




Orient BlackSwan

Poetics and Politics of  
**Sufism & Bhakti**  
in South Asia  
*Love, Loss and Liberation*



Edited by **Kavita Panjabi**






This book offers a literary, performative, cultural and linguistic analysis of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia. Scholarship on this subject is usually limited to either the Sufi or the Bhakti tradition, or to a particular language or region. *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia* tries to bridge this gap through a comparative approach on the evolution and cross-fertilisation of ideas between Sufism and Bhakti. It focuses on the range of influences across different linguistic and cultural divides. From Kabir's notion of love and femininity to the articulation of religious identities in Jayasi's *Padmavat*, to the trajectories of the concept of *viraha* in the Nehruvian era, to the performative sentiments of *baul* and *thumri* artists, this book coalesces different strands of emotions and spiritualism.

Central to this book are the methodological approaches of comparative literary studies, by means of which it attempts to bridge the disciplinary divides of academia, and root the literary and philosophical study of Sufi and Bhakti traditions in performance art as well as social processes both within and across cultures.

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The ASIHSS Programme, Department of Comparative Literature,  
Jadavpur University, Kolkata

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**Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia**

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## 11 Madly In Love

### ON A TRAIL OF SONGS OF SEPARATION

Moushumi Bhowmik

*Ore bhakti na hole,  
Maular didar ki mele?*

Without *bhakti* (devotion) in your heart,  
Can you ever have a vision of the *Maula* (Master)?

NURU PAGLA, A SINGER OF Faridpur in Bangladesh, had an otherworldly smile on his face as he sang this song. *Kulsumbibi mehmani korlo*, he sang on:

Kulsumbibi gave a big feast.  
Allah had come to her that day.  
He did not come as the *Paighambar* (Prophet),  
Nor did he come as a *zamindar* (landlord),  
But he came with the song of the *fakir* (humble devotee/mystic minstrel).

Nuru repeated

*Ore bhakti na hole,  
Maular didar ki mele?*

I have wondered at the meaning of this 'bhakti' of which Nuru Pagla sang. Is it simply devotion mixed with awe and inspiration, or is it also a kind of love verging on total submission, a humility which

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This chapter is based on a presentation made at the seminar 'Convergence of Bhakti and Sufism', Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, on 8-10 February 2006. The author is a singer and songwriter of Bengali music, currently researching *viraha* in the folk music of Bengal. She has been supported by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore to make field recordings which are being archived at the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology, Gurgaon and the World and Traditional Music Section of the British Library's Sound Archives in London.



in turn leads to freedom? In Kulsum's case she had to attain humility, only then could she ask to be blessed with divine vision. Or the feast she had spread out for her guests kept turning to ashes along with her jewels. It was not enough that she had invited the entire town to her house, for she had left out her sister Fatema because she wore rags. However, until she saw the significance of these rags and brought Fatema to attend her feast, Kulsum could not feed her guests. In other words, Kulsum would remain caged in her own pride till she realised the meaning of Fatema's *fakiri*. Nuru Pagla's song seemed to me to refer to that bhakti or devotion which comes as a release. There was such submission in Nuru's singing too, who, interestingly, is called *pagla*, the mad one.

In the course of my travels through West Bengal and parts of Assam in India, and in areas in Bangladesh, in search of songs of *viraha* (longing for union while being in a state of separation), I have come to believe that love and devotion find their true expression only in the rare instances when one can rise above one's self to a state of total submission and attain 'madness'. This submission can be to love or to the creator; to the teacher (*murshid* or guru) or even to art. Perhaps it is only then that the devotee can have *Maular didar* [the vision of God]. The rest is the mere enactment of love.

This chapter attempts to see both the singer and the listener in their madness, while also demonstrating how historical events, political processes, social circumstances and the moment of singing and listening, go into the making of a song; the entanglement of songs with the lives of people—be it the Vaishnava *bhakta* poet's song of *viraha* or the Sufi's song of submission.

