

Translation with Notes

THE SONGS OF LALON FAKIR (PART II)

Lalon Fakir

Selection, translation from Bengali, and notes

by

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How does the strange bird fly in and out of the cage!^{1 2}

If I could catch the bird I would put it under the chains of my heart.
The cage has eight cells and nine doors with landed openings here and there.
Above it is the main hall with a mirror-chamber!
What is that other than my bad luck that the bird want to fly away from the cage!
O my Mind! You are enamored of the cage!
Little knowing that the cage is made of raw bamboo and may any day fall apart.
Lalon cries and he is afraid that very soon and suddenly the cage will be broken!
When an ill-wind blows
The bird will fly out of the cage collapsing the cage's tenuous support!
And then the bird has nowhere to stand on!
That thought possesses my mind and I feel a hectic fever all over my body.
Who owns the cage, and whatever is the bird?
For whom do I shed my tears ?
The bird lives in my yard and scams to veil my vision.
If I knew beforehand that nobody can tame a wild bird,
Then I would not have grown fond of the bird.
Now nothing has been left to Lalon except shedding tears.
The cage of raw bamboo will not endure long and the bird will fly away deaf to all crying!
When the bird will leave the cage is your constant worry,
And you forget all about your Teaching.
No one you call your own will go with you.
Suddenly will come the summons and the peremptory call must be answered.

¹ All Lalon songs translated here are from Mobarak Hossain Khan (Ed.), *Lalon Samagro* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Rafiqzaman Humayun, Geetanjali, 2007); cf. জনতা প্রকাশ, রফিকুজ্জামান হুমায়ুন, ঢাকা ১৯০০
২০০৭.

² This song was previously translated in part; now it is translated in full. Cf. "The Songs of Lalon," *Global Conversations: An International Journal in Contemporary Philosophy and Culture*, Vol. IV (01), p. 102.

Friends, relatives and your parents will say that you are dead and nobody will touch you!
So, don't burden your mind with false thoughts!
Lalon! You should seek in yourself and the fear of death will be no more.

Note: The philosophy that we are presented with here is called “Dehototto” in the Baul Tradition. (*Baul* is traditional Bangla bard; *Deho* means ‘body’, *Totto* – ‘theory’). The main focus of this philosophy is on the connection of body and soul. The bird in this song is commonly taken to stand for the soul, whereas the cage – for the body. Readers may notice that sometimes Lalon addresses himself in third person, as if distancing from himself in a way similar to the usage of the non-personal pronouns, as in “One should not do that!” This points to the way the Bauls always tried to free themselves from the “Illusions” of life, which are associated with the ‘Teaching’ he refers to.

Who stays in my room,
In my whole life I have never seen it.³
I can only feel its movement,
But I cannot see it with my eyes,
In the marketplace of life it exists,
But when I try to touch it,
It's to no avail!
Everyone says that it is my soul,
I stay quiet and listen to it but I say nothing.
Is it made of water or fire?
Maybe earth or wind,
Nobody can tell me right!
Since I cannot solve the mystery of my own house,
I avoid talking about others.
Lalon says,
“Who is not-myself and who am I?”
The room is only locked because it is locked with your own thought!
And the best version of myself and the teaching live in that room.
One can only open the lock with thoughts,
And then one can see the play of life!
Then all the pains and sufferings are extinguished,
And it is beautiful!
Lalon says politely,
“How does thought looks like?”

³ Bengali has a gender neutral pronoun, which Lalon uses here and which can also refer to ‘he’ and ‘she’.

Is it like a statue?
Or is there is a lamp in that room?
Whenever I try to comprehend it, it gets lost
Without friendship in your thought there will be no respect for the self,
Try to understand the relation to your own self,
When you can do it, then you will own it!”

Note: It may suffice to say that Lalon is not always easy to understand. This song speaks about one’s soul or self, and how one can find it. He also discusses what the self actually is. And the analogy of room (or house) can be seen once again as the body, whereas the person who lives in it, as the soul or the self. Lalon here appears to be alerting us to the need of self-knowledge, very much like in the Delphic “Know thyself!”

