rather they, as humanists, believe that all human beings are equal, irrespective of caste and creed. (“Baul”). Besides, they do not make any discrimination between men and women. Bauls are devoted to their search for “Maner Manush” (the man of the heart), that is, their divine beloved. There are similarities between Sufi practices of attaining spiritual elation and Baul practices of attaining devotional frenzy. In fifteenth to sixteenth century, in East Bengal they grew and their songs spreading deep philosophical insights became popular. Later on, in the nineteenth century Baul songs and philosophy became widespread and reached the common people mainly through Lalon Shah and his disciples. Lalon is considered one of the most remarkable Bauls with regard to his poetic talent, musical composition, philosophical insights and spiritual practices. Since then the Baul philosophy in fact has left a remarkable mark on different sections of society including intellectuals, philosophers, and researchers. However, a wide range of their philosophical insights is still unexplored.

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Bauls lead their lives mainly in two ways— as wanderers and as settlers in secluded parts of a village. In both cases their isolated or wandering lifestyle attracts the attention from the people. Though they are harmless, selfless and do not care about the material world, throughout the history they have been underprivileged, neglected, oppressed, persecuted and destined to be outcast in society. They become easy targets of religious conformists and fanatics since they do not conform to the practices of prevalent religions, social institutions and political establishments. Although their songs entertain the common people profoundly, many facets of their philosophy have remained unknown to the world. Due to the accessibility and availability of Western sources of knowledge production, we are familiar with many terms of Western and modern philosophy. However, Bauls and their philosophy are not paid due attention in the mainstream academic research. For example, long before Jean-Paul Sartre came up with his conception of “existential humanism”, Lalon Shah had preached this philosophy through his songs. Besides, the present world hardly knows that he was aware of modern lifestyle and technological inventions and his secluded lifestyle was his own choice. Moreover, the profound influence of his philosophical insights into life through his devotional songs on the great poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam is beyond question.

This article argues that Lalon propounded existential humanism even before Sartre wrote *Existentialism is a Humanism* in 1946 and termed existential humanism “an optimistic philosophy”. It offers a short textual analysis of some of Lalon songs in a bid to underscore the facts that Lalon was well aware of the modern technological inventions and his philosophy on life and the world is deeper and more comprehensive than any other western philosophy. His philosophical message is still relevant in the present world and can lead us to the path of humanity. Finally, the article shows how Rabindranath Tagore became inspired by the devotional songs and philosophy of Lalon and turned himself into a kind of Baul.

Lalon Shah: A Baul of Bengal

Fakir Lalon Shah or Lalon Fakir used to live in a village of Kushtia, Bangladesh and is considered one of the greatest Baul singers in the history of Baul tradition. Although it is popularly known that he was born in 1774 in a remote village of Kushtia, there is no historical evidence supporting the claim. (Maniruzzaman 10). However, the researchers have agreed that he died on 17 October 1890. (ibid. 1). There are controversies regarding his religious identity. Many stories and rumours about his life and religious identity are found in popular discourses. However, from an objective investigation into his life and works it is difficult to determine whether he was a Muslim or Hindu. M. Maniruzzaman did a rigorous research on his life, works and philosophy. He concluded that Lalon was born in a Hindu family, but was later attached to a Sufi devotee named Siraj Shain and became his disciple. (1- 11). But he transgressed the boundary of sectarian religious doctrines and cannot be identified with any of the conventional religious creed. He never made clear his religious identity; he would always smile while asked about his religious identity. However, through his songs such as “Casteism” he attempted to answer the question on his identity.

People ask, what is Lalon’s caste?
Lalon says, my eyes fail to detect
The signs of caste. Don’t you see that
Some wear garlands, some rosaries
Around the neck? But does it make any
Difference brother?

(“Lalon Fakir: Songs (19th Century)”)

This bold proclamation was obviously radical in a society where dominant dogmas and superstitions were prevailing. Moreover, the essential questions he asked to the whole world could shake the very foundation of socio-religious institutions and most importantly the established conceptions and conventions of human existence. The above lines also speak of a truly democratic and classless society that we aspire to but the present world has failed to provide it for us.

Now we would like to offer a short study on some facets of Lalon’s songs in order to show how his Baul concepts exhibit an inclusive philosophy of humanism in which existential tensions are also prevalent.

Lalon and Existential Humanism

Jean Paul Sartre talks about existential humanism in his 1945 lecture— “Existentialism is a Humanism”². He firmly upholds that “if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its ‘subjectivity’.” (Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”)

Sartre defends the concept that existentialism is a form of humanism by saying that in reality, the word humanism has two very different meanings. One may understand by humanism a theory which upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value. That kind of humanism is absurd, for an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined. (“Existentialism is a Humanism”)

Man’s curious search for the meaning of his existence is put in the centre of existential humanism. Sartre sates that “[s]ince man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human universe) – it is this that we call existential humanism.” (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 17-23). Sartre calls it “humanism”, because man himself is his own legislator, he decides for himself during his distress and he is in a constant search of a kind of realisation leading him to believe the superiority of his being.