## THE SONG AND THE STORY

It was a day of music at the local trader, Sadek Ali's house in Shobharampur, on the bank of the River Kumar in Faridpur town, western Bangladesh. Nuru Pagla was one of the invited singers. He sat quietly among three blind singers—Ibrahim, Harun and Rafique—waiting for his turn to sing. He wore a weathered jacket and had a *gamchha* tied around his head and from time to time he muttered: 'O, I've got a fever, I've got a fever.' Then all of a sudden he stood up and started to sing in wild gestures the *Khatnamar jari* (although he announced it as the *Shahidnamar jari*) crying out Joynal's (Zain-ul-Abedin) distress after the death of his father, Hussain, the Prophet's

grandson, at Karbala. And as is the case with *jarigan* or songs built around Islamic mythology, mainly the Battle of Karbala, the rest of the musicians and even the listeners spontaneously joined him in the refrain or *dohaar*. Then, as abruptly as he had begun, Nuru Pagla stopped and sat down, leaving the song unfinished. The concert continued with Ibrahim Boyati singing Bijoy Sarkar (*Posha pakhi ure jabe sajani/Ekdin bhabai nai mone* [I did not know that the caged bird would one day fly away]<sup>2</sup>) and Salamatbhai singing a rare *bichched* (separation song) by Mokshed Ali Shah.<sup>3</sup>

The day was drawing to a close and the sky had changed colour and the call to *Maghrib* was given out from the mosque nearby. Nuru stood up again, this time in a gesture of submission and said, 'I want to sing another little song.' He leaned forward and stretched out his hands and tunelessly began: *Ore bhakti na hole, Maular didar ki mele?* From valour and martyrdom to submission, Nuru had been on a journey that day, taking the listener along with him.

The question of how stories travel and how songs get made is one of curious interest. Nuru Pagla's *Khatnamar jari* or the Story of Bibi Kulsum are popular narratives in Bengal, and they are based on Islamic mythology, essentially localised. They are also tales from uncharted geographies (at least those were unvisited lands at the time when Islam came to Bengal). Yet, stories and mythologies get appropriated by a place and songs get made; existing musical forms accommodate new ideas, new poetry and song mingle with the old—it is a continuous process. Of the form called *jari* the folklorist and poet Jasimuddin wrote: 'In pre-Independence Bengal, Hindus and Muslims were almost equal in number and at concerts there would be members of both communities in the audience. So, in order to win the hearts of the people the mythologies of both communities were humanised.... Although many different stories are sung in *jarigan*, the main theme is the tragic tale of Muharram' (Jasimuddin 2003: 1).<sup>4</sup>

Why only in pre-Independence times, these stories have their relevance in people's lives even now, for they express feelings which have the power to transcend time and historical/theological barriers such as those between the Shias and the Sunnis, or between Hindus and Muslims. Yet what also needs to be understood is that even if stories and songs cross barriers, that does not necessarily suggest that barriers cease to exist. It might be a case of people's need for songs and stories, and occasions to celebrate and mourn, and no matter where the song or story comes from, if it is something they can connect with, then they make it into their own. In his book *My People*



*Uprooted: The Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal*, while the author Tathagata Roy unhesitatingly blames the Muslims for the pre-Partition riots, he lists the many things which the Hindus lost along with their homeland, among them the *bhaoaiya* and the *jari*, which he says are forms of folk song but does not go into details of what is sung in a *jari* (Roy 2001). On the other hand, during a field trip to Sylhet in 2006, I heard the lament for the *dhamail*, a form of song and dance performed by women during rituals, including weddings, which are built around events in Krishna's life. The *dhamail* has been nearly lost from Bangladesh with Partition and the migration of the Hindu population mainly to West Bengal and the north-eastern states of India. I feel that what these instances point to is perhaps a plurality, which was there but is gradually being lost; an intermingling of cultures and ideas, a sharing; the possibility of cohabitation, despite conflicts and differences, even hatred, yet not with an impenetrable wall standing between communities.

