



## Recontextualising Lalon Sangeet: Oral tradition to stage performance and cinematic adaptation

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### Abstract

Lalon Shah is a profound mystical poet and saint in 19th-century Bengal. His mystic songs have been transmitted through various forms of stage performances, translation, and film adaptation over the centuries to reach an urban audience and popular culture. This study examines the cultural transformation of Lalon Sangeet from an indigenous oral tradition to its contemporary manifestations in stage performance, popular music, and cinematic adaptation. Lalon Fakir's Baul philosophy challenges caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and social exclusion. Lalon's songs, preserved through oral circulation rather than written archives, exemplify the resilience of subaltern knowledge systems sustained through collective memory and embodied performance.

The study pays particular attention to the contrast between the participatory 'ashar', a dialogic, non-hierarchical performance space central to Baul praxis, and modern mass-mediated platforms such as television, fusion music, and cinema, which reframe Lalon Geeti for urban and global audiences. While these mediated forms introduce aesthetic innovation, they also alter the intimate performer-audience relationship intrinsic to oral tradition.

The study argues that despite processes of modernisation, commodification, and technological mediation, the core humanistic and spiritual philosophy of Lalon, centred on 'Moner Manuṣ' (the inner self as divine) and the rejection of caste, creed, and institutional religion, remains conceptually intact. By examining the continuity and transformation of Lalon Sangeet across cultural forms, this research contributes to ongoing debates on oral tradition, folk modernity, and cultural sustainability. The study ultimately positions Lalon Sangeet as a dynamic cultural discourse that negotiates between tradition and modernity while sustaining its radical ethical vision of human unity and social equality.

**Keywords:** Baul tradition, oral tradition, cultural transmission, performance studies, folk modernity, film and musical adaptation

### Introduction

Oral traditions have long served as crucial sites of cultural memory, ethical discourse, and philosophical reflection, particularly within societies where knowledge transmission relied on collective performance rather than written archives. In the Bengal region, folk and oral cultures evolved as alternative epistemic systems that articulated resistance to caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and social exclusion. Despite colonial intervention, postcolonial fragmentation, and contemporary market-driven cultural transformation, these traditions have persisted by adapting to changing socio-historical conditions and media environments.

Among the most influential figures of Bengal's oral-mystical tradition is Lalon Fakir (c. 1774–1890), whose Baul philosophy foregrounded human unity, spiritual egalitarianism, and the rejection of institutionalised religion. Composed and transmitted entirely through oral means, Lalon Sangeet functioned as a performative mode of inquiry rather than a fixed textual canon. Embedded within participatory spaces such as the 'ashar', Lalon's songs sustained a dialogic relationship between performer and audience, where music operated as shared philosophical reflection and ethical practice.

In the modern period, however, Lalon Sangeet has undergone significant transformation as it moved from intimate communal gatherings to stage performances, recorded music, popular culture, and cinematic representation. While these mediated forms have expanded its reach to urban, national, and global audiences, they have also altered the original conditions of performance and

reception. This shift raises critical questions concerning authenticity, commodification, and the sustainability of oral traditions within mass-mediated cultural economies.

This study critically examines the evolution of Lalon Sangeet from an indigenous oral tradition to its contemporary manifestations in stage performance and film adaptation. Drawing on folklore studies, performance theory, and cultural transmission, the study analyses how technological mediation reshapes form, audience engagement, and philosophical expression. It argues that despite aesthetic modification and institutional reframing, the core humanistic vision of Lalon Fakir, centred on 'Moner Manuṣ', and the rejection of caste, creed, and social hierarchy, continues to function as a resilient ethical discourse. By tracing both continuity and change, the study situates Lalon Sangeet as a dynamic negotiation between tradition and modernity within the broader context of folk cultural sustainability.

