

## **Man of the Heart** **Berkeley Playwright Channels Bengali Bard in New Production**

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The stage is empty, except for a wooden doorway, a strip of linen, and a rough piece of fabric hanging from the rafters. The lights go up, and the set's cold sparseness gives way to the warmth of a lone voice, singing.

Sudipto Chatterjee appears in the doorway dressed in simple white pants and smock. His feet are bare. Two musicians, one playing a hand drum and the other a traditional two-stringed instrument called the do-tara, accompany Chatterjee's rich baritone. He sings a song composed by Lalon Phokir, an itinerant musical mystic who roamed the countryside of colonial Bengal throughout the 19th century. The Bengali lyrics are projected in their English translation on the fabric screen overhead.

"There's a Man in the Heart, atop a throne of light," he sings. "Tell us, O Teacher, of what he looks like."

Lalon spent most of his 116 years seeking this man of the heart, the spirit of the divine that, in his songs, suffuses every human body. Chatterjee, an assistant professor in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at UC Berkeley and a 2004-2005 Townsend Fellow, has himself focused much of his career on seeking Lalon. Chatterjee's self-penned one-man production, "The Man of the Heart" premiered to packed houses during its two-night run in September, marking a culmination of that search.

What Chatterjee found is that the truth about Lalon is slippery. His biography is elusive, his beliefs fluid. Yet within that very ambiguity, Chatterjee believes, lies Lalon's bracing relevance to a world torn by religious strife.



Sudipto Chatterjee as Lalon Phokir in "The Man of the Heart"  
Photo credit: Suman Mukherjee

Chatterjee's fascination with Lalon began during his childhood growing up in Kolkata (Calcutta). A singer from the countryside passed by the Chatterjee home every day singing the songs of Lalon. Chatterjee taught himself these songs with the help of his father's record collection.

In his early 20s, Chatterjee met a fellow Lalon aficionado and soon-to-be fast friend, Suman Mukherjee, today one of India's most influential young directors. Mukherjee, a Townsend Center artist-in-residence in September 2005, directed Chatterjee in "The Man of the Heart," deploying the same mix of minimalist set design, music, and multimedia that have characterized his larger productions in India.

Over tea the day after the second show, both men said their desire to create a performance about Lalon came from a need to rescue him from a mindset they believe has transformed their hero into a "feel-good icon."

In Kolkata "Lalon is celebrated, but for all the wrong reasons," Chatterjee said. The urban intelligentsia of India, he says, have claimed Lalon as a folk-hero progenitor of Indian secular democracy. That reading, he said, strips Lalon of his complexity and authentically Indian spirituality. "Seldom there is an honest attempt to recognize why he is so good," he said.

In "The Man of the Heart," Chatterjee moves back and forth between the voice of Lalon and the Lalon scholar. In the guise of the latter character, he observes that Lalon could have been no democrat, since he did not know what democracy was. Democracy was an imported concept, the colonizer's ideology later appropriated by the colonized to achieve their own Western-style notion of freedom. Lalon, Chatterjee said, was the "last prophet" of a different kind of liberation, one based in authentically Indian spiritual ideals.

In Lalon's lifetime, Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists chastised Lalon for gleefully synthesizing both religions to form his own body-centered theology. Today Hindus and Muslims both claim Lalon as their own.

"The Man of the Heart" suggests that not only is the historical record vague on what religion Lalon officially professed, but that he played the trickster to ensure history could never pin him down. "The Man of the Heart" interweaves contradictory accounts of Lalon's biography, his family, and his religious affiliations through a dizzy mix of narration, archival documents, and video footage from contemporary Bengal to illustrate the fundamental ambiguity of Lalon's identity.

In the context of India's ongoing and often violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, Chatterjee believes Lalon's syncretism holds an urgent message for today's audiences. "Lalon is talking about the reconciling of so-called Tantric Hindu belief systems with Islam, which are so irreconcilable from outside," Chatterjee said. By locating spirituality within the physical body, he says, Lalon creates the possibility of a universal identity that undermines the religious divisions fueling violence around the world today.

"The kind of divinity Lalon is talking about that resides within this mortal frame is something that we all need to hear and learn from," he said

Chatterjee and Mukherjee have not decided whether to assemble a Bengali version of "The Man of the Heart" to perform in India. They say the script would need to undergo significant revisions for a Bengali audience, which unlike an American audience would come to the popular figure of Lalon with several preconceptions.

Mukherjee especially is no stranger to controversy in Bengal. His politically charged "Tales of the River Teesta," based on the novel by Debesh Roy, tells the story of poor rural Bengalis displaced by a

government land-reform program. The play directly criticizes Bengal's long-entrenched left-wing government, which led to cancellations of scheduled performances across the Bengali countryside. A caravan taking the play to Bangladesh encountered police roadblocks.

While they mull the possibilities, Chatterjee and Mukherjee have several projects keeping them busy. Mukherjee has left Berkeley for Kalamazoo College in Michigan to direct "Nagala-Mandala" (Play with a Cobra) by Girish Karnad. Chatterjee is at work on an essay about the last Indian play produced by UC Berkeley, an elaborate Sanskrit production staged in 1914 (see [sidebar](#)). He will also direct the West Coast premiere of "Harvest," set to debut on campus in November 2005. The play, by Indian dramatist Manjula Padmanabhan, tells the story of a dark future when multinational companies harvest the organs of poor Indians for rich American customers.

Like "The Man of the Heart," Chatterjee and Mukherjee's other plays take up one of their favorite themes: the hidden power of those whose voices aren't heard, or, as they like to say, "the moss under the stones of history." Much of the power of the unheard in India lies in their embrace of a spirituality that defies the strictures of established religious orthodoxies. That is the power of Lalon, and, they believe, the power of theater that upholds a similar impulse to defy any form of ideology.

"Let's read the myriadness of Lalon in its myriadness," Chatterjee told an audience during a post-show discussion of Man of the Heart. "Let the rainbow be a rainbow. Otherwise it becomes white light."

– *Marcus Wohlsen*

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