



Baul Sadhak Lalan Fakir on Syncretism and Women Liberty: A Historical Study

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Abstract

Bauls the syncretic tradition, Lalan Fakir was the prominent preceptor of this way of sadhana. People belonging to all caste, class, and community have come under the shelter of this way of sadhana. The name and fame of Lalan Shah was widespread throughout Bengal. He is considered as the icon of equality, fraternity and brotherhood. The idealism of Baul tradition has been reached its zenith under the leadership of Lalan Fakir. His teachings and preaching of syncretism successfully created a social movement of the oppressed section of the society of Bengal. Lalan emerged as charismatic leader among the general mass of his contemporary society. He, in his lifetime strongly protested against caste disparity, class oppression, social persecution and religious bigotry. Baul seeks their 'Man of heart' within the Man, through love and devotion. In this way of sadhana, they have no shrine, no scripts and no Temple or Mosque they have only the song, mystic in nature to express their inner cry or joy. Lalan gives the highest position to man. As it is the body centric esoteric way of sadhana, no sadhak can attain siddhi without the active participation of the women. Women are termed as 'chetan Guru' so, to women he offers the highest position, proclaimed for women liberation, honoured as the 'sadhan-sangini' for the sexo-yogic union by which attainment of Supreme Bliss will be possible.

Keywords: Preceptor, Sadhana, Syncretic, Esoteric, Man, Women, Liberation.

Introduction

Bauls are regarded as the most studied and most popular folk tradition among all other folk traditions of undivided Bengal. The literary meaning of 'Baul' refers to psychologically crippled people of the society. The Baul philosophy and the tradition indicates a group of people who seek divine freedom of human life. The fundamental message of this philosophy is to love fellow human beings. The tradition disclosed 'God lives within the human soul' and as such one can reach God by serving humanity only. Baul believes in humanism and also believes that nowhere but it is in this human body where God dwells. So, a Baul is none but a believer who offers his worship to Human Guru leaving all speculative ideology and religion. Briefly, the terms refer to a folk religion, a specific category of mystic songs, and a very distinctive class of people combined with domestic and Ashramas life. Since 18th century – 19th century onwards this Bauls of Bengal becoming an alternative way of livelihood compared with the other mainstream traditional religious sect of the society of undivided Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore, the popular poet of Bengali literature was very much influenced by the Baul way of sadhana and philosophy. He also tried to incorporate the Bauls musical tunes and religious outlook in his literary activities. In Baul tradition of undivided Bengal the most popular and talented Baul was Lalan Shah or popularly known as Lalan Fakir (1774-1890 C.E). Lalan was the 19th century religious mendicant of Baul tradition, was

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born in Chheuria, of Kusthia district Nadia of undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh). He wrote and composed many Baul songs and which are known as 'baul gan' he had many disciple and followers known as 'Lalan panthi' or 'Lalan sahi sampradaya'. Lalan songs have direct approached to the traditional society and the religion through the mystic language which have dual in meaning. These songs attracted the common people of Bengal and directed to them to a new way of life. He had no formal education from any academic institution but he had inner talent and teachings of his guru Siraj Sain which encouraged him into go through the spiritual and philosophical way of life. He writes and composed Baul songs with deep knowledge of traditional religious philosophy. His songs are full with mystic approach express the religious philosophy of Baul cult full with devotional emotion. He was one of the prominent and popular Baul sadhak among the Hindu and Muslim originated Baul of 19th century Bengal. (Choudhury, Abul Ahsan, 1974, pp. 53-58)