### Cultural Roots

The oral traditions of Bengal can be traced back to pre-colonial Bengal, which was an undivided region, spanning from the Himalayan foothills in the north to the Bay of Bengal delta in the south, from the Subarnarekha River to the west. The Chittagong Hills, Tripura's hills, and Meghalaya's Khasi Jaintiya Hills are in the east. Bengal's oral tradition and folk culture have served as a source of social, philosophical, and spiritual knowledge for generations before written history. Over 200 years, the Bengal region (Bangladesh and West Bengal, India) has maintained its oral traditions and cultural heritage despite

political instability and market-driven cultural encroachment. During this phase till today, stories, songs and all other forms of oral and cultural knowledge are passed down through spoken word, song and performance and have evolved into various modern art forms today.

Lalon Fakir's mystic songs have been transmitted through various forms of stage performances, translation, and film adaptation over the centuries to reach urban audiences and popular culture. Translating, fusing, and adopting Lalon Fakir's songs and philosophy resonates with wider audiences and influences several art forms, such as music, literature, and visual arts. He is regarded as a Bengali cultural icon, having inspired and influenced numerous philosophers, poets, and social thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Allen Ginsberg.

Lalon's humanistic philosophy firmly denounces distinctions based on caste, class, and religion, while also opposing doctrinal conflicts and racial prejudice. His worldview emphasizes the rejection of material concerns in favor of spiritual realization, aligning closely with the socially reformative traditions of Bhakti and Sufism in the Indian subcontinent. He founded the *Lalon Akhra* at Cheuriya, located about two kilometers from the Kushtia railway station in southwestern Bangladesh, which remains a central space for the preservation and dissemination of his teachings. Lalon's followers are predominantly found in Bangladesh and in the Indian regions of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam's Barak Valley. Annually, on the occasion of his death anniversary, thousands of devotees and admirers assemble at the *Lalon Akhra* for a three-day commemoration involving musical performances and reflective discussions on his songs and philosophical ideas.

### **Lalon Sangeet and Baul Tradition**

Lalon Fakir articulated his philosophical worldview predominantly through lyrical and musical forms, using song as a primary medium of metaphysical and ethical expression. Scholarly estimates suggest that his corpus may have comprised between 2,000 to 10,000 compositions, although only approximately 800 are conventionally recognized as authentic. Lalon did not produce written manuscripts of his works; rather, his songs circulated through oral transmission and were subsequently documented by his disciples. This reliance on orality is further explained by the limited literacy among his followers, which resulted in only a small fraction of his compositions being preserved in written form.

From Lalon Sangeet to Baul Geeti, it originated from an indigenous community's oral cultural traditions. The oral tradition of Baul song in Bengal relies on face-to-face interaction due to limited technology in rural areas. However, with modern media like television, the Internet, and radio transmission, a veil of impersonal technology has supplanted direct engagement between performers and the audience. Visually appealing images of celebrities in popular culture often leave viewers of modern media detached.

On the other hand, the singer and the audience in Baul Sangeet's 'ashar' (programme or soiree) are seated in a close-knit circle with no separation between them. Like a group huddle, the ashara occurs when people gather near to one another, sometimes talking or debating human issues, and occasionally a Baul may sing a song that can spark

further discussion by singing and maintaining the vitality of the general exchange. This represents the idea that the song or performance is a sharing of understanding among all in attendance rather than an individual imposition onto them.

A significant dimension of the Baul Geeti tradition is its deeply syncretic mystical orientation, emerging from the interaction of Sahajiya, Vaishnava, Sufi, and other cultural-spiritual influences. Owing to this composite formation, Baul identity cannot be confined to or claimed by any single religious community. Rather, its humanist ethos has enabled diverse groups to engage with Baul practices as a shared cultural and ethical tradition. Within the historical context of undivided Bengal, Lalon Fakir stands as the most prominent and influential figure of the Baul lineage. His philosophical vision foregrounds the primacy of humanity, consciously rejecting the authority of institutionalized religion, ritual formalism, and dogmatic belief systems. Mondal states:

To them, the human body and the human body alone are the objects of worship. They have no social and religious hierarchy in their tradition. They always keep themselves engaged in searching for "Moner Manuṣ" (Man of the Heart) (Mondal 2015: 58).

