

# Mysticism in the Songs of Bangladeshi Baul (Mystic) Singer - Khabiruddin Dewan

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**Abstract** Sufism in the songs of Baul (mystic) poets and singers is naturally originated in the then Persian (Iranian) singers but the southern part of Asia specially in Bangladesh, it has been spread through the lyrics and songs of Baul singers. Generally in this type of songs the Baul or Mystic singers symbolize the souls as various birds. They also symbolize their songs as the sweet notes of flute. Sometimes these mystic poets use the terms- *Tori* (small boats), *Kheya Nouka* (canoes), *Kheya parapar* (to cross the rivers), to symbolize the journey from this physical world to afterworld. They use the word *Sai* or *Moner Manush* for 'God' or 'Allah' - the Almighty.' In this essay, the researchers have tried to show the countrywide popularity of this type of songs and its influence on mass people.

**Keywords** Baul Song, Alefchan Dewan, Akhda (Temporary House), Murshidi Songs, Sect, Khabiruddin Dewan

Though in Bangladesh, the mystic or Baul songs flourishes around the area of Kustia i.e. greater Nadia, after that, 'as a result of several saints' efforts several schools (Gharana) have been spread in Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, Dhaka, Tangail, Mymensingh, and the western part of Sylhet.' (Habibur Rahman, *The Folk Songs of Bangladesh and geographical environment*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1982, pg-144), that means this widely spread songs though obeyed the socio-economic condition and cultural and geographical encroachment, yet as it holds the main theme of Baul religion, so it is named as *Baul* songs. In *Baul* songs there are some sects like- *Attototto*, *Dehototto*, *Gurutotto*, *Premtotto*, *Srishtitotto*, *Gudhatotto*, *Poromtotto* etc. which are also found in the mystic songs like *Murshidi songs*, *Fakir Songs*, *Tarza songs* and *Bichar songs*. Individuality has been created in the language and lyrics of these songs according to and on the basis of regional and spiritual aim. We find the influence of Sufism in the songs of the saints like Kalu Shah Fakir (1810-1905), Sha'nal (Shahlal) Shah Fakir. Alefchan Dewan (1839-1929), Malek Dewan (1893-1988), Bhaba Pagla (1902-1984), Khalek Dewan (1909-2003), Khabiruddin Dewan (1929-2007) etc. in the greater Dhaka region.

Alefchan Dewan hailed from the village Bamansur of Keraniganj upazilla in the district of Dhaka. He was more known as 'Alfu Dewan'. He was a wandering mendicant and his songs; there was a scene of mysticism. His ideal was Sufism. He became famous by singing *Marefati songs*. It is heard that he had a close relation with Lalon Shah- a very popular and famous mystic singer of Bangladesh. He could

play a number of folk musical instruments. It is also heard that he had harmonized with the songs of Lalon Shah. This saying proves Alefchan's talent in music. Though he is known as the saint-singer of mystic and *Murshidi* songs, we find his talent in *Baul* songs also. In the prologue of his songs, he introduced himself through the words like- '*Dayal*', '*Dervish*', '*Pagaal*', '*Dewan*', '*Gonshai*', '*Fakir*' etc. To increase the number of the songs of Lalon Shah, some researchers added many songs which are composed by some other mystic poets or singers. They are known to be Duddu Shah, Panchu Shah and Gopal Shah, they belonged to Kustia region while some others added the songs of Alefchan Dewan and Kalu Shah Fakir of Dhaka.

Alefchan's followers accuse that Dr. S. M Lutfur Rahman in his book *Lalon Shah: Life and Songs* included three songs of Alefchan's songs as Lalon's songs. I would like to uphold this matter here because there is such a close similarity between the thought and language of Lalon's and Alefchan's songs that it is really tough to bring out the difference from these songs. But this is not true in case of all of their songs. Though belonging to the *Baul* Gharana, Alefchan's songs are greatly influenced by *Murshidi* and *Fakiri* sects. He became the follower of a spiritual guide and was a disciple of Chistiya Tareeka (way). It is also heard that during the last days of his life, he wanted to be a follower of the Naksbandya Tareeka. But he had a lot of followers who belonged to non-muslim especially Hindu religion.