Lalon throughout his life kept on searching a divine entity, which is not a conventional god, but “the man of heart” having the ability to heal his existential crisis. But “the man of the heart” always eludes the heart searching for it. In Lalon’s words, “When will I be united/ with the Man of my Heart (Maner Manush)?” (Salomon 463). Lalon believed that the beloved entity having the power of healing resides in the human body. The entity is not exactly what constitutes the concept of God.

Thus Lalon in the nineteenth century could theorise man’s tension of existential crisis and search for a shelter for his contentment. Regarding the man as a centre and his search and hope to find “the man of heart”, Lalon’s existentialism is humanistic as well as optimistic. This is what Sartre in his lecture elaborated on. According to him, existential

humanism is an optimistic philosophy. It never plunges men into despair. In Sartre's words,

“What man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself. In this sense existential humanism is an optimistic philosophy.”
 (“Existentialism is a Humanism”)

In Lalon's world, man ever struggles with his existence in an attempt to find “the man of the heart”. In his pain and solitude he may find “the man of the heart”, transcending all hurdles and boundaries of socio-religious conventions. He proclaims,

Does a person tell beads
 who has found the Man of the Heart?
 He sits in solitude
 and watches the game.
 Only a madman shouts
 for someone nearby.
 But let people believe what they want,
 forgetful mind.
 Just as the hand massages the place
 where pain is,
 one should remember the Man of the Heart.
 (Salomon 79)

Pointing to the transcendental tendency of man, Lalon further expresses his wish to be annihilated with the entity in the song,

Meditating on his image,
 I lose all fear of disgrace.
 Poor Lalon says,
 He who always loves
 knows.
 (Salomon 463)

A clear delineation of transcendental philosophy is evident here when he wants to go beyond the man-made boundary of social conventions. In fact, the world of Lalon songs is the world of transcendence of man. It is the world that takes man nearer to “the man of the heart” for whom man keeps on haunting eternally to have a glimpse of “the man of the heart” even for once. It is the longing that allows man to come out of all the perceived doctrines and dogmas in order to search the nature of inner self, that is, ultimate truth. Lalon would thus sing—

In a mirror city
 Close by
 Lives a neighbour
 I've never seen
 Though I long to see him
 How can I reach him
 Being like an islander
 Amidst endless water –
 No boat in sight
 Of my curious neighbour
 What can I say, for
 He has neither limbs nor
 Head and shoulders
 One moment he's soaring in space
 And floating in water the next

If only he'd touch me once
 All fear of death would disappear
 He lives where Lalon lives
 And yet is a million miles away
 (Haq, trans.)

Lalon used to live amidst a society where on the one hand, caste, creed, sectarianism, religious bigotry, and superstitious dogmas were prevalent; and on the other, class division, social injustice, violation of women's rights, disregard of humanism and humanity, stagnant human life, and frustration would largely dominate human life. With his magical and mystical songs he attempted to subvert all types of division and discriminations. Man remains the centre of Lalon's ruminations on existential humanism. Therefore, his spiritual rendering of human existence for better life can empower man in the backdrop of oppression, suppression and exploitation.

The Baul beyond the Boundary

Lalon was well aware of the surroundings of his society nurturing all sorts of exploitations and discriminations. Through his songs he protested these malpractices and offered an intrinsic insight into life celebrating spirituality and mysticism. He objected the outer shell of religion and tradition and condemned any form of show-off and discrimination. He called for a society free from the curse of class and caste. In his words,

If a Brahmin male
 Is known by the thread he wears,
 How is a woman known? People of the world,
 O brother, talk of marks and signs,
 But Lalon says: I have only dissolved
 The raft of signs, the marks of caste
 In the deluge of the One!

(“Lalon Fakir: Songs (19th Century)”)

Lalon was not just a spiritual singer residing in an *akhra* (a remote dwelling) with disciples and propagating humanism; he was an activist, as well. He protested actively against the colonial agents namely Zamindars who used to torture the peasants. At that time he along with his fellow Bauls took up bamboo sticks to protect Kangal Harinath who published the tortures of poor villagers by Jorashako's Zamindar family and became target of their musclemen. (Maniruzzaman 19, 103). Lalon even in his songs significantly pointed out the atrocities and extravagant lifestyle of the Zamindars who were strong allies of the British colonisers. He considered in his songs both the Zamindars and the British colonisers “thief” who would loot the public property to maintain their lavish lifestyle. He states,

The king of the kingdom
 is the head of the thieves.
 Where and to whom
 will I complain?

(Maniruzzaman 103; translation mine)

Besides, how Lalon talks about the emancipation of women and equality of man and woman as human creation is quite significant. In a society where women were not even considered complete humans, he did contribute a lot to upholding the honour of Bengali rural women through his songs. For example, he firmly questions,

What mark does one carry when
One is born, or when one dies?
A Muslim is marked by the sign
Of circumcision; but how should
You mark a woman?

