

Mystic Songs of Sunamganj District of Bangladesh: A Glimpse

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to describe a goldmine of music and lyrics of a district of Bangladesh. The district Sunamganj is proud for her 200 plus mystic poets, many of them have written more than five hundred, even a thousand songs. But her name and fame did not spread over the planet. This tiny effort carries the very essence of the enchantment of the concert of colour, sound, melody and rhythm on the shores of the thousand haors (wetland) and about twenty five rivers of Sunamganj.

Introduction

I am not a singer but love songs.

I am not a folklorist but highly impressed by folksongs.

I do not have childhood association with mystic songs but deeply fond of Mystic or Baul songs.

I had a great opportunity to live in Sunamganj district for 14 months that included at least two rainy seasons and two winters. It was a part of my job assignment, but offered me much more than just bread and butter. What was behind it? The answer is the mystic songs of Sunamganj, drenched in ecstatic melody since time immemorial and flourished through natural beauty of grass, soil, water, flowers and foliage and common people's feelings and faith of the district. This write up is my sharing of experience with mystic songs of Sunamganj. The problem remains in the understanding of these mystic songs as well as making other understanding. That's why they are more mysterious. It is endeavour to present some songs through translation and skilful sketches.

Baul songs – UNESCO Heritage

In 2005, UNESCO proclaimed 43 new Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity with traditional 'Baul songs of Bangladesh' being one of them. It was one of the three Heritages of Humanity identified by UNESCO from South Asia. Ramleela, the traditional performances of the Ramayana in India, and the Musk Dances of the Drums from Drametse of Bhutan, were the other two Heritages.

The Bauls are mystic minstrels living in rural Bangladesh. The Baul movement was at its peak in the ninetieth and early twentieth centuries, and has now become popular again among the rural population of Bangladesh. In a broader sense, Baul or Mystics songs are all folk songs though Baul/Mystic songs are unique for their

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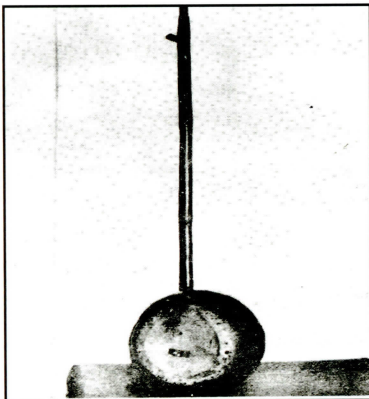
special and emotional flavours which reflect the pain of deprivation of human beings and their eternal longing for union as well. There is no English synonym for Baul, the nearest one is Mystic. A mystic song mainly deals with spiritual feelings of human beings intermingled with religious emotion. Baul songs do the same thing but Baul has an added dimension since Baul songs deal in a major way with human body, his behaviour, habitation, loss of relation and homelessness in general. The most fascinating linkage between the two is that both a Mystic poet and a Baul want to free his individual self and makes an esoteric union with the universal self. The Kushtia region of Bangladesh is famous for Bauls and Sylhet, especially Sunamganj is well known for Mystic poets.

There are 2 classes of Bauls. One is the homeless; they reject family life and society. The great Baul Lalon Shah stands out in the list of the homeless Baul. But Mystic poets or Bauls are mainly non-ascetic who live with their families and accept society. The great poets of Sunamganj Hason Raja, Radharamon, Shah Abdul Karim maintained their normal family lives. Indeed, their mystic music mysterious way of life and living always have great influence upon the vast swath of Bangali mind, life and culture.

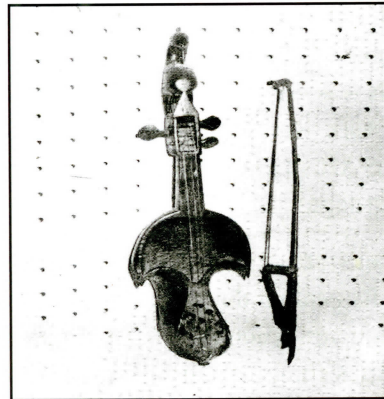
The many compositions of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore were highly influenced by the spirituality of this Bengali mysticism. The national anthem of Bangladesh, composed by Tagore, is the culmination of blended effect of Baul mystic lyricism and melody that roam over the vast plain landscape of the country.

