

THE BODY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND SOCIALITY:

Fakir Lalon Shah and His Followers in Contemporary Bangladesh

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BANGLADESH**

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I introduce the unorthodox conceptualization of the body maintained by the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890) in contemporary Bangladesh. This study is an exploratory attempt to put the wisdom of the Fakirs in conversation with established social theorists of the body, arguing that the Aristotelian conceptualization of habitus is more useful than Bourdieu's in explaining the power of bodily practices of the initiates. My ethnographic research with the prominent Fakirs—participant observation, in-depth interview, and textual analysis of Lalon's songs—shows how the body can be educated not only to defy, resist, or transgress dominant socio-political norms, but also to cultivate an alternative subjectivity and sociality. I explain how the corporal body acts as the means of both spiritual cultivation and socio-cultural transformations, and show how the Fakirs manage desire without indulgence or suppression, but by sanctifying it. Sanctifying desire serves as the Fakirs' way of cultivating an ethical relationship to the self. Fakirs' sanctified desire strives, often unsuccessfully, to annihilate egoism and cherish the indivisibility of human beings, practices that together constitute the enduring fabric of a supposedly selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality. Finally, I discuss how in contemporary Bangladesh, public authorities, mass media, and civil society stakeholders have been gradually coopting the heterodox praxis of the Fakirs.

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the current era of postcolonialism, decoloniality, and subaltern studies, the reexamination of marginal cultures or indigenous traditions has gained a new momentum. This reexamination aims not to determine whether those marginal traditions are modern or progressive. Instead, scholars search for broader socio-political significance of the apparently mundane activities or beliefs of the marginalized people all around the world. The analyses of the praxis of heterodox groups require new concepts and new interpretations. One marginalized group, called Baul, to be specific Fakir, in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India has been practicing a heterodox culture for a long time. I reexamine the Fakirs' antinomian praxis with a new perspective. This perspective allows scholarly conversations between the Fakirs' wisdom and established academic scholarship, unlike area studies scholarship. The broader significance of this perspective includes a theorization of a radically different way (from majority traditions in Bengal and elsewhere) to view life, subjectivity, and sociality.

Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890) is the most influential "mystic minstrel" in Bengal—Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. Despite having no formal education, he composed around 1000 songs, which are simple but thought-provoking. Lalon's songs are the most popular folk songs in Bengal. As did Lalon, his followers (most of whom are poor and village dwellers) sing songs typically accompanied by the one-stringed "*Ektara*," live wandering lives, practice religious harmony, and preach universal humanism. Fakirs are known for their "esoteric and

ascetic” practices. They incorporate “*bhakti*” (selfless devotion and love) into the practices of combating the vices of the body. Fakirs are small in number—perhaps from several hundred to several thousand. No census has yet been made of them. But their influence in the cultural sphere of Bangladesh is significant. Thousands of people including the urban, educated, middle class population attend the annual gatherings at the *dham* (sacred site) of Lalon. The events are highlighted by local television channels, radio stations, and newspapers.

Lalon Shah was a poet, singer, and spiritual leader in rural Bangladesh. Lalon’s songs were oral compositions, not written texts; there is no complete and authenticated catalogue or collection of his songs. Although the primary audience of his songs has been the rural, uneducated, poor villagers of Bengal, his songs have attracted numerous local and international scholars because of his rich and thought-provoking poetico-philosophical verses. Fakir Lalon Shah has fascinated numerous scholars all around the world, including Allen Ginsberg and Rabindranath Tagore, but few have noted the secular significance of Lalon’s “mystical” songs and Fakirs’ unorthodox life-practices, such as wearing white dresses only, having no children, owning no private property, and attempting to lead a self-sacrificing life. Often Lalon has been represented as a mystic, folk, not this-worldly, and sometimes superstitious. But Lalon’s songs are this-worldly, “secular” (for the lack of an appropriate word), political, and profoundly philosophical as well as poetic; they call for social movements against all forms of discriminatory segregation among human beings based on race, religion, class, caste, or gender. Unlike modern secularists, instead of rejecting religion altogether, Lalon discovered new insights from traditional religious narratives and opened a new horizon of embracing all human beings as one community irrespective of any other identity under one “Divine” identity—the “simple human being” that is the Fakirs’ God.

Fakirs are famous for their heterodox life-practices. Not surprisingly, there has been social outcry surrounding their heterodox practices. Fakirs invert gender hierarchy (Knight 2011; McDaniel 1992), violate caste purity and hierarchy, venerate the “Simple Human Being” as God, and ritually use bodily secretions, popularly known as “the four moon practice” (Cakrabarti 1989; Jha 1995a, 2010; Openshaw 2002). Fakirs seem to share some basic propositions, specially the centrality of the body, with other major spiritual traditions such as Yoga, Tantra, Sufism, Buddhist and Christian Monasticism, and T/Daoism. But the internal differences are too significant to generalize. Fakirs, specifically Lalon, mostly dealt with smaller heterodox traditions in Bengal, such as *Sakta*, *Kartabhaja*, and *Sahebdhani* (offshoots of Yoga and Tantra), and *Cishtia* (a variety of Sufism).

Fakirs, specifically the followers of Lalon, are typically poor, marginalized, and illiterate. Because of the Fakirs’ unorthodox rituals, they usually choose to live in a relatively remote area of a village. Moreover, as the practitioners willingly withdraw themselves from the power structure of the mainstream society, the Fakirs become vulnerable to misconduct, humiliation, and often verbal and physical harassment. Fakirs are often beaten up and cast out. They are abhorred equally by some Hindus and Muslims (Das 1992: 82-83; Jha 2002). Chowdhury (2009: 987-995) recorded the historical antagonisms against the Bauls, specifically against Lalon and his followers.

However, as the Fakirs sing popular Lalon songs, they enjoy the admiration and love of a vast majority of the people in Bangladesh. Interestingly, the popularity of Lalon’s songs is both helpful and challenging for the practitioners. It is helpful because that is how the Fakirs find support among the people in general. The popularity of the songs often plays an effective role in

finding new disciples. At the same time, the popularity among the people sometimes prevents the Fakirs from focusing on the long-term spiritual praxis including performing the bodily rituals.

While there is no dearth of literature on the Bauls¹ of Bengal or Fakirs, almost all the previous studies confined the discussion to area studies scholarship. Edward Dimock (1966), Shashibhusan Dasgupta (1966), Shaktinath Jha (1995b, 2002, 2010), Sudhir Cakrabarty (1989, 1992), Lisa Knight (2011), June McDaniel (1989, 1992), Jeanne Openshaw (1997b, a, 2002, 2010) and Abul Ahsan Chowdhury (1990, 2009), contributed some extraordinary ethnographic details to the literature. However, they mostly limited their discussion to local, comparable traditions or religions. Some exceptions are Jha's (1995b) analyses of the historical and socio-political conditions of the emergence of Lalon and Openshaw's (2002: 240-250) interesting insights on the limitations of Subaltern Studies in studying Baul/Fakir traditions in Bengal. The Comparative Studies scholar Hugh Urban (2001a, 2009), especially, has made significant contributions in attempting to broaden the scope of the discussion. His interesting works on Tantra, colonial Bengal, and the Kartabhaja community explain the socio-political conditions of the developments of those practices and engage broader concepts such as secrecy and postcolonialism. Farhad Mazhar (2008), on the other hand, interprets Lalon's verses to highlight the radical potentialities of the philosophy and life-practices of the Fakirs in addressing contemporary socio-political problems in Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, none of these scholars seriously engage the social theories of the body.

Lalon categorically denounced caste prejudice, religious dogmatism, and gender discrimination. Despite their own spiritual hierarchy, Fakirs' spiritual politics aims at

¹ Baul is a popular, generic name given for a range of groups that are somewhat similar with the Fakirs. And the category of Baul is too generalized to represent the specificity of various groups.

overcoming the divisive boundaries and normative categories based on caste, gender, religion, or race. Fakirs consider promoting this radical socio-politics their spiritual duty. This politics, I find, is deeply rooted in their heterodox view of the human body.

Society presupposes and must produce socialized human beings; social beings acquire certain forms of subjectivities and embodiment through socialization. The more successful the socio-cultural apparatus of a society, such as school, family, and religion, in (re)producing the desired subjectivities and embodiments, the more cohesive and less coercive that society is likely to be in maintaining social order. The process is generally known as biopolitics. But subjectivity is not an abstract idea; it must be realized in the body—must be embodied. Social subjects are socialized bodies. However, the bodies can be socialized or trained by socio-cultural, biopolitical apparatus to produce manageable subjects, e. g., law-abiding citizens. One can also train the body to embody different forms of subjectivities that defy dominant social and political order. The Aristotelian model of “training of the self” is one appropriate example of training the self to constitute heterodox subjectivities. Whereas biopolitics explains how the body is manufactured to adapt or comply with the dominant codes of conduct, the model of “training of the self” shows how people might attain an autonomy of the self. This autonomy of the self enables subjects to cultivate heterodox socio-cultural norms. The growing literature on the body in recent times focuses heavily on the social control of the body, and thus pays less attention to training the self/body in cultivating significantly different subjectivities and socialities, which is often an individualized mechanism of attaining self-autonomy. My research analyzes the plausibility and significance of the model of the training the self in our contemporary times.

The objective of my research is to examine the *possibility* of training the body, or what I call educating the body, in cultivating a selfless subjectivity and sociality. Education of the body

refers to the practices of combating what the Fakirs call the six vices—lust, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and envy—and cultivating supposedly selfless love and devotion to human beings regardless of their identity. Ethical sociality is premised on the commitment to participate in social relations at the cost of personal interest, not to maximize self-interest. Important to note that cultivating selfless subjectivity is a goal that the Fakirs continuously chase after, often unsuccessfully. I address the spirituality of the practitioners by studying the unorthodox rituals through which they sanctify the human body.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork while residing in several *Asrams* (Fakirs' dwelling and practicing places) in the remote villages of the Kushtia and Meherpur districts in Bangladesh from June to October 2014. I focused on the three well-known disciples of Fakir Loban Shah.² They are Nohir Fakir, Rowshan Fakir, and Shamsul Fakir. I stayed and dined with the Fakirs, interviewed them, observed their private and public rituals, and observed *Sadhusanga* (gatherings of the initiates), and *Gostha* (songs performed in early morning). I also interviewed experts (Shaktinath Jha, Sudhir Chakraborty, and Farhad Mazhar). As part of the analysis, I compare the Gurus' interpretations of Lalon's songs with my direct observations of the rituals. I also conducted content analysis of thematically selected songs of Lalon to examine his reflections on the dominant culture, and scrutinized the Fakirs' interpretations of the verses and translations into bodily practices.

My research shows a way of overcoming the problematic politics of ethnography. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, but carefully avoided “Orientalizing” or exoticizing the population of my research. As a native of Bangladesh and a Bengali speaking person, the Fakirs and I belong to the same community of Bangladeshis and Bengalis. However, as a non-initiate I

² Loban Shah was the most prominent follower of Fakir Lalon Shah in contemporary Bangladesh. He died in 2010.

am an outsider of the Fakir community. I avoid eroticizing the initiates by holistically discussing the life-practices of the Fakirs. I also deliberately attempted to exclude undue prominence to the unorthodox, subversive norms (e.g., about sexuality and ritual use of body fluids). I frame my observations in appropriate contexts to understand the underlying rationale of the uncommon practices of Fakir Lalon Shah. Furthermore, I avoided “Othering” the population of my research by shifting the focus. Whereas previous studies mostly focused on the Fakirs’ “secret,” “mystical” bodily practices, I listened to the adepts critically appraise the dominant groups in Bangladesh. In doing so I attempted to reverse the typical role of the respondents of a research, in this case the Fakirs. I documented how the Fakirs view the dominant culture in Bangladesh, and explain the significance of the difference between their own praxis and the majority culture in Bangladesh.

Let me also specify two major difficulties that I faced in conducting this research. The first one is the authenticity of Lalon’s songs included in the available compilations. The only written version of Lalon’s songs was made by a prominent disciple of Lalon, Bholai Shah. Bholai Shah’s collection went missing, although some disputed copies of that collection have been published. It’s important to note that the introduction of printing press in Bengal made it possible to compile and publish collections of Baul songs during 1880 to 1905 (Jha 1995b: 171). However, there was no collection of Lalon’s songs published in his life-time or immediately after. None of the available collections of Lalon’s songs is considered complete and correct. Often the verses are different in different collections, and whether some of the songs were at all Lalon’s has been highly debated. Besides consulting the important collection of Abul Ahsan Choudhury (2009), I mostly followed the collection of Khodokar Rafiuddin (2009), which is generally accepted by my respondents. Khodokar Rafiuddin himself was a prominent follower of

Fakir Lalon. As an insider of the Fakir he collected the songs from his fellow practitioners. Although it was one of the earliest attempt to formally compile Lalon's songs, the collection was not complete but widely accepted as a reliable compilation by the practitioners in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Abul Ahsan Choudhury, an academic located in Kustia, collected and verified the songs from various practitioners and scholars over a long period of time. Chowdhury's collection is the most popular compilation of Lalon's songs in contemporary Bangladesh. However, this collection includes songs that are composed by others but incorrectly credited as Lalon's songs. I also consulted a collection by the Bangladeshi scholar-practitioner Farhad Mazher (2009), who aimed to document the "correct" version of the lyrics of some important songs of Lalon.

Second, as a non-initiate, I faced a lot of difficulties in gaining access to the confidential world of the Fakirs. Fakirs perform both public and private rituals as part of their spiritual training. While I have observed, participated, and discussed the public rituals, I was careful not to ask questions about some aspects of the private rituals of initiate couples. Fakirs discuss those heterodox rituals *only* with fellow initiates, as doing the same with non-initiates often results in violence against the practitioners. As a non-initiate, I decided not to focus on the private rituals. Instead, I focused on understanding the Fakirs' reading of mainstream Bangladeshi society through a non-initiate eye.

Finally, one important clarification is that my research with the Fakirs *cannot* be generalized as representations of all the Fakirs or Bauls of Bengal. I conducted research with some of the most prominent Gurus in Bangladesh as an attempt to capture the best-case scenario of the praxis of the followers of Lalon in current Bangladesh. Fakirs or Bauls (broadly speaking) do not have any supreme leader, such as the Pope. Nor do they have any umbrella organization

to which all of them belong. The only person the devotees strictly follow is their Guru, who initiates them. Gurus also do not necessarily maintain any hierarchy among themselves. Thus, it is notoriously difficult to find practitioners who represent the entire community of the Fakirs. They are diverse, decentralized, independent, and often hard to distinguish from the followers of other sister spiritual traditions. Instead of trying to find the proper representatives of the Fakirs, I selected some of the most famous and widely respected senior Gurus for this research. Another important rationale of selecting some of the most prominent Gurus is to understand some of the most persuasive explanations of the Fakirs' praxis. My goal of this research is *not* to document how the practitioners generally translate Lalou's ideas into practices. Instead, I worked with some of the prominent Gurus among the contemporary followers of Lalou. Focusing on a few of the most articulate voices among the contemporary Gurus, I also intend to make possible a dialogue between the wisdom of the Fakirs and the scholarly writings of established social theorists of the world. I specifically attempt to put the dominant theories of the body in conversation with the Fakirs' insights.

In this research, I attempt to present what a "mystic" tradition in the Orient can possibly contribute to the scholarly discussions on the body, embodiment, subjectivity, and sociality. I also show how the apparently other-worldly, spiritual praxis of a marginalized group in remote villages of Bangladesh can potentially contribute to articulating novel approaches to sociality of the body.

In presenting the findings of the research, I organized the dissertation into five separate chapters. I begin with the history of the Fakir tradition in Bengal and delve deep into the genealogy of the key concepts and practices of the initiates. In searching for a better conceptual tool to understand the Fakir praxis, I found Aristotle's *habitus* to be an effective but neglected

one. I then show how the bodily practices of the Fakirs offer an interesting insight into social theorizations of the body. To explore the broader significance of the practices of the Fakirs I put the insights of the fakirs into conversation with social theories of the body. To further illuminate the theoretical significance, I discuss why the fakirs' management of desire deserves careful attention. I highlight how the initiates' sanctification of desire can potentially add important insights to the literature on the relationship between desire, subjectivity, and sociality. Before concluding I describe the tendency of coopting the heterodox praxis in contemporary Bangladesh.

In the first chapter, I describe the history of the Fakir tradition in Bangladesh and greater Bengal, which includes West Bengal, India. The chapter on the history describes how the Fakirs' idea of the body, for example, builds on hundreds of years old ancient traditions in Bengal. It also shows how the genealogy of the Fakir tradition creates the conditions of transcending the conventional boundaries of religions, specifically Islam and Hinduism. I show in this chapter that Lalon's praxis is closely related yet different from various age-old traditions in South Asia. I specifically discuss how the Fakirs' life-practices build on important features of Buddhist Sahajya practices, Gaudiya Vaisnavism, and small heterodox groups such as Kartabhajas. Reviewing the history helps understanding the meanings of some key concepts and practices. In this chapter I also found that Lalon's key concepts and metaphors can be better understood by closely reading an important Sufi, Ibn Arabi.

The second chapter discusses why the bodily practices of the Fakirs matter, especially the theoretical importance of the practitioners' somatic spirituality. In understanding the Fakirs' praxis, I discovered that Aristotle's habitus is more useful than Bourdieu's. I followed Saba Mahmood's (2005) lead in rediscovering the importance of Aristotle's habitus. Aristotle's

“habitus” refers to the power of training the embodied self in cultivating heterodox subjectivities. I show how Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus differed from Aristotle’s. I argue that a careful reexamination of the signature characteristics of Aristotle’s habitus, i.e., the power of educating the body, is imperative in attempting to theorize the power of the body in (re)constructing the tenets of society, community, or culture.

The subsequent chapter specifically deals with the bodily practices of the followers of Lalou in contemporary Bangladesh and their broader socio-cultural significance. In the third chapter, I show how the Fakirs transform their selves, subjectivities, and socialities by educating their corporeal dispositions. I claim to contribute to social theorization of the body by arguing that not only do culture, society, and the state play significant role in (re)shaping the dispositions and sensibilities of the body, the body can also be trained to *radially* transform the tenets of culture, society, or community.

In the fourth chapter I show that as part of educating the body the Fakirs sanctify desire, which they consider a key to cultivating a selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality. I analyze the Fakirs’ management of desire in relation to two other dominant models, which are the suppression of desire explained by Freud and the proliferation of desire conceptualized by Foucault. I show that the Fakirs’ sanctification of desire does not aim to maximize the pleasure by suppressing it rationally. Instead, the initiates’ goal is to overcome the sense of the pleasure of the self. They claim to utilize the private dispositions of the body to transcend selfish dispositions.

Before concluding I describe the recent changes of the Fakirs’ practices in our times in the fifth chapter. I specifically focus on the gradual co-optation of the Fakirs’ heterodox culture in contemporary Bangladesh. Although the practicing Fakirs have remained marginalized as a

group, Lalon's songs and the popular performances of those songs have gained significant popularity among the vast majority of the people in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The growing popularity has helped the Fakirs interact with the wide variety of people, including journalists, academics, government officials, and some international visitors. But the popularity of the Fakirs comes at a cost. The long-term spiritual practices of the Fakirs have become less appreciated. More importantly, the conditions that are needed for the practitioners to perform the rituals smoothly seem to be gradually waning. The popularity of the cultural programs that are held parallel to Lalon's *dham* seem to overshadow the annual ritual gatherings of the Fakirs. Apparently neither the Fakirs nor the local government has sole control over the site. If this uneasy coexistence continues (which seems to be the case), the Fakir tradition will likely experience a significant change in the future. That changed reality might contribute to losing the urge of the initiates to unite at Lalon's *dham* frequently. Another possibility is that a fraction of the Fakirs will be showcased by the local government authorities at the sacred site, while the non-practitioners will eventually set the course of the events.

In the course of analyzing the Fakirs' life-practices, I have come up with two important observations. First, the Aristotelian conceptualization of habitus can possibly be a bridge between the East and West. Despite the significant internal differences, the classical Greek model of cultivating the self, Indian psycho-somatic traditions such as Yoga and Tantra, Chinese Taoism/Daoism, and mediaeval monasticism apparently share a common ground: Educating the embodied self to cultivate an ethical subjectivity. Classical habitus as a concept turns out to be key in rethinking the relationship between the body, society, and culture. Another important observation is that the wisdom of the people of the marginalized, indigenous traditions can

potentially be important sources in theorizing alternative conceptions of sociality and subjectivity.

2.0 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE EMERGENCE OF FAKIR LALON SHAH

For a non-initiate, like myself, one of the few plausible ways of understanding the Fakirs' praxis, especially their key concepts and rituals, is to examine their historical developments. Besides non-initiates, members of the dominant Muslim community in Bangladesh are also generally unaware of the meanings of the terminologies and the significance of the rituals of the marginalized Fakir community. To have a comprehensive understanding of the Fakirs' praxis, I investigate the historical trajectories of their key conceptions and rituals. In attempting to explore the broader significance of the psycho-somatic praxis of the initiates, I also review the thematic similarities between the Fakirs and other sister traditions, such as Sufism.

The historical context in which Fakir Lalon Shah and his heterodox life-practices emerged in greater Bengal relate closely to three major developments: 1) Buddhist Sahajiya praxis from around the 8th to 12th centuries, 2) Gaudiya Vaishnava movement led by Caitanya in the 16th century, and 3) the advent of a plethora of relatively smaller, heterodox "cults" in the 18th and 19th centuries. Furthermore, the conquering of Bengal by the Afghan and Turkish invaders and the simultaneous spread of Sufi orders played a crucial role in setting the context for the rise of Fakir Lalon Shah. In this chapter, I trace the genealogy of the Fakirs in these three historical developments. In the last section, I briefly describe thematic similarities between Ibn Arabi and Lalon.

2.1 BUDDHIST SAHAJIYA PRAXIS

Buddhist Sahajiya praxis as found in *Carayapad* is as old as Bengali literature, at least the written form of it. *Carayapad* was written in approximately during the 8th to 12th centuries. These texts were first discovered from Nepal in 1907 (Sastri 1917). The language of *Caryapad* was an early form of what later became Bengali. *Caryas*, the lyrical texts of Buddhist Sahajiyas were possibly written during the Buddhist dominated, Pal dynasty in Bengal. Buddhist Sahajiya was considered a branch of Tantric Buddhism, which flourished under the auspices of Buddhist rulers in Bengal (Dasgupta 1962: 9-14). But later dynasties dominated by Hindu Brahmins, specifically *Sens*, contributed heavily to the virtual elimination of Buddhism in general. Moreover, Buddhism in Bengal survived not among the elites but the marginals. Vaisnava Sahajiyas and Kartabhajas are some of the traditions that carried the legacy of Buddhist Sahajiya practices in various forms. Bauls and Fakirs have retained some significant features of one of the oldest traditions in the history of Bengal. Interestingly enough, the verses of *Carayapad* have been recently translated into contemporary vernacular Bengali and sung by a group of initiates in today's Bangladesh.

Dasgupta identified general similarities between Sahajiyas and the Fakirs or Bauls of Bengal (1962: 164-167). Both the Sahajiyas and Bauls consider *Sahaj*—the natural, simple, innate—as both a method of spiritual cultivation and their supreme goal. Both groups are known for their aversion to orthodoxy, especially Brahminism, and criticism of ritual-centric religious practices. Instead, Sahajiyas and Bauls are Guru-led traditions. They consider the body to be the microcosm of the universe, and the abode of truth. They oppose erudition as a source of truth or knowledge. Dimock also opined that Bauls and Sahajiyas share many features (1966: 249-270). However, the differences are also significant. For example, unlike the Bauls or Fakirs, Buddhist

Sahajiyas were missing the ideas of love and devotion, or *bhakti* (Dasgupta 1962: 345). Sufis and Gaudiya Vaisnavas mainly contributed to the popularization of devotion later among the initiates of various sorts. Moreover, Fakir Lalon made Islam a central concern as part of an effort to address the growing number of Muslims in Bengal.