Of course there is the other aspect of stories and songs assuming a metaphorical presence in our lives and in our creative work. In his novel for young adults based on his personal experiences, *Supuriboner Sari*, the poet Sankha Ghosh has written about how as an adolescent boy, he was grief stricken upon reading Mir Mosharraf Hossain's story of Karbala (Ghosh 1990, 54–57; Hossain 1973). In 1956 Jasimuddin collected from Khulna a *jarigan* about Muhammad's daughter, Kulsum's feast. In it the singer, Shaikh Ukiluddin Ahmed, describes Fatema, also the Prophet's daughter, climbing boulders and drilling paths through rocks to go to Kulsum's house with her children: '*Pathor bhed kore chhed cholechhe Narayani*' (Jasimuddin 2003). Interesting, Fatema becomes the Hindu goddess of plenty, Narayani or Lakshmi, in this *jari*, for she is endowed with riches of her own despite the rags that she is wearing. More recently, the Bangladeshi filmmaker Tareque Masud used a song about Ali and Fatema in his film *Matir Moyna* [The Clay Bird]. One of his main characters is called Ayesha, after Muhammad's third wife. She is a strong, independent-minded woman and is in a relationship of conflict with her husband, the *qazi*. They live in troubled times of war. It is in a scene in this film that a blind singer sings a ballad about Fatema, Muhammad's daughter, who is angry that her private space of worship has been violated. She curses those who violated her shrine with death in battles amongst brothers. Least did she know then that it was her own sons, (who were actually spying for their father Ali, because he thought that his wife was probably cheating on him), she was sending to death.<sup>5</sup>



I first met Nasima on the sets of *Matir Moyna*, in a location near Dhaka. I was composing the background music for the film while Nasima was playing herself, a young singer of *palla gaan* (song-debates). That was in 2002. A couple of years later, while travelling on my song-collection trips, I sought her out again. Nasima, probably in her early thirties, sat in a friend's studio in Dhaka and spoke to me about her life and art and love, singing along the way. I asked her questions about growing up with music and repertoire, and she sang for me an extract from the *Meye-Purush Palla* (Woman versus Man song-debate). I was quite startled.

*Ali Fatemi meyer chhobi, mim hoite Muhammad Nabi  
Ore meye hoite janma shobi, hoyna kichhui meye chhara  
Meye hoy jagater shera ...*

It was a song with abundant Quranic allusions, about the woman being the creator of everything—from the letter *mim* to Muhammad Nabi. The melody on the other hand was exactly that of a Shyamasangit (devotional song for Shyama or Kali). That is what I told her and she said, 'Yes indeed, it is Ramprasadi', referring to the bhakti poet, Ramprasad Sen (1720–81), who wrote verses in praise of Kali. However, by 'Ramprasadi' Nasima probably meant a kind of musical structure only (*Prasadi sur*) and was not really thinking of Kali worship. What emerged from this exchange was the complex process by which a song such as this one is constructed. In it, different historical times and perspectives seem to naturally come together and major events such as the Partition, when a land and its people were divided on religious lines, don't seem to matter.

## TRAVELLING WITH THE SONG

Although the songs of the East Bengal refugee—made unforgettable through the renditions of Ranen Roychowdhury or Hemanga Biswas in Ritwik Ghatak's films—or that of Haripada Debnath—which the French musicologist Alain Danielou and music collector Deben Bhattacharya separately recorded in Benaras in the 1950s—are most commonly talked about in the context of the migration of music in Bengal, there are other songs that have come into the land both before and after the Partition.<sup>6</sup> Thoughts about the music and the people associated with it, crossed my mind when I heard Ghulam Shah

Fakir sing, '*Aroj kori o pak bari tomar hujure*' [I plead to you, wash me clean with your pure waters], in his feeble voice, accompanied by his sons Salam and Jamir, in their house in Shaspur, Birbhum district, West Bengal, during a field trip in 2004. Who brought such a tune to Bengal? I thought. This is music which is sung in rural Bengal as part of a community's musical expression of devotion, yet you hear in it lines from songs of northern India, which in turn carry echoes of places further west.