Baul songs constitute the enduring form through which their devotional hymns have been preserved and transmitted. Far from functioning merely as instruments of popular entertainment, these songs facilitate deeper engagement with spiritual practice and contemplative devotion. Simultaneously, they operate as cultural archives that sustain the essential features of folk tradition, including ethical values, philosophical thought, interdisciplinary knowledge systems, modes of anonymous collective creation, and their broader socio-cultural impact. Despite their small number, the secular sect known as Baul is able to transcend any human wall. For the majority of their life, they have been using their actions, song melodies, and free-form rhythmic dancing to spread deeper philosophical truths among the populace.

### **Cultural Transmission**

Through sustained interreligious contact, an individualized mode of spiritual practice, and a codified set of norms and conventions that enable the convergence of diverse religious and social elements, the disciplined Baul sect continues to uphold the inherited ethical and cultural ideals of Bengal's earlier civilizational formations. According to widely accepted scholarly narratives, Lalon was born into a Hindu family and later contracted smallpox while undertaking a pilgrimage. He was subsequently rescued by the Sufi practitioner Malam Shah, an encounter that significantly shaped his spiritual development. Lalon later became a disciple of Siraj Shai, who interpreted Islamic teachings through the framework of Ma'rifat (mystical or esoteric knowledge). Engaging with this epistemological approach, Lalon also aligned himself with the Vaishnava Sahajiya tradition and ultimately articulated a monistic conception of the divine, affirming the oneness of God beyond sectarian distinctions.

Lalon was raised in a rural community ruled by superstition and ignorance, but he developed into a brilliant individual. His pursuit is motivated by his spiritual worldview, which is centred on equality and togetherness. That is why he quests...

Shob loke koy Lalon ki jaat shong sare.

Everyone wonders, "What religion does Lalon belong to in this world?"

Lalon says, "What does religion look like?"

I've never seen the true colour of religion.

Some wear beads as necklaces (Hindu rosaries).

Others count beads as Tasbih (Muslim rosaries).

And so people say they belong to a different religion.

But do you bear the sign of your religion?"

When you come (to this world) or when you leave (this world)? (Jenkins, 2002, p. 57) <sup>[4]</sup>

An enthusiastic admirer of the integrity and oneness of all humans, this devotee had this philosophy. He was endowed with profound social conscience in addition to being a traveller on the enigmatic path. All religious cults can harmonise their spiritual understanding in Baul Sangeet, in which they oppose the hypocrisy and hollowness of religious activities performed in the name of religion. He was quite agitated about the issues his civilisation was currently facing. He was experiencing caste discrimination and religious intolerance at the time; thus, his songs revolted against these things. This self-taught folk poet was keenly aware of the actual catastrophe facing his culture and the wider world. Rabindranath Tagore was strongly touched by his songs' distinctive subject matter, lyrics, and rhythmic pattern with melodies. The introduction of folk songs from the lower classes to the higher classes' literary repertoire is Lalon Fakir's most significant accomplishment.

According to Lalon, individuals who have faith in people might strive towards God or the ultimate soul. However, the question remains: where can we find this 'Mānuṣ Ratna'? In response, Lalon says:

Milon hobe koto diney?

Amar moner manusher e sone?

When will I meet with the man of heart? (32)

(Self-translation)

Lalon also remarks...

Vala kore khūjis kyāpā deśe-bideśe Āpana ghara khujile

Ratan pāi anāse. (Khan 2007: 353) <sup>[5]</sup>

It is not possible to find this 'manuṣa ratana' (humanity) and 'moner manu's (Supreme Being) outside of ourselves or both overseas. Our bodies contain it. Anyone who discovers their own body will find it readily; in other words, if someone realises who they are, they will receive this 'manuṣa ratana'. This type of realisation unites people across all the cultures, religions, societies, and nations. For those who believe in man and humanity, man is God, and humanity is the ultimate way to reach towards God. The great and intense love of which the Baul sings is for the divine beloved residing in the innermost recesses of his heart and variously called 'maner-manuṣa' (Man of the Heart).