2.2 GAUDIYA VAISNAVISM IN BENGAL

“পাগলের নামটি এমন
বলিতে অধীন লালন
হয় তরাসে;
ও সে চৈতে নিতে অদ্বৈ পাগল
নাম ধরেছে” (Choudhury 2009: 387)

Lalon in this song expressed his urgency to tell the world about a madman who appeared not as one but three men named Caite (Caitanya), Nite (Nityananda), and Adyi (Advaita Acarya). Those three met in Node (Nadia in West Bengal, India). Caitanya (1486-1533), Nityananda (1473/74-1535-45), and Advaita Acarya (1434-1559) were the three central figures of Gaudiya Vaisnavism in the 16th century Bengal. Vaisnavism was not invented by those three figures, in fact it had existed long before Gaudiya Vaisnavism (De 1961: 1, 8-26). While Caitanya was the youngest man among those three, he became the leader of a distinct tradition based on the ecstatic love of and utmost devotion to Krishna, the Hindu avatar. Advaita being the oldest, about 50 years older than Caitanya, was a famous Brahmin scholar, who was considered by some as the incarnation of Krisna in his time. However, Advaita denounced that claim and instead considered Caitanya as the incarnation of both Krishna and Radha in one body. Nityananda on the other hand was the youngest but became the most popular personality among the followers as

an icon of ecstatic love, a fierce critic of caste prejudice, and an eccentric character who had the audacity of disregarding almost everyone. He has been also popular among the Bauls and Fakirs. Despite being a son of Brahmin, Nityanada defied caste hierarchy and mingled and lived with the lower caste people, specifically Sudras. Nityananda has been particularly appreciated by the Fakirs as he did not leave the followers alone and remained in Nadia permanently, unlike Caitanya, for example. Lalon sang, “The kind-hearted Nitai will not leave anyone alone; embrace the gracious feet and never let go.”

“দয়াল নিতাই কাউরে ফেলে যাবে না
ধর চরণ ছেড় না” (Mazhar 2009: 146)

Contrary to the Vaisnava ethics, Nityananda ate fish and meat and had a habit of drinking. He loved extravagance, in terms of dress, especially. Yet he deliberately violated caste hierarchy and mingled and dined with lower caste people frequently (Ghosh 2007: 116). Furthermore, Nityananda decided not to continue his life as a renunciate shortly after the death of Caitanya. He got married and raised children, which was against the fundamental principles of renouncer Vaisnavs. Some argue that Caitanya himself instructed Nityananda to get married (Kar 2014: 105), although Ghosh (2007: 35) questioned the validity of the conclusion. Nityananda married twice, and ultimately grew rich (Chakrabarty 1985: 135). He was a rebellious and extensive traveler. His audacity of radical disregard for all was famous. He lived with the Sudras. Birbhum, the birthplace of Nityananda, was famous for the coexistence of diverse cults, especially Saivas and Saktas. This is perhaps one reason he was able to disregard caste prejudice (Chakrabarty 1985: 136-137). Both Advaita and Nitaynada avoided the Tantric, Sahajiya erotic practices, and instead greatly appreciated love and devotion. Although, some claim that Nityanada was a Tantric and even was sometimes credited for combining Vaishnava and Sahajiya traditions (Dimock 1966: 51-52).

Like the Fakirs, singing and dancing comprise another distinguishing feature of the Vaisnavs. Chanting the name of Krisna was a signature practice of Caitanya. Nityananda on the other hand passionately performed *Songkirtan*, which is not simply chanting but storytelling and dancing. *Songkirtan* was one of the most effective tools in popularizing Vaisnavism. The followers of Lalon also perform musical debates (*pala gaan*) on spiritual discourses that last all night. Like *Songkirtan*, songs written in simple colloquial language by Lalon and performed by the practitioners have been instrumental in winning over the hearts of the followers of Lalon.

Buddhist Sahajiyas, smaller heterodox groups that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the Fakirs have at least two important principles in common: Vehement opposition to Bhamin orthodoxy, ritualism, and caste prejudice; and deliberate subversion of dominant social norms and cultural codes. These are also some of the main reasons Nityanada became a widely-respected personality among the Fakirs. Nobodip or Nadia's dominant Brahmins were especially hostile to Muslims (Chakrabarty 1985: 51). On the contrary, Haridash Zobon, a converted Muslim, was a known figure in Caitanya's circle.

2.3 FLOURISHING OF SMALL HETERODOX GROUPS

Soon after the death of Caitanya, Gadiyua Vaisnavism started to lose its appeal to the mass people. Instead, Brahmin orthodoxy and caste discrimination created a climate of animosity between poor people and the elites. Brahmins were extremely oppressive. For example, a Brahmin was happily allowed to commit adultery with a non-Brahmin (Sudra) woman, whereas Sudras were expected to be completely subservient to the feet of Brahmins (Chakrabarty 1985: 40-41). "The Sudras and the common people did not matter at all" (Chakrabarty 1985: 39).

Against this backdrop, during the 18th and 19th centuries in Bengal, fifty-six Vaisnava and semi-Vaisnava groups flourished (Chakrabarty 1985: 349), most of which were listed in the classic collection named *Bharatiya Upashak Samproday* (Indian Worshipping Communities) by Aksaykumar Datta (1820-1886). The groups identified by Datta included, Aul, Baul, Kartabhaja, Balarami, and Sahebhdhani. The followers of Fakir Lalon Shah were identified as Bauls. And the most prominent among those groups was Kartabhaja. Baul as a tradition began approximately in the second decade of the seventeenth century. Madhob Bibi and Aulchand were the two main Gurus. And Madhob Bibi's son Bir Bhadra popularized Baul tradition (Sharif 2009: 806). Despite some differences, there are striking similarities between Kartabhajas and Bauls or Fakirs. Kartabhajas were both similar and different from Gadiyua Vaisnavism. They embraced the Vaisnava idea of love and devotion but did not denounce Sahajiya bodily practices, which included sexual rituals. Kartas and the followers of Fakir Lalon also share the same principle of incorporating devotion and love (*bhakti*) into Sahajiya bodily practices. As for the Fakirs, the body itself is divine to Kartabhajas (Urban 2001a: 143). Moreover, both the Fakirs and Kartabhajas vehemently oppose dominant social and cultural order and practice an alternative sociality. Both the groups are known for their harsh criticisms of caste prejudice and Brahmin orthodoxy. Like the Fakirs, Kartabhajas used enigmatic language that served at least two functions simultaneously: conveying coded meanings for the initiates only, and creating conditions of diverse reading and interpreting of the same verses. Obviously, the practitioners of both groups did not have any texts or documents except songs, which were collected and published by others later. Furthermore, most of the followers of Kartabhaja Gurus and Fakir Lalon were poor people, peasants, and villagers living far from urban centers. Kartabhajs, like many of the Tantrics, believed that the human body is the microcosm of the universe. They also

aimed to reach the “Person of the Heart” or *Sahaj Manush* through the body (Urban 2001a: 143). Fakir Lalon and his followers too believe these ideas and practice accordingly. Although both Kartas and Lalon had Hindu and Muslim followers, Lalon differed from Kartabhajas mainly regarding criticizing conventional Islamic narratives and practices.

Kartabhajas also made significant contributions in making the role of women prominent in the spiritual world. For example, Ramsaran’s wife Swarwati (Sati Ma) became a very influential Guru. Among the five *Ghars* (schools) that Lalon recognized and still are highly respected by the Fakirs is *Sati Ma Ghor*. Sati Ma was the preceptor of her son Dulalcand (Lal Shashi), who became the most prominent figure in the tradition. Although I have not any prominent female Guru, the Fakirs in general greatly appreciate the contribution of women in their spiritual practices. Another important similarity between these two groups is a ritual gathering named *Dol*. Kartabhajas’ *Dol* festival became famous as the festival of Ghospara. They used to observe *Dol* in Bengali month named *Falgun*. Fakir Lalon and his followers also observe this as *Dol Purnima*, not in *Falgun* month but the subsequent month, *Caitra*. Aulchand and Dulalchad had a huge number of disciples who came from Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. Both were famous for their miraculous, charismatic powers, especially of physical healing. Lalon on the other hand was known to strongly discourage those practices.

Besides the intriguing similarities between Kartabhaja and Fakir traditions, understanding the historical contexts of the rise of Kartabhajas helps us identify the broader socio-political conditions that set the ground for the emergence and popularity of Fakir Lalon Shah in remote rural areas of Eastern Bengal, currently Bangladesh. Although Kartabhajas were in Ghosh Para area of West Bengal in undivided India, Lalon was practicing in East Bengal, specifically in Kustia district. The geographical distance between Ghosh Para and Kustia is not very far at all.

The main cities of West Bengal and East Bengal were Calcutta and Dhaka. Although Ghosh Para was at the border of the main city, Calcutta, and rural areas in West Bengal, Kustia was a typical remote rural area. Despite these differences, the overall context in which various smaller heterodox groups, including Kartabhajas, emerged is directly relevant in understanding the making of a spiritual leader of marginalized people such as Fakir Lalon.

A concise description of the historical, socio-political conditions that allowed the emergence of diverse, deviant orders is the following:

The reasons for the sprouting of numerous deviant orders in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries are not far to seek. The slow consolidation of British power in Bengal before 1757, and the quick downfall of the Moguls after 1709 made life and society in Bengal highly hazardous. The internal and external markets for the indigenous goods were dying out or withering. The Bengal Nawabs lacked the administrative organization for coping with the various problems of the 'period of the transition'. The Bengalis of West Bengal were harassed by the Maratha raids which first began in 1742. The penetration of British mercantile capital into the traditional Bengali industries upset the old economic order. Both the Bengali peasants and the Bengali weavers were very badly affected by the work of the foreign monopolists. (Chakrabarty 1985: 346)

Colonial British rule, which was about to solidify in Bengal, coincided with the dismantling of the several hundred years of Muslim rule. The new rules set by mercantile capital unsettled the traditional sources of livelihood of the majority. As the peasants and weavers were badly affected by colonial British mercantile capital, it is important to note that most followers of Fakir Lalon (1774-1890) were weavers. Lalon was in Kustia, which was slow to be affected by the developments in the city, Calcutta. However, East Bengal, specifically Kustia, was badly affected by the newly formed class of landlords (*Jamindar*), which we will discuss later.

As the rise of Kartabhajas is of more interest here, let me touch on the socio-political conditions that facilitated the emergence of Kartabhajas, superbly identified by Hugh Urban. The most important reason was:

[---] the rapidly changing economic context of early colonial Bengal. Both the religious and the economic marketplaces underwent a series of significant transformations, as old centers of trade began to crumble, as a host of foreign goods began to flood into Bengal, as the urban center of Calcutta began to emerge as the new center of exchange, as the British Company introduced new forms of mercantile capital into the traditional economy. (Urban 2001a: 37)

Kartabhajas emerged at a historical juncture, Urban also observed, during “ [--] the late eighteenth century, amidst the collapse of both traditional Hindu and Muslim power and the rise of the British East India Company, [--] at a very liminal and transitional time in the precolonial history of Bengal, amidst the rapid transfer of power between indigenous and foreign rulers” (2001a: 59).

Fakir Lalon lived through precisely this precarious transition to British colonial rule and mercantilism. Lalon was a contemporary of the Kartabhaja Guru Dulalcand. The founder of Kartabhaja tradition, Fakir Aulcand’s probable life span was 1686-1779, and the most popular Kartabhaja Guru, Dulalcand was most likely born in 1775 (just one year after Fakir Lalon) and died in 1832/1833. Chakrabarty (1985: 353) mentioned one of the stories about Aulcand that he might be a disciple of a Sufi, Alakh Shah, located in East Bengal, who preached Hindu-Muslim unity during the middle of the 18th century. During my field work in Kustia, I observed that the followers of Fakir Lalon often invoke “*Alek Snai*” especially during their important gatherings, such as, *Sadhusanga*. “*Alek Snai*” could possibly refer to the historical figure, Alakh Shah.

Although Lalon with his disciples kept calculated distance from the dominant non-initiate community and culture, he lived through the major historical events of 19th century Bengal, such as peasant movements waged mainly by rural peasants against local elites patronized by the colonial administrators. The most significant of these upheavals were the Wahabi rebellion with the leadership of Titumeer in 1831, the Farazi movement led by Dudu Mia, the Santal uprising in

1855-1857, and the peasants' resistance against the imposition of indigo cultivation by the colonial British in 1859-1861.

In a rare move, Lalon once directly participated in protesting the oppression of the poor peasants by the *Jaminders*. Lalon's contemporary Kangal Horinath Mojumder (1833-1896) published *Grambarta* newspaper, famous for documenting and disseminating the stories of oppression of peasants by the *Jaminders*, the landlords in Kustia region. The *Jaminders* understandably started to treat Lalon and his followers as enemies. Once the *Jaminders* sent thugs to punish Kangal Horinath as he published reports of suppression of the subjects by the *Jaminders*. Hearing the news, Lalon reportedly amassed his companions, encouraged them to arm themselves with sticks, and collectively marched to save Horinath, who was a well-wisher and friend of Lalon (Cakrabarti 2009: 880-881).

The oppressive rule of the local *Jamindars* continued even after the death of Fakir Lalon. On 11th December 1945, Lalon's *akhra* was up for auction as the followers failed to pay the taxes to the *Jamindars*. The family of the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore was the *Jamindar*. The Fakirs at that time worked very hard to collect money from the people around them and finally were able to buy back their most important site of spiritual practices (Jha 1995b: 175).

In a nutshell, Lalon was a legend of the times of turbulence, especially of poor people's uprisings against elites, *jaminders* (landlords), and the colonial rulers. Lalon had about ten thousand followers (Jha 1995:203), although the number might be exaggerated. His followers were apparently more numerous than the members of the then-famous Hindu reformist organization, *Brahmma Samaj* or Indian Association (Jha 1995:177). Despite having many followers, Lalon did not participate in traditional political activism. However, the importance of Lalon lies in the significance of apparently isolated practices of the initiates in both reflecting on

the limitations of dominant life-practices and in examining alternative modes of living and socializing.

Before concluding this chapter, I focus on one of the less studied aspects of Fakir Lalon. That is the influence of Sufism on Lalon. Despite some important works on the influence of Sufism in Bengal, specially Haq (1975), there has not been sufficient research on the influence of Sufism or mysticism on Lalon. In the following section I focus on the striking thematic similarities between Lalon and the Andalusian Sufi, Ibn Arabi.

2.4 STRIKING THEMATIC SIMILARITY BETWEEN LALON AND IBN ARABI

Lalon and his followers' spiritual praxis differs significantly from other sister traditions in greater Bengal mainly because of Lalon's extensive engagement with Islamic discourses. More specifically, Lalon in his songs mentioned verses from the Quran in articulating his arguments to defend the Fakirs' spiritual practices, specifically his position on the body and training the body to cultivate their spirituality. Lalon and his followers invoked eminent Islamic spiritual leaders such as Mansur al-Hallaj. In researching the influence of Sufism on Lalon, I revealed the intriguing similarities between one of the most famous Sufi, Ibn Arabi and Lalon. As of my current knowledge, no other research on Lalon has focused on the intriguing thematic proximity between these two figures.

I find striking thematic similarities between Fakir Lalon and one of the most prominent Islamic scholars, Ibn Arabi (1165-1245). Ibn Arabi's two main books that have been translated into English are *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Openings/Revelations)* and *Fusûs al-*

hikam (*The Ringstones/Bezels of Wisdom*). In addition to these two translations of primary source material, I rely on scholars of Ibn Arabi, specifically William Chittick (1994, 2013), Sachiko Murata (1992), and Sadiyya Shaikh (2012).

Ibn Arabi was a Persian scholar. The influence of Ibn Arabi and Sufism in general on the spiritual traditions in Bengal was prominent. The intermingling of Sufism and Yoga has been studied, specifically Islamization of Yoga in Bengal (Ernst 2005; Hatley 2007). Here I want to only identify some broad thematic similarities between Lalon and Ibn Arabi. Both of them emphasized on some key concepts: *Barzakh*, *Fana*, ego, vices, embodied experience, secrecy, theophany, silence, perfect human/body, humans as slaves of God, and ecstasy (*Iltidhadh wasla*). And they also used some common images, such as sight not eye, hearing not ear, light/rays, hidden electricity in the cloud, mirror; house of mirror; *Qalb*/heart as *Quaba*; *moqam*, *nur*, and *Nur-e-Tajella* (*tajalli* or self-disclosure of God).

As it is very difficult to have a detailed understanding of the ideas of Lalon from his lyrics, I find Ibn Arabi to be one rare source whose detailed and comprehensive explanation of the spiritual practices could be key in gaining a better understanding of the Fakirs' discourse. Ibn Arabi's writings are the only source that I have so far encountered that analyzes many of Lalon's key concepts in a comprehensive manner. Yet I am careful not to readily accept Ibn Arabi's views as the same as Lalon's. I simply take Ibn Arabi's elaborations as a potential source that seems to have important clues in gaining a clearer and more articulate explanations of Lalon's key concepts and metaphors. As the Fakirs do not have written texts that explain their thoughts in a holistic manner, Ibn Arabi's comprehensive writings turn out to be very helpful in understanding the Fakirs' important ideas and practices. In the following pages, I briefly identify six major areas of the apparent thematic similarities between Lalon and Ibn Arabi. At the end, I

also mention significant areas of differences between them. Although the major themes of both Lalon and Ibn Arabi seem to have considerable similarities with many other spiritual traditions such as Taoism, Buddhist and Christian Monasticism, and Yogism, I confine the discussions only to Lalon and al Arabi to avoid long digressions.

One thematic similarity between Lalon and Ibn Arabi is regarding the relation between the Creator and created beings. Two important concepts are common in the two thinkers: the omnipresence of the Creator among the creations, and the relationship of love among them. Lalon sang, “স্বয়ংরূপ দর্পনে নেহার, মানব রূপ সৃষ্টি করে”(Rafiuddin 2009: 98, song#314), meaning God created human beings to see the Self in a mirror. This is also an important theme in Ibn Arabi: God created human beings in God’s own image. Lalon also sang, “পুরুষ পরওয়ারদেগার, অঙ্গে ছিল প্রকৃতি তাহার, প্রকৃতি প্রকৃত সংসার সৃষ্টি সব জনা।” (Rafiuddin 2009: 86; song # 242). Lalon here mentioned two important concepts: *Purush* and *Prakrity* as two inevitable components of a singular entity from which all creations originate. Lalon also sang, “গগনের চাঁদ গগনে রয়। ঘটে পটে হয় জোতির্ময়, তেমনি খোদা খোদ রূপে রয়, অনন্তরূপ আকৃতি।” (Rafiuddin 2009: 65; song# 124). Lalon here described the relationship between the Creator and created beings as the process in which the moon lights the world without leaving its place in the sky. Similarly, Lalon said, God manifests the self in numerous embodied forms, without compromising God’s pure essence.

Ibn Arabi on the other hand emphasized two important things in the process of creation: Gods’ desire to know and God’s love for the created beings. Ibn Arabi used a verse from *hadith qudsi* to make his point: “I was a Hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world in order that I might be known” (Shaikh 2012: 69). The relationship between God and the creations was described by an important concept “*Wahdat al-wujud*” (Oneness of Being/ Unity

of Existence). Although Ibn Arabi did not use the exact same term, his ideas are well-represented by this term (Chittick 1994: 15). Just like Lalon, Ibn Arabi explained the relationship between the Creator and created beings by likening God as light and all creations as rays emanating from that light. Like Lalon's *Purush* and *Prakrity*, Ibn Arabi explained the relationship between humans and cosmos as inevitably interdependent where "the cosmos is unconscious and passive and gains spirit only when the human being, who is conscious and active, enters into it" (Shaikh 2012: 72).

A second significant thematic similarity between Lalon and Ibn Arabi is the idea that one can know God by knowing one's own self. Lalon sang, knowing the universal Self or God in the form of self is the real worship, "স্বরূপ রূপে রূপকে জানা, সেইতো বটে উপাসনা" (Rafiuddin 2009)(R#322). He also sang, "যারে আকাশ পাতালে খুঁজি, এই দেহে সে রয়। [---] লামে আলেফ লুকাই যমন, মানুষে সাঁই আছে তমন [---] আহাদে আহম্মদ হল, আদমে সে জন্ম নিল" (Rafiuddin 2009: 106, song#358). These lines mean that the One we look for in the sky or beneath the earth actually lives in the human body; the way the Arabic letter "ا" *Alif* hides in "ل" *Lum*, the same way God lies in human beings. Lalon continued that the way *Ahammad* emerged from *Ahad*, it is in the same way *Ahad* got embodied in Adam. Lalon also sang, "এই মানুষে মানুষ রতন, মানুষের হলনা যতন, লালন বলে পেয়ে ধন, পারলাম না চিনিতে।" (Rafiuddin 2009: 92, song#277). Literally this means that the "jewel Human" (God) lives within human beings, but Lalon decried that he could not take proper care of that. He also decried that despite having the jewel within himself, Lalon failed to recognize.

Ibn Arabi espoused similar views about the relationship between the creator God and all creations. "Whoso knows himself, knows his Lord," is a *hadith* quoted by Ibn Arabi (1980: 272). Ibn Arabi had a similar opinion that by knowing one's self one can know God. Moreover, Ibn

Arabi explained that humans are created in all forms of divine names, and the perfect human being embodies the unity of all divine names and qualities. Moreover, Ibn Arabi explained human beings as the mirror images of God.

Third, both Lalon and Ibn Arabi maintained that human body is the microcosm of the universe (macrocosm). Among the followers of Fakir Lalon, it is a common belief that the human body is the microcosm of the universe. They also believe that everything that exists in the world can be found in the body in a miniature form. Moreover, for them God is embodied in every human being. In Ibn Arabi, the terms are *Al-Insan Al-Kabir* (the Big Human as macrocosm), *Al-Insan Al-Saghir* (microcosm). Ibn Arabi referred to the macrocosmic universe as *Al-Insan Al-Kabir* where the divine attributes remain diffused and opaque. On the other hand, *Al-Insan Al-Saghir* is where those attributes remain compact, in miniature forms. “The microcosm is the human being, created in the form of every divine name and containing within himself the realities that bring the cosmos into existence. The macrocosm is the whole cosmos, so long as perfect human beings exist within it, since without them it is incomplete, a body without a spirit” (Chittick 1994: 35).

Another thematic similarity between the two is about the supremacy of humans among all creations. Lalon and his followers believe that humans are the best creations of God. Lalon sang, “অনন্তরূপ সৃষ্টি করলেন সাঁই, মানবের তুলনা নাই; দেব দেবতাগন করে আরাধন, জন্ম নিতে এই মানবে” (Rafiuddin 2009: 70; song # 152), meaning God created numerous forms of beings but humans have no parallel. Moreover, he continued, even deities pray to be born as humans. Lalon also sang, “আপন ছুরাতে আদম গঠলেন দয়াময়। নাইলে কি আর ফেরেশ্তারে সেজদা দিতে কয়” (Rafiuddin 2009: 70, song#152), meaning God created Adam in the image of the Self; otherwise God would not command angels to bow before Adam. Ibn Arabi also had fairly similar

viewpoints. He explained that only human beings have the potential to embody, reflect all divine attributes comprehensively (*al-Kamil*) or become the perfect Human Being (Shaikh 2012: 72). That is one of the reasons why humans are considered the supreme being. Ibn Arabi considered humans as the soul, consciousness of the universe. Ibn Arabi also used the famous hadith that “God created humans in “His” own image.”

Both Lalon and Ibn Arabi had described the inseparable relationship between God and the Prophet. Lalon sang:

“আহাদে আহম্মদ নাম হয় জগতে
আহাদ নামেতে খোদায় মিম হরফটি নফি দেখায়,
মিম উঠায়ে দেখনা সবায়,
কি হয় তা-তে। আকারে হল জুদা। খোদা যে বলছে খোদা,
দিব্যজ্ঞানী না’লে কি তা পারে জানিতে।” (Rafiuddin 2009: 134, song#515)

In this song, Lalon identified the inseparable relationship between *Ahad* (God) and *Ahammad* (the Prophet), where the only difference is the absence of “mim” in *Ahammad*. Lalon said one would notice what happens if we take out “mim” from *Ahammad*. Lalon continued to say that *Ahad* and *Ahammad* may be different in forms, but people with special knowledge know that *Allah* takes the form of *Ahammad* to invoke the Self as Allah. In another song, Lalon stated,

“আপনি খোদা আপনি নবী,
আপনি হও আদম ছফি,
অনন্তরূপ করে ধারণ,
কে বুঝে সাঁই লীলার কারণ,
নিরাকারে সাঁই নিরঞ্জন,
মুরশিদ রূপ হয় ভজন পথে।” (Rafiuddin 2009: 45; song# 16)

Lalon said that God and the Prophet are the manifestations of the same Self; as is Adam. The same Self takes numerous forms. The same formless God also appears as *Murshid* during the spiritual praxis. Lalon in these songs maintained that all creations of God, including the Prophet are essentially different manifestations of the same God.