Instruments of Baul/Mystic Songs

The most used instruments of Bangali culture are demonstrated in the

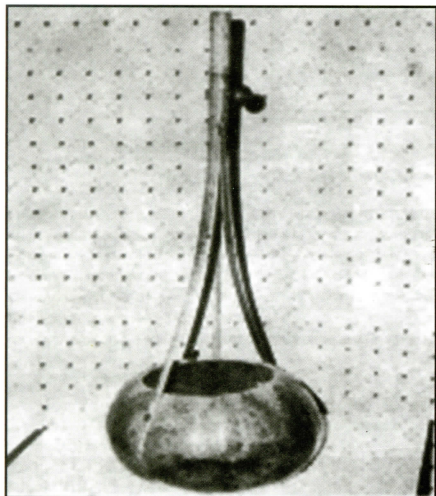


Ektara



Sarinda

pictures below. They are mainly used by the mystic singers and rural common people. They are very simple instruments resembling the very ordinary common life of Bangladesh.



Laou



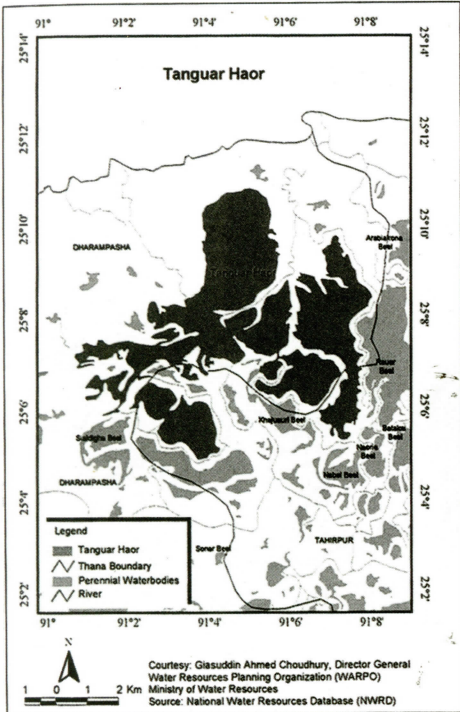
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The most popular instrument is Ektara. It is a single string instrument where fingers and thumb are used. It needs one round ripe pumpkin in with the kernel ripped out, one long woode stick, one peg and one bridge to make this instrument. Besides the Ektara, the Dotara is also popular which has four strings. The most ancient folk wind instrument is the flute, locally known as Banshi. Its body is made of bamboo and has six holes for the fingers to produce the notes.

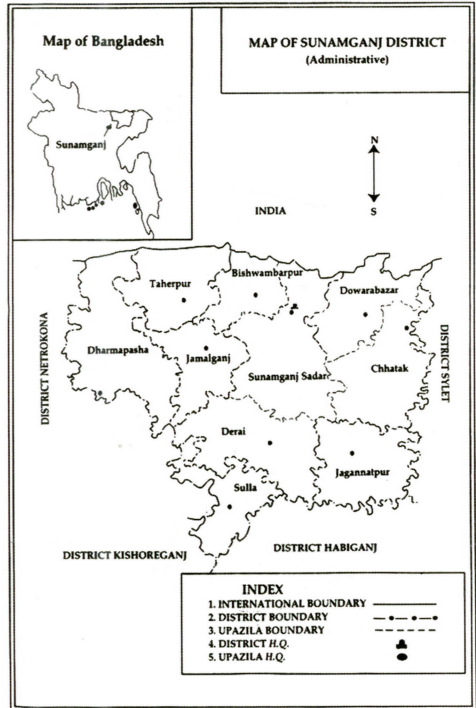
Other instruments are the Laou – one-stringed instrument and is made of two small bamboo sticks, and a shell of dried gourd; the Khamak – a rhythmic instrument with one or two strings attached to the head of a small drum; the Tabla – a pair traditional drums called ‘baya’ (the left hand drum) and the ‘daina’ (the right hand drum); the Mridanga – a barrel-shaped clay drum with two heads; the Mandira – small bell-shaped cymbals, etc.