He sings-

*'The sailors sail away  
Bind the rope tightly  
O captain! Where Sriguru is!  
He goes to the other side of the sea merrily*

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*Alefchan says- one may go  
If Sriguru takes pity on one,  
He may go there with all!*

(Gist:- In this song, the poet says that he is aimless if his guide does not show him the right path ).

There is a *Baul*-effect in the lyrics of this song. But in Keraniganj area the singers of his *Akhda* (den) presents it in *Murshidi* melody. Alefchan's two sons- Malek Dewan and Khalek Dewan and his grand-grandson Khabiruddin Dewan inherit his songs and his spiritual meditation. Arif Dewan of this generation has become famous as a singer. Shakir Dewan, Azad Dewan, Uttam Dewan etc. are related with this sect of songs. These singers have been creating a distinguished type of Gharana i.e 'Dewani' sect in between two other *Baul*-type sects like *Murshidi* and *Fakir*.

Malek Dewan, son of Alefchan Dewan came to the world of music by inheritance. Besides *Marefati*, he used to perform *Murshidi* and *Kirtan* also. Through music he got spiritual enlightenment too. He became popular among all races, religions, castes without any discrimination. He used to speak about the unity among Hindus and Muslims through music. 'O lord, take me to shore,' 'If I would remember Him properly.'-all these songs still are sung by the people throughout the country.

Khalek Dewan, younger brother of Malek Dewan also took lessons of music and like his father and elder brother spread secular thoughts throughout the country. He became popular by performing the songs like- 'There is no boundary of Love', 'What is the use of nuptial night if you don't come'.

Khabiruddin Dewan, son of Malek Dewan, has gained melody as ancestral inheritance. Father, uncle and grandfather- he got fundamental knowledge of music from these ancestors. Then he himself began to perform. He performed *Murshidi* and *Marefati* songs competing with the contemporary artists who were from far and abroad. Still it won't be an exaggeration that in spite of his ancestors' extraordinary talent, Khabir's was dim but his wide-spread popularity excels them.

Arif Dewan (b. 1960), son of Khabiruddin Dewan is a popular singer of this time. He is proceeding upholding the mainstream of Bengali folk songs. Though he mainly sings the songs composed by his great-grandfather, grandfather, and his father, simultaneously he composes songs himself. Besides these, he has upheld the songs of Lalon Shah, Abdul Aleem, Bijoy Sarkar, Rajjab Ali Dewan to our new generation. He is a registered lyricist, musician and artist of Radio Bangladesh (Bangladesh Betar, ID no. 1014549). 'I am a Baul who wander from one place to another', 'O boatman, keep your boat in the shore', 'My friend (Lord) will come in the darkness', 'I heard him playing flute'. – All these songs have become widely popular. His songs are recorded in more than 20 CDs.

Shakir Dewan (b. 1971), another son of Khabiruddin Dewan is a music-director as well as a skill-handed journalist and researcher. In the mean time, some of the

books written by him are published. He collected his father's songs, edited and published them accordingly which outwardly shows that he has observed his responsibility as a son to his father but through this, he has performed a national duty indeed! Through the publication of the collections of Khabiruddin Dewan's songs done by Shakir Dewan, his lyrics have been saved from being lost forever with the course of time. His songs have got the opportunity to be easily reached to most of the people.

Khabir Dewan's lyrics are very ecstatic. So far we have read and observed that the singers of *Sufi* and *Baul* Gharana only wanted to awaken against the rituals of the religions. They obeyed their own religion but they showed sympathy to other religions. Khabir Dewan most probably was not *baul* tradition wise but in his songs, he expressed the ideals of *Baul* very cordially. We get this idea when we read the lyrics of his songs let alone the melody. He wrote:

*'Some says, you exist  
Some says no,  
How can I realize you?  
Where shall I go?  
O the Omnipresent Omnipotent Lord!'*

(Gist: Here the poet is confused about where he can find God).