Ibn Arabi and Lalon had similar view on the relationship between God and the Prophet. Ibn Arabi described the relationship by invoking a famous *Hadith*, “*ana Ahmad bi la mim*”³, meaning I am *Ahmad* (the Prophet) without the “mim,” or *Ahad* (God). Interestingly it is the same example Lalon used in his songs. Ibn Arabi considered the Prophet as the perfected man. Lalon also considered the Prophet to have the similar quality.

Another thematic similarity between Lalon and Ibn Arabi concerns gender. Both maintained the idea of fluid gender identity and sometimes an inverse hierarchy. Lalon sang, “পুরুষ নারী ভাব থাকিতে, পারবানা সে সেভাব রাখিতে, আপনার আপনি হয় ভুলিতে, সে জন গৌর রূপ নিহারা” (Rafiuddin 2009: 130, song#492). Lalon clearly stated here that as long as one maintains the typical gendered identity of male or female, it is impossible to embody the desired mood; one needs to forget the self to see the image of God. Lalon also sang, “দ্বীলিঙ্গ, পুংলিঙ্গ, আর নপুংস শাষণ কর, যে লিঙ্গ ব্রহ্মান্ডের পর, তায় প্রকাশি” (Rafiuddin 2009: 103, song# 340). Lalon here specified that one must overcome the typical gendered identity of male, female, or neuter as part of the spiritual training.

Ibn Arabi also expressed similar opinion. He emphasized the verse that “‘Other than the Creator, there is not in this universe a male,’ and those who are generally referred to as males are all ‘really female’ since there is nothing that is not acted on,” as explained in *Al-Futuh al-Makkiyya* (Shaikh 2012: 121). This is somewhat similar to Lalon’s two key concepts, *Purush* and *Prakrity*, where God is considered the only *Purush* and all other creations are *Prakrity* or female. Another interesting similarity concerns the idea that God can be witnessed only in women, which is also a common and significant theme for Lalon and his followers. Ibn Arabi clearly stated,

³ This hadith is quoted in Shaikh (2012:74).

“However, his contemplation of the Reality in woman is the most complete and perfect, because in this way he contemplates the Reality in both active and passive mode, while by contemplating the Reality only in himself, he beholds Him in a passive mode particularly” (al-‘Arabi 1980: 275). Ibn Arabi also said that “[---] the best and most perfect kind of the contemplation of God is in women” (al-‘Arabi 1980: 275).

Despite the thematic similarities, there are some significant differences between Lalon and Ibn Arabi. While Lalon particularly made the training of the body central in his spiritual practices, Ibn Arabi did not seem to do that. Moreover, for Lalon and his followers having a heterosexual partner is mandatory in their spiritual journey. Ibn Arabi did not make being part of heterosexual couple essential in his spiritual practices. Lalon considered bodily fluids, especially ovum and sperm, to be sacred. The bodily praxis of retaining and inverting the flow of the fluids that Lalon and his followers often practice are not known to be found in Ibn Arabi. Another area of difference between them is that in addition to Islam, Lalon also dealt with the beliefs and practices of Hinduism and Buddhism, whereas Ibn Arabi did not do that. Further key areas of difference include the beliefs and practices regarding reproduction. Whereas Lalon and his spiritual praxis prohibited reproduction for the practitioners, Ibn Arabi on the contrary, had three children.

In concluding the discussions on the historical perspectives on the emergence of the heterodox practices of Fakir Lalon, let me emphasize that Fakir Lalon was both a continuation of and disjunction from the traditions of hundreds of years old heterodox praxis mainly of non-elite, rural people in greater Bengal. Besides critically examining the smaller heterodox practices, Lalon attentively analyzed the three most important religious traditions in that area, which are Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. The Fakir tradition in a way is the result of that careful

examination of the existing traditions. Important to note in this context is the fact that like numerous other traditions, Lalon's Fakir tradition was an oral one.

3.0 TRAINING THE EMBODIED SELF: HABITUS

Although Fakir Lalou and his followers have their own ways of training the embodied self, they are far from unique. Various models of training the embodied self have existed for a long time. Some of the ancient traditions are, for example, Yoga and Tantra in India (Alter 2004; Samuel 1989, 2008; Urban 2001b) and D/Taoism in Japan (Alter 2004; Kohn 2000, 2001; Samuel 1989, 2008; Urban 2001b). Moreover, other illuminating examples of the training the self are Pagan technology of the self (Foucault 1988, 2012), mediaeval Christian monasticism (Asad 1993), and the Ramanandi Order in India (van der Veer 1989). Researchers found interactions not only between Indian Yoga and Chinese D/Taoism, but also with Greek traditions as explained by both Plato and Aristotle. The idea of precious semen (as seed) ascending to the brain through the “spinal serpent” is one common theme among Yoga, T/Daosim and those Greek traditions. The diffusion of Yoga from India to China is well known, but the Greek connection is not. McEvilley summarized one possible explanation of the diffusion of the ideas of Yoga and Tantra from India to Greece: “One hypothesis would focus on the diffusion of elements of pre-Socratic lore from India into Greece during the late sixth century b.c. [sic], specifically the period 540-510, when both northwest India and eastern Greece were within the Persian Empire” (1993:70). McEvilley also mentioned one possible mediator: Democedes, assumed to be a contemporary of Pythagoras, exchanged ideas with people coming from various parts of the Persian Empire, and he might have transmitted the Indian Yoga knowledge to Greece. The same author later suggested that the

common knowledge regarding the body found in Yoga and Tantra possibly had preexisted in Mesopotamia. However, what is notable for us is that despite flourishing in distant times and places, these traditions (such as ancient Paganism, mediaeval Monasticism, and Indian Yoga) share some basic ideas. Although the influence of Yoga and Tantra is significant on the bodily practices of the Fakirs, there is no direct historical connections between Aristotelian model of training the self or habitus and Lalou's spiritual praxis. In this section, I only try to find out interesting ways of finding out broad thematic similarities between Lalou and Aristotle's habitus.

Notwithstanding the big differences in terms of time and space, I consider Aristotle's habitus as a model of training the embodied self a sister tradition of the Fakirs' way of training the body. I build on Saba Mahmood's (2005) proposition that Aristotelian habitus is more useful than Bourdieu's in understanding spiritual rituals, for example, of the mosque based activism in Cairo. I compare Aristotle's habitus as a model of praxis with the Fakirs' in gaining the broader theoretical importance of the initiates' heterodox practices. To clarify, invoking Aristotle in discussing the Fakirs does not mean to corroborate the dominance of Western theorists whose theories often are built on Greek thinkers, such as Aristotle. Instead, I underscore that the insights of the Fakirs are neither exclusively Eastern nor Western. I show that, despite the differences, the wisdom of marginalized traditions in the East, specifically South Asia, shares some basic assumptions with those of the West. I see habitus as an effective conceptual tool that bridges diverse traditions on different continents. Moreover, the traditionally marginalized, small heterodox groups, such as the Fakirs, can be potent sources of alternative theoretical insights about the body, subjectivity, and sociality. Habitus as a concept appears to be effective in making theoretical dialogues between the insights of the Fakirs and established scholars of the body, specifically Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, and Michel Foucault.

In this section, I show how Aristotle's habitus was taken up by Bourdieu to conceptualize his theory of the relationship between the body and society. I also show how Bourdieu in his theorization of habitus abandoned a key aspect of Aristotle's conceptualization of habitus, i.e., the power of training the body. By analyzing the Fakirs' model of training of the body, I explain, how they cultivate an alternative subjectivity and sociality.

Reinventing Aristotle's habitus serves two other important purposes. Analyzing a spiritual praxis in South Asia by using the concept, habitus, helps me bring the insights of the marginalized Fakirs into conversation with broader social theories. Habitus becomes a useful tool to avoid marginalizing the wisdom of the initiates and, more importantly, to explore the theoretical significance of their knowledge and rituals in relation to the mainstream literature in social studies. Habitus as a concept also appears to be one important conceptual tool that makes possible bridges between the apparently distinct spiritual traditions in the East and the West.

There has been a disjuncture between Aristotle's model of training the self and later developments in social theories of the body such as embodiment and biopolitics. The abruptness of the disjuncture surfaces in Bourdieu's redefinition of the term "habitus." Bourdieu purged the term "habitus" totally of its classical meaning of "virtuous dispositions." Habitus as virtue was a hallmark of Aristotle's model of training the self. Aristotle's use of the term, habitus, was continued by Roman and Medieval thinkers (Nederman 1989; Sparrow and Hutchinson 2013), including Islamic philosophers (Mahmood 2005: 137). The ripple effect of the disjuncture orchestrated by Bourdieu concerns the role of the self, specifically the body: while Aristotle's model allows the self the power to educate itself to embody an ethical subjectivity or virtuous dispositions, the later literature on embodiment by Marcel Mauss, Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu, and on biopolitics by Michel Foucault, put the body under the strategic command of

power through society, culture, and the state. Aristotle's paradigm of training the self has been marginalized in social theorizations of the body, except in some interesting works by Foucault especially on Pagan technology of the self (1988, 1990a, b, 2012).

The lack of research on the power of educating the body in cultivating a heterodox, ethical subjectivity was evident in the review of overall research works related to the body by the founding editors of the flagship journal *Body and Society* (Featherstone and Turner 1995). The authors identified six major study areas on the body: Symbolic aspects of the body, the body at play in everyday life, gender and sexuality, technoscience and the body, sociology of health and illness, and sociology of sports. Their review exposed the lack of focus on the radical power of the body to cultivate an alternative subjectivity and sociality (not merely to resist, subvert, transgress, or defy dominant systems, on which ample research has been conducted). In 2010, during the re-launching of the same journal, the editors indicated a shift of scholarly attention from "disciplining, normalizing, and regulative techniques (modification)" to "the relational dimensions of corporeality (what bodies can do, for example)" (Blackman and Featherstone 2010: 5). Yet, they stop short of specifying the insufficient attention to the radical power of educating the body in (re)constituting the self, society, or culture.

In the following pages, I first trace the classical Greek and Medieval meanings of habitus to show what Bourdieu's reconceptualization misses. My argument is *not* that Bourdieu's formulation is flawed. Instead I argue that his redefinition of habitus discarded something significant—the power of *radically* transforming the embodied self by deliberately training the embodied self. I then show how the Aristotelian notion of the radical power of training the embodied self has been marginalized in the analyses of the three important social theorists of the body—Bourdieu, Douglas, and Foucault. I argue that they scarcely attended to how the

cultivation of bodily dispositions, sensibilities, and inclinations facilitate alternative subject formations. And finally, I show that reexamining Aristotle's habitus contributes to contemporary social theories of the body in two ways. First, it brings back the long-neglected insight of the radical power of the body in cultivating an alternative subjectivity and sociality. As an example, I show how the Fakirs in current Bangladesh educate their bodies to cultivate a selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality. And, second, it demonstrates a way of undoing the prevalent culture of not only discounting but trivializing the wisdom of marginalized, indigenous traditions, such as the Fakirs in Bengal. This trivializing culture does not, however, exclusively belong in the West. Scholars of the marginal traditions, regardless of their geographical location, often contribute to the trivialization process by confining the discussions to area studies literature.

3.1 HABITUS BEFORE BOURDIEU

Habitus originated from the Greek root word “ἕξις” literally meaning “hexis”—state or condition. Habitus was one of the most important concepts that Romans like Cicero and Medieval thinkers—including figures of 12th and 13th centuries such as Thomas Aquinas, Godfrey of Fontaines, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham—inherited from Aristotle (Nederman 1989: 87; Carlisle 2013).⁴ As Nederman (1989) elaborated, habitus was not a repository of socio-cultural knowledge or wisdom, as in Mauss's conceptualization. For

⁴ Carlisle (2013) traced the genealogy of Greek “hexis” translated by Roman thinkers— from the verb “habere,” “to have.” Later habitus and habit were often used interchangeably. The author also explained the historical debate around habit, grace, and freedom in Christian theology and modern philosophy.

Aristotle, habitus is not something one can have temporarily; it is the quality that one must ingrain deep into one's core self that cannot be altered frequently. It is not simply habit but more like conviction, not merely psychological but almost like an innate psycho-somatic status. Carlisle (2013: 33) explained, quoting Aristotle, "[---] a hexis is constitutive of the person, insofar as it has 'become through length of time part of a man's nature and irremediable or exceedingly hard to change' (Aristotle, 1963: 24/*Categories* 8b26–9)."

However, habitus is not natural or instinctive; nor does habitus require any divine or supernatural blessings. Rather one needs the firm determination and, more importantly, sustained training of the different psycho-somatic faculties of the self. Having good intentions is insufficient in embodying habitus. One must train oneself rigorously for a long time, cultivate ethical and moral dispositions so that by nature one does not fail to act morally, and so that morality and ethics inhere to one's nature, which is cultivated not inherited. Habitus is also different from mere virtuous disposition or inclination; it is the disposition or inclination ingrained that is the precondition of ethical or virtuous dispositions. Virtuousness is an outcome of habitus. So, habitus may be understood as a set of virtues *naturalized* in one's self. Habitus is one's habituated capability of virtuous activity; it is that precious human accomplishment that prevents one from committing immoral acts or makes one almost immune to malicious intents. For a virtuous person, immoral actions must be unintentional. Aristotle's model of training one's self must be a conscious and rigorous attempt to acquire the quality of habitus. However, once the capability is acquired, the execution of that quality becomes routine or instinctive (not inherited, gifted or blessed but cultivated). Habitus is human's "second nature," which is equally difficult to achieve and alter (Nederman 1989: 90-91). And thus, habitus is a powerful quality

that the self attains by strategically overcoming the antagonistic forces, e. g, the hegemonic norms of society, culture, or power.

Aristotle clarified that humans are naturally endowed with the capability to act according to our will, and by exercising that capability we can either be virtuous or immoral. He also concluded that both virtues and vices are voluntary, as we deliberately choose to act in a particular way towards a particular end (Aristotle 1962: 153). “[B]ut virtue, like art, is constantly dealing with what is harder, since the harder the task the better is success” (Aristotle 1962: 83). Cultivating virtuous dispositions are difficult; the process is a lengthy, industrious one. However, *humans can perform that difficult task, if they wish to*. Hence the power of Aristotle’s habitus. Human beings embody the radical power of transforming themselves into ethical subjects, regardless of socio-political and cultural settings. This key power of Aristotle’s habitus, as I show later, has been missing in social theories of the body.

Medieval Christian monastics also used the term “habitus” in the same way. The Stoics considered habitus as “a way of being or acting”; monastics made it synonymous with virtue (Agamben and Kotsko 2013: 13). Constituting the monks’ mind and the body through communal habitation was distinctive of them. And when that constitution of the body and mind is habituated and ingrained, it was called virtue—habitus. Marcel Mauss (1973) revived the concept “habitus” in explaining variations among different communities regarding routine, mundane bodily movements such as walking, swimming, and moving. He made one of the fundamental shifts giving birth to a modern conception of habitus that virtually disconnects it from Aristotle’s model. Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1990: 53,56) revised the concept further with a double move: by adding the socio-cultural and historical component, and purging almost entirely the pedagogy of private training of the self. Not surprisingly, Foucault’s biopolitics has no space

for habitus. In the modern biopolitical regimes, analysts claim, disciplinary mechanisms highlight how power (re)produces certain docile bodies, obedient citizens, productive but manageable subjects. In contrast, Aristotle's model of habitus purports to explain how one can train the self to radically transform oneself to embody a radically different subject. While the modern biopolitical regimes treat the body ultimately as an object of the machinations of power⁵, Aristotle's model allows the self to establish its command over the body and mind. Aristotle's training of the self intends to achieve a private virtue, i.e., "habitus"—ingrained in oneself that a person must attain through desperate, systematic, and prolonged cultivation and education of the bodily dispositions, sensibilities, and inclinations. These conceptual revisions represent a significant change of authority: The dominant segments of a society, culture, the state have gained a sweeping authority on the body; the question of the power of the self to cultivate a radically different subjectivity and sociality has become at least irrelevant and at best utopian. More recent theorists have portrayed more meticulous control over the body.

Refocusing on Aristotelian habitus, my search goes beyond the agency of the body in transgressive, subversive practices such as drag shows (Butler 1990, 2004), carnivalization (Braun and Langman 2012), and body modification (Featherstone 2000; Pitts-Taylor 2003). While "neo-tribals" or "modern primitives" appropriate the age-old rituals of indigenous peoples in Africa or Asia in subverting the dominant systems in Western cosmopolitan cities, I highlight the antinomian traditions in the Global South. I also emphasize that despite the geographical distance and the differences in practices, the spiritual traditions in the East and the West are comparable. Unlike the various practices of subversion and transgression, I underscore how the

⁵ However, the machinations of modern power or biopolitical regimes do not imply an absence of freedom or agency, rather freedom or agency is also a creation of power, not as a one-way process but a circular process where agency and power (re)constitute each other constantly.

initiates of heterodox traditions, for example, the Fakirs in Bengal, invent and cultivate alternative socialities and ethical subjectivities by educating the embodied self.

Bourdieu's "habitus" aimed to recover "an acting agent" both from the structuralist cage and the trap of methodological individualism. In doing so, however, he sidelined the potentiality of the formation of *radically* different subjectivities. Bourdieu used the term to undermine both structuralism and rational choice theories. In other words, he avoided the opposition of structure and agency by transcending the categories. "By taking up the old Aristotelian notion of *hexis*, converted by scholasticism into *habitus*," Bourdieu explained, "I wish to react against structuralism and its odd philosophy of action, [---] with the agent reduced to the role of bearer-*Trager* - of the structure; [---]" (Bourdieu 1985: 13). He also added:

I wish to put forward the <<creative>>, active and inventive capacities of habitus and of agent (which the word usually does not convey) but to do so by recalling that this generative power is not of a universal mind, nature or of human reason [---]. (Bourdieu 1985: 13)

He preferred "habitus" to "habit," which sometimes imprisons an agent into the mechanistic or instinctual impulses; and an agency has barely any control on those impulses.⁶ Bourdieu's habitus endows a subject with pre-reflective and reflexive dispositions. Bourdieu aimed to redeem "an active, creative" subject from the deterministic clutches from structuralism. He allows a subject to be creative within her familiar settings; it frees one to invent ways to adjust with, accommodate, or at best slightly modify her surrounding conditions. But Bourdieu deprived a subject of the radical energy that is needed to defy, reject, and renounce the dominant

⁶ "One of the reasons for the use of the term habitus is the wish to set aside the common conception of habit as a mechanical assembly or preformed programme, as Hegel does when in the *Phenomenology of Mind* he speaks of 'habit as dexterity'" (Bourdieu, 1977: 218). To know more about the difference between "habit" and "habitus" see (Crossley 2013).

socio-cultural settings, and more importantly to cultivate radically different subjectivities and socialities that characterized Aristotle's "habitus."

Although Bourdieu's habitus lacks the power of conscious and deliberate transformation of itself, it does not entirely fail to explain change (Wacquant 2016), as it potentially adjusts, adapts, and changes to varying conditions, on the one hand, and may resist exactly that by reproducing the unchanged reality, on the other (Aarseth, Layton, and Nielsen 2016). Silva (2016b) summarized the debates to demonstrate the potentiality of reading habitus as a non-rigid, dynamic concept, especially by considering Bourdieu's writings over a career during the course which his characterizations of habitus evolved in various directions. Specifically, Bourdieu's concept of *clivé habitus* (Bennett 2007; Friedman 2016) or split habitus is the closest in terms of explaining disjunctures in one's habitus. When objective conditions contradict a person's habitus, one's self becomes split, and Bourdieu called that state of "double consciousness" a "*hysteresis*" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 60). Yet, the possibility of radically changing one's self and subjectivity as a deliberate choice seems to be beyond the scope of Bourdieu's habitus. Recognizing the fact that Bourdieu generally considered radical transformations as exceptions, Crossley (2003) explained why Bourdieu's habitus can still be a useful tool in understanding social movements and their consequent changes. Drawing on social movement research, Crossley argued that activists acquire a "radical habitus," which is to find themselves radically transformed because of their active participation in protest activities. Those who participated in social movement activities, such as demonstrations, tend to develop life-long predispositions to do so, often at the cost of their personal interests. For radical transformations to take place, Crossley argued, pre-conscious habitus must not be unlearned entirely. Instead, in times of crises, some of the unconscious elements of habitus come under conscious examination and

consequently new dispositions emerge. However, these new dispositions slowly and steadily turn into durable dispositions of unconscious habitus.

While Crossley stretched Bourdieu's formulations of habitus to explain the "radical habitus" of activists, he did not invoke Aristotle's habitus, which I argue is readily useful in explaining much more radical and fully conscious attempts to change the self. I show that habitus in Bourdieu's formulations is less suitable than Aristotle's conceptualizations of habitus in explaining radical transformations in one's dispositions, sensibilities, and propensities. I show later in this chapter by analyzing the praxis of the initiates that the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah in contemporary Bangladesh, who *deliberately* and *radically* transform their notions of the body, self, subjectivity, and sociality.

Habitus as a concept seems to have infinite potential. Scholars have proposed to enrich Bourdieu's habitus by connecting it to psychoanalysis (Darmon 2016; Silva 2016a), to (new)biology (Warin et al. 2015). While these recent developments are promising, I wonder whether capitalizing on the prospects of the present or future must come at the cost of the past. I ask, do we have to be historically amnesiac in revamping an important sociological concept, habitus? I argue that by reexamining classical Aristotelian conceptualizations, habitus can be reinvented to explain the power of radically reconstituting the self, subjectivity, and sociality. Reexamining Aristotle's habitus not only strengthens habitus as a conceptual apparatus. It also enriches social theories of the body by incorporating interesting insights into the radical power of the embodied self not merely to defy, resist, or delegitimize dominant power but also to cultivate alternative subjectivities and socialities. To illustrate this point, I examine the three dominant social theorists of the body, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Douglas.

3.2 BODIES UNDER FIRE: BOURDIEU, DOUGLAS, AND FOUCAULT

Bourdieu, Douglas, and Foucault share a common feature: studying the processes of putting the body under strategic control and close monitoring of power, mainly society, culture, and the state. While Bourdieu and Douglas explained how the body is shaped, conducted, or controlled by dominant socio-cultural injunctions, Foucault noted the role of the state and non-state agencies in investing the body to ensure the circulation of productive but manageable subjects. The radical power of Aristotle's "habitus" or that of training the body practiced in other sister traditions has not been highlighted.

Bourdieu's definition of habitus recognized the unconscious use of habitus but denied the necessity of deliberate, long-term efforts to be in that state (1990: 53). Habitus for him is not only temporal but also historical; history actualized in the present. "The *habitus* – embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" Bourdieu (1990: 56). He recognized the ingrained nature of habitus but negated that it is an outcome of a deliberate and "pedagogical process" (Mahmood 2005: 138-139).

Bourdieu highlights the socio-cultural, historical repository of embodied dispositions, whereas Aristotle's habitus was personal cultivation of the self. For Bourdieu, habitus works below the level of consciousness, which is not exactly unconscious but conscious unconscious that the human beings embody through socialization. On the contrary Aristotle's habitus is fully conscious, deliberate training of internalizing certain qualities of the self. What is more interesting is that Bourdieu's (embodied, historical) habitus fails to grasp the importance of the power of the self that is highly regarded and sought after by Aristotle's model. In Bourdieu's

model, dominant forces of society or collective forces take over the self that allow little or no scope to an individual subject to (re)define its capability and destiny. In Mauss and Bourdieu, the body can only mimic, imitate, attend to, comply with, respond, react, adapt, absorb, and so on. In Aristotle, the body has the power to define, act, preempt, protect, prevent, shape, dictate, and control. The latter accords the body a radical power whereas the former takes it away strategically—not always forcefully.

