

**Who was Jaura Khatun? / জওরা [জহুরা?] খাতুন কে ছিলেন?**

**Audio loop, 18 min 39 sec**

This is the story of a name we find in the catalogue of an archive. It is, as Philip Scheffner would have said, ‘a ghost story’.

In 1978, the late Bengali poet and essayist, also a civil servant in British India, Annada Shankar Ray, published a book *Lalon O Tanr Gaan* on Lalon Fakir, the famous nineteenth century mystic poet of Bengal. There is an essay in the book titled ‘*Loksahityer Sandhane*’ or ‘In Search of Folk Literature’. Dated 1977, it starts with the author reminiscing about an incident which took place ‘about 45 years ago’, when he was posted as the magistrate in Naogaon division of Rajshahi district in undivided Bengal, now Bangladesh.

‘There arrived one day a man from Santiniketan, in search of folk songs. Dr Arnold Bake, Dutch citizen, admirer of Rabindranath Tagore, who was famous for his transcription of Tagore’s songs... In Naogaon there was another man who had come a long way with his collection of folk songs and who had already published an anthology of these songs, *Haramoni*, with an Introduction by Tagore himself. He was a sub-inspector of schools in Naogaon. While he went about the countryside on his inspection duty, he also collected [texts of] folk songs from people. Not many knew of his work then, but today he is the famous Mohammad Mansuruddin.

‘When I heard of Bake’s visit, I put Mansuruddin on the job. Within just a day he got hold of a fakir and fakirni [male and female wandering singers of mystical songs]; who knows where from? The man’s voice was not great, so he was mostly silent. The woman sang one song after another and Bake *saheb* recorded them with his machine. There weren’t any tape recorders in those days. Bake’s instrument was old-fashioned. *The beautiful voice of the fakirni got packed and sent abroad* – তার গান যন্ত্রে চালান হয়ে গেল, আমরা কেউ তাকে ধরে রাখতে পারলাম না।’ [The precise word Ray uses is ‘challan,’ which conveys a sense of transaction. Her voice got *challaned*, Ray writes.] *We could not keep her*. However, Mohammad Mansuruddin wrote down the songs and later published them. *Haramoni* is being published as volumes and recently the eight has come out.’

From Rajshahi, through Naogaon to Ishwardi, Santahar, Mahasthangarh—the story moves in many directions. From place to place, from person to person, in search of Jaura Khatun. Annada Shankar Roy comes in, as does Mohammad Mansuruddin. We go to Sujanagar and find Mansuruddin’s grave. In Mahasthangarh, we find other women like Jaura Khatun, singers of mystical *bhaber gaan*. The Naogaon ganja workers whom Bake recorded, who were they? What was the significance of ganja cultivation in the region? What was its relation to the songs which Jaura Khatun sang? What is this story of hemp and healing which seems to be held in this voice? Where did Jaura Khatun come from? Where did she go? *Who was she?*

Voice-over: Moushumi Bhowmik