There is another singer by the name of Golam who comes from Jalangi in Murshidabad, West Bengal. His journey through song has been a most interesting one, as has been the journey of the songs he sings. Golam sings mostly *Bangla qawwali*. He grew up in Murshidabad and began singing quite early. Then one day Rashid Sarkar of Manikganj in Bangladesh visited his village and Golam was so taken by Rashid Sarkar's singing that he followed him to Bangladesh and has been going there ever since, for the past ten years or more. The impact of these travels is clearly seen in Golam's style of singing. In fact, today in folk festivals in West Bengal, Golam stands out both for his style and repertoire. That is the story of the singer's personal journey. Meanwhile, a song such as *Khajababa Khajababa*, a fairly new composition of Rashid Sarkar, which Golam sings with tremendous energy, seems to have come out of other journeys. It refers to the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti whose shrine is in Ajmer in Rajasthan. The song could be the result of journeys made by poets and pilgrims from the east to the north and back, or merely the result of recorded music from Muslim shrines in the north coming into Bangladesh in the east.

For the Muslim fakirs of Bengal, their repertoire includes songs built around different shrines, as well as compositions of mystic poets like Lalan, Duddu Shah, Hasson Raja, Jalaluddin and others. These are mostly songs about cleansing the mind, rising above the conflicts of religion and caste, and celebrating humanity, for it is within the human that the divine resides, the body is but the shrine: *Manush thuiya khoda bhojo/E mantrana ke diyachhe?* Jalaluddin Khan (1894–1972) of Netrakona in Bangladesh wrote: Who has asked you to worship god instead of worshipping humanity? I have heard Sunil Karmakar of Mymensing in Bangladesh sing this song with grace and gentleness, in a clear Ramprasadi style. I have also seen Gholam Fakir of Gorbhanga in Nadia dance in joy with his *dotara* while singing this song, but in another tune and style that could perhaps be identified as fakiri or murshidi (although musicological labels like these can be confusing and limiting too).



## POLITICS OF REPERTOIRE

Recently there seem to be an increase in political pressure against these traditions. There is an increasing number of *kirtan akhras* in Joydeb (where a more institutional form of Vaishnavism is showcased, as opposed to the radical ideas and practices of the mystic minstrels or Bauls) which is the traditional place where Baul melas were held every year on the Makar Sankranti day (around 14–15 January), Kenduli, Birbhum district, West Bengal; there a growing opposition to the singing of *goshther gaan* (songs about Krishna's childhood and cowherd days) in the highly institutionalised Lalan Mela in Kushtia, Bangladesh; bombs are planted at folk concerts in Bangladesh (where mainly marifati song-debates are held and compositions of the mystic poets are sung, and where men and women sing together); the fakirs of Gorbhanga, Nadia and elsewhere are ostracised within the Muslim community, because of their 'unconventional' lifestyle and music.

Abdul Hamid Jalali of Sylhet had referred to such pressures when we met first time at the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal in 2004. He told me the sad tale of the poisoning of the holy fishes in the shrine's pond in 2002. 'You've come for the song,' he said, 'but these days people are afraid to sing. Earlier you would find singers, fakirs and gurus in this shrine any time you came.'

This was in the end of December 2004. Abdul Hamid showed me holes in the ground where bombs had gone off some time back, killing people who had come to the shrine to seek relief from their troubles. Later in his house Abdul Hamid, his wife and children and his devotees together sang a *qawwali* written by Hamid himself: *Jhanke ure akash jure dekhte ki sundar, Jalaler Jalali koitar*.<sup>7</sup> He sang of the beauty of the pigeons which crowd the dome of the shrine; they are believed to be holy too, the Sufi master's pigeons, his blessed *koitar*. He sang his song of lament to those birds: *Jalal Babar piyarer gojar, marilo kon nishthur simar* [Go pigeon go, fly in flocks, go and tell the Baba what has become of his land, tell him how the fish have died]. *Jalaler Jalali koitar/Babajir Jalali koitar*, the Chorus sang.