Aristotle's habitus of the powerful body lost its power and came under stronger administration of dominant social and cultural codes in Mary Douglas. Her famous conceptions of "two bodies," i.e., the self and society (Douglas 1996: 85), demonstrate how the body of the self and social body act in accordance, where the latter primarily dictates and the former complies. The relationship between the self and society is not mechanical but strategic. Self and society negotiate, co-opt, strike balance, and so on without relinquishing the ultimate control of society over the body. Society often utilizes the images of the body to devise cultural codes. Douglas noted, following Mauss: "the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension" (Douglas 1996: 78). Douglas had two significant observations: 1) instead of treating society as the image of the body, it's the opposite and 2) there is no natural, i.e., pre-social, treatment of the body; it is always-already social.

Regulations and moderation of bodily behaviors, she added, also reflect general social norms, customs, control, and their ilk.

Bodily control is an expression of social control – abandonment of bodily control in ritual responds to the requirements of a social experience which is being expressed. Furthermore, there is little prospect of successfully imposing bodily control without the corresponding social forms. (Douglas 1996:78)

For example, intimate relationship approves narrowing the space between bodies, whereas formal relationship requires sufficient space between them. Strong social and cultural regulations, particularly formal occasions and public places, require calculated movement; well-decorated body; moderated and decorous expressions; the least exposure of the bare body, and so on. On the contrary, settings with less regulation, informal gatherings, or private, intimate space allow casual dress; relaxed movement; undecorated or least decorated body; uncontrolled expressions, and revealing the body. Furthermore, the notions of cleanliness and filthiness are directly linked to social order. “Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (Douglas 1984: 2). So, dirt and purity represent a relationship that generates social order by creating hierarchy, authority, norms, and so on. Societies with strict codes of purification and dirt tend to allow the body less freedom to be disorderly, i.e., not-purified, and inflict harsher punishments for noncompliance with those ritual codes. In other words, the body internalizes societal expectations, concerns, vulnerabilities, and prospects so that it can serve itself in accordance with the expected appearance, role, and mode. Thus, we see in Douglas's analyses how the physical body becomes a mirror image of prevailing social or cultural order in which the latter directs whereas the former merely complies with.

In Foucauldian analyses, power has “an immediate hold” over the body, which is invested to make it productive. In his much discussed analysis of disciplinary power that does not repress but produces the body, to be specific docile body and corresponding subjectivities, Foucault stated, “But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an *immediate hold* upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 1977: 25, emphasize mine). For Foucault, power

codes are inscribed on the body to make it manageable, accountable, measurable, and of course investable with scientifically predictable productivity. By administering the body, power also “intensifies individual's desire, for, in and over his body,” which at times engenders the revolt of the body. For example, in response to the 18th century prohibitions on children's masturbation, the body revolted by its manifold eroticization. And in response, he continued, power introduces “a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of *control* by repression but that of *control* by stimulation. 'Get undressed- but be slim, good-looking, tanned!'" (Foucault 1980b: 57, emphasis added). Interestingly, both forms of investments have the same objective: to exert control over the body by power. The body in Foucault's analyses becomes a site of power-play; the body is an instrument of investment. The heroism, efficacy of the discipline, productivity are incentives for a docile body. It is all about how dominant power use, utilize, manage the body at its convenience.

Foucault considered the body “essentially as an object” of power, and power exerts control on the “passive physical body” (Turner 1994: 36). Turner added that “Foucault's body has no flesh; it is begotten out of discourse by power.” He thus labeled the body in Foucauldian discourse as “theoretical body.” Turner (1994:38) also recognized Foucault's occasional depiction of the body as resisting power, but that resistance is not collective, not in alliance with others but individual, specifically “through private acts of ‘deviance’ or ‘perversion.’” Foucault mentioned another form of bodily resistance.

Once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency. Suddenly what had made power strong becomes used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to counter-attack in the same body. (Foucault 1980b: 56)

But this “counter-attack” is rather like an auto-immune response that has to happen as a universal rule. Unlike Aristotle’s habitus, that counter-attack is expected, spontaneous, and mechanical. Carefully planned, adventurous, and radical challenges seem to be less probable or not taken into consideration at all in this case by Foucault. This type of resistance is neither deliberate nor organized. The power of Aristotle’s habitus is again not emphasized.

Turner’s appraisal of Foucault is summarized superbly by Csordas: “The absence of agency and the possibility for critique in the key concepts of power, discourse, and body leads Turner to define Foucault and his followers not as theorists of the body, but as ‘anti-bodies’” (Csordas 1994: 14). The theorizations of “the body as an *outcome* of social processes” by Foucault and Norbert Elias were criticized for ignoring the other perspective of “the body as social agent” (Lyon and Barbalet 1994). “The bodies they deal with are the bodies of individuals subjected to forces over which they have no control” (Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 49).

The active-passive dichotomy regarding the role of the body is not fully convincing. In Foucault, the difference between freedom and subjugation is mostly blurred. Following Mauss’s proposition that there can be no natural body or behavior which is not at the same time social or cultural, Douglas claimed natural is necessarily cultural. And the success, strength, legitimacy of a culture or society depends on the extent which it effaces the distinction between social/cultural and natural. Foucault also echoed her by saying that power operates through an art of disguising—the more one hides the more successful s/he is regarding domination, control, or instituting hegemony or being recognized as legitimate authority. The same applies for the dominated subjects—the freer they seem to be the more they are subjected to power. Careful readers might take issue with my undermining the much-discussed freedom/agency of an individual in Foucault’s analyses of the body. I respond by quoting Foucault himself:

“Power is tolerable only on the condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is *proportional* to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault 1990a: 86; emphasis mine).

“Even though you don't exercise power, you can still be a ruler. Better yet the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty” (Foucault 1980a: 221).

In Foucauldian analyses, where people—the objects of power—act in the falsely perceived realm of freedom, that freedom is a veiled arena set by power. In other words, Foucault's freedom of the subjects is like the Christian Providential dictum: You are free to choose God but never free to not choose. In Foucault's analyses, the autonomy of subjects is in fact an “auto-immune autonomy,” an autonomy that undercuts the basis of its very existence and effectiveness.

My critique of Foucault does not point to the lack of agency of the body or an embodied subject. Instead, I underscore the absence of the radical power of educating the body in cultivating defiant subjectivities and alternative socialities. In Foucault's formulation, to be able to work, power needs to make sure the actors play by the preset rules of the game. My argument is precisely this: Is it possible that the body/embodied subject not only plays by the existing rules, or at times conducts routine and expected deviation of the rules, but also performs well-planned, systematical actions to constitute radical changes? Like Aristotle's *habitus*, why cannot the body be educated in a certain way so that it refuses to play by the set rules, and instead introduces new sets of rules?

In the above discussions, I show how Mauss, Douglas, Bourdieu, and Foucault in their analyses shifted the focus from the radical power of the body in cultivating a radically different subjectivity and sociality. Bourdieu in redefining “*habitus*” trimmed the power of the Greek technology of the self. Many of the later social theorists of the body followed Bourdieu's lead.

By reexamining Aristotle's "habitus," I do not intend to merely look for Bourdieu's "active agent." Instead I underscore a possibility of the emergence of a radically different subjectivity, such as selfless subjectivity of the Fakirs. Furthermore, the model of training the self does not reestablish the structure-agency, nature-culture, biological-cultural dichotomies. Instead, I argue that by training the body, one can transform simultaneously the self, society, community, and culture.

3.3 POWER OF EDUCATING THE BODY IN OUR TIMES

Like Bourdieu, instead of doing "theoretical theory," I find in Aristotle's habitus—the power of training the embodied self—a *modus operandi* for explaining the bodily practices of the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890) in contemporary Bangladesh. Explaining the Fakirs' praxis with Aristotle's habitus, I attempt to extend the discussion on the Fakirs from area studies literature to broader social theorizations of the body, subjectivity, and sociality.

Saba Mahmood (2005) also found Aristotle's habitus more useful than Bourdieu's in explaining the mosque based ethical-spiritual activism of Muslim women in Egypt. In explaining the practices of piety, Mahmood particularly emphasized an interesting point of Aristotle's habitus. Ethical state of mind does *not* precede ethical behavior of the body; instead, ethical dispositions are the result of performing ethical acts. Following Aristotle, she claimed to invert "the usual [Anthropological] routing from interiority to exteriority" (Mahmood 2005: 121), the traditional route being explaining behaviors and actions as emanations of (un)conscious thoughts and convictions of a person. While Mahmood's emphasis on the importance of actual bodily practices and actions in constructing dispositions and inclinations is important, Mahmood's

emphasis on going from exteriority to interiority seems to presuppose a distinction between interior self/mind and exterior body. My point is that it is not a question of interiority or exteriority, but inseparability. Similarly, it is not a question of precedence or posteriority, but simultaneity. Bodily practices of the self *neither* precede *nor* follow relevant thoughts or sensibilities; they are coterminous. The mutual influence of bodily actions and the state of mind is instantaneous. In the Fakirs' praxis, interestingly, cultivation of selfless love and devotion and education of the vices of the body is always simultaneous, and they are inseparable from one another.

As in Aristotle's habitus, the Fakirs' systematic, long-term praxis enables them to exercise the radical agency of human beings. The Fakirs, like Aristotle, identify virtues and vices to be embodied and combated, respectively. Another striking similarity is the firm belief in the radical power of the self in educating the body and the soul to cultivate ethical dispositions and alternative socialities. However, there are significant differences as well. Spiritual masters, i.e., Gurus are vital among the Fakirs, whereas in Aristotle's habitus Gurus are not essential. While Aristotle emphasized more on disembodied soul, the Fakirs in contrast focus heavily on the body itself. Fakirs strikingly differ from Aristotle as the initiates intend to unlearn the dispositions of the self and instead wish to dissolve an individuated self into the universal "Self." While Aristotle's habitus does not constitute a spiritual worldview, Fakirs are mainly spiritual, yet not otherworldly. Fakirs claim to accomplish the spiritual goals only in this life and only by properly educating the human body. Although Aristotle's habitus potentially promotes counter-hegemonic life-practices, Fakirs' praxis include radically different, heterodox conceptions of the body, life, and sociality. Fakirs' praxis is intriguing not only because it is radically different from majority

traditions, but also because it addresses dominant social ills, such as religious intolerance, caste prejudice, and misogyny.

Two important aspects of the Fakirs' praxis are: 1) combating what they call the six vices of the body, and 2) cultivating selfless love and devotion towards all human beings regardless of their identity. Under the mentorship of a Guru, initiates learn the art of managing the vices and cultivating selfless love and devotion. An initiate must acquire a heterosexual partner and practice as a couple. They perform non-procreative sexual rituals and men practice retention of semen. Fakirs' eat vegetables and avoid meat, fish, and egg. However, some other followers of Lalou eat fish. Gurus wear only white dresses. They renounce their family, private property, and kinship relationships to live in relatively remote places to form a distinct community of the Fakirs.

Like Aristotle's *habitus*, Fakirs embark on a strictly ritualized, carefully crafted, and a lengthy training of the embodied self. A beginner must be initiated by a Guru to begin the life-long journey of a Fakir. Guru plays a central role by teaching, guiding, and supervising the activities of a disciple. Guru teaches disciples about the senses, vices, dietary restrictions, sacred secretions of the body such as ovum and sperm, embodied divinity, and preparing the body to materialize the indivisibility of the body and all other beings (Jha 2010; Knight 2011; Openshaw 2002). Disciples are expected to follow Guru's instructions and teaching strictly. A devotee ritually bows before the Guru, touches his/her forehead to Guru's legs, and kisses the feet to express sincere devotion and selfless love. I observed, in the remote villages of Kustia district in Bangladesh, the devotees of Nohir Fakir, Rowshan Fakir, Shamsul Fakir ritually kiss the feet of their Gurus with utmost sincerity. Their devotees usually visit their Gurus frequently and especially on Friday nights. They sit around facing their Gurus, listen carefully to the Guru, sing

songs of Lalon, play instruments, dine together, and perform rituals such as eating a few grains of rice with water in the evening. Gurus often examine the disciples' sincerity in performing their spiritual activities. A devotee is ritually offered *khilafat* (ritual ascension to and recognition as a Guru) if that initiate's performance has been satisfactory at least for 12 years, according to Rowshan Fakir.

As in Aristotle's habitus, one of the preliminary lessons the beginner Fakirs learn is about the vices and virtues regarding the body. For Aristotle, virtue is the mean of two vices—excess and deficiency (Aristotle 1962: 97). For example, the mean of confidence and cowardice is courage, which is a virtue. Fakirs' six vices are lust, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and envy. And two important virtues are selfless love and devotion to all beings, especially to Guru. Fakirs do not eat meat to combat lust, to avoid the "hot energy," and maintain "calmness," as Nohir Fakir explained. They avoid meat also to prevent the supposed transmission of animal aggression and shamelessness. As did Nohir Fakir, Rowshan Fakir, and Shamsul Fakir, Gurus transfer the ownership their inherited private property to the organization of the Fakirs as a way of combating the egoism and greed. They often live on begging as a way of unlearning the inclinations of pride. The practitioners also practice humility by ritually singing devotional songs of Lalon especially in early morning and evening. The songs remind them of the difficult task of nurturing the mood of selfless love and devotion (*bhakti*) in this life.

Both in Aristotle and the Fakirs' praxis, humans can consciously choose to embody vices or virtues. "[A] man is the origin of his actions" (Aristotle 1962: 139). Humans certainly have full control over the means, not the ends. Virtue is an outcome of training the self accordingly; as is vice. Both the Fakirs and Aristotle agree that humans are born with the power and potentials to act towards constructing themselves as they want, be it virtuous or vicious. It's their choice of

actions that is key. Lalou sang, the self can enact its agency by learning to perform the spiritual training effectively.⁷ Important to note that in Lalou's praxis, an individuated self is an embodied expression of the universal "Self," and by training the embodied self an initiate can realize the dormant power of the "Self" within the human body. Not only do the Fakirs believe that humans inherently possess agency to train and transform themselves radically, they also can potentially harness the divine power of the universal "Self" or God. Thus Lalou sang, even deities desire to be born as humans (Rafiuddin 2009: 70). Humans are endowed with more power than deities, according to the Fakirs. And they have the unique capability of harnessing that divine power.⁸ To clarify, this divine power is so much different than the notion of agency. While "agency" allows a subject to act at will, divine power supposedly enables a person to cease the separation between the Creator and created. To that end, initiates continue to perform the rituals with the instructions of Gurus for their entire life, despite knowing that the expected result is uncertain. Neither the blessings of a Guru nor the possibility of realizing the divine power is definite. The incessant yet sincere performance of rituals throughout the life conditions the radically different subjectivity and sociality of the Fakirs.

As a model of training the self, Aristotle's habitus aims at constituting virtuous subjects or an ethical subjectivity. Those subjects are likely to be counter-hegemonic and unorthodox, as Foucault explained that the modern world favors not ethics but expertise, not an ethical subjectivity but juridical one (1997: 279, 294). Fakirs' education of the embodied self produces strikingly different meaning of life and sociality. In the next chapter, I show three distinct features of the Fakirs' praxis: somatic divinity, counter-egoistic subjectivity, and ethical

⁷ "আত্মরূপে কর্তা হবি, সাধন করতে পারলে" (Rafiuddin 2009: 54)

⁸ "অনন্ত রূপ সৃষ্টি করলেন সাঁই, মানবের তুলনা কিছু নাই, দেব দেবতাগন করে আরাধন, জনম নিতে মানবো" (Rafiuddin 2009: 70)

sociality. Although the Fakirs' spiritual accomplishment is often unintelligible in non-initiate eyes, the socio-cultural significance of the praxis is not. I specify three important ways the Fakirs' address social ills: 1) scathing criticism of Hindu Brahmins' caste prejudice and Muslim Mullahs' claim of authentic interpretations of Islam, and articulation of an inclusive spirituality and somatic interpretation of divinity; 2) denunciation of the practices of indulging egoistic desires (for example, of sensual gratification, private ownership of property, and reproductive practices of the family) and cultivation of a counter-egoistic subjectivity and selfless love and devotion to all beings, especially humans; and 3) delegitimization of the biopolitical apparatus of generating "productive but manageable citizens" (by denouncing modern education, conventional sociality, and socio-economic mobility) and cultivation of an ethical sociality.

While the soul is central in Aristotle, the body is central to the Fakirs' spiritual practices. "But human goodness means in our view excellence of soul, not excellence of body" (Aristotle 1962: 61). Educating the body is the precondition of being able to discover God within the self, which is one of their supreme goals. Whereas Aristotle's *habitus* celebrates the notion of self, the initiates in Bangladesh desire to annihilate the egoistic self or to dissolve the individuated self into the universal Self, which is their God.⁹ As the body hosts the divine power that animates the body, Fakirs insist that any spirituality or religion must treat all human beings as equally divine. Fakirs thus vehemently oppose any discrimination based on ethnicity, belief, gender, caste, or class. The only criterion of an acceptable hierarchy is spiritual accomplishments. Thus, the hierarchy among Gurus and disciples are strict, yet they claim to practice selfless love primarily among themselves. Their conceptions of somatic divinity also insist that only by searching for

⁹ Lalon sang, "আপনায় আপনি ফানা হলে, দেখা দেবে সাঁই রাবানা, [---] "স্বরূপে রূপ দেখ সংক্ষেপে" (Choudhury 2009: 113). God ceases to be invisible if one dissolves the self into the "Self," and sees the "Form" of the "Self" miniaturized in the form of you, the individual self.

embodied divinity and taking proper care of the living human beings can one know and serve God. They are famous for practicing religious harmony, as the followers of Lalon come from both of the dominant religions in greater Bengal—Muslims and Hindus (Dube 2008; Jha 2008). Not surprisingly the Fakirs are also famous for their merciless criticism of religious intolerance, caste prejudice, and misogyny.

In the history of religions, it is rare to find a tradition in which women are ritual equals, in which nonprocreative sexual activity is more valuable than the reproductive variety, in which menstruation is both positive and spiritual, and in which the woman's body is sacred and the dwelling place of a deity which is neither male nor female, but includes aspects of both. The Baul [Fakir] religion of Bengal, in India, is one such tradition. (McDaniel 1992:27)

However, patriarchy does exist among the Fakirs. I met no prominent female Gurus. I observed all the female partners of the Gurus that I met usually cook and take care of the household. On the other hand, male Gurus *mostly* perform the intellectual tasks of explaining the songs of Lalon, debating multiple interpretations of the verses, and leading the ritual gatherings. Moreover, the bodily practices are often androcentric. For example, they talk a lot about retention of semen of the male practitioners but do not much to say about what female initiates are supposed to do other than cooperating with their male partners.

Cultivating a heterodox subjectivity by educating the body is not unique to the Fakirs in Bangladesh. There are many antinomian traditions in Bangladesh, India, China, and elsewhere. Broadly speaking, the heterodox practices of many Yogis (Alter 2011; Samuel 2008; White 2011), Tantrics (Samuel 1989; White 2001, 2012), T/Daoists (Blofeld 1981; Kohn 2000, 2001; Oldstone-Moore 2003), Christian monastics (Asad 1987; Wiesner-Hanks 2014), among many others are not entirely distinct from those of the Fakirs. Their commonality amidst differences make them sister traditions of Aristotle's paradigm of training the self—*habitus*. While those

heterodox practices all around the world vary significantly, one common feature is the cultivation of counter-hegemonic, ethical subjectivities, and alternative socialities.

In relating Aristotle's habitus with the living heterodox traditions in Indian sub-continent, I do not claim that Aristotle's habitus is more ancient than ancient Indian psycho-somatic training models such as Yoga and Tantra, or vice versa. Historical evidence show there were interactions between Greeks and Indians during the late sixth century BC (McEvelley 1993). Rather, invoking Aristotle's habitus, I initiate a theoretical dialogue between the wisdom of the marginalized traditions and broader social theories of the body. Aristotle's habitus is instrumental in revisiting the long neglected radical power of the body. Reconnecting the discussions with Aristotelian habitus requires an appreciation of the theoretical significance of the wisdom of those traditions, e.g., Fakirs, D/Taoists, Yogis, and Tantrics in the Global South. The insights of those practitioners have often been underappreciated, marginalized, even sometimes discounted as "mystical," "otherworldly," or "superstitious" not only in the Western world but also in the Global South.

Reconsidering pre-Bourdieuian habitus does not merely highlight the changes of meaning and practices regarding habitus; it also underscores one crucial limitation of the dominant social theories of the body. Social theories of the body have been phenomenal in explaining how the dominant socio-cultural and political apparatus control, invest, manipulate the body. Some studies also show the body transgresses, resists, and deviates from the norms of the dominant systems. But what gets less attention of the dominant social theorists is the potential radical power of the body in (re)constructing and cultivating alternative models such as selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality. That's exactly why recognizing the limitations of Bourdieu's redefinition of habitus is revealing. Recalling the signature characteristics of

Aristotle's *habitus*—the power of educating the self, the body—warrants careful analyses and thorough reexamination of the apparently marginalized bodily practices of the “esoteric,” “mystic” traditions all around the world. Available literature on the initiates and adepts mostly confine the discussions to area studies scholarship. Attempting to challenge that tradition, I put the Fakirs’ insights in conversation with broader socio-political and philosophical discussions, specifically with social theories of the body.

In the next chapter, I discuss the Fakirs specific ways of training or educating the body and how their education of the body allows them to cultivate a supposedly selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality, and at the same time to combat some of the dominant social ills. This chapter introduces the Fakirs’ conceptualization of the body, subjectivity, and sociality, which are notably different from majority cultures in Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, those conceptualizations are present in different forms in various spiritual traditions, for example, Yogism, Tantrism, Buddhist and Christian monasticism, and D/Taoism. Three key aspects of the Fakirs’ praxis are somatic divinity, selfless subjectivity, and ethical sociality. Social theorists have long emphasized the profound impact of society, culture, and the state on the body, but have paid little attention to the powerful ways the body can be trained to construct heterodox social fabrics and cultural mores.

4.0 TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EDUCATING THE BODY

Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault stand out among theorists who have addressed how society, culture, and the state discipline, reproduce, and control our bodily dispositions, inclinations, and sensibilities. Complementary studies of non-conformist bodily performances, such as drag show, body modification, neo-tribalism, and modern primitivism focus on how bodies transgress, resist, and defy dominant norms, values, and interdictions. My ethnographic research addresses how the body can be educated not only to defy, resist, or transgress significant features of dominant socio-political system, but more importantly to cultivate and configure an alternative model of subjectivity and sociality. I emphasize that there is a significant difference between merely unsettling, delegitimizing, or disturbing an already existing system, and constructing a comprehensive, recognizable alternative. I show how the body can be trained to simultaneously renounce dominant norms and values, and internalize and reproduce heterodox cultural mores. Moreover, I explain how the educated body can play an insufficient but important role in combating cultural prejudices as evident for example in religious dogmatism, caste system, and misogyny.

Let me clarify three important points. First, despite cultivating heterodox subjectivity and sociality, the Fakirs fail to disregard completely dominant socio-cultural settings. For example, the Gurus are required to go inside a village for ritual begging, at least once in a month.

Moreover, they organize *Sadhusanga* annually and expect non-initiates to attend the gathering, interact with the Fakirs, and assist the practitioners, for example, financially.

Second, many of the initiates' stated goals are often extremely difficult to reach. For example, acting completely against self-interest is often impossible; not owning any private property or serving others at the cost of the self are very difficult to practice, at least consistently. However, the practitioners deliberately chase after the seemingly unreachable goals. I focus more on the Fakirs' stated goals and their ideological basis to explore the broader theoretical significance, which has remained largely unexplored. I remain cautious that there are often inconsistencies between the stated goals and the actual practices of the Fakirs. Besides acknowledging the dilemma, I focus only on select prominent Gurus, who are well-known for being relatively more successful, to examine how the Fakirs attempt to minimize the gap between the ideals and actual practices.