In this song, he says about the abstract idea of God. According to the religious books, God is Omnipresent, He stays everywhere, but then why does everybody search for Him- this universal question arises in the artist's mind also. But this theism doesn't focus only on absolute existence of God, it also focuses the mankind. He sings in another song:

*'Throughout the whole world  
I wandered about,  
I found nothing but only human being  
And inside them  
God exists,  
Alef and Malek Shah observes  
The mystery of creation.'*

(Gist: In this song the poet praises the high rationality of man over all other creation of God).

Khabiruddin Dewan is such a person who preached the eternal truth that- 'Nothing is greater than man.' He composed a large number of songs of this *Baul* Gharana. He was not a wandering mendicant *Baul*, yet he cherished this *Baul-philosophy*. He was also eager to find out his '*Moner Manush*' (God/ inner soul). His lyrics are rich with experience:

*'He cannot be called a man  
Who is only skinned,  
I wandered here and there  
But found no real one.'*

(Gist: The poet searches for a true human being but finds no one except only some irrational fools).

'Moner Manush' stays among all. He revealed this truth by using the phrase 'Moner Manush'-firstly uttered by Lalon Shah and ultimately he composed a very charming song:

*'Moner Manush stays among all  
Notice him  
He is called Chintamani  
His sign is in our souls,  
He comes and goes as he wishes.'*

(Gist: Here the poet imagines his Subject of worship as a Bird Who comes and goes away from him whenever He wishes).

Not only on Baul-philosophy, he composed many songs on *Srishtitotto* also. Khabir Dewan's individuality is notable in his *Murshidi* songs. He, like others took his *Murshid* as the mediator to proceed onwards. But from his point of view, to know the *Murshid* a devotee must gain certain eligibility and if a devotee fails to know the real *Murshid*, he won't be able to get redemption. In one of his songs we see:

*'You can verify one's mind  
If you rub it against a touchstone  
It is only the Guru who  
Realizes the purity of the offerings of a priest.'*

(Gist: The poet is puritan here, so he surrenders to his Guru or spiritual guide and requests him to verify the real follower).

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*Khabir says, I came for two days  
With a hope that I would meet him  
But now I am in a puzzle,  
Coudn't find out my Murshid!'*

(Gis : The temporary stay in this world does not give poet much time to find out his *Murshid* (spiritual guide) which makes him puzzled ).

In this song, Khabir Dewan used some technical words which are the expression of his modern mentality. There is a deep expression of his own devotion and belief in his songs. He is sure about his *Murshid* and expresses his idea:

*'None will be able to meet Allah  
Without the intermediation of Murshid,  
So, don't waste your time to find him out.'*

(Gist: Here the poet says confidently that without the guidance of *Murshid* none is able to realize his Creator).

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*Thinking this Khabir Dewan says,  
The person who is devoted to his Guru  
Keeps the reflection of Murshid in close touch*

*Then nothing else is to be worried about.'*

(Gist: With confidence the poet says that everybody should keep in close touch with his *Murshid* or guide to overcome all the sufferings.)

In this song he used some words like reflection or *Murshid* and some other words from which we become clear that he was a man of broad mentality. He wrote about *Urash* Festival held in his own village while saying about his own *Murshid*:

*'In Bamansur, all the devotees  
Again and again take the name of Allah  
Whole world is taking His name  
In the guise of Murshid.'*

(Gist: The poet here feels his Creator's reflection in his spiritual guide. Here the poet imagines that his creator and his guide are all the same).

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*Khabir says, he who has no Murshid  
How unlucky he is!  
His birth and death is in vain,  
What will happen to you O fellow!  
What wealth will you take with you?'*

(Gist: In this song, the poet wails for the man who fails to find out his guide throughout his life).

His lyrics about Islamic culture and tradition are considered as the valuable treasure of our folk songs. To awake the original Islamic conscience he referred to the historical characters and events. In one of his songs, we get the name of Abdul Kader Jilani (R):

*'When the name of Jilani Pir is taken  
The earthen pot turns into gold pot  
Think deeply about him and find out the true*

*path,*

*Only then you will get Him.*

(Gist: Here comes a reference of the Pir (spiritual guide) Abdul Kadir Jilani – who is famous in this subcontinent and in some parts of Asia- for his spiritual power).

