



**UC Berkeley theater professor Sudipto Chatterjee explores the life and times of Bengal's beloved mystic Lalon with intellect, music and verve. A *Siliconeer* report.**

Above: Sudipto Chatterjee presenting a solo performance in “The Man of the Heart.” a multimedia play written by him and directed by Suman Mukherjee.

You have to marvel at a guy like Lalon Phokir. A rustic villager he might have been, plucked right from the heart of Bengal's rural bosom, but in his mystical musings he fascinated the likes of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the towering colossus of Bengali literature.

Lalon, a nineteenth century Bengali wandering minstrel, spoke and sang of a common humanity. He treated religious divides with disdain. Needless to say, this did not endear him to the religious powers that be.

Yet he went about his life without changing his ways.

Lalon has become an icon of sorts for the progressive Bengali, who loves to point to his disdain for religious divides that seems so modern and humane. Yet if truth be told, it must also be conceded that Lalon is also looked upon as the lovable minstrel, but not taken awfully seriously — he was, after all, a rustic poet when Bengali culture is obsessively focused on the city.

In *Man of the Heart*, director Suman Mukherjee and author/actor/ performer/singer Sudipto Chatterjee use a very spare set and a long piece of white cloth, they present a performance that is at once compelling, energetic, and enormously moving.

Chatterjee brings boundless energy to his performance and carries the hour-long multimedia performance on his able shoulders. An excellent actor with superb singing

skills, his greatest gift is an ability to shed the urbane persona that makes his Lalon convincing.

What's absorbing about the performance, which is also written by Chatterjee, is the intelligent, inquiring look Sudipto has taken at Lalon. This is no simple narrative but a look from many angles – historical accounts, contemporary Hindu and Muslim jaundiced views – and then goes beyond. What emerges a Lalon that all of us failed to understand perhaps, because of our own limiting preconceptions.

Lalon has his own take on the world, mankind, and the Special One — as Chatterjee eloquently brings out in some lovely renditions of his songs.

With the beautiful accompanying folk music of Soumya Chakravarti, and Chatterjee's robust performance, the play is an unforgettable introduction to one of Bengal's lesser known sages.

Director Suman Mukherjee is one of India's premier young directors and a visiting artist-in-residence this semester at UC Berkeley's Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Chatterjee has said he's been intrigued by Lalon since the age of 5 or 6, when he heard a Baul singer from the country pass his home every day singing various compositions from Lalon's rich repertoire, estimated at more than 1,000 songs passed down orally.

Lalon angered Hindus, Muslims and others by refusing to answer if he had been born Hindu or Muslim and insisting that what is in the heart matters more than whether someone worships in a mosque, temple, cathedral or synagogue.

But since Lalon's death and ever-growing popularity, he said, Muslims in Bangladesh have built a protective mausoleum over his grave, while the Hindu majority in West Bengal has claimed him as an icon of secularism.

Chatterjee has sung Lalon's songs with gusto, despite some doubt expressed by the Baul community about whether a non-Baul can do so. "I feel like I have an inner connection that goes beyond the urban-countryside divides," he said.

Sudipto Chatterjee is the author of fourteen plays and translations in Bengali and English. He has directed several plays including Nuraldeen's Lifetime (by Bangladeshi playwright, Syed Shamsul Haq), Girish Karnad's Hayavadana, Badal Sircar's Bhoma and J.M. Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and its Bengali adaptation, Birpurus . Off the stage, he has directed Free To Sing?, and is currently finishing his second documentary on the Pandvani performance tradition of India.

Suman Mukherjee has directed – Samay Asamayer Brittanto (2003) Debesh Roy/Mukherjee, Mephisto (2002) Klaus Mann/Arione Mnouchkine/Mukherjee, Teesta Paarer Brittanto (2000) Debesh Roy/Mukherjee, Falguni (Prelude) by Rabindranath, Kalantok Lal Fita (2002); Jaisa-Ka- Taisa (2000) by Girish Ghose; Measures Taken,(1997) by Bertolt Brecht invited by Barnard College, Columbia University, New York;; Gantabya

(1997); Coriolanus, a play by William Shakespeare/ Bertolt Brecht; Natir Kaha, adaptation of Chekhov's Chorus Girl ; Dain, a play by Abhijit Sen; Haripodo Haribol and Janani, plays by Indrashish Lahiri.

He has performed in the U.S.A, Canada, Bangladesh, Germany, France.

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