Third, as I focused only on the disciples of late Fakir Loban Shah, I encountered fewer disagreements in terms of interpretations and practices among his disciples, compare to others. Typically, a Guru train his/her disciples in the same way to avoid any significant internal differences. The disciples of a same Guru identify themselves as belonging to the same *ghor* (school of praxis). The differences appear significant among the disciples of different Gurus. For example, unlike Rowshan Fakir and Nohir Fakir, Fakir Doulat Shah and his disciples eat fish. Hridoy Fakir, a disciple of Doulat Shah, was highly critical of a prominent member of Loban Shah *ghor*, Rowshan Fakir.

My field experience with the practitioners shows that in the case of a community of the Fakirs¹⁰—the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah in contemporary Bangladesh—bodies do not necessarily succumb or surrender to prevailing socio-political injunctions. Rather, Fakirs educate the body (under the apprenticeship of a Guru) and hone its dormant energies to nurture a supposedly selfless subjectivity and an ethical sociality, which requires cultivating social relationships as part of the spiritual obligation of the practitioners to serve others. By aiming to cultivate a selfless subjectivity, not only do they (re)educate the body, they also create their own heterodox community and culture. However, in doing so they do not isolate themselves completely from the dominant groups, but deliberately relocate themselves at the margins.

More importantly, the conscious and constant urge to embody selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality of the Fakirs, I find, could be an interesting way of thinking about addressing some of the important concerns of contemporary Bangladesh. The heterodox bodily practices of the Fakirs require them to actively combat religious intolerance, dehumanization, and misogyny. Instead, their stated goal of ethical sociality is to nurture accommodative and inclusive spirituality, divinity of the human body, cultivation of senses of the body for spiritual accomplishment, and veneration of the traditionally disparaged women's body, specifically menstrual blood. However, there are often inconsistencies between the stated goals and actual practices.

According to the Fakirs' narrative, the body is the most precious resource of human beings. Not only does it allow humans to live as the most intelligent being; the human body enjoys the unique capability of its sense organs to transcend the self and viscerally experience

¹⁰ The followers of Fakir Lalon are popularly known as Bauls. But my respondents prefer "Fakir" to Baul, as did Fakir Lalon Shah.

the organic interconnectedness of all beings, including humans. Fakirs insist that one can viscerally experience the indivisibility of the creator and created beings only through the proper education of the body, only in this life time, and only in this-world.

As the body is one important site of political struggle for dominance and control, Fakirs retain the control of the body as a means of both defying dominant cultures and practicing alternative modes of relationship among human beings. The initiates denounce the dominant culture and authority only to constitute an alternative Fakir culture, which complies with the norm of an absolute submission to the spiritual authority of Gurus. The initiates embody an intriguing way of being in the world, defining life in a strikingly different way from majority of the Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh and elsewhere.¹¹

4.1 HETERODOX BODILY PRACTICES

As did Lalou, his followers (most of whom are poor and village dwellers) sing songs accompanied by the one-stringed *ektara*, live wandering lives, practice religious harmony, and

¹¹ I deliberately avoid terms like “sub-culture” or “counter-culture” in portraying the antinomian life-practices of the Fakirs. “Sub-culture” as a category deprives its subjects of the recognition of an independent, whole culture. The term denies a culture full recognition by designating it merely as a “sub”—subsidiary, subordinate, or transient, as the category of “sub-human” fails to register the full status of human beings. Moreover, “sub-culture” as a category legitimizes and reproduces a normative hierarchy among cultures. On the other hand, the idea of “counter-culture” tends to characterize a tradition solely according to what it opposes, instead of representing in its entirety including the criticisms, denunciations, appreciations, and constructions. Furthermore, the concepts of “sub-culture” and “counter-culture” marginalize and trivialize endangered, unorthodox life-practices, especially in the Global South. That’s why I describe the practices of the initiates as a “radically different” culture.

preach the egalitarian identity of human beings irrespective of caste, religion, community, class, skin color or any other exclusionary, discriminatory categories. Yet they have their own ways of maintaining strict hierarchy, as in the distinction between Guru and disciples. Under the apprenticeship of a Guru, one needs initiation in the beginning. Later an initiated disciple must have a heterosexual, initiated partner to embark on the advanced stage of the bodily practices.

My research puts contemporary social theories of the body into conversation with the literature on those “mystic” traditions. I show that Fakirs’ have intriguing insights on the body, subjectivity, and sociality. I refer to the body in a broad sense, as a physical entity that is simultaneously a social construct. Education of the body refers to the versatile and visceral processes through which we prepare the body to live. In this sense, the body is not separate from the mind, but one way by which the symbolic and material are fused. That’s why I treat ideas and practices of the body in my analyses with equal importance. In explaining the significance of educating the body, I include songs, worldview, and rituals, all of which are centered on the body. I also disagree with the idea that society, culture, or the state work from outside the body. Thus, I critique the Foucauldian and Bourdieusian theses of “inscription” or “imposition.” As the body is always already imbricated with society, culture, the state, or power, educating the body includes cultivating certain types of relationships between the body and society, culture, and the state. The followers of Lalou often are not born into the Fakir culture. They leave the non-initiate community to become an initiate. They learn to embody a new culture by voluntarily subjecting the body to heterodox codes of conduct. In explaining the comprehensive process of the Fakirs’ education of the body, I specifically discuss the absolute submission to and selfless love for a Guru, the relentless efforts to combat the six “vices” (i.e., lust, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and envy), food regulations, dress codes, ritual singing of *doiyna* (songs about the state of

haplessness) and *gostha* (songs performed in early morning), and ritual gatherings of the initiates (*Sadhusanga*).

As suggested by Wacquant (2015: 4), I connect my ethnographic enquiry “firmly” with a theoretical point (transformative power of the body), and build on my long-term engagement with the Fakirs. I have been attending the Fakirs’ gatherings and performances, closely interacting with my practitioner and semi-practitioner friends, since 2000. I conducted an ethnographic study with the followers of Lalon at *Asrams* (Fakirs’ dwelling and practicing places) in Bangladesh. I tried to learn about, experience, and feel their practices by being with them, by participating in the rituals, and by listening to the practitioners. I did not intend to study the “secret,” “esoteric,” and “exotic” bodily practices of the Fakirs. Nor did I aim simply to scrutinize how and why the Fakirs are so different from us. Instead, I attempt to sketch out how the Fakirs see us—the majority cultures in Bangladesh, and how that understanding informs the Fakirs’ praxis. I wanted to see the majority cultures of Bangladesh through the eyes of the Fakirs and do so by examining their heterodox practices from a non-initiate’s perspective. In other words, by experiencing the marginalized life-practices of the Fakirs, I try to map out my personal understanding of the Fakirs’ reading of the larger society. In doing so I intend not to invert the subject-object relationship, but to show how an ethnographic research can be an excellent opportunity to reflect on the dominant norms of a majority culture by immersing into and learning from a heterodox, minority tradition.

My fieldwork included staying and dining with the Fakirs, interviewing them, attending their private and public rituals, listening to interpretations of Lalon’s songs by influential adepts, participating in *Sadhusanga*, and *Gostha*. Instead of formally becoming an initiate, I have developed deep rapport with the Fakir community. As Rowshan Fakir frankly told me once, “I

don't usually talk about things [that are not supposed to be discussed with a non-initiate], but for some reason I kept doing it with you." However, they always reminded me to become an initiate so that they can talk more frankly about their practices including the private bodily rituals.

I highlight two points before discussing the process of educating the body. First, I focus only on some of the most prominent Fakirs to explore the broader theoretical significance of their praxis. My findings do not represent many other Gurus and devotees, who may have different opinions and practices. Second, all the prominent male Gurus have/had female *sadhon songinee*—spiritual partners. I noticed that Ronjona Fakirani, the female partner of Shamsul Fakir, was the only female *practitioner* who sang at the gatherings. Ronjona Fakirani was also the only one who sometimes interpreted the songs and the importance of their practices, although female singers, who are not always initiates or well-known Gurus, regularly perform at the gatherings. None of the female partners of those prominent Gurus is famous for their own knowledge and wisdom; instead, they are mostly known as the heterosexual partners of Gurus. However, their devotees equally respect and bow before both the male Gurus and their female partners. In their ritual gatherings women were small in number but noticeable as all the Gurus always bring their female partners and sit in the middle. It is striking to see in the Fakir community, girls and women freely mingle, interact, participate, and sing during the ritual gatherings—*sadhu sangha*. Usually those gatherings include overnight musical performances, discussions, and debates.

4.2 POWER OF THE BODY

I underscore three standpoints associated with the Fakirs' bodily praxis, which define them as alternative life-practices. First, the Fakirs criticize Hindu Brahmins' caste prejudice and dogmatic Muslims' claim of authentic interpretations of Islam. Both critiques articulate an inclusive spirituality and somatic interpretation of divinity. Second, the initiates denunciate the practices of indulging egoistic desires (for example, of sensual gratification, private ownership of property, and reproductive practices of the family). The apparent aim of the standpoint is to cultivate a counter-egoistic subjectivity and selfless love and devotion to all beings, especially humans. Finally, the initiates are critical of modern education, socio-economic mobility, and conventional sociality of the majority Hindus and Muslims. This critique aims at what is known as the biopolitical apparatus that generates "productive but manageable citizens."

Despite the manifest intentions of the Fakirs to transcend any form of egoism, I observed the Fakirs at times expressed frustration or envied the relatively greater accomplishments of fellow practitioners. The Gurus often find themselves in an unspoken competition with their fellows to have more devotees, to attract more attention of the local and national media, to secure wealthy followers who can possibly donate money to construct buildings and decorate their sites dazzlingly so that more people pay attention and take note of their events, and to secure the recognition of their fellows and the wider public as an accomplished spiritual leader. Furthermore, the prominent Gurus tend to downplay the views of fellow Gurus or their interpretations of Lalou's songs. At times, I noticed, the Gurus maintain an informal alliance with their like-minded fellows and an implicit reservation about others. This is evident in the

case that followers of different Gurus, who do not necessarily regard each other with high esteem and rarely invite each other to their gatherings, such as *Sadhusangas*.

4.2.1 Somatic Divinity

In this section, I show how the Fakirs' conceptualization of the body problematizes the popular religious narratives of God, and articulates an alternative model of spirituality—somatic divinity.

Along with all such systems of embodied wisdom, the Fakirs consider the human body as the greatest means of experimentation. Through bodily experimentations, adepts come to know, “see,” and experience the truth. And their experiments with and about the body provide them with the effective tools to understand the problems of the dominant religious practices. To use their own terminology, they are against *onuman* (speculation); their only source of truth is *bartaman* (bodily experimentation). Literally *bartaman* means “present.” But they understand *bartaman* as something that can be experienced and verified only through the body and its sense organs. As Rowshan Fakir explained, “if I spend my entire life only saying that I am eating rice, will that satisfy hunger? If I actually eat rice, only then my stomach will be filled.” In another occasion, he suggested me an experiment: “For just one week, you eat only vegetables, refrain from eating meat and copulating, you will feel the difference by yourself.” Instead of trying to understand the truth only through arguments, *Bartaman* for the Fakirs is experiencing the truth through one's own body. Farhad Mazhar explained *Bartaman* as something that exists “within,” which is both invisible and inseparable from the animated body. He referred to the embodied form of divinity within the body. Rowshan Fakir explained:

Clams live deep in the sea; they contain dirty, sordid fluid inside the shell; and within that stinky fluid, pearls exist. [--] Clams stay in the deepest and remotest spaces in the sea. Only a diver who can reach the deepest area of the sea, may find that pearl; others can't.

Fakirs refer to the body as the precious resource through which we can explore the nature of the self and more importantly the universal, divine “Self” embodied in every human being. But one needs spiritual education from a Guru to realize that knowledge (and power) of the human body.

In the Fakirs’ praxis, knowing the self is pivotal. That knowing is impossible with the tools available in modern education, which focuses on the mind. Rather, self-knowledge comes through educating the uninitiated body under the mentorship of a Guru and embodying *bhab*—the mood of selfless love and devotion. That prescribed education of the body must begin with an initiation and submission to a Guru, a recognized adept who must guide the disciple in a long journey. A Guru directs a devotee in almost every aspect of his/her life, e.g. about dietary practices, dressing, care of the body, everyday rituals, and the relationship with the partner, family members, kin, and other fellow human beings.

The crucial part of the spiritual education is to experience the “seminal truth” (Alter 1997) about the body. The Fakirs become aware of how every human being is born out of the precious secretions of the body—*raja* and *bij* (ovum and sperm). These bodily fluids contain the divine source of life, the divinity itself. According to the Fakirs, learning about the vitality of the “sacred” bodily substances and taking proper care of them to harness their dormant energy is one of the most important duties of human beings. Male initiates are strictly prohibited to waste the precious fluid—semen. As part of educating the body, they perform strictly confidential non-procreative sexual rituals. According to the Fakirs I consulted, loss of semen is strictly prohibited and is considered one of the greatest sins. As they say, the loss of “matter”—semen—is tantamount to death and the cause of frailty of the male body. To take care of the bodily fluids, they avoid meat, garlic, and onion. Fakir Nohir Shah explained to me that those foods generate excessive heat in the body and prevent practitioners from combating the vices, specifically lust.

He explained that meat is the source of “hot energy,” and garlic dilutes semen and thus compromises its strength.¹² For the same reason, they also avoid specific vegetables that can cause the same problems. However, some of the practices and explanations are male-centric, as they do not seem to be concerned about the fluids of female bodies.

Two important implications of the notions regarding bodily fluids are: Vehement opposition to misogyny and denunciation of discriminatory hierarchies among human beings in the name of religion. While the majority populations in Bangladesh consider semen and menstrual fluid impure, the Fakirs consider them sacred, the most precious. While staying with Shamsul Fakir and his female spiritual partner Ronjona Fakirani, I saw Ronjona Fakirani ritually expressing her devotion everyday by touching her forehead on the ground in front of her partner, who sat cross-legged and put his hands together as a symbolic gesture of prayer. And during that time Shamsul Fakir responded by only bowing before his partner. That’s how the Fakir couples show devotion to each other and worship the embodied divinity in each other. But I asked why Shamsul Fakir did not also touch his forehead before the partner. He replied that he would do so during “her times.” He meant that when they menstruate, women receive the utmost respect and devotion from males. It is because in the process of menstruation the sacred source of human life emerges, grows, and perishes. This is quite a radical practice for a man to bow before a woman, especially during menstrual cycles, in a society where women are widely considered inferior to men, and where menstruating female bodies are considered impure or ill-omened. Fakirs also equally denounce chastity and abstinence.

¹² Two other points: They also say that those who eat meat have the risk of developing violent, aggressive dispositions of animals. Nohir Shah and all other followers of Fakir Loban Shah avoid fish, garlic, and onion. Often they say it is to accommodate *Vaisnab*—a Hindu variety—guests, who avoid garlic, onion, and fish. However, other fakirs in Bangladesh eat fish, onion, and garlic. Lalon was known for eating Hilsha fish.

According to the Fakirs, the sources of the human body—ovum and sperm— confer no caste, class, race, sex, religion, or any other discriminatory identity. Therefore, human beings must not be categorized in any unalterable, hereditary hierarchy, such as, the Hindu caste system. By highlighting the universal and sacred nature of bodily secretions (which are generally considered impure by majority in Bangladesh), Fakirs see no essential biological basis for discriminatory identities and communal segregation. Although they practice hierarchy among the Gurus and devotees, such hierarchy is not based on any heredity or given attributes. Instead, hierarchy is based on spiritual accomplishments, the degree of mastering the art of training the body and cultivating selfless devotion. That is why they vehemently oppose the Hindu caste system, which enforces one’s occupation and status based on heredity only.

Sanctification of bodily fluids is tied to the process of producing somatic spirituality, which accommodates different religious groups under the identity of a Fakir without necessarily relinquishing their practices altogether. Lalou sang: “Regardless of an identity such as Hindu or Muslim, whoever possesses *Bhakti* [the mood of selfless love and devotion] also possesses the blessings of a Guru.” He concluded the song by invoking the metaphor of only one moon that lights up the world, and analogous to that, the same seed (bodily secretions) that gives birth to everyone; all those divisions are false.¹³ He revolted by singing: “Unless one renounces one’s *Jat* [discriminating hierarchies in the name of religion, caste or gender], one will not have the divine blessings. If Lalou could catch it he would burn *Jat* in fire.”¹⁴

¹³ “ভক্তের দ্বারে বাঁধা আছেন সাঁই/হিন্দু কি যবন বলে, তাঁর জাতের বিচার নাই/ [---] এক চাঁদে হয় জগৎ আলো, এক বীজে সব জন্ম হলো, লালন বলে মিছে কলহ, ভবে শুনতে পাই” (Rafiuddin 2009: 79; Song number 205)

¹⁴ “জাত না গেলে পাইনে হরি/ কি ছার জাতের গৌরব করি/ ছুঁসনে বলিয়ে/ লালন কয় জাত হাতে পেলে/ পুড়াতাম আগুন দিয়ে” (Mazhar 2009: 288)

Other songs also denounce *Jat*. Lalon sang: “If circumcision marks a Muslim man, what about woman? If a Brahmin can be recognized by his holy thread, how can one identify a female Brahmin? Some put on *Tajbi* [Islamic rosaries], some wear [Hindu] rosaries around the neck. Does that make different *Jats*? Where is the sign of *Jat* during the arrival and departure [to and from the world, that is, birth and death, respectively]?”¹⁵ Lalon even chose a name for himself that successfully evades conventional Muslim or Hindu identification.¹⁶ He deliberately hid his family background, specifically the identity of his parents, to prevent others from labeling him as a Muslim or Hindu or any other *Jat*.

Lalon was specifically critical of the popular interpretation of the Islamic notion of the non-duality of God. One of the most controversial rituals of the Lalon practitioners is the ritualistic bowing of devotees before a Guru and kissing his/her feet. According to the popular interpretations, a Muslim can never kneel to a human being or any other entity for that matter, except Allah. In contrast, Lalon venerated the “Simple Human Being” as God, or the embodied manifestation of God. The formless God gets expressed in every human being, but an uninitiated body is incapable of realizing that divinity within. Lalon defended his position by invoking the notion of the omnipresent God. That omnipresent God is like a seed that grows into a plant or tree, blossoms as a flower, transforms into a fruit, finally to produce many seeds, which again turn into many other trees. And the cycle goes on; but the source of life that circulates among all the seeds is the primordial power that is the condition of the creation of all beings, all lives. The

¹⁵ “সব লোকে কয় লালন কি জাত এই সংসারে/কেউ মালা কেউ তজবি গলে/তাতেই কি জাত ভিন্ন রে বলে/যাওয়া কিম্বা আসার বেলায়/জাতের চিহ্ন রয় কারে/সব লোকে কয় লালন কি জাত এই সংসারে/সুন্নত দিলে হয় মুসলমান/নারী জাতির কি বা বিধান/আমি ব্রাহ্মণ চিনি পৈতাম্ভ প্রমান/বামনি চিনব কেমনে/সব লোকে কয় লালন কি জাত এই সংসারে” (Chowdhury 2009:657)

¹⁶ Sudhir Chakroborty told me that the world Lalon [literally means “nurture”] had not been used as a noun before; the conventional use of it was a verb (Mozumder, Fieldwork 2014).

metaphor of seed applies to the human body. This may be one crucial reason why Fakirs are so concerned about the loss of semen.

Lalon sang: “Allah, who understands your divine play? Allah, you invoke yourself as Allah!”¹⁷ Lalon believed that God resides in all human beings. So he poetically mocked the fact that human beings—themselves the abode of God—search for God everywhere in the world except in themselves! However, only some qualified human beings are capable of recognizing that divine quality; only the adepts can do that with their educated bodies. That is why one must surrender to an adept, a Guru, in an attempt to make oneself capable of educating the six vices and cultivating selfless love and devotion, to transform one’s untrained body into a perfected body (*nitya deha*), and finally to discover the divinity within. Gurus or *Murshids* (another nomenclature for the embodied manifestation of God) are the guides, the specially qualified human beings, as was Lalon in his times. That’s why Lalon sang: “One who is *Murshid* [Guru] is *Rasul* [prophet]. Make no mistake, it is the same person who is Allah.”¹⁸

The praxis of somatic divinity also appeals a part of the Hindu community. While attending the annual observances at the site of Lalon’s mausoleum in Kustia, I saw a sizable number of devotees in ochre robes attending the events, who are traditionally from Hindu background. I also met a young devotee wearing ochre robe who was born Hindu and was practicing Hindu asceticism. Later in his life he decided to become a follower of Lalon. Still he keeps working as a Hindu religious priest at a local temple. This coexistence of Hindus and Muslims at different sites of Lalon practitioners is not an exception. And it is no surprise that Lalon and his followers have been celebrated as an icon of non-communalism and religious

¹⁷ “কে বোঝে তোমার অপার লীলো/আপনি আল্লা ডাকো আল্লা বলে” (Rafiuddin 2009:49; song number 34)

¹⁸ “যে মুর্শিদ সেইতো রসুল; তাহাতে নেই কোন ভুল, খোদাও সে হয়।” (Mazhar 2009: 113)

harmony in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. The interesting aspect of Lalon's somatic divinity is that it does not reject religions outright. Instead, it builds on the conventional narratives of Islam and Hinduism and their icons to popularize an accommodative and inclusive spiritual praxis.

4.2.2 Selfless Subjectivity

Fakirs identify self-centered dispositions as vice. Conscious and constant attempts to fight those dispositions, despite apparent failures, are imperative for their spiritual accomplishments. Combating selfishness requires reeducating the body so that it unlearns egoistic dispositions. Annihilating the ego works as a vehicle for reaching their ultimate goal of dissolving the egoistic self into the universal "Self"—the indivisibility of all beings, the cessation of the separation between the creator and the created. The initiates insist that their best success in combating the ego and embodying selfless love and devotion is a possible visceral experience of being in union with God. The interesting twist here is that even if any of them ever experienced that union, it would last only for a moment. Although none of the Fakirs I talked to has ever had that desired experience, they already have realized how ecstatic it would be to completely unlearn the dispositions of ego and realize the organic indivisibility with God. Their apparently unreachable goal paradoxically never stops generating strong fascination among the practitioners. The Fakirs thus incessantly chase after the goal of transcending the ego for their entire life, ideally with utmost sincerity, as a slightest deviation offsets the hard-earned achievements.

In combating the egoistic dispositions of the body, the Fakirs renounce affluence, private property, reproduction, family, carnal pleasure, socio-economic mobility, and conventional social recognition or status, most of which I elaborate in the next section. They own no property

(or the bare minimum needed for survival) to combat inclinations to luxury, greed, and envy; and often rely on begging and their well-wishers' charity to tackle pride and egoism. Renouncing conventional name, fame, or establishment, the initiates long for spiritual accomplishment, the loving union with "the person of the heart," meaning God. Instead of indulging egoistic desires or carnal pleasure, the adepts try to learn the bliss of experiencing somatic divinity. They wear only white dresses to symbolize the death of egoistic desires. They even call themselves "*jyanta mora*" [living dead], who are like dead bodies that could aspire for no material wellbeing but divine blessings. However, being a "living dead" does not make the Fakirs pessimistic towards this-world. On the contrary, the praxis of a "living dead" generates an intriguing impetus to best utilize every single moment of a short and precious human life towards materializing a novel vision.

Two specific practices of the Fakirs are telling about their fight against egoism: kissing Guru's feet and consuming Guru's food as blessings. Disciples must greet their Guru and pay respect by both bowing before Guru and touching the forehead on Guru's legs and kissing his/her feet. Kissing Guru's feet is the first mandatory ritual an initiate performs. This ritualistic performance is meant to educate a disciple about submitting everything of one's self to a Guru and to teach a disciple about undoing the dispositions of any sovereign self. Devotees call this relationship "slavery" to Guru. Guru then takes care of devotees by advising them about virtually every single action of their life, and a devotee's success depends on his/her performance in properly complying with Guru's instructions. Moreover, the performances alone do not suffice. A devotee must also follow the principles of the Fakirs with utmost sincerity, in addition to embodying heartfelt dedication to Guru. The initiates are expected to long for the blessings of Guru and the lessons about taking care of the body and realizing its sacred potentialities.