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*Lo! Jilani Pir  
Was born in Jilan  
To get his blessings  
His lovers sacrifices  
their lives.'*

(Gist: The poet expresses his deep love and devotion for Jilani Pir - Addul Kadir Jilani ).

The Holy Quran – for the Muslims is a must to obey, Khabir Dewan made us remember the matter. As in it, a full lifestyle of a man is narrated clearly, so he calls everyone to

follow it through his song:

*'Firstly perform your works  
According to the Quran,  
From the beginning to the end  
Follow and follow it*

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*Khabir says don't take your  
Religion as trifling matter,  
Try to understand accurately what  
Allah says and then devote yourself.  
Obey your own religion first  
Then fix up your mind  
Coming to this world will be successful  
And only then your life will be full of bliss.'*

(Gist: The poet here, as a Muslim, is very loyal to the rituals of the Holy Quran and again and again tells to obey all the orders of God. He moreover tells that only by obeying His laws, one can obtain the blessings of Him).

Khabir Dewan was expert in composing songs about *Dehototto*. Many of his songs are of this sect. We can realize his ideas about *Dehototto* from some quotations of his songs. We know that 'boat', 'boatman', 'Dighi(pond)', or 'river'- these words are used symbolically by many thinkers. We find Khabir Dewan using the word 'launch'-(a kind of water vehicle) as a symbol while composing songs. In one such, he says:

*'O the passengers of the launch!  
What is your destination?  
All are in the guise of passengers  
Is anyone your kith and kin?*

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*We all are passengers  
On the arrival at the destination  
No one is there on board!  
All will leave without asking anything  
And for a short while is the conversation!'*

(Gist : The poet imagines himself and other people none but some passengers on board who after reaching the destination i.e. afterworld will not say or ask anything to anybody).

As Lalon Shah has mentioned '*Achin Pakhi*', Hason Raja's '*Kuda Pakhi*', same is Khabir Dewan's '*Uda Pakhi*'. These kinds of his songs are comparable with Lalon's and Hason's songs. In one song we see:

*'My soul is a flying bird( Uda Pakhi)  
How can I tame it,  
It cheats me and flies away  
It closed its eye forever  
Never opened its eye anymore.'*

( Gist: In this song the poet imagines human soul as a bird. Like a bird if it flies away once, never returns to the cage i.e. body again).

This *Uda Pakhi* is found in another song termed as *Manura Pakhi*. With the same symbol Khabir composed different songs with different melody:

*'The Manura Pakhi cries  
I know not for whom;  
It always makes me crazy  
I pass sleepless night.'*

(Gist: His soul laments but he does not know for whom or what- as it is fact that human being cannot realize for what his soul longs).

Again in another new song, this *Manura Pakhi* is described as *Mon-Pakhi*. With this symbolic word he expressed his mental agitation, so he sought shelter to *Sai*. He sang-

*'All happiness of life ended  
Mon pakhi, you try to understand  
The happiness came to an end.*

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*This is Khabir's bad luck  
Thorns are everywhere on the way  
I remained as a worthless  
And watched immorality in the world  
Now I realize everything,  
O my Lord! give me shelter, I have no way.'*

(Gist: At last the wailing poet seeks shelter to God Whom he sometimes calls – Sai or Lord).

Departing songs/ Forlorn songs remind us the name of Bijoy Sarkar. In the southern part of Bangladesh, especially the greater Jessore on the south bank of the river Padma, Faridpur, Barisal, Pirojpur and Khulna- the *departing* songs of Bijoy Sarkar is still heard. On this bank of the Padma it is not so widely sung. However we find such type of songs in the songs of Arif Dewan He sings:

*'Is there any such friend of mine  
Who may console me,  
I traveled far and abroad  
But could not search out anyone.'*

Departing songs or forlorn songs means the songs full of lamentation for one's beloved who cheated or forsook the lover alone. The departing song of Bijoy Sarkar titled '*The tamed bird would fly away one day, I couldn't imagine that even for a day*'-is a frequently heard song in the southern part of Bangladesh.

