

Translation and Commentary

THE SONGS OF LALON FAKIR

Lalon Fakir

Selection, translation from Bengali, and commentary

by

Sayed Muddashir Hossain

“Oh, my caste is being ruined! Oh, my caste is being ruined,”¹

Say people, but I find it really strange!

I see rather that people are not interested in the right path!

When I tell them to follow it, they say many excuses!

When you came to this world what was your “Caste?!”

And after coming to this world what “Caste” you have taken?

And think about this,

What will be your caste when you will leave this life?

“Brahmins, Chandala, Leather Workers, Shoe Makers,

They all clean themselves with the same water,

But you still say they look uncouth and untasteful just because of the caste?

But The Death will not excuse anyone!”

If in secret someone eats food given by a whore,

What harm does it do to the religion?

Lalon asks what actually “Caste” is?

This illusion is never resolved!

¹ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/jatgelo/>. Other representative publications of LalonFakir’s works include: *Collection Of Lalon’s Works*, edited by Dr. Abul Ahsan Chowdhury (Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh, 2014) (in Bengali), cf. লালনসমগ্র ডক্টর আবুল আহসান চৌধুরী (পাঠক সমাবেশ); *Lalon Fakir and His Songs*, edited by Onnodashankor Roy (Dhaka: Kobi, 2017) (in Bengali), cf. লালন ফকির ও তাঁর গান অন্নদাশঙ্কর রায় (কবি প্রকাশনী); *Lalon’s Songs and Texts*, edited by Sudhin Dash (Dhaka: Merit Fair Publications, 2017) (in Bengali), cf. লালনগীতি ও স্বরলিপি সুধীন দাশ মেরিট ফেয়ার প্রকাশন

All people ask Lalon what is his caste?²

In return Lalon asks how does caste looks like?
I have never seen it in my life!
If you do circumcision, you become Muslim!
But for women what is the law?!

If you wear at your naked chest the holy thread then you are a male Brahmin,
But how should I recognize a female Brahmin?!

Hindu people use Mala (a rosary) and Muslims use Tasbih (also rosary)
And they are the same thing!

Yet you say that just the name makes them different!
When you first come to this world or when you leave this world,
Where is your sign of your case?
In this whole world everyone talks about caste!
They tell story about it,
But Lalon says, I have drowned my caste in the river!

In the cage, an unknown bird comes and goes!³

I do not know how it happens,
But if I could have known I would have caught the bird and kept it in the cage!
There are eight chambers and nine doors to this cage,
And each of them separated by slits.
And upon this cage or room there are more buildings,
And on the top floor there is a beautiful dance floor!
Just because I am lucky, the bird stays in the cage,
Otherwise, it would have left and flown to the forest!

But you must remember the cage is made out of raw bamboos and really weak!
And Lalon cries and says,
“Soon the cage will be dropped and opened!”

Very near to my House there is an unknown city,⁴

And there lives a neighbor.
But I have never seen that neighbor!
There is endless water in the village,
And it has no beginning nor end!

² <http://www.lalongeeti.com/shoblokekoy/>

³ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/khacharvitor/>

⁴ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/barirkache/>

My mind desires to see the neighbor,
But how can I go to that village?
I do not know how I should describe this neighbor!
This neighbor does not have any head, shoulders or hands!
This neighbor floats sometimes in vacuum,
And sometimes in the house!
If this neighbor would touch me,
All of my agonizing pain would go away!
Lalon and this neighbor live in the same place,
But alas! At the same time millions of miles away!

When can I be together with the person of my mind!?⁵

I look forward towards this like a thirsty bird,
But all I see is a dark moon!
I want to be the footman of this person,
But my bad luck!
That does not happen!
Just like thunder hides in the clouds,
I am a blind who cannot find the true face of that person!
But when I can remember that face in my mind,
I fear no shame!
Lalon Fakir ponder and says,
The ones who love only they know!

If you worship humanity, then you will become a golden person,⁶

Without humans you will lose all of your riches.
The story of a human is like a vine that adorns a big tree
You should know about it and only then you can understand your true self.
Even if you are a poor vagabond, yet you cultivate humanity,
You will get the blessing of life.
Without humans you will be lost in nothingness.
Lalon says that if you worship humanity, you can get the ultimate redemption.