Background of folklore environment of Sunamganj

Sunamganj is a fertile land of mystic songs. The land has been blessed by numerous mystic poets. It is the poet Radharamon Datta who composed: *‘I will show my pangs to whom/ Slicing my heart/ The chaff-fire burn eternally’*.



Tanguar Haor- Lowest Pocket of Bangladesh



Political map of Sunamganj



A view of Tanguar Haor



Karach (the traditional tree of Sunamganj)



The scenic beauty of the Surma River



The Burkey boats in the Surma River

Almost all the mystic poets dream alike and a little doubt is left there that it is nothing but the extraordinary natural setting and beauty of Sunamganj blended them into that shape. Sunamganj has 11 Upazilas (sub district) with two million inhabitants, who are all mystic in heart and lovers of folk songs. The music loving people enjoy their time during the long rainy season here. The vast area of this district goes under water during the rainy season but the same turns into great paddy fields during winter.

The vast expanse of water, the colourful horizon, the green paddy field, the traditional 'Karach' tree (*Pongamia Pinnata*), the blue sky, the sparkling moonlight – all are sources of inspiration to compose songs after songs. The folk songs carry the very essence of the enchantment of the concert of colour, sound, melody and rhythm on the shores of the thousand haors including the great Tanguar Haor and about twenty five rivers including the Surma, Renuka, Rakti, Kalni and Kangsa.

Selected Poets of Sunamganj and their songs



Out of about 200 poets, only a few renowned mystic poets have been selected for this presentation through translation and illustration¹. Many mystic poets had composed more than 1000 songs, while only Poet Radharaman had composed about three thousand songs. Through these songs, the sound of rowing ribs, the hot spring of heart, the sparkling moonlight of autumnal night and the boundless glories of creations are flashed out like flowing springs from the hilly mountains under deep rain-soaked midnight.

The Mystic poet, whose name and fame crossed the boundary of Sunamganj and entered into the various parts of the world, is Poet Hason Raja. He was born on 7 Poush 1261 BS (1855 A.D.) at Laksmansree village of Sunamganj District. His father's name was Dewan Ali Reza and mother was Hurmat Jahan. The poet died on 22 Agrahyon 1329 BS (1922 A.D.).

At the Indian Congress of Philosophers in 1925 at Kolkata and in his Hubert Lecture at Oxford in 1930 A.D., Poet Rabindranath Tagore had mentioned with great reverence the Idealism of Poet Hason Raja. From that time his fame began to spread at the international level. The following² song has taken from his famous book "Hason Udas" published in 1907 A.D.

Captive Soul-Bird of Hason Raja weeps
Shut up in the earthen cage.
Imprisoned by parents in the midst of joy.
I became captive in the cage in red and white.
The Maina bird on full flight became in the cage.
Parents bound him in the net of love!
The bird becomes restive after entering the cage.
But it has not the power to break open the tight-built cage.
The bird will fly off leaving the body behind,

1. Mohammad Ali Khan (ed.), *Sunamganj in Mystic Songs, Officers' Club, (Sunamganj, 2002)*

2. Translated by Sitiesh Ranjan Acharyya

Leaving the land, relations and all bonds of love!
Now I am rearing the Bird with the fondest care
But the cruel Bird will not cast even
A farewell glance at me!
The cruel Bird will not return to look back once
At the repeated and piteous call of Hason Raja to come back!



Sketch by M. A. Qayyum



Mystic poet Aasim Shah was born in 1250 BS (1833 A.D) near the bank of the river Naljur of Jagannathpur Upazila in the District of Sunamganj. For the salvation of his soul he spent 12 years in meditation at 'Tabibari Mokam' on the mountain of Laour. He also got company of Peer Shahjur Moni who was a disciple of mystic poet Syed Shah Noor. None of his songs were published during his lifetime, but the general mass used to sing those songs very often. He wrote more than 300 songs. He died on 1353 BS. On his birthday and death anniversary 'Urs' is held where thousands of people gather. This song has been taken from poet's birthplace:

“Ah! no more life-human once passes beyond
(the) time that is gone, gone forever
O can you get the day back
that you have lived already
Nothing will there be when time is smashed under.
Learnt from ‘Veda, Puran’ none will have
there is nothing beyond man
Be with him, be with in union
only man who is to reign over
Soul the same, potency in equality
be ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ it is the humanity
No rites, no rituals, no clan, no scripture
out of that found no truth, no picture
Being born into ‘Musalman’ as feels fakir ‘Aasim Shah’
it is no matter
But yet to be in human, how shame
how it is to be there³.”