In Hamid's house that night the power of *qawwali* had mingled with the pain of *bichchhed* (separation) as Hamid sang: '*Chhariya jaiyo na bondhu re*' [O my friend, don't leave me, don't forget me]. Something was changing in his world; the shrine was no longer the same as before, the Baba's fish were all dead, there were gaping holes in the ground, some people seemed too afraid to love and were thus touching the minds of others with fear.



I have sometimes also wondered if political pressures also affect an artist's choice of repertoire. At a Baul-fakir mela in Calcutta in 2006, Mansur Fakir of Gorbhanga sang the *Radharanir bichchhed* (*Kaliya piriti korile shoi, shukhero na chhilo or*) to the great appreciation of the mostly Hindu middle-class audience. In his fakir's patchwork robe, Mansur's presence on stage was impressive; he held his *ektara* in one hand and stretched out the other and sang the pain of Radha's separation from Krishna. I have no doubt that Mansur was genuinely moved by the song, there were tears in his eyes as he sang this Chandidas composition. Yet, it is important to remember that a singer is also a performing artist, who has to play a role and bring him/herself to believe in that role. At this festival the other fakirs were doing much the same thing, and when I asked Gholam and Akkas why they were not singing murshidi/fakiri/sufi songs, they said, 'there is a place for everything.'

Jadab Sarkar of Silchar in Cachar, Assam, had said more or less the same thing. Jadab is a singer of mainly *maljora gaan* (another name for song-debates), but he also composes bichchhed gaan. Where Jadab's original home is unclear; there was a time when he said that he grew up in Sylhet (which is across the Kushiara River from Karimganj in Cachar). Now, given the complexity of the immigrant question in Assam, Jadab thinks he needs another set of credentials. So he says that his home has always been in Shilkuri Camp of Silchar on the Indian side. But one thing that Jadab Sarkar says with pride is that he has learned music from the oldest living folk composer of Sunamganj in Bangladesh, Shah Abdul Karim.<sup>8</sup> He says so in his songs too, paying tribute to the master in the concluding lines, which hold his signature or *bhonita*: '*Mono re, Jadab Sarkar ailo bhabo parabashi hoiya/Karim naamer shari gaiya jabo tori baiya re mon....*' [I shall sing the praise of Karim and sail my boat ...]. 'I slightly change these lines when I am singing in a very Hindu place,' he said. 'What do you mean?' I asked. He said that if it seems safer, then he might sign off with '*Hari naamer tori baiya*' [I shall set sail in the name of Hari], which is another name for Krishna.

## SINGING AND LISTENING

I am walking in search of songs of viraha across a map made up of disjointed pieces of land and water, but bound together by their songs and stories—Joypur, Srimangal, Shahbag, Teesta, Meghna, Karimganj,

Krishnai, Agomoni, Torsha, Kushiara, Baotipara, Mymensing, Bethnal Green, Ajoy, Mayurakshi, Borak, Shonai, Jahajpur, Kumar Nodi, Bhasan Char, Hartley Pool, Sindurmoti, Tarapith, Murshidabad, Ujandhol. On the wayside are scattered moments of love, loss and longing, which I pick up as I pass them by. It is these moments which I believe make a song, not just the words and musical structure or the idea or message a song tries to express. Besides, it is in both the singing and listening that a song gets made; in the moment and place of utterance and in the person who utters the song.

I felt this very strongly the night we went to Baotipara village in Faridpur district of Bangladesh to record songs of the twentieth century bhakta-poet Banikanta, sung by members of his family and the community. Baotipara is a mostly Hindu village, although Banikanta's songs are sung by people all around, irrespective of faith. The poet, folklorist and song-collector Jasimuddin of Faridpur (1903-76) used to visit Banikanta here in Baotipara and transcribed many of his songs and later put them in his own collection of folk songs, sometimes giving Banikanta credit for his compositions, sometimes keeping the songs anonymous.