Baul's Way of Sadhana

Baul sect is an esoteric in nature, so the songs which are written and composed by Lalan fakir are mystic and full with expressions of religious beliefs, philosophy, cultic rituals and the religious practices of sadhana. He wrote more than thousand Baul songs on Guru tatwa, Deha tatwa, Atma tatwa, prema tatwa, Sadhan tatwa, Manush or param tatwa, Nabi tatwa, Gour tatwa and on different social discriminations and social inequalities (Monsuruddin, Muhammad, 1368B.S, p. 55). It is said that Lalan leaved more than hundred years, he was a son of the Hindu kayastha family, whose title was 'kar' his father was Mahadev kar and name of his mother was Padmavati. There was a controversy among the scholars of the Lalan about his original caste and community. There was a story about the early life of Lalan fakir in which it is stated that, in early child hood Lalan lost his father and since he was interested about kabi gan, kirtan, and many more folk traditional cultures of undivided Bengal and lived with his widow mother. After his marriage, he and his friends gone for the pilgrimage to Puri of Orissa. But, affected by the small pox and seriously gone ill, all the friends and inmates leave him, some Siraj sain and his wife took him and save his life. Later Lalan took initiation(diksha) from Siraj sain and started his new life, after getting the initiation from Siraj sain he was known as Lalan fakir and becoming a prominent Baul sadhak. During 19th century in undivided Bengal he gave initiation or diksha to many Hindus and Muslims of the lower ranks of the traditional society of Bengal. Kanganal Harinath Majumder (1833-1896 C.E) was one of his followers and contemporaries. Lalan's ideology, philosophy, songs, knowledge about the Baul cult and tradition gave him immense popularity among the Baul sadhak of 19th century Bengal, and that's why he known as Lalan Shah means Lalan the great. In 1890, he took his last breath at the age 116 years.

Lalan and Anti-Caste Thought

Lalan was a Hindu by birth and he came to close contact with Siraj Sain and became the preacher of his own religious thought which known as 'Baul'. It is also notable that during his lifetime and religious activities he also faced several questions on his caste and religious identities but he intentionally over looked the questions. For religious fathom and tried to destroy the legacy of the caste and religious discrimination. To him, caste religion and scripts has no meaning, he emphatically tried to established that the knowledge, devotion and love for all is the only way to realize the supreme being and the God or 'the Man of Heart' resides within the human being. One can catch or realize Him with proper way of religious practice, guided by preceptor or Guru. Any person can achieve the highest state of realization, there is no constrains of caste religion or class. In his songs this social discourse has also been manifested in his song-

sob loke koy lalan ki jat sangsare
Lalan vabe jater ki rup dekhlam na ei nojore
Keu malai keu tachbi galay
Tai to j jat vinno balay
Jawa kingba asar belay

Jater chinnha roy kar re
 Jodi chhunnat dile hoy musalman
 Narir tobe ki hoy bidhan
 Baman chini paita proman
 Bamni chini kise re.
 Jagat bere jater kotha
 Loke gourav kore jatha tatha
 Lalan se jeter fata
 Ghuchiache sadh bazare. (Bhattacharya, Upendranath, 1364 B.S, p. 123)

Free Translation:

They ask, 'to what caste does Lalan belong? Lalan says, he has not seen how caste looks like. Some were garland of beads and some lockets of images, that's makes one differentiate caste. At the points of entrance and exit there remains no sign of caste. If by pruning, one becomes Muslim, then how to identify a Muslim lady? A brahmana has his sacred thread what about lady brahman? Still they discuss caste around the world as Lalan says, I have submerged my float in the market of my desire.'" (Bandyopadhyay, Pranab, 1989, p. 66-67)

This song was published in 'The Hitakari' patrika in 15th kartik, 1297 B.S or 31 October 1890 C.E, here the religious bigotry, caste of birth, strictly hatred by Lalan Shah. Throughout his life Lalan fought against all sorts of social disparity, he strongly criticized the caste system based on the concept of purity and birth which make differentiation between human beings. He stated that all of these discriminations are man-made. In this song he raised question about this man-made laws, ideas, and convention. Lalan believes that God does not make any difference between men and men, then why in the name of caste we make disparity in the society? His first revolt was against this caste system. Lalan could realize that caste system was the main weapon of the upper-class population for exploiting mass population and wanted to wipe out all these social malaises.