Disciples also maintain a subtle difference in greeting Gurus. They kiss the feet of the Guru who initiates them. And everything else of the ritual remains the same for all other Gurus. The practitioners thus bow before all other Gurus and touch their forehead on the ground or sometimes on their legs, but avoid kissing their feet. Interestingly enough, Gurus also have their own Gurus. For example, I observed, how Nohir Shah was greeted by his many followers and he himself greeted his *Guruma* (the spiritual partner of Guru) in the same way. Although Nohir Fakir is one of the most respected and renowned Gurus in contemporary Bangladesh, I saw him bow before his *Guruma* and kiss her feet. More interestingly, when Nohir Shah's *Guruma* (the spiritual partner of the deceased Fakir Loban Sha) arrived at Nohir Shah's residence to attend a *Sadhusanga* in the same village, Nohir Fakir came out of his room rushing and literally ran towards his *Guruma* to kiss her feet and to express his devotion and love to her. Important to note that at that time Nohir Shah was ill and usually walked slowly often needing others' help. I never saw such sincerity, eagerness, and joy explicitly visible in Nohir Shah's face as it was the case during greeting his *Guruma* at his place.

Another way the Fakirs combat egoism is by consuming food from Guru's own plate and from his/her own hand. It is not exactly left-over food, although devotees often consume Guru's left-over as sacred. Although the Fakirs strictly prohibit wasting food, Gurus sometimes intentionally leave some food for devotees to consume. I observed that Fakir Doulat Shah always ate the first bite of his food and then distributed some of the mixed rice and curry from his own plate to his devotees. And the devotees accepted Guru's food with notable sincerity on the palm of their right hand and ate them with gratitude. Only after that did the devotees start eating food from their own plates. It is also important to note that whenever the Fakirs eat together, Guru or the most senior Guru among the attendees will begin eating first, and only when that Guru

permits others to start eating will they do so. Similarly, the attendees must not finish eating before the Guru. During eating, they ritually utter “You accept Your devotion, *Murshid* (God).” The practitioners do not eat only to satisfy the needs of the body, they also consider eating as an act of serving God and expressing their devotion. This is one reason the Fakirs call eating “*seba*” or serving. As God is embodied within every living being, the Fakirs remind themselves that God exists both in the one who offers the devotion and who receives it. In doing so, they claim not only to aim to transcend the self, but also to spiritualize the otherwise mundane, everyday activities, such as eating.

Fakirs denounce the egoistic indulgence of desire, especially lust. They do not cut, shave, or trim their bodily hair. Male Fakirs grow their hair and beard long, sometimes really long. That’s why they often wear ponytails or braids, which also interestingly serve another important purpose: Male fakirs’ deliberately attempt to acquire “feminine” dispositions in their bodies as part of the spiritual training. Embodying feminine dispositions, according to their narrative, is crucial for the male practitioners to excel in the spiritual endeavor. They also oppose those who renounce the company of women (except for procreation) as a way of repressing sexual desire. They maintain a positive approach to the body, or the “flesh.” While the initiates discipline desire and consider the instincts of the “flesh” as the primary impediment to embodied ethics or virtue, the motto of our times has been to ensure equal opportunity for everybody to rationally maximize pleasure, indulging sexual desire.¹⁹ Egoistic subjects may temporarily restrain desire²⁰

¹⁹ Needless to mention the historic exclusions of the colonized, the people of color, and women among others who have been denied the right to equality with the colonizers, whites, men, and other dominant groups.

²⁰ Temporary restraint of desire is not always repressive (Foucault 1990a). It is a strategic move intended to maximize pleasure in a sustainable way.

to secure safe and sustainable gratification, whereas *Sadhus* (the initiates) abhor the gratification of carnal desire as a disgrace to humanity.

However, Fakirs refuse to practice celibacy and abstinence. They claim to combat the dispositions of lust through non-erotic and non-procreative bodily rituals. It is strictly prohibited to copulate for sensual gratification or for procreation. The practitioners perform sexual rituals as sacred duties, not to seek sensual pleasure. According to the Fakirs, all women (both initiated and uninitiated) are sacred; specifically, the procreative organ is the sacred birthplace of life. That is the expressed reason for why male Fakirs worship women, especially their reproductive organ.²¹

Fakirs' practices of owning no or minimal personal property, avoiding luxury, and wearing only white garments systematically undercut the temptations to indulging egoistic desires. They claim not to seek happiness as such and instead prefer solace. As Lalou sang, “সুখ চেয়ে সোয়াস্তি ভাল” [Solace is preferable to happiness.] (Rafiuddin 2009:75). Another translation of the proverb by Bangla Academy is: “Peaceful poverty is better than worried affluence” (Ali, Moniruzzaman, and Tarque 1999: 853). Fakirs claim to prefer the sense of relief from possible anxieties, which are likely to accompany affluence. Their practices of singing songs also play an important role in cultivating the counter-egoistic dispositions. For example, the initiates ritually sing “*doinya*,”—the songs expressing the vulnerabilities, limitations, helplessness, and inspirations of an initiate— usually twice in a day, early in the morning and

²¹ Fakirs did not elaborate the confidential rituals to me as it is prohibited for them to talk about those things with a non-initiate like myself. They also maintain extreme caution as their heterodox practices often cause outrage and anger among certain Muslim and Hindu groups. And for the same reason they have been attacked, harassed, and sometime tortured by those groups. Although the Fakirs did not explicitly discuss the sexual rituals, I got an impression that their practices are not entirely different from the well-documented practices of the followers of Lalou in West Bengal, India (Jha 2010; Openshaw 2002).

during the sunset. Rowshan Fakir often sings this particular song of Lalon: “বিষয় বিধে চঞ্চলা
মন দিবা রজনী” [The poisonous desire for material benefits keeps my mind restless, always]
(Rafiuddin 2009: 73). Renouncing the desire for material wealth or happiness, Fakirs supposedly
desire the joy of *onurag*, where the individuated self strives to dissolve into a loving relationship
with a Guru. Guru is considered the embodied manifestation of the universal “Self.” They claim
to seek the joy of selfless love or “simple love” (সহজ প্রেম), love for the sake of love only
without seeking something in return (নিহেতু প্রেম). In contrast to the pleasure of indulgence,
Fakirs aspire the “simple love” by inverting the conventional rules of seeking love. For example,
they supposedly mate not for procreation or carnal pleasure but as an obligation to perform
sacred rituals, the details of which are supposed to be kept strictly confidential among the
initiates. Lalon sang: “প্রেমের গতি বিপরীতে সকলে জানে না” [The flow of love is inverse; not
everyone is aware] (Choudhury 2009: 335). By inverting the conventional norms of egoistic
individuals, Fakirs perform their spiritual rituals.

4.2.3 Ethical Sociality

This section explains how the Fakirs train their embodied self to constitute an alternative, ethical
sociality of the initiates. Ethical sociality primarily requires the embodiment of an ethical
relationship to the self—being truthful to the self, self-examining one’s every single action, and
surveilling oneself constantly. In this case, Fakirs’ educate the body aiming to materialize its
“innate potentials” to embody the indivisibility of all beings including humans, to transcend the
individualized self and become “One.” In doing so, Fakirs sever conventional familial
relationship, deliberately attempt to combat the dispositions of having private property or

progeny, enroll in Guru-led education, learn to sing devotional songs, and participate in ritual gatherings.

One important feature of the Fakirs' praxis is that cultivating an ethical sociality is endless process. At no point could the practitioners assume that they have already accomplished the goal. They must relentlessly and consciously attempt to perform the rituals and lead their daily lives according to the ideals. However, in practice, the Fakirs admit that they often fail to do that. Moreover, as this process requires collective efforts of the initiates, the goal of cultivating an ethical sociality has appeared to be one of the more challenging tasks of the community of initiates.

Fakirs go through a long process of Guru-led schooling in cultivating ethical sociality. Gurus teach the devotees why the body is central in combating egoism; how to unlearn the desires for family, progeny, and property; and contrastingly how to embody selfless love and devotion. Gurus are the teachers of Fakirs. *Sadhusangas* are their schools. Songs of Lalou are their texts. To begin the schooling process, they must be initiated by a Guru; Gurus must accept them as devotees. Under the strict supervision of a Guru, devotees must spend at least 12 years (according to Rowshan Fakir) to pass the preliminary stage. If the Guru finds a disciple's devotion, practices, and dispositions satisfactory only then might the Guru recognize the devotee as a tested adept and offer him/her *Khilafat*—an elaborate ritual attended by fellow initiates.

While Fakirs generally recognize the importance of literacy, some Gurus criticize modern education as the source of egoistic dispositions. According to Rowshan Fakir, educated devotees better understand the songs, the messages by Lalou Shah. Literate initiates read, write, and interpret the verses well. However, the prominent Guru Nohir Shah expressed his concern about modern education, as it supposedly makes many people self-centric. He recalled that it took him

a long time to transform his public perception from Nohir *Saheb* [Mr. Nohir] to Nohir Fakir. He explained, “It took me at least 24 years. I was waiting for those days when people will call me Nohir Fakir; that was my earnest expectation.” Fakir in Bengali literally means a beggar; one who has no property or social status. Nohir Fakir was an educated, relatively wealthy person. He inherited around five acres of land from his father and father-in-law. However, throughout the years since becoming an initiate he has sold almost all his lands. He spent much of the money in arranging annual gatherings of the initiates or *Sadhusanga* at his *akhra*. His long journey as a Fakir requires him to combat the sense of pride and egoism associated with his public image as a powerful member of the local elite. Nohir Fakir explains why modern education is at best inessential and at worst problematic in that journey: “Our prophet (peace be upon him) did not have formal education but became a great human being; Lalon Shah did the same thing. That [formal] education makes people blind, brings arrogance, and those people brag in excessive pride. [---] The pride of the self soars!” Nohir Fakir deliberately wanted, but often failed, to erase all the traces of the egoistic tendencies that he had developed mainly through modern education. He later recognized that some modern educated people may be different but they are rare. According to him, his educational task as a Fakir is to learn to be an honest man. According to his opinion, “the sign of an honest person is his/her tendency to work without any self-interest.” However, I noticed the Gurus at times envied the fame of their fellow adepts.

Fakirs do not aspire to be productive citizens, either. Their subjectivity and dispositions of the body are not supposed to be attracted by the prospects of having a good job, affluence, family, and progeny. They often rely on begging but Lalon’s songs never glorify begging as a means of survival (Jha 1995a: 206). Instead, Fakirs beg as a way of unlearning egoism. As Rowshan Fakir said, Fakirs must go begging at least once in a month even if they have

everything needed. Begging is a mandatory practice among the adepts. But that ideally should not be their living. Lalon himself worked on his betel plants (Jha 1995a:206). Following Lalon, Fakirs typically do not want to be dependent on others; they find feasible means of earning a livelihood. For example, Nohir Fakir practices homeopathy. Shamsul Fakir and Ronjona Fakirani live on cultivating the agricultural lands that they inherited from their parents. Given that Fakirs' subjectivity demands the bare minimum, they opt out from the modern world of competition. Ideally, Fakirs cannot save even for the next meal; they are supposed to live on their well-wishers' charity or beg for every single meal. However, I observed, for example, Rowshan Fakir sometimes saved food or his devotees' future offerings (rice, vegetables, oil, and sometimes cash). But they do not save to invest or to use them for any profitable purpose. Fakirs who inherit property from their parents usually transfer the legal ownership to the *Asram* that they belong to. I collected a copy of a legal document from Shamsul Fakir. According to the document, the ownership of the land of the *Asram* in Pakkola, Kushtia has been legally transferred to the members of the *Anandadham*—the name of their place.

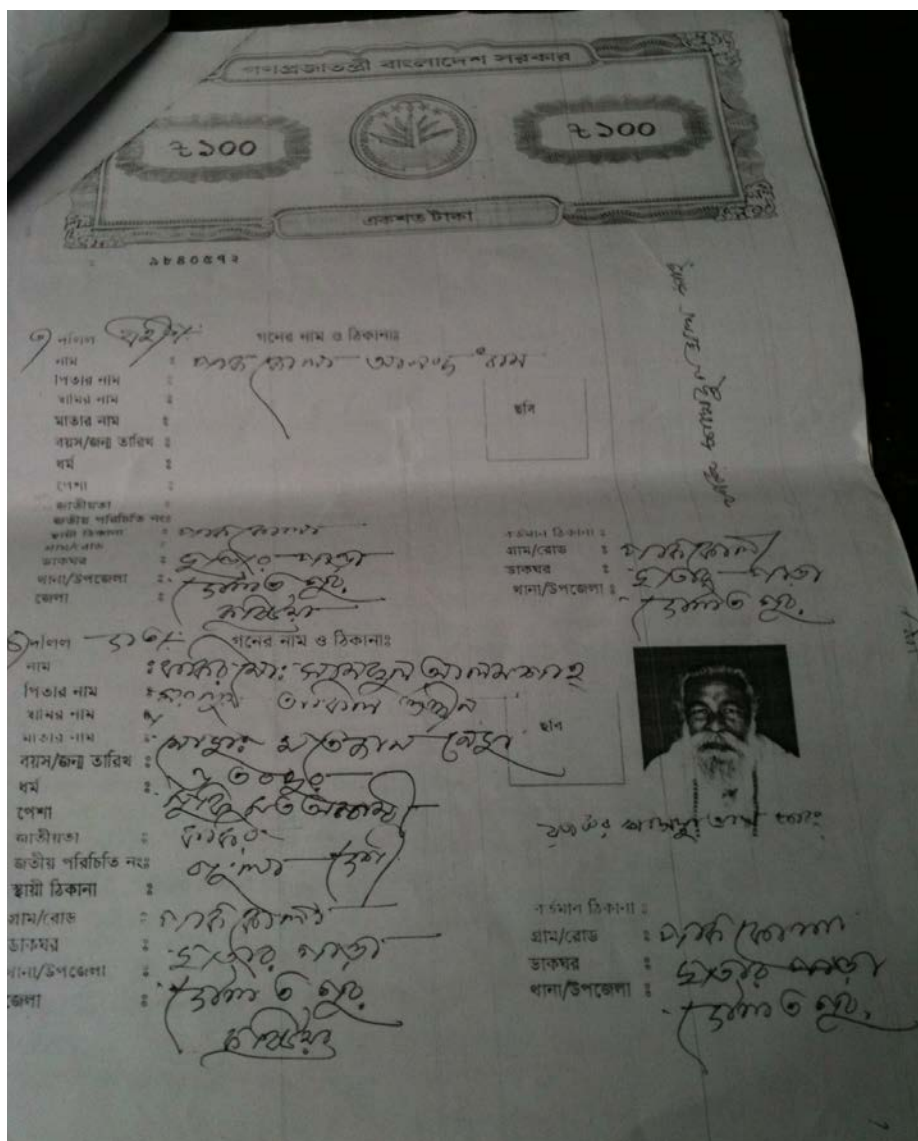


Figure 1: Legal document showing the transfer of private property to Anandadham

Fakirs' alternative sociality starts with deliberate attempts to renouncing conventional family and social life. After initiation, *Sadhus* (another nomenclature for Fakirs) usually sever the conventional relationships with their parents, family members, and relatives; they leave their homes and build *asram/akhra* (places for the initiates) in silent, remote corners of a village. Lalon sang: “গুরুকুলে যেতে হলে লোককুল ছাড়তে হয়” [One must sever the traditional bond with society in order to join the community of Gurus] (Rafiuddin 2009: 186). To signify the

transformation, a Guru gives new names to the initiates after *Khilafat*, when they are recognized as adepts. Lalon similarly took this name, probably after initiation. As did the ancient Indian Sanyasis and Vaisnabas (Jha 1995:207, 238), Lalon never disclosed his previous name, identity, and life story to anyone. Fakirs' adoption of their new identity entails deliberately erasing their previous familial history and religious or community identity. During the *Khilafat* Fakirs also put on white garments. After that, they cannot wear any colorful dress. Rowshan Fakir explained: By choosing white garments, they always remain prepared for death, as Fakirs could be buried in the same clothes they wear every day. The adepts thus claim to overcome the fear of death. Death is the ultimate enemy of egoistic life. Egoistic subjectivity is afraid of death; it wishes to avoid death, desperately attempts to procrastinate. Fakirs begin their spiritual journey by embracing the idea of death.

Rowshan Fakir left his parents' house and initially built a makeshift shelter on a tiny piece of land near a graveyard, where no one had lived. Later his relatives transferred the ownership of that piece of land to him so that he could live there permanently. Currently the initiates collectively own the land. His disciples and well-wishers financed building a house for him. Rowshan Fakir rarely visits his family in the village and refrains from taking any food from relatives as they are not initiates. He does not participate in his relatives' major social events; nor do they invite him, as they know he would not join them. Yet Fakirs expect the non-initiates to visit them during the ritual annual gatherings of the initiates (e.g., *Sadhusanga*), when Fakirs express their love to the non-initiates by offering good food to all attendees regardless of their identity. The attendees, as I observed, love the adepts' performance of Lalon's songs, and especially *palagaan*—debates in the form of musical performances—for example, on the

differences between conventional interpretations of Islam and theirs. These musical debates are at the same time learning sessions for the junior initiates and the non-initiates.

Interestingly enough, those abandoned lands that the Fakirs' choose as their new homes have now become the centers of unconventional social gathering of the Fakirs. Hundreds of people gather during the annual *Sadhusanga* at their *akhras*. Those remote places on those occasions get crowded by people from all social classes for several days and nights. They even attract members of civil society, e.g., urban educated people, journalists, and scholars, and sometimes high officials of the state. Leaving the mainstream society, Fakirs thus develop an alternative sociality that is nevertheless open for conversation and friendly debates with non-initiates.

Not only do the ethical Fakirs commit to serve fellow initiates, they also serve non-initiates like me. When I first met Shamsul Fakir and Rojon Fakirani at their place in Kustia, they allowed me to stay in their home and offered food. During my stay, they spent countless hours answering my questions. My friend who introduced me to them was not a stranger to them, but I was. They never hesitated to host me despite my friend's absence. On Friday nights during weekly gatherings, they cooked food and hosted both their devotees and other non-initiate visitors. It is a common practice among the Fakirs to host, serve food, and discuss at length with non-initiate visitors. As the Fakirs do not entertain conventional kinship relationships, the stranger guests become their relatives. The enthusiasts are their unknown but expected guests. In doing so the Gurus may be optimistic about meeting potentially new followers of Lalou, although such optimism does not always yield fruits.

In the above discussions of this chapter, I showed how the Fakirs' spiritual praxis centered around the body allows the practitioners to cultivate a subjectivity and sociality that is

fundamentally different from majority Muslim and Hindu cultures in Bangladesh. However, the heterodox Fakirs fail to entirely isolate themselves from the dominant socio-cultural system. I specified three important ways the initiates attempt to cultivate selfless subjectivity and ethical sociality as part of their spiritual goal. Although they often fail to reach the extremely difficult spiritual goals, especially to embody selfless subjectivity, their sincere and persistent efforts to reach the apparently unreachable goals lay the foundation of a distinguishable subjectivity and sociality of the Fakirs.

Fakirs would find Douglas's following observation an understatement: "The physical body is a microcosm of society, facing the center of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures" (1996: 77). Fakirs, instead, hold that the human body is the microcosm of the universe. Moreover, the center of power is not external to the body. For them, the supreme power is embodied. It is the divinity within. However, uninitiated, non-educated bodies are unaware of that power; they are "blind" despite their perfectly functioning eyes. Once an educated body discovers the power of the spiritually trained body and realizes the potential, other sources of power, according to the Fakirs' convictions, fail to take control of the body. As the Fakirs do not desire material wealth, family, progeny, or pleasure, as they claim to overcome the fear of death, they apparently embody extraordinary level of courage and vigor that we may observe in madness and zombies. No wonder that they deliberately call themselves "mad" and "living dead." Thus, an educated, adept body undercuts the hegemonic codes of physical-psychological grammar of sociality,

civility, or polity. Fakirs' bodies fail to heed Bourdieu's formulation of the "call to order"²² of the prevailing authorities; initiates educate their bodies to unlearn the deeply buried predispositions of submission to dominant regimes. The initiates cultivate radically different dispositions of the body and only submit to their Guru. The adept body longs for the unison with "the person of the heart" disregarding the norms, values, laws, and sovereign authorities of the state; it only desires the prolongation of that loving union in this world.

Fakirs' intriguing insights on the body, especially the relationship between egoistic dispositions and sociality, call for raising questions about the fundamental assumptions about society itself. They invite us to question the assumption that society presupposes self-centric, egoistic individuals, better known as rational subjects. What if we begin to think about society without presuming that human beings are selfish, or human bodies have natural instincts of fulfilling their desires often at the cost of the same of others? In other words, the Fakirs' discourse can be read as a critique of the rational actor model in social sciences. What will a theorization of society look like that refuses to see society or the state as the manager of the inevitably conflicting motivations, actions, and drives of self-seeking bodies? What will a conceptualization of society look like that is predicated upon somaticity, instead of disembodied subjectivity?

In the following chapter, I turn to another key aspect of the Fakirs' life-practice, which is strategies of managing desire. This chapter examines an alternative management of desire, i.e., sanctification of desire, practiced by the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah in contemporary

²² "The social world is riddled with *calls to order* that function as such only for those who are predisposed to heeding them as they *awaken* deeply buried corporeal dispositions, outside the channels of consciousness and calculation" (Bourdieu 1999: 14; emphasis original).

Bangladesh. That sanctification of desire involves strict and systematic guidelines for utilizing the sexual energy as a means of perfecting the body. I explain how the Fakirs' sanctification does not exactly repress or proliferate desire, as theorized by Freud and Foucault, respectively. Instead, the Fakirs sanctify desire. Besides analyzing select lyrics of Lalon's songs, I draw on my ethnographic experience with the Fakirs. By sanctifying desire, the initiates equally condemn celibacy, "copulation for procreation only," or the seeking of carnal pleasure. Yet they glorify both the "flesh," and this-world. I unpack two socio-political implications of the Fakirs' management of desire: Transcending egoism and averting the defining dilemma of modern subjects—split of the self into two conflicting camps, i.e., egoistic self and social self. In doing so I build on three insights of Foucault, Marx, and Ghazali, respectively: 1) The modern world dissociates ethics from truth by shifting the emphasis from "taking care of the self" to "knowing the self," 2) safeguarding and celebrating egoism or the sovereignty of an individual is the goal of modern sociopolitical institutions, including law and the state, and 3) without the necessary ethical grooming, a juridical subject is fraught with self-contradiction. I show how the Fakirs' sanctification of desire -- particularly their constant and conscious urge to transcend egoism -- constitutes the enduring fabric of a counter-egoistic, ethical sociality, which postulates the indivisibility of human bodies, and implicitly critiques the assumption of individuals as "isolated monads," to use Marx's concept. Management of Desire

In this chapter, I first explain Fakirs' bodily practices, specifically management of desire, where desire is neither repressed or produced. Before explaining what is potentially useful in the Fakirs' approach for our theoretical discussions on desire, I highlight the relationship among cultivation of certain dispositions of the body, management of desire, ethics, and politics by reviewing Foucault's analyses of the conceptual shifts in analyzing those key issues. To

understand the broader socio-political significance of Fakirs' way of managing desire as an integral part of educating the body and cultivating an ethico-political subjectivity, I build on Marx's critique of the triumph of egoism in modernity, and the eminent Islamic philosopher Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's (1058-59 to 1111 AD) insight on the problems of dissociating ethical dispositions from a juridical subject formation.

I argue, borrowing from Ghazali, that the art of managing the relationship with the self (which Foucault narrowly defined as ethics), is the inevitable grounding without which juridical subject formation is fraught with contradictions. Fakirs mode of combating the six vices is an interesting way of managing conflicts between juridical subjects and ethical subjects. Whereas ethical subjects regulate their actions primarily according to their own ethical judgement, juridical subjects on the other hand focus on laws.²³

²³ Let me clarify two points. First, following Mignolo's (2011: 54) observation that, "Eurocentrism is an epistemic rather than a geographical issue," I maintain that that modern subjectivity is an epistemic category; it is not a geographical or temporal one. It is not only located in the West or absent in the East. Taking it as an epistemic category allows us to see why a modern subjectivity could exist simultaneously in the West, East and elsewhere, and can coexist with non-modern or traditional subjectivities. It also dismisses the assumption that a modern subjectivity must follow or even replace a traditional subjectivity. In fact, the epistemic category deliberately avoids any orientalist, teleological project, or a linear historiography. So, when I compare the Fakirs with their modern counterparts or traditional others, I do not entertain any normative modernist assumptions; instead, I take "modern" or "traditional" as contested categories, often coexisting at the same time and place. I follow Foucault and Marx in referring to egoism as a key feature of modern subjectivity, and private-public or civil-political dichotomy as an important component of modern sociality. Second, by putting Fakirs' practices into a dialogue with the dominant features of the modern world, I do not intend to frame the discussions in modern-traditional, or religious-secular normative binaries. I want to avoid that. Although Fakirs are few and marginalized, they are part of the modern world. In this chapter, I simply underscore that Fakirs' life-practices offer a fresh insight into thinking about subjectivity and sociality. Finally, I invite readers to note that Fakirs also have their own limitations.