Same thematic lyrics are pronounced in Khabir Dewan's song in a bit different way-

*'The parrot(totapakhi)flew away  
O my beloved, but never told me  
Where it went.*

*He who has a bird like mine  
Will realize how I feel  
And he will no longer tame any bird  
Because it is really painful  
My body aches  
Khabir cries for that bird and hopes  
If it comes again!*

(Gist: Here the poet laments for his beloved whom he calls parrot and pines away for his beloved's separation. But in the last line he is a bit hopeful that some day he will meet his beloved again).

Though there is similarity between Khabir Dewan's and Bijoy Sarkar's theme of songs, still Khabir's songs created a new genre in the departing songs.

Khabir Dewan composed different types of folk songs but simultaneously he composed songs regarding contemporary topics. He highlighted the topics like Arsenic Problems and Safe Maternity in his songs. He composed songs based on the government policy for Adult Education. To create awareness among mass people his song may contribute a lot in the national development programs. A mystic thinker composed such worldly songs;

It may be considered as a national duty. These songs may be the important weapons of government publicity.

He composed Jarigaan (a kind of song sung by a group of people) on our language movement. He, after stating the history of our language movement, sings at last:

*'O heroes and martyrs  
Take my salute  
We didn't forget you, never we will.  
O the people, who laid down their lives  
For our mother tongue  
They remained immortal forever.*

*Though we know that we have long way to go, long way to go.'*

He raised his voice to state our great liberation war. His songs about liberation war can play an important role to make our new generation (post liberation war) aware and more enthusiastic.

This folk poet composed some intriguing verses about our Father of Nation Bangabandhu:

*'You extended love to all  
Then why did you hide yourself?  
That's why we weep for you till now!  
O my comrade!*

---

*The Father of Our Nation  
A model like Bengali  
This country will uphold  
His ideals forever.'*

His songs are so progressive in thought that they will make him immortal especially he will be remembered by the Bangladeshi people forever for his songs regarding Sufism. I have searched for the prologue of his songs where I have found in most of the songs he mentioned his name as Khabir or Khabir Dewan. Again in some songs he used the term Kangal (beggar) Khabir. Why did he choose this term for himself? Was he a beggar of love? What type of love did he want? Spiritual love-this is the answer we get. What is the system to reach the goal? The answer is Chistiya Tareeka.

According to him:

*'Khawja, it is very difficult to realize  
Your mystery,  
He who realized, emerged himself in you.  
In Chistiya Tareeka  
There are five sects,  
All obey your commands as you beckon.  
If your name is remembered  
His address is known as Chistiya  
All become faithful  
With your blessings!'*

(Gist: In this song poet directly praises his another spiritual guide- Khawja Mainuddin Chisti and he wants to be blessed by him).

This Sufi poet-singer of Chistiya Tareeka has enriched the treasure of music. As his songs have been collected now, we will be able to take the essence of it. His mystic songs will increase the spiritual feelings among the Bengali people. Khabiruddin Dewan, the successful and eligible heir of Alefchan Dewan has enriched the folk songs of Bangladesh. Folk-lyric, folk music, folk philosophy- all these are combined in one book which the readers will accept as their own treasure without raising any question and we hope for the best of it. Sufism or Mysticism in this way knowingly or unknowingly or naturally spread throughout the country through the songs sung by these illiterate or half literate Baul singers. They contribute much in the folk songs also. Yet, they, in one sense still remain ignored though they are the sons of soil. So, their talent deserves respect and attention of the people from all classes. This should be done to show the respect to our values and tradition of our country.

### Objective

The Baul singers are mostly illiterate. Here the researchers have tried to depict how these illiterate singers could easily express their mystic and ecstatic ideas through their songs which were generally sung orally and though most of them have no written form, yet how popular these songs are among people indiscriminating the classes.

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