Kangal Harinath, one of contemporary journalist and editor of 'the GrambartaPrakashika' was close to Lalan Fakir who has provided many information about this Baulsadhak of 19th century Bengal. Kangal Harinath was also known as Fikirchand and he was a follower of Lalan Fakir. He first introduced Lalan, the silent sadhak of Baul tradition to his readers with high respect and introduced him as a Sain. In his book 'Brahmanda Veda', also mentioned that "if nobody supposes that after Muhammad no holy Sain has appeared in Muslim religion, we rejected the idea and claimed that may holy Sain has glorify the Muslim sect, one of them is Lalan shah of Nadia. His Guru (preceptor) Siraj Sain was also a Jogi(siddha) of higher state of saint as well" (Mazumdar, Harinath, 2008, p. 32). According to 'the Bharati', (the Bengali newspaper) the editor Akhsaykumar Maitra, commented that "All about Lalan Fakir, we don't know, and which are known, are myth, Lalan did not disclose it even to his close disciples, they also know nothing" (Debi, Sarala, 1312 B.S, Bhadra edition). On the basis of field study at kumarkhali, he also included that Lalan intentionally did not want to disclose his early life, to him the caste and religion has no meaning for attainment of the highest state of self-realization. Actually, Baul tradition is an esoteric in nature and they don't want to express the way of its sadhana, in their verse-

apona bhajana kotha na kahibi jatha-tatha,

Aponake haibe aponi sabdhan". (Sen, Kshitimohan, 1954, p. 45)

As they are the worshippers of secret tradition, so this religious way is for the Baul only, not the matter of express to the out sider, and they know that nobody will believe the religious ways and its philosophy.

Baul religious tradition is the extremely based on body worship, 'kaya sadhana', in which no need to judge the caste, creed or religion. Through the grace of Guru or Murshid, a Murid(disciple) can achieve the Supreme Bliss. So, in Baul philosophy no need to know the caste or religion, Lalan himself ridiculed and criticised the questions are asked to him which expressed in his song as:

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sabe bole Lalan Fakir Hindu ki Jaban
Lalan bole amar ami
Na jani sandhan.

Aki ghate asa-jaoa
Aki patni dichhe kheya
Keu khay na karo chhonya
Bivinna jal ke kotha pay.

Veda Puran koreche jari
Jabaner sain Hindur hari
Lalan bole bujhte nari
Ei rup srishthi korlen ki rup praman.

Bibidher noy Musalmani
Poita nai jar seo Bamni
Bujha re bhai dibyo-gnani
Lalan temni ghatnar jate tan. (Khan, Mobarak Hossain, 2007, p. 483)

Free Translation:

everybody asks if Lalan
Is a Hindu or a Muslim.
Lalan says, he does not know
The 'self within' himself.
They pass through the same moorage,
And same ferryman
Takes them to cross the river.
They don't feel untouchability
In drinking the water of the same river,
O wise, tell me the difference
Between the Muslim woman
And Brahman woman. (Bandypadhayay, Pranab, 1989, p. 67)

This song composed by Lalan Fakir has a universal appeal. He is above all of caste, creed or class, in his religion worshipping of 'man' is the central philosophy where rites, rituals, dogmas or customs has no meaning. It is true that when world was busy with caste, gender or class and communal quarrel, in a remote village Lalan, the unlettered mystic poet wrote his inner philosophy full with universal brotherhood. In his word-

emon samaj kabe go srijan hawbe
Jedin Hindu Musalman Buddha Christian,
Jati-gotra nahi rabe. (Ahmed, Wakil, 2010, p. 250)

Lalan dreamed for that day when no religion, no social discrimination on caste or class.

Preacher of Syncretic Religion

Kangal Harinath one of contemporary journalist and editor of 'the Grambarta Prakashika' was close to Lalan Fakir who provided many information about this Baul sadhak of 19th century Bengal. Kangal Harinath was also known as Fikir chand and he was a follower of Lalan Fakir. He first introduced Lalan, the silent sadhak of Baul tradition to his readers with high respect and introduced him as a Sain. (Mazumdar, Harinath, 2008, p.34)

Lalan was truly a sadhak, philosopher, theologian, poet, lyricist and successful music composer. He is the introducer of the Baul cult, a new religion for emancipation of the subaltern class of rural Bengal society. According to the Kangal Harinath, Lalan preached a 'new religion'. (Mazumdar, Harinath, 2008, p. 34)

Rabindranath Tagore also mentioned in his speech in 1909, that

“I am very curious about the life history of the preachers of minor religions. When I travel in rural areas of Bengal, I noticed some sages are preaching their sermons on their personal endeavor. They are not always been accepted by the civil society, but my personal opinion is, we should pay heed to their preaching, and if we could do so, then we would understand that how these minor religions could assert impacts on the social structure in Indian subcontinent. I know about one of such religious preachers. His name is Lalan Fakir. He, by amalgamating Islam and Zionism made such a syncretized idea that mesmerizes us.” (Tagore, Rabindranath, 2006, p. 213-15)