Sketch by M. A. Qayyum



If anyone wants to listen to the murmur of the ocean, if some one wants to shower himself with moonlight of Autumn's night, if any one likes to feel the benevolence of the Almighty in his very core of heart, then he shall have to visit the world of Poet Radharaman Datta (1833-1916 A.D.) and to adore him. His father's name was Radha Madhab Datta and mother was Suborna Debi. Radharaman was born in 1240 BS (1833 A.D.) and died on 26 Kartic 1322 BS (1916 A.D.) at the age of 82 years. The great poet's birthplace is Keshobpur of Jagannahpur Upazila in the district of Sunamganj.

So, everyone comes to Keshobpur in search of the root of Radharaman, to give wreath of flowers at the tomb of the poet. Radharaman is the pioneer of famous 'Dhamail' Song which is still popular. Though the poet created many songs, yet he is not known to have presented any song written by him. The following song is one of his famous and popular songs:

“ O Bee, go and tell
That body of Radha burns
From pangs of separation from Srikrishna.
O my Bee, I entreat you to apprise Krishna
Of my state in perfect manner.
O my Bee, tell that she does neither
Take meal or water nor does she dress her hair
And she has left her house in the attire
Of a lady as if turned mad.
O my Bee, you live in upstream turn of the
River and your permanent dwelling is in downstream;
Who was forbidden a sight of eyes
And a smile of face?
O my Bee, Radharaman thinks within his mind and says
Who has rekindled the fire of anguish of mind
Extinguished earlier⁴.

4. Translated by Sitesh Ranjan Acharyya



Sketch by M. A. Qayyum



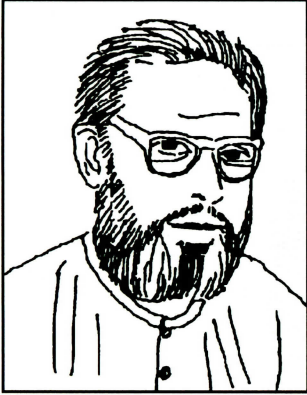
Poet Shah Abdul Karim studied at a night school during his childhood and grazed cattle at daytime. The poet got his first lesson on song from his village-mate Ustad Karim Uddin. Afterwards he took lessons from famous 'Baul Sadhak' Rashid Uddin. He was born in 1322 BS at Dhalgram village of Derai Upazila in the district of Sunamganj and died at his own birthplace in 2010 A.D. The poet wrote near about one thousand songs. Aftaf Sangeet, Gono Sangeet, Bhatir Chiti, Dhalmela, Kalneer Dheu, Kalneer Kulay; all are his famous books. He has been awarded 'Ekusahy Padak 2001' for his

special talent on folk songs. The poet's father's name was Ibrahim Ali and mother was Naiorjan Bibi. His wife Aftabun Nessa Sarola died before him. The following song has been taken from his book and translated by Md. Tariqul Islam:

Don't touch me
Because I am abandoned
For falling in love with my beloved
And I am not to be pardoned.
My time I have to pass
Shedding only tears and tears.
Love is a divine spell.
Separation is curse from hell.
I know it and know my mind.
There is no way to find
With sorrows time passes by.
Nobody knows how much suffered I.



Sketch by M. A. Qayyum



by **M. Hymayun Kabir:**

Poet Giasuddin Ahmed is one of those extraordinary mystic poets who automatically arouse interest again and again to his devotees for the songs. The poet wrote more than one thousand songs.

He was born at Shibpur village of Chatak Upazila of Sunamganj District on 12 August 1935 and died in 2009 A.D. In his book 'Marile Kandisna Amar Dayae' is published with his 326 songs. His father's name was Mohammad Fatteh Ullah and that of mother was Amou rota Bibi. The following song has been selected from his published book and translated it into English.