⁵ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/milonhobe/>

⁶ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/manushvojle/>

Everyone says “Human, Human!”⁷

But which race does this Human has?

Everyone tries to take Human to their race and convince them,

But I have tried to look into the origin of those races and found only Humans there!

A very mindless game they are playing,

Making groups and groups,

I do not know how to divide this Human,

Apparently, everyone can do it very easily!

But what I see is this,

When they chant the farewell, they chant for the dead people,

They become all equal.

I have looked into three different people to understand the reason of this division,

But I have seen that they all are the same one thing!

I find this business very troublesome and confusing!

Those who find Humanity to be true,⁸

Do they care about other views?

Holy Mounds of Soil or Holy Wooden Pictures,

Or God or Goddess, who can tell the future!

That person does not care about all these,

Because they have found the real thing!

They will not be fooled by any sweet talk,

Because they know the true thing!

Those who have weak knowledge,

Or the weakness of the heart to accept Humanity,

They are easy to be fooled!

That's why Lalon wanders around,

And does not get stable in one position.

⁷ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/manushmanush/>

⁸ <http://www.lalongeeti.com/manushtotto/>

Lalon Fakir – The Poet-Philosopher

To truly admire and grasp the cultural importance of the works of Lalon Fakir we have to understand the socio-cultural context of his time. He was born circa 17th October 1774 in Jashore, today's Bangladesh. At that time the whole Indian subcontinent was together under British rule and the Hindu caste system was maintained.

There were main four castes Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, as well as those called Dalits, who did not belong to any caste. The castes were determined by the Hindu mythology according to which the people were created from a certain part of the god Brahma's body. The Brahmins were created from the head, thus being the most intelligent of all people, who have to take care of the work related to priesthood and communication with gods. The Kshatriyas were created from the arm, and thus they have to do the heavy lifting and muscle work, which qualified them to be the rulers and the warriors. Brahmins and Kshatriyas were considered higher castes.

Vaishyas were created from the thigh. Here, we need to note that traditionally anything related to leg was not considered good on the Indian subcontinent. For instance, one should not kick a book or make feet high in the presence of a respectable person. With this in mind, Vaishyas were the second worst caste in this system; they were farmers, traders etc. For their part, Shudras were created from the feet and were considered the worst of all castes. They were the poorest of all as well. It is also notable that the caste hierarchy is indicative of the socio-economic hierarchy of the traditional Indian society, which was thus sanctioned with the help of religion.

In practice, caste division was largely exclusive. A Brahmin would not pass under a shadow cast by a Shudra and sometimes Vaishya, for the view is that this makes the Brahmin unclean and then they will need to take a bath again. Likewise, cross caste marriage was unthinkable. The Dalits got the worst of the deal. They were not even considered proper human. The caste people would not eat anything offered by them or sometimes would not even talk to them. The Dalits were basically people who did the "dirty jobs" in the society, such as anything that has to do with cleaning. Also, since Hindus believe in the cycle of rebirth, they used it to justify the perceived social injustice of the caste structure. They would just maintain that in another life they have done something really bad, angering the gods, and that is why now they are reborn under such bad conditions in this life.

Lalon was born in a Hindu family. It is uncertain in which caste he was born, but the way in which his life unfolded clearly left its mark upon him. It is said that his family was making a pilgrimage towards the temple of Jagannath, when Lalon was infected with Smallpox. At that time smallpox was considered very deadly and someone infected with this disease would have been directly abandoned. Thus, Lalon was also abandoned by the River Kaliganga, and was possibly floated on the river with a Vela, a boat-like structure made out of Banana trees. Then, a Muslim family found him and took care of him. The father of that family was most likely called Malam Shah and his wife was Matijan. According to the legend, they found Lalon in a Vela that had stopped by their village Cheuriya. They offered him the love of a family

member, as if he were their own son. Later on, he founded a musical group inspired by Siraj Sain. It is also said that Lalon lost sight of one eye due to the small pox.