The existence of so many heterodox religious groups and sects in the Bengal 19th century creates the gateway of religion based on the syncretic nature and heterodox in character. Lalan advanced this tradition and framed a specific religious tradition based on body worship, guru worship, and in his religious way of sadhana ‘man’ has given the highest position. Kartabhaja, Sahebhdhani, Balaram Hardi etc are almost same in nature, and their leaders came mostly from the lower strata of the society and had no pretensions to scriptural learning. Baul also forsook the scriptural learning, ritualistic practices for the spiritual uplift and realization of the truth. Since 19th century Bengal, Lalan raised his rebellious voice against the orthodox ritualistic religious and social dogmas and build up a radical movement for the subaltern population of Bengal. The humanitarian appeal of his song became the slogan of downtrodden people throughout the Bengal. Like John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin or Ulrich Zwingli of Europe, Lalan raised his questions against the main stream orthodox established religions which gave a momentous impact on socio-religious life of rural and urban Bengal.

Lalan and Women Liberty

Lalan against structural and Vedantic as well as the shariatic religious believes, firmly condemned the caste differences, based on sexo-yogic way of sadhana, supportive for women liberation with equal right for women. All the major religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism subjugated and chained women with the shackle of religious rules. Women were captivated within the four walls and make them compelled to think to be inferior to male, But Baulsadhak Lalan Fakir offers the highest position to the women in his way of sadhana. In his Baul song the position and importance of women is firmly reflected. Lalan and his disciples accepted women as the individual human being and the root cause of the human creation. In Baul way of sadhana women defined as the ‘prakriti’, without who’s the realization of the ‘supreme Being’ will not be possible for a Baulsadhak as it is an esoteric sexo-yogic way of sadhana. Here male and female have equal role as it is ‘jugal sadhana’, without women or the sadhan-sangini, sadhak can’t be reach to the ultimate stage of sadhana. In Baul way of sadhana sadhak think himself as the women or ‘prakriti’, with his female consort(prakriti)sadhak wanted to be united with the ‘Purush’ (the Supreme Beloved) within the human body. So, Baul have to acquire the women nature to be united with purushforsexo-yogic practice (Jha, S.N, 1999, p. 95). ‘Baul society is extremely women centric, so, the real sadhak wanted to own the nature of a woman’. (Openshaw, Jean, 2004, p.25)

In a song Lalan says

meye haye meyer beshe, bhakti sadhan kar bose

Adi Chandra rakh koshe, kakhano tare chhero na. (Khan, Mobarak Hossain, 2007, p. 483)

In this song Lalan clarify that in Baul way of Sahaj Sadhana, the sdahak has to own the nature of a woman forgetting his male nature. In 19th century Bengal Lalan raised his revolutionary voice against the ‘commodification of women’ in the name of society or religion and shows honour as the cause of all creation of human form which reflected in his several songs, in a song he said-

“nile Fatemar saran fate hay karan

Likhechhe farman sain er jabane.” (Talib, Abu, 1962, p. 62)

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Which demonstrate in the verse of his Guru or sain to go to the shelter of Fatema for spiritual grace. Lalan obeyed and honoured every women or mother as because the all-male or the Supreme Lord also appeared from the womb of a mother-

achhe mayer ote jagat-pita bhebe dekho na,
Hela karo na bela mero na. (Talib, Abu, 1962, p. 77)

Realize that the lord of world within the womb of the mother, don't disobey and don't waste time to understand. In Baul way of sadhana women designated as 'chetan Guru' who can assist the Baul sadhak to reach the ultimate stage of sadhana. The creation of the human forms is in the womb of mother, she given birth of all including the great human being in this earth. Lalan fakir and his disciples salute this capability of mother. In a song Lalan says

...je din Sain nairakare
Bhese chhilen ekesware
Sei achin manush ese tare
Doshor holo tatkhana.
Keu tare jenechhe daro
Khodar chhor nabir baro
Lalan bole narocharo

