

Lalan Shah—The Great Baul

—Dr. Anwarul Karim—

LALAN Shah is the leading 'baul' of Bangladesh. His influence on our people, both rural and urban, is indeed tremendous. Every year thousands of people from different parts of the country throng at Lalan mausoleum to observe his death anniversary which falls on the 1st of Kartik (B.S.) and also at the time of annual festival in the month of Falgun for three consecutive nights. The whole of Kushtia then takes a festive look. Bauls both male and female come from different parts of the country to pay homage to their great spiritual leader Lalan Shah who died at Seuria, a village adjacent to the Mohini Mills of Kushtia and where the Lalan Academy is located, on the 1st of Kartik, 1297 B.S. corresponding to 19th October, 1890 A.D.

The age Lalan lived in marked the beginning of a new era both in social reform and in religious awakening. Although a mystic by faith he was endowed with a critical faculty.

He had a tremendous disregard for caste system and social stratification which tortured men to nothingness. In fact he was a humanist. He was born in a period when society was really being suffocated by the pressure of social stratification. Lalan indeed assimilated different ideas and types of culture into a unity. He incorporated both Sahajiva and Sufi disciplines into his doctrine. His was a religion of Man. Lalan believed that man was the best of all creation and he himself felt the dynamic identification with the Divine. The religion of Lalan is a cumulative cultural achievement of different forces.

He called upon all to eschew narrow ideas of communalism and to form a Universal brotherhood.

He was not a religious reformer. But he fought for his ideals to make the world free from social injustice, hatred

and corruption.

Tagore brought Lalan Shah to the limelight when twenty of his songs which he collected during his stay at Shelaidah, six miles from Lalan Academy

that he met Lalan Shah in his youth. There had been speculations over his meeting with Lalan Shah while he was in Shelaidah although there is no mention of such meeting in

Padma along with other members of his family. It was fifth May, 1889. The original sketch has been kept preserved in the museum of Rabindra Bharati Society, Calcutta. A copy of the same has also been kept preserved in the Lalan Academy, Kushtia. In fact Jatirindranath and Rabindranath were among the first to recognise the poetic genius of Lalan Shah.

It was Tagore who was the first to make proper assessment of his songs. Tagore was very much drawn towards Lalan and in many of his songs adapted his melody. His 'Gitinjali' bears ample testimony to this truth.

In his Hibbert lecture delivered at Oxford, England in 1930 Tagore quoted lines from a song of Lalan Shah, 'Nobody can tell me whence the bird unknown comes to the cage and goes out. "I would feign put round its feet the fetters of my mind could I but capture it".

The songs of Lalan brought in a sort of reaction against orthodoxy. It proclaimed Monism and preached ardent personal devotion. Lalan whose mystic experience was shaped by Seraj Shahi, his spiritual teacher, afterwards was greatly influenced by the great Persian mystics, Jalaluddin Rumi, Hafiz, Jami and Saadi. The songs of Lalan Shah although fall within the classification of Baul songs they are typically his own and as such are known as Lalan Geeti.

Lalan Shah belongs to that group of mystics among whom Kabir, Dadu, Rajjab are perhaps prominent. Lalan has considered God as Shain or the Lord of his life. He is the supreme object of his love. Lalan submitted to the will of his God. (The author is Director, Lalan Academy, Bushula).



Lalan Shah's portrait sketched by Jyotirindranath Tagore.

and Kushtia own, were published in an issue of monthly Prabashi, Calcutta. Rabindranath had a business concern at Kushtia town and occasionally he lived there. There are reports

Tagore's writings or discussions, nor Lalan's name. His elder brother Jatirindranath Tagore drew up a pencil sketch of Lalan Faquir on the Padma boat while cruising over the