Don't cry my love at the time of death
Don't cry for me
Please recite Sura Ya'sin* at my dying bed
So that I can avoid Satan's trick!
You will give my last bathe by soothing broken heart
Don't cry for me, but read kalmia for me
Bury me with essence of rose and say good-bye
And recite Holy Quran at the deceased home
If you can't console your heart then cry after Burial
Please pray for me to most kind Allah, sitting at mosque
Pray for me to Rahman Allah, Not for the graveyard
So that Almighty Allah forgives me, my dear.

◆ Sura Ya'sin is known as the heart of the Holly Quran.



Sketch by M. A. Qayyum

Kala Shah

Any photograph or sketch of Poet Kala Shah is not available; his original name is Abdur Razzak. He had his own style of writing which was appreciated by many people. The poet wrote a lot of songs during his life time.

His famous books are ‘Ratna Sagar’ (published in 1347 BS), ‘Ananda Sagar’, ‘Prem Sagar’, ‘Prem Ananda Prem Taranga’.

The poet was born in 20 Falgoun of 1248 BS and died on 2 Jaisthaya in 1369 BS. His birth place is Dhaipur, a village of Kulanja Union under Derai Upazila of Sunamganj District. Poet’s father’s name was Tomij Ullah.

The following song was translated into English by Sitesh Ranjan Acharyya:

My paddy does not turn into dried rice
By frying a gram of paddy, I store it
Filling seven large containers!
I set about ploughing the hills of Laor.
I started harrowing the waters of sea
I sowed seeds all over the land
And how I could round up my business!
I milked the cow upon vessel with pores
And used sacks as containers of curd!
Churning milk all my life,
I did not get any ounce of melted butter!
I set my plough all over the land
Where I shall take the round?
The rope broke loose of the bull
And next I look round!
I ask you, my sweetheart, to judge,
Which is superior between tree and seed.
Tree yields seed and seed yields tree
Thus concludes Kala Shah deliberating deep.

Dinonath Baul

Dinonath Baul is one of the ancient poets of Sunamganj District. He was born at the early stage of nineteenth century. Neither his photograph nor any book was published by him. The following song was collected by a researcher which has been translated into English by Sitesh Ranjan Acharyya:

O my good soul, keep not on plying the boat,
Keep the thread of love in your hand
And unfurl the sail of the Boat!
Six persons are conspiring sitting on six sides,
I have lost both the principal and profit
Engrossed in the enchantment of woman!
The sky is the Boat made of Kadam wood
And water is getting into the boat leaking through the joints,
Ply the boat carefully taking it along the margin of the river,
His Holiness the Divine Guide is the Helmsman,
O mind, give up evil thoughts and
You will cross the river if Guru's grace is on thy head,
Dinonath says, how long I shall keep the broken Boat afloat,
By constantly failing out water from it?
It is now time to go home by winding up the shop
As the time is swiftly passing by!

Conclusion

In terms of folklore, Sunamganj is one of the potential areas of the world. But the tragedy is that her name and fame did not spread over the globe. Except Hason Raja, other poets are not widely known. Many of them have written more than five hundred, even a thousand songs. For our culture and heritage, we should explore this wealth and present it to other parts of the world. I had no idea about this goldmine of music and lyrics before coming to Sunamganj and within a short period, I was immensely impressed. I cannot forget the melody and beauty of the folksongs, in particular the Mystic songs of Sunamganj. I wish to dedicate the following song⁵ composed by me to the great mystic poets of Sunamganj at the end:

I float adrift dawn to dusk on the river Surma,
I imagine the display of rain and sunshine at hill-folds,
I float adrift dawn to dusk
Green leaves of hijol, karooh
make shadows of day and night,
The girl from Kangsa harmonizes the feelings,
Ripples on the river causes dangle at heart,
I float adrift dawn to dusk
The raft of white cloud dismantled over the sky,
At the bends of rivers fish and birds are in profusion,
Pangs cooled by the melodious songs of Hason Raja
I float adrift dawn to dusk

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