Se bine kul paba na. (Ahmed, Wakil, 2010, p. 280)

When sain or the God was floating on the water all alone, she the unknown gave the shelter to Him and accompanied. Some thinks that she is superior than even Nabi, Lalan says whatever you do without her grace no one achieve the salvation. Whole of the world was silent about the prestige and position of the women, they were treated as the 'child bearing machine' and 'seva dasi', but in Baul way of sadhana women are appreciated as 'sadhan-sangini', 'chetan guru', 'adi-shakti', 'Prakriti' from whom the 'rasa'(raja) can obtained by the Baul sadhak for their sadhana, without the love and honour which will be not possible.²⁰(Ghosh, Chumki, pp. 92-98) To Lalan and in Baul society the sadhak and sadhika consider the equal status, none is treated as superior or inferior, they have to show respect to each other as it is the sadhana of duality but in one unit. For the process of sadhana Bauls have to wait for the 'mahajoga' the very moment of the menstrual flow of his sadhan-sangini(female consort). So, without direct involvement of the women Baul sadhana would not be successful. Far from the renaissance of 19th century urban Bengal, in rural village Lalan and his Baul-Fakir disciples honoured the entire women section silently, in a song Lalan says

Nairakare bhaschhe re ek phool,
Bidhi Vishnu Har adi Purandar
Adyer se phool hay matrikul. (Ghosh, Chumki, 2017, p. 92-98)

All the Divine form Vishnu, Shiva Brahma, as human form is floating in a flower into the womb of mother. Or in another song Lalan said that

jakhan chhila bindhumoni
Dharechhilo ma Janani
Dime usum dilo suni
Dhare Brahmar akar. (Bhattacharya, Upendranath, 1364 B.S, p. 640)

Free translation:

When He was formless semen
Which has conceived by mother into her womb and
Finally, shaped as Brahma.

In this song the creator of all life is also created and shaped by a mother, without the shelter of the womb of a mother or women no creation will be possible. The female being are the fundamental cause of all creation. Lalan criticized the orthodox practices of the hindu religion as there no dignity of women has been giving. In a son he ridiculed as

... o myayar thyang nara dhan chaul hali thakur khay,
Bhaj ga jaiya myayar pay.

Manipurer myayara sab chire kote goda pay,

Sei chire diye pujo kare, lage brahmaner sebay. (Chaki, Lina, 2001, p.70)

Though, this song has a spiritual and metaphoric meaning but literally in this song Lalan criticized the orthodox rigid social system for the women section of the then Bengal. Here he tried to say that by manual husking the women prepared the rice from paddy which has been used as 'bhog' offer to god, he also mentioned that in Manipur the women prepared the dried rice with their fat leg which also has been used for offering the 'bhog' to god and the 'prasad' has been taken by the brahman. So, according to the Lalan women is the helmsmen who only can able to overcome the river of sorrow or can end the life-death cycle by her grace. Far from the so-called civilized society Lalan and his Bauls of Bengal honored the entire women section and gave them the highest position in society and in religious way of sadhana. In another song he advocated for the emancipation of the women from socio-religious bondage as-

kuler bou haye mona ar kotodin
Thakbi ghare
Ghomta fele chal na re jai
Sadh bazare.
Kuler bhaye kaj harabi
Kul ki nibi sange kare?
Pastabi smasane jedin
Felbe tore. (Talib, Abu, 1962, p. 234)

In this song Lalan is rebellious against the imprisoned position of the women within the four walls, and he called them to come out from all the restriction of the society to see the outside world, otherwise at end of life on cremation ground, she might be repentant for not doing anything as her wish. Discarding all the social barriers Lalan advocated for the women liberation. Lalan and his Baul tradition offer the tortured women section free social shelter where she treated as the 'sadhan sangini' or the 'Ma-Gosain' of the Sadhak Baul, the highest position as equal as the male. In 19th century Bengal there were a large section of women initiated into the Baul religious tradition, specifically the lower section women of the rural Bengal enter into the minor religious tradition like Baul-Fakir, Kartabhaja, Balarami' Shahebdhani, for social security and prestige, both from Hindu and Muslim society. In a song which has been justified as

juboti aurat jato
Fakir haila kato
Swami chhari pিরer sange jay. (Chakraborty, Sudhir, 2007, p. 107)