5.0 MANAGEMENT OF DESIRE

One must be initiated by a Guru to begin the spiritual journey of a Fakir. Under the guidance of a Guru, initiates orient themselves gradually with the preliminary steps, e.g., complying with dietary regimen, (im)purity prescriptions, and norms of the Fakir community. These dietary restrictions supposedly help defeat lust and prevent them from embodying animal aggressiveness. A beginner visits the house of a Guru frequently to seek advice regarding everyday practices and often offers food and money to express love and devotion to the Guru. An initiate learns to develop selfless devotion and love for the Guru by gradually severing all other forms of familial and social relationship. A beginner also needs to find a heterosexual spiritual partner among initiates. Both must devote themselves entirely to the Guru to be able to learn the art of combating the six vices of the body. After a long time, usually at least 12 years of testing (according to Rowshan Fakir), if the Guru finds the initiates' devotion and practices satisfactory, the Guru might offer them *khilafat*—the spiritual ascension from a general devotee to an adept. After that ascension, the adepts can only wear white garments—the symbol of the death egoistic desires. At this stage, they can no longer reproduce. They must live in a relatively remote place away from residents. Fakirs are not typical hermits; they do not isolate themselves totally from the larger society. Instead they maintain a calculated distance from outside society so that they could form a self-consciously different community and culture. The adepts lead their new life with their spiritual partners and other fellow adepts and initiates. They sing devotional

songs written mostly by Fakir Lalon. Those songs contain coded instructions and warnings for the devotees. They regularly meet in their ritual gatherings (*Sadhusanga*), perform rituals collectively, sing the spiritual songs, share their experiences and thoughts among their fellows, and often consult senior Gurus. During the ritual gatherings, the initiates sometimes discuss and debate their ideology and practices. The devotees must also go for begging as part of their training that aims to annihilate the ego. They are not supposed to have private property. But sometimes they keep the bare minimum to survive; yet that property is usually owned by the initiates' organization. They are expected to free themselves from all forms of self-interest and devote their actions entirely to the welfare of others. In doing so they must also learn to conquer lust and to transform the carnal appetite—over which a non-initiate has supposedly little or no control—into a sacred desire. That sacred desire is to realize the body's dormant capacity to reunite with the universal “Self” (*param*), which is their God. They believe that God is omnipresent and every human being is an embodied manifestation of God. The uneducated bodies, as the narrative goes, are ignorant of the divinity within. Thus the adepts desire to “know” the self—the divinity of the body—to end the “painful” separation of the created human beings from their God, which is only possible in this life and through the proper utilization of the sacred corporeal potentialities.

While I was trying to understand the bodily rituals of a Fakir couple, the Gurus repeatedly warned me saying that discussing those private rituals of a Fakir couple with a non-initiate is strictly prohibited mainly because of the culturally sensitive nature of the content. On top of that some people intentionally misrepresent the Fakirs' practices, which sometimes create public furor against the practitioners. Rowshan Fakir once mentioned:

In our area, the Fakirs are now careful. Sadhus have become overly cautious as some journalists and strangers show up and ask various questions: how many

years have you practiced? why did you go to your Guru? what kind of *sadhona* (spiritual practices) did you do with your Guru? how do you perform *rotisadhona* (sexual rituals)? And so on. I saw one *sadhu* saying, he was saying: “I know what I have done with my Guru; you find your own Guru and learn from him. [--] who are you that I have to tell you what I have learned or gotten from my Guru by performing spiritual practices for 12 or 20 years.”

To be cautious I deliberately avoided any explicit discussions on the sexual rituals of the practitioners. However, I draw on available literature that discussed the rituals of an initiate couple. I am aware that the literature is mostly about the Bauls practicing in West Bengal, India, which shares border with Bangladesh. The impression I have conversing with the Fakirs in Bangladesh is that the ritual differences are minor.

5.1 SELF AND THE BODY

In this section, I briefly touch on paradigm shifts in contemporary social theories of self, subjectivity, and truth. I then compare the insights of the Fakirs with those general theoretical debates to explore possible theoretical significance of the bodily practices of practitioners under study. In this process, I aim to identify useful theoretical insights in illuminating the broader significance of apparently mundane spiritual praxis.

Recent theorists have identified at least three alterations associated with traditionally important technologies of the self: self-fulfillment in lieu of self-renunciation, juridical subjectivity instead of ethical subjectivity, and knowledge of oneself in place of taking care of the self. Going back to Greek traditions, Foucault specifically identified an inversion of the technologies of the self in modernity. In ancient Greece “know thyself” was simply a part of the more prominent principle, i.e., “taking care of the self.” To take care of oneself one must know

about oneself, and taking care of oneself was not merely a matter of personal moral development (which was not considered less important) but for having successful careers, including political. On the contrary, “[I]n the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle” (Foucault 1988: 22).

Foucault briefly outlined the genealogy of the technology of the self, notably self-examination and its relation to truth, and its legacies in our contemporary world, especially through Descartes and Kant. According to Foucault, Descartes’ *Meditations* can be read as one kind of self-examination, which made a decisive break from pagan Greek tradition that was taken up differently by Christianity, especially in its monastic tradition. Two significant common threads characterized the previous traditions: self-renunciation and ethical grounding of the self. Departing from those standpoints, in Cartesian meditation on the self, the knowing subject undercuts ethical grounding by making one’s ability to recognize evidence the only prerequisite to have access to truth and knowledge. From the sixteenth century onwards, Foucault argued, “evidence” replaced “ascesis” as the key to venue toward truth. Hence he made the extremely important observation and pointed out the decisive break: According to the Cartesian model, one can be immoral or unethical but can still have access to knowledge, and certainly know the truth (Foucault 1997: 279). In 19th century Western political thought, or even earlier in Rousseau and Hobbes, the need for self-examination or the need for an ethical subject was also missing; the emphasis was solely on a juridical subject (Foucault 1997: 294), in other words, a law-abiding citizen. Marx pointed out precisely this as a central problem of the modern world, which I will discuss later. Kant, on the other hand, made the question of ethics central in imagining a universal knowing subject, who must be ethical in the first place, and also must abide by the

maxims (Foucault 1997:279-280). Later scholars assigned themselves a project of constituting a new, positive self—one that verbalizes rather than renounces one’s self (Foucault 1988: 49).

Unlike the underlying modern principle that prioritizes “know thyself” over “take care of self,” the Fakirs of Bengal consider proper training of one’s body as both the means and end. Their goal is to embody “*nitya deha*” [“perfected body”]. While, in a sense, both the models of “know thyself” and “taking care of yourself” see truth-seeking as the goal, they differ greatly on what truth is, how to seek truth, and to what end. The truth seeking subject or the rational, knowing subject has been given probably the most important status in the modern worldview, at the cost of the need for taking care of the embodied self. If “know thyself” considers truth as abstract rational calculation of mind, “taking care of the self” supposes truth as embodied. Since truth is power (or better, power is truth), in the former model the source of power of the self is in-depth, scientific knowledge about itself. Fakirs also set the ultimate goal as “knowing the self,” but for them knowing is not an abstract, disembodied, rational process. Rather, knowing the truth entails cultivating “the true body” or embodying the truth. Truth is, according to the Fakirs, what a “true body” does.

Four important aspects of the Fakirs’ praxis need highlighting: 1) Self is embodied, 2) knowing the self requires educating the body to viscerally experience (*aswaddon*) the indivisibility of the Creator and the creations, 3) truth or justice is what a perfectly educated body—true/just body—does, and 4) knowing the self by educating the body aims to completely eradicate the dispositions of the individuated self or ego and nurture an organic bond among all human beings, that is, among all bodies.

Lalon sang²⁴ that knowing the self is the epitome of the spiritual accomplishment. He clarified “I” or “me” is not what we think of it; “I” does not belong to “me.” Knowing or discovering the self is pivotal, as knowing the self is the only way of knowing the universal “Self” or God. According to the Fakirs, human beings are the embodied manifestations of God. Moreover, while all beings are divine manifestations, only the human body is endowed with the unique capability of realizing the divine potentialities to the fullest. Realizing those divine potentialities of the human body is the only way of discovering the indivisibility of God and human beings, of viscerally experiencing the dissolution of the individuated self into the universal “Self.” Lalon maintained that if one examines the form in which the self appears, one can make visible the universal “Form.”²⁵ In other words, all existing beings take different forms to make their existence real, and they all share a common feature, the Form. Similarly, according to Lalon, human bodies are diverse manifestations of the same divine power. In Lalon’s songs, three key concepts are at play: *rup*, *swrup*, and *arup* [Form, form of the self, and formless]. God in nature is formless and beyond the reach of the senses, but God manifests in different forms. And human bodies are endowed with the unique capability of viscerally experiencing the divine Form (*rup*) that permeates all its manifestations, as humans are created in God’s own form. That is why knowing the self requires educating the body, meaning both being aware of the dormant capabilities of the body and preparing the body to realize them.

Lalon observed that all around the world we keep hearing the word “I,” but we do not know who that “I” is. Fakirs think that non-initiates or uneducated bodies are ignorant about the meaning of “I” or the self, as they are unaware of their greatest resource—their own body.

²⁴ “আমি কী তাই জানলে সাধন সিদ্ধি হয়। আমি কথার অর্থ ভারি আমাতে আর আমি নাই।” (Choudhury 2009: 129)

²⁵ “স্বরূপ রূপে দিলে নয়ন, হবে রূপের রূপ দরশন, পড়িশনে খাঁখায়া” (Rafiuddin 2009: 64).

Uneducated bodies do harm to themselves by striving for indulging the senses (*itorpona*). Fakirs, on the contrary, aim to educate the body by being a disciple of a Guru, an adept. Gurus teach disciples about the precious potentialities of the body as well as its vices, and more importantly how to cultivate the senses of the body and embody selfless love (*nihetu prem*) and devotion to all beings, especially humans. According to Lalou, the eminent Islamic thinker Mansur Hallaj understood the meaning of “I” correctly, which is (*ami satya*) [I am truth or I am just]. By pronouncing “I am truth/just,” Hallaj indicated he discovered the divinity within his embodied self.²⁶ He claimed to reach a spiritual level at which he no longer could differentiate himself from God. For the followers of Lalou, reaching that indivisibility or ecstatic union requires the perfection of the body and the complete eradication of egoistic dispositions. And that is also the way one can potentially cultivate a true/just body or embody truth/justice.

In another song Lalou insisted that if “I” am not true, Guru cannot be true; the form of “I” is the form of God.²⁷ One can interpret this in different ways. The existence of “I” makes the existence of the Guru possible. Here Guru is not only an adept; a Guru is at the same time an embodiment of the indivisibility of God and humans. In that sense, the existence of “I” also makes the existence of God real. However, being “true” can mean both the existence of an embodied human being and a perfected, educated body. As human beings are the embodied forms of formless God, the very existence of humans conditions the possibility of knowing the unknowable God. Moreover, as human bodies are endowed with the unique capability to realize the divine potentialities of the body, one must consciously carry on the difficult tasks of educating the body to materialize the true divinity within. The crucial point is the agency of

²⁶ It is interesting to note that the word reportedly used by Hallaj (“Haqq”) was also one of the 99 names of God.

²⁷ “আমি সত্য নাহি হলে, গুরু সত্য কোন কালে আমিকে যেরূপ দেখা, সেইরূপে দীন দয়াময়।” (Choudhury 2009: 296)

human bodies, which is vital in unleashing the reality or the truth of the human body. Thus, Lalou sang, those who find truth in human beings would not be convinced by anything else, such as deities.²⁸ Lalou expressed his conviction that human beings can materialize the truth of humanness only through realizing the potentialities of the body and only in this life.

Fakirs' conceptualization of knowledge of the self or truth seems to differ both from modern thought (as described by Foucault) and Pagans or Christian monastics. Whereas the tendency of modern thinkers is to consider knowledge or truth to be knowable by rational capacity, the Fakirs conceive truth or knowledge to be embodied. While Pagans and monastics seem to consider taking care of the self often as a disembodied process, for the Fakirs the process must be somatic.

A modern subjectivity typically embodies intelligence, rationality, and productivity, but not necessarily ethics. And to be able to act ethically, one needs to cultivate ethical dispositions of the body. As I discussed earlier, ethics or ethical dispositions do not typically appear for the modern subject to require any embodiment. Three interrelated features contribute to that: 1) The mind-body dichotomy and the primacy of mind over the body, 2) rational maximization of egoistic desires, and 3) the modern separation between the private and public sphere. The mind-body dichotomy has long been questioned, and newer approaches of embodiment have gained currency. The questions of rational indulgence of ego, and the civil-political or private-public dichotomy came under criticism in Foucault and Marx. However, two key areas—modern approaches to managing desire and the triumph of egoism—have attracted less scholarly attention, to which I now turn.

²⁸ “মানুষতত্ত্ব যার সত্য হয় মনে, সেকি অন্য তত্ত্ব মানে।” (Choudhury 2009: 572)

5.2 BEYOND THE “REPRESS OR PROLIFERATE” GRIDLOCK

Management of desire is a key to explaining differences in subject formation. Pagan Greeks, the adherents of the three Abrahamic religions, Buddhists, Taoists, and Hindus consider uneducated sexual desire as a vice, although they differ significantly regarding the ways of addressing it. In contrast, celebrating the indulgence of carnal appetite is characteristic of our times. Pagan Greeks addressed the problem of desire by “taking care of the self”; they restrained the sexual desire for the sake of healthy body and good life (but not to please God). As Foucault observed, Christianity later equated “flesh” with sin and condemned both sex outside marriage and non-procreative sex. Unlike pagans, Christian monastics such as Saint Benedict invoked divine obligations for self-restraint. Muslims, e.g., Ghazali, continued the tradition of self-restraint by not always demonizing “the flesh.” Buddhists and in many others such as Yogis and Brahmacharis practice abstinence and avoid non-procreative sex as part of disciplining desire. However, a typical modern subjectivity desires the *rational* maximization of pleasure. A modern subject needs to be rational to ensure the same rights for everyone. Furthermore, while those traditions recognize the vitality of ethical dispositions in managing desire and more importantly in embodying the desired attributes of a human being, the modern world disciplines desire to ensure the right to rationally maximize the pleasure for everyone. To avoid any confusion, let me clarify that I do not argue that modern subjects do not discipline desire, they surely do. But I insist that modern subjects discipline desire only to maximize its *rational* fulfillment. They restrain or discipline themselves only to the proportion required to maintain equal opportunities for all citizens. Of course, we all know the liberal hypocrisy of depriving women, people of color, the colonized, and many others of equal rights that are enjoyed by their counterparts, i.e., men, whites, the colonizers, and others for a long time. But ideally the liberal principle is to

rationalize every citizen's egoistic desires so that one does not infringe upon the same rights of other fellows.

Foucault famously attempted to go beyond Freud's (2015) analyses of repressing desire. Foucault argued that the modern concern is about ways of proliferating, producing, and maximizing desire. The modern principle is to say "yes" to desire, specifically sex (Foucault 1990 [1976]:157). The problem, therefore, is how to say "yes." Once again, modern subjects do not regard sexual desire as a vice, they instead intend to eternally explore various ways of fulfilling, facilitating, and amplifying the carnal appetites and maximizing the pleasure.

However, the followers of Fakir Lalon Shah consider sexual acts for carnal indulgence and broadly speaking actions regarding the pleasure of the ego or self as pernicious. While the Fakirs venerate the sexual energy of the body, they abhor eroticism for the sake of carnal pleasure. They avoid both celibacy and abstinence. Instead, in their spiritual praxis, the company of a heterosexual partner is mandatory. The initiates aim to educate the body to best utilize the sexual energy to viscerally experience the ecstasy or supreme joy of transcending the individualistic ego and embodying the Oneness, the indivisibility all beings—*param* [the absolute or the universal "Self"]. As part of managing desire, the Fakirs perform the "sacred" non-procreative, non-erotic²⁹ sexual rituals with heterosexual spiritual partners.³⁰ Those rituals are supposed be performed to avoid indulging the sensual cravings. Fakirs consider the rituals crucial in attempting to hone the untapped sacred energies of the body, to harness its dormant potential, to rejuvenate, and finally to realize its divinity. Their sexual rituals do not aim at "pleasure" but the supreme joy, the ecstasy of materializing the organic interconnection, the

²⁹ In the sense of not intending carnal gratification.

³⁰ Fakirs are apparently heterosexual. I never asked any questions about the possibility of same sex rituals, as it is an extremely sensitive issue and often risky to try to discuss the possibility of non-heterosexual practices.

umbilical bond with all beings of the universe. These sexual rituals of the Fakirs tend to be in many cases similar with Tantric practices, but the Fakirs often claim to be different in some cases, specifically for the Fakirs' emphasis on love and devotion.

Due to their heterodox praxis, the Fakirs have been subjected to social castigation and often brutal attack by the dominant groups including some of the Hindus, Muslims, and modern educated people (Choudhury 1990, 2009; Jha 2002). To avoid such problems, the Fakirs strictly avoid talking about the culturally sensitive issues with non-initiates. However, scholars, for example Jha (2010), Openshaw (2002), Urban (2009, 2003, 2001a) already discussed and published extensively on the “secret” bodily practices of the Fakirs and the initiates of other sister traditions, mainly based on their fieldwork in West Bengal, India. During my stay, Nohir Fakir, Rowshan Fakir, and Shamsul Fakir reminded me every now and then that I needed to be an initiate to talk about their practices, especially about the sexual rituals of a couple. Although I spent hours and days talking about many other aspects, I always had to skip any explicit discussions about the details about those “secret” rituals. So I draw on the existing studies. For the arguments of this chapter, I focus on their approach to desire and love in general, which I discussed at length with the Gurus.

In sanctifying desire, Fakirs in fact redefine desire in an intriguing way. In explaining that I focus on the role of *a spiritual partner, Guru, and love*. As I mentioned earlier, a heterosexual partner is mandatory in the spiritual journey of the Fakirs. For the initiates, heterosexual couples are essential in understanding the process of (pro)creation. Interestingly enough, the relationship between the partners is not typical, as they desire to cultivate selfless love and devotion primarily to their Guru and then to all beings.

A spiritual partner is the life-long companion of an initiate couple. The initiates practice

together and learn from each other. However, female partners are considered naturally more advanced than their male counterparts in the spiritual journey. The female body, according to the Fakirs, is more capable of hosting and nurturing the divine force. Lalon once clearly stated that she who is Khodeja [the first wife of Prophet Muhammad] is also an embodied representation of *khoda*, God. They become separate only in forms.³¹ The male partners are suggested to learn from their female partners, who are often considered as masters.³²

I observed Rowshan Fakir, Shamsul Fakir, and Fakir Doulat Shah, as they lived with their female partners. Nohir Fakir's female partner died few years back. All the Gurus with their partners live in their *akhras* (dwelling and practicing place) at relatively remote places. They remain a calculated distance from the majority communities but do not isolate themselves like hermits. I saw all the female partners of the Gurus cook for them and conduct household works. The female partners barely participated in discussions about the songs and their practices. When I asked about that all of them responded by saying that the female initiates understand everything as they have been practicing in their lives for many years, but they do not always talk. Although the male Fakirs venerate their female partners, their female partners are not well known as Gurus or adepts. The female practitioners are mostly known as the partners of the famous male Gurus. The adepts are all married following the popular tradition and their own rituals. Apparently, they live typical family lives, but that is far from reality. As the female partner of Shamsul Fakir, Angela Fakirani once told me, "Our love is so different." The glue that holds their relationship is the spirituality not material wellbeing or reproduction. They ritually bow before each other every

³¹ "যে খোদেজা সেইতো খোদা, আকৃতি নাম রাখলেন জুদা" This song is missing from many available anthologies of Lalon's songs. But it was collected and published online by the scholar-practitioner Farhad Mazhar at <http://chintaa.com/index.php/network/showArticlePoetry/17/english>. Accessed on May 19, 2016.

³² "চেতন গুরুর সঙ্গ নিলে দেখিয়ে দেয়া"(Rafiuddin 2009: 109)

day, and male Fakirs particularly venerate their female partners during menses. That's when they think the sacred seed of life flows. The somatic techniques of taking care of the fluids are taught by a Guru. This knowledge is considered precious and may only be learned from adepts. A devotee is expected to devote his/herself to serve a Guru. A disciple is in turn blessed to have the privilege of earning a Guru's confidence and grace.

Fakirs aim to transform lust into love. In doing so they do not renounce the company of the opposite sex or practice "copulation for procreation only." Their notion of love is not to be confounded with the Christian notion of asexual "agape." Instead, for them, it is mandatory to have a heterosexual partner and perform strictly ritualized sexual practices of a couple (*jugol sadhana*), under the guidance of a Guru. Fakirs oppose demonizing "the flesh" but insist on utilizing the precious potential of the body through appropriate education and training. Fakirs condemn practices of indulging carnal desire sometimes by comparing it to incest with one's mother, which is one of the most abominable acts. Nohir Fakir, the eminent Guru, complained that non-initiates do not know how to take care of the dignity of a mother [*"matri ijgot hefajot korte jane na"*]. As the practitioners strictly oppose practices of indulging desire or sensual gratification, be it rational or beyond-rational, they consider non-initiates who give in to their desires as the unfortunate beings who fail to live up to the human potential. They are just "*jeeb*" (living organisms), to use the Fakirs' terminology.

The sexual rituals require the male initiates to retain semen and both partners to stop reproduction. And they do not use any contraceptives. The rituals aim to conquer lust (one of the six vices of the body) but utilize the dormant sexual energy. Fakirs consider conquering lust as one of the most difficult but decisive steps in combating the vices of the body, in attaining the perfected body. They use the metaphor of extracting the precious jewel from the mythical

venomous snake's head. If anyone attempts but fails, it must be lethal. On the other hand, if one succeeds, s/he gets the most precious gift. This is a reason why the adepts insist on not disclosing the details of the bodily practices of an initiate couple to non-initiates. The secrecy of the Fakirs is also a way of protecting non-initiates from possible harms if they attempt to perform those rituals without the strict guidance of a Guru.

Although the practitioners practice as couples, their desired beloved is not his/her partner but the Guru. Guru is loved not merely as a human but the manifest embodiment of God. Guru is the only source of the grace that is inevitable in realizing the divine potentials of the human body. The figure of Guru is imagined as an embodiment of a perfectly educated body, a true/just body. A heterosexual couple submits to a Guru and seeks guidance on every aspect of life. Thus, the need for secrecy or privacy becomes redundant in Guru-disciple relationship. This extension of intimacy is an important step in eradicating the dispositions of egoistic self. An initiate couple thus cultivates an unconventional relationship with a Guru. A spiritual partner still remains someone significant with whom one shares everything and must perform bodily rituals.

The disciples act as “slaves” to a Guru. A beginner willingly submits oneself and wishes to be a “slave” of a Guru. As the prominent Bangladeshi scholar-practitioner, Farhad Mazhar, explained, “One can be free only by being a slave.” Being a “slave” of a Guru requires an initiate to devote every bit of the self to serving all beings, and Guru is the most important mentor in that journey. Guru is loved as *Murshid*, who is at the same time beloved, master, guide, and divine. A Guru is venerated as an embodied manifestation of God who can teach devotees the most precious knowledge. Guru's blessings are the most desired gift in a devotee's life. Gurus in turn long for, as Farhad Mazhar remarked, a sincerely dedicated disciple with utmost devotion and self-less love. He recalled, when his Guru Fakir Loban Shah was terminally ill, the Guru

frequently sang that the soul of Guru and disciples is no different after death; it's the same. So is their master. The song continues, Guru then implores to a disciple for help.³³ Mazhar recalled his Guru telling him that a disciple is the best resource of a Guru, as after death only that disciple can spread the precious knowledge and teaching to others. After the death of Loban Shah, Mazhar recalled that he was ill for three years. I also learned that Mazhar was so shocked that he cried like a child embracing the tomb of his Guru.