It appears that growing up with two families has given Lalon a certain sense of rebirth, which has uniquely reflected in his poetic philosophical thought. Here is an extract of one of these songs:

Hindu people use Mala (a rosary) and Muslims use Tasbih (also rosary)⁹
And they are the same thing!
Yet you say that just the name makes them different!

We can clarify here that Malas are rosaries, which Religious Hindus count on when reciting holy chants. Muslims also recite their holy chants while counting on bids, but they call it Tasbih. Here Lalon is pointing to the fact that both Hindu and Muslims perform very much the same ritual but they call it by different name. He was often asked what his religion was, but he refused to answer that because he did not think he had a concept of religion. He was born in a Hindu family which later on abandoned him. Then, he was taken care of by a Muslim family by the time he became an adult. As a result, he appears to have lost his sense of religion, which made him ask rhetorically “What religion do you have when you come to this world and when you leave it!” This is a rather simple but very deep question. When a baby is born into this world, they do not have any mark of religion. Only later on one would take – most typically – the religion of one’s family. Likewise, when one dies, one is dead as other people are dead. These are essentially arguments by which Lalon dispels the difference between religions.

The theme of death will always be an important focus in his philosophy. He uses death as a kind of “Grand Leveler,” who drags down everyone to the same level. And he says it rather simple,

“Brahmins, Chandala, Leather Workers, Shoe Makers,
They all clean themselves with the same water,
But you still say they look uncouth and untasteful just because of the caste?
But The Death will not excuse anyone!”

Lalon was primarily a song writer and a Baul. Bauls are people who are basically hermits, but rather than professing religion they cultivate spirituality or philosophy through their songs. Lalon never wrote his philosophy in a formal way. The songs we have from him have been handed down orally by his followers, and only sometimes written down.

As Lalon left his new family with his singing group, he travelled from village to village begging for food, offering to sing songs in return. During that time people started to call him “Fakir,” which means beggar. People started noticing him and he started attracting followers. Lalon would take everyone in his band regardless of their caste and without discrimination. There were also female members in his group, which at one point created a controversy. It is said that a prostitute took safe refuge in his group, which became a reason for the inhabitants of a village to refuse them entry to it – and by some accounts – to violently attack them. This particular incident has been addressed in one of his songs:

⁹ All block quotations in this commentary are taken from the above translations.

If in secret someone eats food given by a whore,
What harm does it do to the religion?
Lalon asks what actually "Caste" is?
This illusion is never resolved!

The fact that Lalon was born in Hindu family and tradition but later on grew up in a Muslim family has most certainly played a part in his attitude towards the caste system and religious differences. Muslims were out of the castes, but for Lalon this in no way made them any worse than Hindu. And apparently nothing in his experience in the two traditions convinced him that the existent caste class division is to be supported. This has left a clear and significant footprint in his philosophy. Here is what he says about caste division:

All people ask Lalon what is his caste?
In return Lalon asks how does caste looks like?
I have never seen it in my life!
If you do circumcision, you become Muslim!
But for women what is the law?!

Circumcision is a common practice among Muslims, which produces a permanent sign of their religious identity. Here, in raising the issue regarding female Muslims, Lalon also shows his concern for the other sex. At that time, women were not treated as equal in both Hindu and Muslim societies. For instance, in the Hindu society, if the husband of a woman dies, she must also die, going to the firepit along with him. Another example is that Brahmin males wear a holy thread called Paita indicating their social status, but this rule did not apply to Brahmin women. That is why Lalon asks how one can know whether a Brahmin woman belongs to that caste.

At the time, while preaching this essentially secular philosophy, Lalon and his followers faced numerous difficulties and were banned from many places. At last, they received the patronage of the Tagore family (from which descends the famous Bengali Poet Rabindranath Tagore), who were Jamindar (Landowners and regional rulers). Thus, Lalon and his followers made a permanent settlement in Cheuriya, Kushtia, today's Bangladesh, where they lived like in a school practicing the philosophy which they wrote and sang in songs.

Lalon was also a metaphorical spiritual thinker, whose songs were at times hard to understand. For instance, he sings,

In the cage, an unknown bird comes and goes!
I do not know how it happens,
But if I could have known I would have caught the bird and kept it in the cage!
There are eight chambers and nine doors to this cage,
And each of them separated by slits.
And upon this cage or room there are more buildings,
And on the top floor there is a beautiful dance floor!
Just because I am lucky, the bird stays in the cage,
Otherwise, it would have left and flown to the forest!
But you must remember the cage is made out of raw bamboos and really weak!
And Lalon cries and says,
"Soon the cage will be dropped and opened!"