In this song it is clear that the women of Hindu and Muslim society leaved their husband adopted the life and tradition of the Fakir. Ushasi Chakraborty in her article 'tai bujhi eto bhay' (that's why much fear) mentioned that in the life ways of the orthodox Hindu and Muslim society the women were tired to bearing so many child with in the four wall covered with the 'purdah', they dreamed to come out from this enchained life of socio-religious customs and rituals, the life way and thought ways of Baul-Fakir attracted them to leave the domestic life, as here child bearing is prohibited but religious enjoyment unlimited. (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 12th December, 2010) The Baul is a determined individualist who passionately rejects any organized system. The system stands in his way as threateningly as a roadblock. The Baul is always struggling to eradicate all the socio-religious malaise. Lalan Fakir was one of them who far from the educated urban life almost silently makes a revolution. Socially, Lalan's effort can be interpreted as a collection of isolated individualists in rebellion against caste and class systems. It started as a revolt against the convention of the established religions like Islam and the Hindu faith. In his verse

those who judge by caste
Practice evil,

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They find nothing.
God is reached when caste has vanished.
How can I boast of my caste
if it spurns friends?
I could light a fire
and burn it. (Bhattacharya, Deben, 1969, p.127)

The Islamic clerics and Maulvis, and the armed force of the religious leaders of Islam tried to destroy this syncretic tradition of the Baul sect. since 18th century these oppressions of Islamic clerics going on in different parts of undivided Bengal. The musical performance of Baul were stopped forcefully by the Islamic supporters, even the Bauls were murdered, physically assaulted. The Bengal tract written by Mulana Riyajuddin Ahmmed of Rongpur, was later published under the title of 'Baul Dhangsher Fatwa'. For the ruthless oppressions of the Sahajiya Baul cult and Sufi Fakirs. The Bauls way of religious tradition in which 'Charichandra bheda' sadhana and the sexo-yogic practice are strongly opposed by the upper class intellectual and social reformers. (Chakraborty, Sudhir,)

In spite of all this organized onslaughts, oppression criticism and murder more than sixty lakhs Bauls were actively engaged in their sahajiya philosophy and humanistic way of religious practice. Abu Talib rightly said that

“as the natural law the male and female united for their reproduction but Baul cult tried to transfer this sexual energy into spiritual energy and by this they tried to achieve the goal, their religious way is the realizations of their man of heart” (2005).

Today Baul is well-known oral heritage of the world, recognized by UNESCO, (2005) and there are many Bauls still now engaged in their way of sadhana and their songs as their inner cries echoed as-

amar moner manuser sane
Milan hawbe kato dine.
Chatokpray aharnishi
Cheye acchi kalo shasi,
Habo bole charandasi;
Ta hay na kapalgune.
Megher Vidyut meghe jemon
Lukale na pay anwesan,
Kalare haralem teman
O rup heriye swapane. (Bhattacharya, Upendranath, 1364 B.S, p. 77)

Free translation:

how the days drag
Before my union
With the man of my heart!
Round the hours
Of the day and night
As the rain-bird
Watches the clouds,
I gaze at the black moon
Hoping to surrender myself
At his feet,
But in vain.

Like lighting,
Flickering through the clouds
The hiding
Never to be found again,
I saw his beauty

Flashing through my dream

And I lost Krishna. (Bhattacharya, Deben, 1969, p.155)

The philosophy of Lalan Fakir provides easy solution to the most complicated problems of caste and communal conflict of the society. He has always stressed on love for all the man kind, as god resides in His best creation, the man. In human form God did not make any difference between one man and other. In God's eyes all are equal. The Bauls of Bengal preached this easiest way of sadhana by which one can achieve the highest stage of sadhana. Lalan, in his long life fought for the dignity of man. He did not bother for anything but man. For this he preached a humanitarian religion which may term as 'Manob Dharma' the religion of man. The main message of this religion is to proclaim the philosophy of humanity by treating every man equal irrespective of caste, class or gender, because this human body is the abode of the Supreme Being. Like Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and other social reformer Lalan was also a notable socio-religious reformer, the worth preacher of syncretism and leader of oppressed section of the undivided Bengal.

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