Banikanta's son, Basudeb, is an old man who lives in his father's house. He is not a singer, just clings to his father's name as one of his most precious possessions. The poet's grand nephew, Gonsai Das, seems more like his true heir in the sense that he is the current artist of the family. He too is old and extremely frail, but when he sings he casts a spell over everybody. He leads the whole community into the song—men and women, young and old. On the night that we went to them, first the women sang a few wedding songs and ritual songs, while we were waiting for Gonsai Das to come. We were sitting on mats in the courtyard under a starry sky, and in the light of the lamps and hurricanes the faces of the men, women and children glowed with excitement and anticipation. It was a special moment for them that we had gone from so far to their village to hear their songs. Interestingly, Basudeb had not come out to meet us. Then the singing began; Gonsai Das led the singers into Bijoy Sarkar and Banikanta's songs of deep devotion and love. After that they began a composition by Deen Haridas:

*Ami cholilam Rai Braja chhere*

*Aar to ashbo na*

I am leaving Braj now, dear Radhika  
And I shall not return ever again.



Every bit of Gonsai Das became the song, for where his voice failed him, his passion carried him forward: '*Ekbar dekhe lao Rai janmer moto, aar to dekha hobe na*' [See me, Radhika, for one last time for we shall not meet again]. *Ami cholilam*—the village sang with him.

Someone came and tapped me on my shoulder. Banikanta's son was expecting to meet me. So I got up and followed him into a thatched-roof hut where I found an old man sitting on the floor and weeping. He looked at me and wept on. Then he said in an accusing tone, 'You have done me wrong. You did not give me time to prepare for your visit. How will I entertain you?' So I said, 'Aren't you happy that we have come for your father's songs?' He said, 'I am. But...'

Then Basudeb talked about his son who had gone over to India and said how he would join him soon. He asked me for my address and said, 'You have to come when I call you. I am going to do something big for my father there, you have to help.'

I said I would and then asked, 'But why must you go? Why do you want to leave your home and go away now, after all these years?' Basudeb began to narrate in anger, fear and grief his experiences of the recent past. He told me about their insecurity since the time of the last parliamentary elections (2001). There was a note of helplessness and desperation in his voice. '*Ami desher manush deshe jabo, e deshe aar thakbo na*' [I belong to my land, so I shall go to my land and I will not stay in this land any more]—the song outside rose and fell with Basudeb's lament. What is home and where is it? Where is one's *desh* or country? What is this *desh*, which cannot keep you? So, was Basudeb's *desh* elsewhere now, where he thought he would be safer and where he wanted to make a new home? 'I want to do a festival for my father there,' he said. Perhaps that is how he thought he could claim a place in the new land.

All of a sudden the old man grabbed my hand and looked at me in an uncanny way and said, 'I know! You are my mother returned to me! O Ma, you have come back to me. Tell me something Ma. Say something to your son before you go away.' The absurdity of the situation was such that I was dumbfounded. 'My mother has been dead many years, she was just like you. Now I know that you are the one', He told me. I began to look for a way to extricate myself from this complete madness. 'Say something Ma,' the old man insisted. 'What can I say?' I said, slightly frightened now. 'When you are in India, call me and I'll go and see you,' I added.

By the time I could return to the singers, the song was nearly over. They were singing the last lines: '*Ami cholilam rai*' [I am leaving and



I shall not come back any more]. I thought of Basudeb leaving his land to go to another, which he thinks will become his own. '*Ami desher manush deshe jabo, e deshe aar thakbo na*', the singers repeated in their individual voices and together as the community and in that repetition their pain at leaving and desire to return, their *viraha* for home became ever more intense.

Now at home, when I listen to the recordings we made at Baotipara that evening, I not only hear the songs but can also hear Basudeb's lament. And then *Ami cholilam rai* becomes for me a song of displacement, insecurity and fear.