Lalon's interpreters believe that here the bird alludes to the heart as he points to the uncertainty of life. The heart beats and goes out, just as our life is uncertain and can end at any moment. Thus, we should be really content that our life stays within us at all, hoping that it reaches the beautiful dance floor which is an allusion to the highest form of humanity one can achieve. The way to achieve that is to go above and beyond the cage, which is base and traps the life. One has to transcend its levels and go beyond to find the best of oneself.

Lalon was also aware of the challenges standing on one's way to knowing one's own self. He says,

Very near to my House there is an unknown city,
And there lives a neighbor.
But I have never seen that neighbor!
There is endless water in the village,
And it has no beginning nor end!

In this song, the neighbor can be associated with one's true self. Lalon thus says that he does not have any idea about his own true self, that he is desperate to know it, and that he cannot attain this valuable knowledge. Apparently, he believes that his true self lives very close to himself, and yet he also feels that they live far apart from each other. He further on says that he is agonizing in pain and that he is certain that if he can know his true self, then all of his pain will go away. Alas, he realizes that he cannot do it; that is, cannot know his true self, and finds this really hard to bear.

Perhaps the key to this his stance can be found in the turning events of his life. When he was separated from his own family and placed on a boat floating the river, he was practically sent to the unknown. This was a common practice at the time for people with incurable diseases. Rivers were considered a way towards the gods and it was hoped that the gods would cure such unfortunate people and bring them a new life. The kind of rebirth Lalon experienced subsequently in his newly adopted family may have left him feeling the core of his identity shaken, thus prompting him, like many other mystics, to search for his own "true" identity.

This peculiar urge to search for his own self can be detected also in his songs as well. For instance,

When can I be together with the person of my mind!?
I look forward towards this like a thirsty bird,
But all I see is a dark moon!
I want to be the footman of this person,
But my bad luck!
That does not happen!
Just like thunder hides in the clouds,
I am a blind who cannot find the true face of that person!
But when I can remember that face in my mind,
I fear no shame!
Lalon Fakir ponder and says,
The ones who love only they know!

This song has been interpreted as a love song, and it seems very much so. But one can find in it the search for his true self that lives inside his mind. He knows how it looks like but cannot really reach it, this leaving him desperate again.

In his later years, Lalon lived in Akhra (settlement of Bauls), during which time Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother, Jyotirindranath Tagore, visited and interviewed him. Lalon was asked questions about his life, his past, and his philosophy. One of these questions was, "Don't you worry about the religion and afterlife?" Lalon answered, "I am a very small human being! For me this life is everything! I am not very intelligent and I cannot think about those big things like after life and God! I just want to think about what I have here now!"¹⁰

Lalon died on 17th October 1890 aged 118 years. His tomb is still there in the middle of the settlement he established himself. To this day his legacy goes on. His songs have been passed down orally through his followers. He has influenced a number of Bengali thinkers. He lived a very simple life, seeking for the truth, and calling for a society united under one core value of "humanity." He passionately spoke against the caste system and any form of divisioning in the human society. He wanted to unite people and encourage them to seek their true selves. His songs are sometimes hard to understand but one can find there some clear messages which one can embrace and move forward. He was living in a difficult time but he managed to challenge the socially exclusive status quo of his time by singing songs of equality. Keeping in mind that this man never received any formal education, his songs are a proof that one can search for and obtain core insights about the value of humanity by questioning and endeavoring to know one's very own self. Below is a sketch of him made by Jyotirindranath Tagore during the time of the above-mentioned interview.¹¹

¹⁰ Sunil Gangapadhyay, *The Person of My Mind* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2008) (in Bengali); cf. মনের মানুষ সুনীল গঙ্গোপাধ্যায় আনন্দ পাবলিশার্স.

¹¹Source/Photographer, Indian National Museum (বাংলা: ভারতীয় জাতীয় জাদুঘর).