The principal themes of Lalon Geeti are the struggles between this nation's various religions and societies, as well as opposition to their caste- and racial-based ideologies. Lalon advocated against various forms of discrimination, such as casteism, religious riots, class oppression, and superstitions. He also taught people via his songs the true meaning of his philosophical beliefs and the importance of these principles in society, which are still relevant today, because there are still riots, class inequality, and casteism in our culture. And for that reason he sang...

Jaat gelo, jaat gelo bole eki ajob karkhānā Satya kāje keu  
noy rāji sobi dekhi tā nā nā nā Āsbaār kāle ki jāat chhile  
Ese tumi ki jāat nile Ki jaāt hovā yāvār kāle Se kathāti  
bheve balo nā.

Brāhmaṇ-Canḍāl-Chāmār-Muci Eki jole hoy go śuchi

Dekhe śune hoy nā ruchi

Jomeo to kāuke chārve nā. (Khan 2007: 246) <sup>[5]</sup>

Shahjahan Munshi loosely translated this song as

People keep talking about their caste disappearing as if it's a wonder; it's strange to see such a factory.

No one is satisfied with the honest work; although everything is visible, no one acknowledges it.

What did people think about caste when they were about to come to this world?

What made you pick a caste when you arrived here?

What caste will you belong to when you depart from here?

Don't bother about such thoughts!

Brahmins, Chandals, and Chamars are all the same; all are pure, just like water.

Despite seeing and hearing, people don't indulge. Death spares no one. (16)

Lalon expresses his conflicted confusion regarding the differences between people based on gender and caste in this song. He was interested in finding out what class or caste a person belongs to, when they are born, when they die, and when they are still alive in this world. Which caste was a man born into, and which one will he inherit upon death? He manifests more concerns, saying that if the same water is required to sanctify the same Brahmaṇa and lower-caste individuals like Muchi (shoemaker), Camara (tanner), and Canḍala (lower-caste Hindu), then why is there conflict among these people? These significant issues, the answers to which are unknown, were posed by the humanist Lalon through his self-educated knowledge.

Lalon Geeti has been a source of inspiration for many musicians. Fusion music, which combines traditional and modern styles, has been a great way to introduce Lalon's timeless wisdom to new audiences and reach from mass culture to popular culture. Earlier, it was sung with only one local musical instrument, which is known as 'Ektara'. Nowadays, young musicians use Lalon Geeti in their fusion music in various ways, such as blending it with Western instruments like guitars, keyboards, and drums and they have evolved a unique sound pattern with a different flavour. Farida Parveen's soulful renditions of Lalon's songs, blending traditional and modern styles, have become very popular.

On the other hand, Lalon Geeti has been merged with genres like rock, pop, jazz, and classical music, creating a new sound that appeals to diverse audiences. Ayub Bachchu's rock-fusion versions of Lalon Geeti, have become incredibly popular in Bangladesh. In collaborations with international artists, Bangladeshi musicians have evolved baul fusion music that showcases Lalon's poetry to global audiences. Warsfashion's electronic-fusion remixes of Lalon's songs and Cock Studio have gained international recognition. These fusion experiments have not only revitalised interest in Lalon's poetry but also introduced his wisdom to new generations and global audiences.

In India, Lalon Geeti has been featured in various music competitions, including Sa Re Ga Ma Pa, a popular Indian singing reality show. Contestants have performed soulful

renditions of Lalon's songs, showcasing their vocal talent and emotional depth. For instance, in *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Bangla* (2018), contestant Imran Mahmudul performed a mesmerising version of Lalon's 'Khachar Bhiton Ochin Pakhi' (A Bird Trapped Inside), receiving widespread acclaim. The following year, in *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Hindi* (2019), contestant Ishita Vishwakarma sang a heartfelt rendition of Lalon's 'Gurusagare Dubilo' (Drowned in the Ocean of the Guru), impressing judges and audiences alike. These performances not only demonstrate the contestants' singing abilities but also help popularise Lalon Geeti among a wider audience, introducing his timeless wisdom and poetry to new generations.