(“Lalon Fakir: Songs (19th Century)”)

He considered woman the breaker of the mystery of creation. Without them it is not possible at all for man to launch a spiritual journey in search of “Maner Manush” (the man of the heart). (Miah 10-11). Lalon sings, “By occult consideration/ Truth becomes known/ By worshipping mother”. (Miah 11).

Apart from articulating deep philosophical message, abstract mysticism and spiritual creed, Lalon speaks of the material world to indicate its incoherence and disorder. He was quite familiar with the blood and flesh world and all aspects of industrialised society and modern living. His songs display astronomy, the shape of the earth, the universe, the motion of stars and planets, and the movement of day and night. For example the following lines can be quoted,

See how day and night spin in turn.
As the sun and the earth rotate, day and night come.

(Maniruzzaman 106; translation mine)

Issues related to history, sociology, geography and so on are also mentioned in his songs. Quite surprisingly, the mention of telephone, camera, watch, clock, industry, gun, school, steamboat, ship and such modern instruments is found in his songs. On camera he wrote, “What a strange device! A picture is snapped by a press.” (Maniruzzaman 106, translation mine).

Lalon’s Existential Humanism and Rabindranath Tagore

A great change was found in the poetic style of Rabindranath Tagore after he had come in touch with the philosophy of Bauls. It would be relevant to point to Tagore’s philosophical transformation resulting from Lalon’s influence of existential humanism on his psyche and poetic sensibility. How much he was influenced by Lalon and other Bauls is evident in his following comment,

“The man of the Heart, to the Baul, is like a divine instrument perfectly tuned. He gives expression to infinite truth in the music of life. And the longing for truth which is in us, which we have not yet realised breaks out in the following Baul song:

Where shall I meet him, the Man of my Heart?

He is lost to me and I seek him wandering from land to land,”

(Pradhan 15)

Before Rabindranath Tagore published 20 songs of Lalon in *Prabashi*³, the Bauls were not well-known as poets and singers among the Bengalis. The *Bhadralok* Bengali used to consider them eccentrics and beggars. Historians argued that Tagore in his youth might have known Lalon. Tagore moved to Kushtia as a Zamindar in 1890, which was the year Lalon embraced the eternal call of his divine self. Though controversy lies in whether Tagore met Lalon in his lifetime, several historical documents indicate that the meeting took place when he first visited Kushtia with Jatindranath Tagore in 1872 and 1875. Besides, Tagore himself in his writings acknowledged profound influences of Baul lyrics

and tunes in many of his songs included in his book *Songs Offering*⁴. (Maniruzzaman 42-44).

While Tagore's play *Dakghor* was being staged, he suddenly felt the need of a song to give a better feel to his lead character. In the short span of the interval, he composed the music of the song "bhenge mor gharer chabi, niye jabi ke amare?" ("Who will take me out, breaking the lock of my door?") inspired by a popular Baul song "dekhechhi roopsagore maner manush knacha shona" ("In the sea of beauty I have seen the man of the heart in the form of raw gold.").

Tagore ended up with humanism in the later part of his literary career after a long poetic journey in search of love, nature, nationalism, and God, but Lalon started with humanism, a search for human self and identity to explore the existence of supreme divinity in the essence of human entity.

Conclusion

Lalon songs are an essential part of Bengal's music highlighting devotional practices and philosophical insights. The article has attempted to analyse how Lalon had propounded the philosophy of existential humanism through his songs long before Sartre came up with his philosophy of existential humanism. It has also been found that his songs quite multidisciplinary in themes could cross the boundary of spiritualism and mysticism, highlighting human and material world. Besides, the article has shown that Lalon not only spread the message of peace and harmony promoting humanism, but as a poet activist took part in resistance struggles against injustice and torture of the Zamindars of his time. This fact would obviously inspire the later revolutionary poets, especially Kazi Nazrul Islam, the National Poet of Bangladesh, who is known as the greatest rebel poet Bengali literature has ever produced.

Therefore, more research on different facets of Lalon songs need to be conducted to bring about various values of humanism since the present world is a complete chaos, has gone far away from the basic sense of humanity in the name of religious dogmas and caste divisions and is afflicted with wars, hunger, inhumanity, injustice, violence, and violations of human rights. Thus, the article has attempted to show that Lalon's school of free-thinking advocating transcendental philosophy and existential humanism is instrumental in bringing about a notable change in society. Lalon's existential humanism could message peace and harmony to the world, heal split souls of modern personality and be a light of hope for making a better world to live in.

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Notes

1. A shortened version of this article was presented in the 2nd International Seminar on *Banglar Loksangskriti: Rupe o Rupantore* organised by Lok Bharati at Indumati Sabhagriha, Jadavpur, Kolkata, India on 30 November 2019.
2. Sartre gave the lecture at Club Maintenant in Paris, on 29 October 1945. In 1946 he published a book in the same name. The English translation was published in 1948.
3. A new section of *Probashi* magazine named "Haramoni" was introduced in 1915 to publish the best poems and songs of the unknown, unrecognised and illiterate village poets. See Maniruzzaman 37.
4. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 for this poetry collection.