Oh my mind! Reflect the question of what the self is!
If you can answer that then you will know how infinitely beautiful it is!
Without knowing the self all other practices are a lie.
The ultimate truth lies in the self!
The beauty of the self is wonderful
And if you have seen it don’t describe it to anyone!
One should try to see and understand it by one’s own self.
If you have the eyes for it you can see it.
Shiraj Shai told Lalon,
If you forget about it,
You will live in lie!

This fish that all the great sages try to catch with their work,
Is actually your own self and it has only taken the form of a fish and hiding itself in water.
It is an uncanny fish and everyone thinks and search for it all over in the seas,
But very few people can really understand how near it lives!
If you can contemplate which is your true sea,
Then you can just dive in it and it will be easy to catch this fish!
If you are right then the fish will come close to you by itself and you will be a great sage,
Siraj Shai says that all other people will drink water and have difficulties to find this fish!

Note: In this song, which also centers on the self, Lalon speaks about Siraj Shai, who was his teacher and introduced him into the ways of the Bauls.

When the fisherman will come and cast the net,
Neither the big carps nor the small fishes will be left.
You all are playing and dancing now
But when the fisherman comes,
He will empty the pond!
You think that the water is very deep,
And that's why you are so happy!
But when the call comes,
It will not ask for anyone's permission!
The material life has shaped the fish,
And that's why I have forgotten my teaching!
Lalon, please hear the plea of this man who has nothing!
And remember again the teaching you learned from Siraj Shai,
And you will not stray away from the right path!

Note: In this short song, in which again comes the name Siraj Shai, the teacher of Lalon, the fisherman can be seen as the death and the fish as all of us. Lalon here appears to suggest that we have succumbed too much to our materialistic life and thus forgotten about the death, whereas death is the ultimate truth we must face.

He who dedicates flowers at the pedestal of love,
Knows the beauty of that flower!
That flower is the main underlying element of the world,
But the words fail me when I try to describe it!
Yet everyone tries to seek this flower on the square of life!
At the end of the month blooms that flower.
Where is its stalk and where is its root!
When I try to know the origin of that flower,
All of my illusions fall apart!
If you remember your teaching,
You will find that flower,
The more Lalon thinks about this flower, the more he feels respect for his teacher!
I saw a magical tree!
Without a seed, a bizarre tree!
The flower of that tree is the moon!
There is no beginning or end of that tree,
The tree floats only on nothing,
And the tree bears fruit without flower!

When I see that I feel puzzled!
What should I tell more about the tree!
The flower is full of honey and the fruit is full of nectar that gives eternal life!
The aroma of that tree is enough to satiate your hunger!
If someone understand the meaning of this tree,
He is a person of real riches!
“I will take him as my teacher,” says Lalon!

Note: The tree here can be seen as life, whereas the fruit or flower as synonymous for the meaning or the true meaning of life!

The moon is now beyond your reach and how do you expect to touch it!

There are thousands of moons out there,
If you try to see it your eyes will not be right for it!
You will be blinded by its beauty!
There is a tree of which the moon is a fruit!
The moon blinks sometimes,
If you try to see it,
Be careful because you will lose consciousness!
There is a city that is magical!
In the night the city is full dark and in the day there is light!
One who knows the news of the light can really see, says Lalon!
There is a thief who is stealing from the city,
If anyone knows how or when he comes, let me know!
Everyone is trying to catch the thief,
But he uses the way of the wind
So none has succeeded to catch him!
The city has twenty four districts,
Two times every day there are canon fires!
Everyone is afraid of the thief!
Think beyond mind and intelligence,
Lalon says if you can do that, you can catch the thief!
Catch the thief with the trap of wind,
He is not a small time thief that you would catch easy!
Under the earth too there is a thief,
He is also in the air!
He is everywhere!
Where is the house and where is the street!

Where is the marketplace!
Everything is in the wind!
If you want to catch the thief,
At first make your heart strong and pure!
If you can do it, says Lalon,
You can catch the thief!

Note: The theme of this song is arguably again the search of one's true self. The sketch below was made during an interview with Lalon by Jyotirindranath Tagore,⁴ Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother.⁵



⁴Source/Photographer, Indian National Museum (বাংলা: ভারতীয় জাতীয় জাদুঘর).

⁵ For more information on the ties of Lalon with the Tagore family see “The Songs of Lalon,” above cited, especially pp. 107-109.