Lalon Shah has been featured in various film adaptations as well, showcasing his poetry and philosophy on the big screen. A Bangladeshi film, *Lalon* (2004), directed by Tanvir Mokammel, explores Lalon's life and teachings. In 2010, a Bengali film director, Goutam Ghose, made a biopic based on the life of Lalon Fakir, which won the National Film Award and the Golden Peacock Award 2010.

Recently in 2018, a Bangladeshi film director, Mahmud Didar, has made a film, namely *Fakir Lalon Shah* (2018), based on Lalon's life and mystic philosophy of life. Bengali film director Raja Narayan Deb has made *Rekhe Aoarey Lalon* (2019) by exploring Lalon's teachings and legacy and restored Bengali cultural heritage. All these films feature several Lalon Geeti, including 'Khachar Bhiton Ochin Pakhi' and 'Gurusagare Dubilo', evolving, reviving, and sustaining his timeless wisdom and poetry for the new generations. These film adaptations not only showcase Lalon's poetry and music but also help to spread his message of love, tolerance, and spiritual seeking to a wider audience.

### Research Statement

This study examines the cultural transformation of Lalon Sangeet from an indigenous oral and participatory tradition to its contemporary recontextualisation in stage performance, popular music, and film, with particular attention to how shifts in media and performance spaces reshape modes of transmission, audience engagement, and aesthetic form. It argues that although processes of modernisation, technological mediation, and commodification have altered the original dialogic and non-hierarchical performance structure of Baul practice, the core humanistic and egalitarian philosophy of Lalon Fakir, centred on '*Moner Manus*' and the rejection of caste, creed, and institutional religion, remains conceptually resilient. By tracing both continuity and transformation, the study positions Lalon Sangeet as a dynamic cultural discourse that negotiates between oral tradition and modernity while sustaining its ethical vision of social equality and spiritual unity.

### Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Lalon Sangeet functions not merely as a folk musical form but as a resilient cultural discourse that continuously negotiates between oral tradition and modern media environments. Rooted in collective memory, embodied performance, and dialogic exchange, Lalon Sangeet historically operated within non-hierarchical spaces such as the '*ashar*', where music served as a participatory philosophical practice rather than a commodified spectacle. As this research has shown, the

transition from intimate oral circulation to stage performance, mass media, fusion music, and cinematic adaptation has significantly altered the modes of transmission, reception, and aesthetic framing of Lalon's songs.

While contemporary platforms: television, reality shows, fusion music, and film, have expanded the visibility of Lalon Sangeet beyond its indigenous milieu, they have also introduced new power structures shaped by urban tastes, market forces, and institutional mediation. These shifts risk reducing a dialogic spiritual practice into a performative product, potentially diluting the participatory ethics intrinsic to Baul praxis (Hauser, 2002; Roy & Hassan, 2010) [3, 8]. Nevertheless, this study argues that such transformations should not be read solely as cultural loss. Rather, they reveal a process of adaptive continuity through which oral traditions survive by reconfiguring themselves within changing socio-cultural conditions (Banik, 2016; Rashid, 2019) [1, 7].

Crucially, despite aesthetic modification and technological mediation, the core philosophical vision of Lalon Fakir, centred on '*Moner Manus*', spiritual egalitarianism, and the rejection of caste, creed, and religious orthodoxy, remains conceptually intact. Lalon's humanistic critique of social division continues to resonate across generations, finding renewed relevance in contemporary contexts marked by religious polarisation, social inequality, and cultural fragmentation (Shil, n.d.; Lopez, 1995) [6]. The persistence of these themes across performance genres and media forms underscores the ethical durability of Baul philosophy as a counter-discourse to institutionalised religion and social hierarchy.

By situating Lalon Sangeet within broader debates on oral tradition, folk modernity, and cultural sustainability, this research contributes to performance studies and folklore scholarship by highlighting how subaltern knowledge systems endure without fixed textual canons. Lalon Sangeet emerges not as a static relic of the past but as a living, evolving cultural practice that continually rearticulates its radical ethical vision through new expressive forms. Ultimately, the recontextualisation of Lalon Sangeet affirms that tradition and modernity are not oppositional forces but dialogic processes through which cultural meaning is preserved, transformed, and reimagined for future generations.

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