## MADLY IN LOVE

Baotipara was a complex story of history and politics, and of feelings, expressions and interpretations. And that complexity got written into the field recordings Sukanta made in that little village on a cold January night in 2006.<sup>9</sup> But, why just Baotipara? In most instances, it is the context, which informs a performance and gives it meaning. On the other hand, only in the rarest moment of an individual artist's transcendence through art can a song rise above its immediate reality. I felt this transcendence when Ibrahim Boyati, the blind singer of Bhashan Char, Faridpur, sang for us a forty-minute long tale of Waz Kuruni (variously spelt and pronounced in different Islamic cultures). This is a story of a man madly in love with the Prophet, although they had never met. One of the interpretations of this story that I have been able to get is that the Prophet knew of Waz Kuruni's love, so at the time of his death he left for him his own robe and in so doing, he seemed in a way to legitimise love as a way of worship. Well, when Waz Kuruni was given the coat, Muhammad's close circle of disciples were surprised, even angry. Who was it to whom the Prophet had left his robe? Ali set out to look for the man. And only on meeting the *pagla* did he realise the meaning of his madness.

So do we, while journeying with Ibrahim Boyati's song. We are drawn into the spell of his story-telling and repeat the chorus: '*Chinli na chinli na pagla re*'. Waz Kuruni's madness was blessed, but it is not easy to recognise such madness; perhaps you have to be led into that world by someone entranced like Ibrahim Boyati. The man plucked his *saroj* (a kind of lute) and sang: *Pagol kemon dor?/Pagoler shejdate kanpe maular shinghashon re/Chinli na chinli na pagol re* [Who is this madman? What sort of madness is it? Who is it who can shake the

universe of the Creator with the power of his love?] It is hard to know him, it is hard to see him: *Chinli na chinli na pagol re*.

Ibrahim to me is one of those rare singer-lovers who have in them the power to lead a community along the path of love. I was once at a *milaad* (community prayer and singing) in a place called Mambar Gotti in Faridpur, Bangladesh, where Ibrahim was leading the congregation, repeating over and over again the names of Allah, Muhammad and Abdul Quadir, his own teacher. There was a woman in a green sari in that congregation, violently shaking with the song; she was in a trance. I do not know who she was, nor will I ever see her again, yet when I picture her at Ibrahim's *milaad*, I think of Nuru Pagla's song, *Bhakti na hole, Maular didar ki mele?*

*Hardame je kore jikir, Aare shei to hoy Allah-r fakir.*

*Fakir Meser Shah tai bole re*

*Maular didar ki mele?*

*Ore bhakti na hole, Maular didar ki mele?*

Who can have the divine vision of the Maula? Who can become the Allah's fakir? Only the one who can enter into a trance by uttering the name of the Creator. Without devotion in your heart, Can you ever be blessed by a vision of the Master?

## Notes

1. Song by Meser Shah Fakir, early twentieth century mystic poet of Faridpur, Bangladesh.

2. Bijoy Sarkar (1903–85) was a folk poet and singer of Narail, Joshor in Bangladesh. He wrote mainly *bhakti* poetry and *bichchhed gaan* (songs of separation).

3. Salamat Khan is a self-styled journalist who lives in Faridpur town. Somewhat bohemian in nature, he takes great interest in Baul poetry and philosophy, especially the compositions of Lalan Sai. Mokshed Ali Shah was a poet and singer of the Lalan school in Kushtia, Bangladesh, who died in the early 1980s.

4. Jasimuddin, 'Introduction' to *Jarigan* (2003). Translation mine.

5. *Matir Moyna* (The Clay Bird), a film by Tareque Masud, Dhaka: Audiovision, 2002. Also, listen to *La ballade de Fatema* by Ibrahim Boyati, a blind singer from Faridpur, in *L'oiseau D'argile: Bande Originale du Film*, Paris and Dhaka: MK2Music, Audiovision, 2002.

6. Listen to tracks of Haripada Debnath on *Music Atlas Bengal*: UNESCO 3C064-17840/1972, EMI Odeon, recorded by Alain Danielou. Also available on CD sampler with Deben Bhattacharya's book *Mirror in the Sky: Songs of*



the Bauls of Bengal, Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1999, and on *Echoes from Bangladesh*: Songs recorded and compiled by Deben Bhattacharya, Fremeaux, 1999.

7. Flocks of birds move across the sky.

What a beautiful sight!

The Master's pigeons fly.

The *Jalali koitor* fly.

8. Shah Abdul Karim passed away on 12 September 2009, at the age of 93.

9. Sukanta Majumdar, sound recordist on this journey through music.

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