The divine love that the Fakirs long for requires bonding of a heterosexual couple and coitus, but equally condemns carnal indulgence, celibacy, abstinence, and procreative copulation. Lalou warned in a song, poison and nectar remain diluted in the body.³⁴ The destructive dispositions of lust and gracious potentials of love are enmeshed in the body. As a practitioner, one must perform sexual rituals but strictly avoid falling prey to the “animalistic” inclination of seeking carnal pleasure. One who submits to a Guru and educates the body to learn to combat the vices will be able to taste the nectar of divine love. Lalou called it “*sahaj prem*” [Simple love].³⁵ According to Lalou, lust is the stem of love. Love cannot be found without lust.³⁶ And only a Guru can teach how to save oneself from the poison of lust but experience the nectar of love. A practitioner must transform him/herself from an erotic person into a non-erotic one. An initiate teaches the self to take refuge in the force of love.³⁷

I briefly underscore four key components of cultivating divine love: *devotion, selfless love, selfless action, and transcending gender identity*. One of the most important requirements

³³ “মরলে গুরু-শিষ্যের একই আত্মা, তোমার আমার একই কর্তা, তুমিই আমায় পারে লগা” (Mozumder, Fieldwork 2014).

³⁴ “বিশামৃত আছেরে মাখা জোখা।” (Rafiuddin 2009: 106)

³⁵ Literally *sahaj* means simple, but sometimes people translate as innate implying the link to another word *sahajat*, which literally means instinctive or inborn. On the origin of *sahaj*, Saktinath Jha argued, it is not actually innate but divine (2013: 141).

³⁶ “কাম হয়েছে প্রেমের লতা, কাম বিনে প্রেম যথা তথা, কৈ হয় আগমনা” (Rafiuddin 2009: 104)

³⁷ “কাম থেকে নিষ্কামী হয়; কামরূপে প্রেম শক্তির আশ্রয়, লালন ফকির ফাঁকে ফেরে, কঠিন দেখে শুনো” (Rafiuddin 2009: 105)

of the praxis of the Fakirs is cultivation of utmost devotion primarily to a Guru and to all beings in the universe. I saw the devotees of the all the Gurus take care of their beloved in all possible ways with utmost sincerity and affection. The devotee couples ritually bow before a Guru and the female partner and kiss their feet every day. They bring food, money, clothing, medicine, help their spiritual mother (the female partner of a Guru) in cooking and household management. The devotees always pay close attention to what a Guru says or wants. Guru in turn teaches and shows devotees what it means to a spiritual couple, what the expectations are, and more importantly how to perform as a couple. By loving a Guru more than the partner or anything else in the world, a couple learns to transcend egoism and cultivates Simple love or love for God. Simple love, according to Lalon, is *nihetu prem* (causeless or selfless love). It is to love for the sake of no other reason than loving itself. One who loves without expecting any return and without seeking an explanation is practicing Simple love. Love for the sake of love itself is the mantra. Lalon also emphasized that the practices of a Fakir must be selfless; their actions, belief, and love must also be the same.³⁸

Another important aspect of the praxis of Simple love is the need for transcending gender identity. Lalon clarified that as long as one remains a typical male or female, one cannot cultivate divine love. One must negate one's self to embody divine love.³⁹ An initiate takes rebirth in the spiritual life. It is a convention among the practitioners that a Guru gives a new name to a disciple after initiation. Lalon clarified that one who seeks divine love can neither be a typical male or female; nor can that person be a neuter gender or androgynous.⁴⁰ Two things: first, it

³⁸ “রসিকও শিখরে, সে মানুষ বাস করে, হেতুশূন্য করণ সেই মানুষের দ্বারে, নিহেতু বিশ্বাসে, মিলে সে মানুষে, লালন ফকির হেতু কামে যায় মারা” (Rafiuddin 2009: 102)

³⁹ “পুরুষ নারী ভাব থাকিতে, পারবো না সে ভাব রাখিতে, আপনার আপনি হয় ভুলিতে, সে জন গৌর রূপ নিহারা” (Rafiuddin 2009: 130)

⁴⁰ “স্ট্রীলিঙ্গ পুংলিঙ্গ ভবে, নপুংসক না সম্ভবে, যে লিঙ্গ ব্রহ্মাণ্ডের পরে, কী দিব তুলনা তারো” (Choudhury 2009: 444)

means that in the Fakirs' discourse, gender is at least theoretically fluid and malleable, and second, one can possibly escape "the trap" of any gender identity. As I mentioned earlier, the Fakirs regard women with higher esteem than men, and sometimes identify God as a female. Moreover, male Fakirs consciously aim to embody feminine characteristics as part of their spiritual training. However, somewhat paradoxically, Lalou also insisted that all forms of gendered dispositions must be unlearned to achieve the spiritual goal.

Simple love takes the body as a crucial resource but denounces lust and other vices of the body. Cultivating Simple love requires transcending the traces of self or egoism and exercising the somatic capability of embodying the organic indivisibility of all beings. It is to love without any expectation or explanation. Moreover, it requires deliberate attempts to disembody rigid gender identity. When one performs all of it, one becomes a *jyanta mora* [living dead], one who has no material expectations or no egoistic dispositions. A living dead, Fakir, longs for nothing but divine love. However, a living dead is not otherworldly but essentially this-worldly, as her conviction is that only in this life and only through this body one can realize the divine potentialities of human beings.

Desire in the Fakirs' praxis does not mean only sexual desire; it is rather extensive. They desire love, Simple love. Longing for divine love does not translate into vilification of the flesh or renunciation of the company of the opposite sex. Instead, for them, "the flesh" is sacred. For them, both heterosexual partners and sexuality are vital in attempting to experience Simple love. Simple love binds Guru, disciple, spiritual partner and God in one rope. It also pervades all aspects of the practitioners' life. Fakirs' praxis is centered on the longing for an ecstatic experience of Simple love.

To the risk of overstretching, I find Spinoza and Hegel's observations on desire quite

relevant in reflecting on the border theoretical significance of the Fakirs' understanding and practices regarding desire. Spinoza and Hegel also understood desire in a broad way. This broad approach to desire includes a form of relating to an object that is regarded to reside outside of the self. According to Spinoza, desire is what defines human beings. Spinoza observed, "Desire is the very essence of man in so far as his essence is conceived as determined to any action from any given affection of itself" (Read 2012: 44). Desire takes different forms because of our diverse upbringing, sociopolitical conditions, and history. "Desire is a particular situation of the general striving, the *conatus*, that defines everything," according to Spinoza (Read 2012: 44). Spinoza maintained, "There are as many desires as objects and as many objects as histories" (Read 2012: 46). Humans have appetites or drives, but they are not always aware of them. Desire is simply a conscious drive. Spinoza did not confine desire to sexuality but extended it define the "essence" of human beings. Hegel also explained desire in a broader sense. However, Hegel differed from Spinoza by introducing the fundamental question of the desire for recognition, "desire for desire," or "desire to be desired." According to Hegel, "Self-consciousness is desire in general," quoted in (Read 2012: 47). Reflecting on Hegel, Kojève observed that "[---] human history is the history of desired Desires," quoted in (Crossley 2001: 87).

In explaining the Fakirs' desire for Simple love, the scholar practitioner Mazhar seemed to appropriate Hegel. He observed:

Desiring an object presupposes a pleasure-seeker. But when I desire a desire, is that an act of seeking pleasure? I desire your desire, that's begging. [---] similarly when you desire *Saiji* [Guru and/or God], what is the nature of that relationship? You desire freely, you desire *param* [the Absolute]. Then he [Guru] would insist, this relationship is possible only if you diminish your desire, self (pleasure-seeking "I"), dissolve it. He would say, I want that desire which has already been dissolved so that your desire has become indifferent to mine [Guru's desire]. That's the meaning of unquestioned submission of a disciple to a Guru.

Mazhar nicely pointed out the broader understanding of sacred desire of the Fakirs. Desire among the Fakirs begin with the double negation: Negation of pleasure-seeking desire, and negation of the self. Desire for them is to dissolve the egoistic self into the universal Self, as personified by a Guru in the imagination of disciples. Desiring God is the guiding theme of every single act of their praxis. It is constitutive of their counter-egoistic subjectivity and ethical sociality.

Fakirs identify “lust” itself as a vice that must be subdued. However, they sanctify the dormant energies of the body that drives desire. They take great care of those driving forces of desire so that they can be harnessed fully and directed towards realizing the divine potentials of human beings. This is one reason, I find the Fakirs’ approach to the body, ultimately, a positive one. While modern subjects are supposed to desire the rational maximization of pleasure, Fakirs long for the joy [*ananda*] or ecstasy of materializing the divinity housed by the human body—knowing the self. Ideally, modern subjects desire the fulfillment of individualistic ego; on the contrary Fakirs desire the embodied actualization of the organic unity of all beings, including humans, at the cost of individuated ego. More importantly, Fakirs’ bodily practices of sanctifying desire, which aim to transcend egoism and cherish the indivisibility of human beings, constitute the enduring fabric of a radically different sociality.

5.3 COMBATING EGOISM AND CULTIVATING AN ETHICO-POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

In this section, I continue to follow an unconventional approach to explore the broader theoretical significance of the Fakirs’ praxis. I try to find conceptual tools available in dominant

social theories that may be at least generally useful in explaining the Fakirs' life-practices. Karl Marx is one rare modern thinker who was concerned about the problem of egoistic self and its desires. According to Marx, the modern distinction between "civil society" and "political state" splits a person into two conflicting entities: "man" and "citizen." Marx (1978) explained, the rights of humans—equality, liberty, security, property—are defined in light of the rights of citizen, which ensure the maximum rational fulfillment of the desires of egoistic self. Although liberty is defined simply as the right to act as one wishes without infringing upon the same rights of others, practically it is the right to own private property. Equality is eventually the equality of "liberty," and finally security is the institutional arrangements to safeguard the right to liberty, equality and property. "Security is, rather, the *assurance* of its egoism" (Marx 1978:43; emphasis original). What is crucial in this process is that the political state and its apparatus (the conservator of the rights of man) guarantee the maximum rational fulfillment of the animalistic desires of human beings, i.e., the rights of citizen. Marx wrote:

None of the supposed rights of man, therefore, go beyond the egoistic man, man as he is, as a member of civil society; that is, an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interests and acting in accordance with his private caprice. Man is far from being considered, in the rights of man, as a species-being; on the contrary, species-life itself—society—appears as a system which is external to the individual and as a limitation of their original independence. The only bond between men is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic persons. (Marx 1978: 43)

According to Marx, the capitalist definition of the liberal "rights of man" guarantee the maximum rational indulgence of egoistic desires of an individual, who can do whatever s/he desires only on the condition that one must draw a line—develop a second self that is political, apart from the egoistic self. That second self, political self of an individual, i.e., citizen, works as the security apparatus of the self that promises the highest possible pleasure for the animalistic

ego. One who is set free to indulge all of his/her animalistic desires must also restrain, in other words do violence to him/herself, in order to comply with the rules of the political world. It is the laws that monitor the compliance with or violation of all political codes of conducts and punish *only* the documented and proven violations. And it is then not really difficult to imagine that those egoistic selves utilize every single opportunity to escape the grasp of legal monitoring and indulge the otherwise illegal or semi-legal desires even in the political realm. Thus, the promise of the same liberty, i.e., equality, often appears shaky or too much to comply with for the egoistic individuals.

Two significant problems stem from the modern configurations of man-citizen split. First, by drawing the reified distinctions between civil and political life, the public and private sphere, modern societies fail to address the problem of the animalistic desires of human nature, especially sexual drive that has been a perennial problem for the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; many different traditions in India and China such as Buddhism, Tantra, Yoga, Taoism; as well as pagan Greece. And second, not only does the human-citizen split dissociate the ethical grounding of the self from the process of becoming a citizen (a juridical subject), it obliges the “private,” egoistic self (human) to confront the “public” self, the second self (citizen). The eminent Islamic philosopher Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali on the other hand argued simply the opposite. He advocated an organic interdependence between the “private” self and the “public” self. Furthermore, for him, a strong ethical grounding is the backbone of a successful juridical, political subject.

The modern world represents a shift in the emphasis on ethics and morality, especially regarding the role of desire. Modern laws make traditional ethics and moral codes at least insignificant and at best redundant. Modern subjects are coerced to comply with the rules of

political life that in return provides them with a license to indulge the egoistic desires in the “civil society,” (to use Marx’s terminology). They are not required to be ethical subjects. The ideal of the modern world is a law-abiding citizen. However, Al-Ghazali exposed the inner contradictions of a juridical subjectivity that lacks ethical grounding. He contended that laws can successfully ensure social order only if they are to manage ethical subjects. Laws can be most effective in a world of ethical human beings who already trained their “soul” not to desire any violation of laws.

In his view, the law could have no meaningful effect unless the psyche and self-understanding of the ethical subject were disciplined in order to synchronize with the demands of God’s law. Ghazali was at his best when he detailed the ideal conditions necessary for the disciplining of the soul so that it might comply with the demands of the law. For the law to have an effect on the conduct of the ethical subject, something had to occur before the law: the cultivation of the self through the disciplinary practices of *adab* [embodiment of exemplary morals and praxis] education [*ta’dib*] and moral cultivation [*ta’addub*]. (Moosa 2005: 219)

That is to say, to train a subject is to let her become the immanent judge of herself; to make a person subject to eternal surveillance of oneself. Laws, for Ghazali, are successful only when they are employed by and for ethical subjects. Those Islamic ethical subjects do not have a license to indulge egoistic desires; there is no room for nourishing those vices. Ghazali’s ideas do not allow the civil and political dichotomization, either. Ethical trainings for Ghazali’s subjects start from the very beginning of their life and stay with them till their death, and the ethical codes are enforced in both private and public life. In short, those ethical subjects must learn to act as their own judge to themselves before being subjected to legal jurisdictions. Unlike modern subjects who assume that laws are meant to ensure the maximum rational fulfillment of egoistic desires, Ghazali’s ethical subjects would assume laws as the double defense or the second order of defense against licentious desires. If ethical subjects contravene their subjective wall of protection, laws should be able to act as the second line of defense against any violation of those

ethical codes that concern both subjective and political morality. Thus, in Ghazali's propositions, the binary opposition between civil and political realm or public and private sphere becomes redundant; instead, a synchronization between them is warranted. A modern society presupposes a clear distinction between civil society and political world. For Ghazali the precondition of a just society is to ensure rigorous ethical grooming of subjects, thus making them sociable and eligible to participate in the public sphere. Private ethical training is an essential stepping stone to becoming a political subject. Unlike modern subjects, who must play contradictory roles in the civil and political realm—restrain your desires only to the extent which is unavoidable in order to ensure the highest rational indulgence of desires—, ethical subjects opt for an organic interdependency between those two realms. Interdependence facilitates each sphere's achieving the common goal: training one's self to act ethically in all spheres of life. For modern subjects the codes of the public sphere work at the cost of the rules of the private sphere, but for ethical subjects the success in the public sphere is predicated upon the success in the private sphere.

Marx said, in his "On the Jewish Question," that one cannot satisfactorily address the problem of religion by sustaining the socio-political malaises that breed religious "defects."⁴¹ One wonders similarly, how it is possible for a modern subject to restrain egoistic desires in the political realm, while patronizing the maximum fulfillment of the same desires in the private realm. Hobbes's answer was: Despite being strangers to each other, humans make society

⁴¹ "But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect must be sought in the *nature* of the state [liberal secular state that expels religion from the public sphere to ensure political emancipation from religion] itself. Religion no longer appears as the basis, but as the *manifestation* of secular narrowness" (Marx 1978:31).

possible through realizing the fear of other fellow human beings and love for oneself, for that one must play a dual, contradictory role of “man” and “citizen” (Daniel 1980: 211-215).⁴²

According to Marx, the alienation among men caused by the liberal separation of civil society and political world needs to be addressed by restoring the identity of “species-being.” The restoration process must stop transforming human beings into “isolated monads” or “automatons.” Ghazali proposed both to abandon the separation between civil society and political world, and to absorb the rights and norms of law-abiding citizens in the political sphere into the virtues of humans in civil society. For Ghazali to ensure social order we must first ensure a moral order of the humans. To make humans comply with political ethics one must make them *first* comply with private ethics. That is to cultivate an ethical relationship to the self. One can surely ask what kind of private ethics Ghazali was proposing. For Ghazali it was Islamic ethics. It can also be questioned why Ghazali’s laws of God would be acceptable to others, or how those Islamic ethics can resolve the potential conflicting set of ethics proposed by other religions or secular philosophers, and so on. These are crucial and legitimate questions. However, what is important is to recognize the insufficiencies, flaws, and inner contradictions of the modern subjectivity; the problems of the binary dichotomies and indispensable confrontation between man and citizen, public and private realms, or civil and political spheres.

Although the Fakirs are typically indifferent about broader socio-political affairs, their praxis does not allow any reified distinctions between civil society and political world.⁴³ They do

⁴² Daniel quoted from Hobbes’s *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, “Though Hobbes recognizes that man ‘by nature, or as a man,’ is essentially social, men as citizens are strangers to each other, relating to one another not because of the “natural affection” of charity or love for each other, but by “either contract, whereby they seek to purchase friendship; or fear, which maketh them to purchase peace. ” Then he added, “Men relate to one another in the marketplace, that is, civilly, in terms of the concepts of the market: friendship and peace are purchased, and individuals deal with one another as equals according to the capitalistic-market-economy mentality insofar as they see each other as strangers” (1980:211).

not have to split themselves into two conflicting camps to pit private, egoistic self against public, social, or juridical self. Unlike modern egoistic subjects, Fakirs aim to transcend egoism. According to the Fakirs' narrative, practitioners must perform the rituals with utmost devotion and sincerity but it is not guaranteed that they will achieve what they want. So, they have to keep going after the elusive goal of dissolving the individuated self into the universal "Self," and a minor lapse in sincerity or devotion regresses them far away. As the narrative goes, every human body has the potentiality of realizing the divinity within, and by realizing the divinity within, s/he discovers him/herself reunited with the universal Self. That ecstatic unison and heavenly honeymoon with the divine beloved (the universal "Self" or the "Absolute," *param*) comes as a fleeting glimpse. That's why Fakirs must relentlessly devote their very best to materialize that possibility even for a fleeting moment in their lifetime. Fakirs' aspiration for transcending egoism is a moving target after which they constantly chase. And this constant chasing is the life-blood of Fakirs' ethico-political subjectivity. This constant chase constitutes the basis of their sociality that combats egoism and cherishes indivisibility. Their subjectivity is thus in a way a counter-subjectivity, which mandates a subject to be persistent in attempting to negate the very subject, the self.

But, how the trained body of a Fakir interacts and comes to terms with the body politic is unclear. Fakirs do not explicitly talk about what kind of socio-political arrangements, body politic is conducive to the Fakir life-practice. Nor do they talk about the state; perhaps it is too alien to them. The literature on Lalon and Bauls that I found and consulted did not raise this question; nor did Lalon and his followers seem to directly address this question. It is highly

⁴³Although the Fakirs do not explicitly talk about the distinction between civil society and political state, my understanding is that they negate such a distinction.

likely they deliberately exclude from their world-view any form of parochial socio-political organizations like “nation” or “state.” I suggest, this omission is not accidental. Instead, it hints at an inherent battle between two models: the annihilation of the self by the Fakirs and the carefully calculated control over the self by power often dubbed biopolitics.

5.4 MANAGEMENT OF DESIRE AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONDITIONS

It is impossible to separate the body from society, culture, or the state; in other words, there is no pre-cultural materiality of the body upon which cultural codes and injunctions are inscribed or imposed (Butler 1989). The body is always already cultural; we come to know the body only through cultural mediations, e.g., language, sensation, or perception. As the body hosts desire, desire is also cultural, political. The relationship between desire and politics is best explained by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1977). They criticize Freud and Lacan by arguing that desire is not a “lack” and want to escape from “mummy-daddy” psychoanalytic deadlock. They also differ from Freudian-Marxian effort to reconcile two economies: Libidinal economy and political economy. “Our point of view is on the contrary that there is but one economy and that the problem of a real anti-psychoanalytical analysis is to show how unconscious desire invests the forms of this economy. It is economy itself that is political economy and desiring economy” (Deleuze 2004: 276). He insists that desire itself is part of the “infrastructure,” the socio-political milieu. What make people invested in hedonism, commodity fetishism, production and proliferation of indulgence of carnal appetites are not merely related to the existing socio-political system. Instead, they argue, desire is invested, assembled, and configured by the existing sociopolitical system in a way so that we are predisposed to be in need of hedonism,

fetishism, indulgence, productivity, and so on. For Deleuze, desire is different from interest. Desire is unconscious drives and impulses, whereas interest is conscious. The strength of the modern management of desire is that it primarily targets unconscious drives and impulses, instead of conscious, rational interests and choices. Moreover, the socio-political arrangements are not static. They can be manufactured, manipulated, and changed; so is desire. Desire predisposes people to act according to the demands of the unconscious manufactured by dominant socio-political configurations. Desire drives the subjects to be active. In that sense Deleuze finds desire positive and productive, the way Foucault finds power productive. Both Foucault and Deleuze agree on this point: What is pleasure for Foucault is possibly synonymous with what Deleuze means by desire.⁴⁴ However, Deleuze and Guattari seemingly failed to highlight how powerful the education of the body of the Fakirs, for example, can be in producing a radical, revolutionary desire. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari exclusively focused on changing the social and political system by ignoring the power of educating the body. Fakirs' bodily practices, on the contrary, invite us to take seriously the proposition that the body does not simply comply with, adapt to, or nurture the dominant socio-political codes and injunctions. The body can also train, educate itself to cultivate heterodox, radical, and revolutionary dispositions, sensibilities, and inclinations.

Just as Deleuze distinguishes unconscious desire from conscious interests, Fakirs differentiate the sexual energy of the body from lust. Deleuze finds desire productive, but that productive desire must be invested properly by the attendant socio-political milieu in making

⁴⁴ In an unpublished note by Deleuze translated by Melissa McMahon with the title, "Desire and Pleasure" in 1997, Deleuze mentioned that during their last conversation Foucault mentioned that his notion of "pleasure" is perhaps the same what Deleuze calls desire. The note can be accessed at the Monash University's web link: <http://www.artdes.monash.edu.au/globe/delfou.html>. I accessed the link on 26 September 2015.

revolutionary changes possible. Otherwise it can be dangerously exploited to generate cravings for hedonism, indulgence, and so on. Fakirs also consider the energies of the body, the bodily fluids, e.g., menstrual blood and semen, precious. They consider the body as the most precious gift human beings have. But that precious energy and gift can become a bane instead of a boon, if humans fail to take care of their body properly. Fakirs' positive approach to the "flesh" advocates proper education of the body and utilization of its precious sexual energy in attaining the desired ethico-political subjectivity. Fakirs thus denounce the vilification of "the flesh." For the same reason, they also vehemently oppose practicing celibacy or abstinence. Yet Fakirs warn everybody about the perils of the failure to properly manage the precious but potentially dangerous vital energy of the body. That's why they make it mandatory to submit to a Guru as the first step of the training.

Whereas Fakirs fail to underscore that the attendant socio-political configurations are equally important in educating desire and cultivating an ethico-political subjectivity, Deleuze failed to grasp the importance of educating desire and the body in cultivating a heterodox subjectivity and sociality. So did Marx. On other hand, both Ghazali and Fakirs fail to emphasize that the socio-political conditions are no less important in educating the body and cultivating its ethical dispositions. Therefore, I conclude, as the body and society are inseparable and always already imbricated into each other, neither can be addressed, taken care of, or changed without simultaneously addressing the other.

The question of desire has troubled human beings for a long time, especially in contemporary times of the dichotomy of repression or indulgence. Fakirs' practices of sanctifying desire offer a different way of thinking about desire. Instead of repressing or indulging, they long for harnessing the precious energies of the body that drive desire towards a

spiritual purpose. Fakirs' noble purpose is to defeat egoism and discover the organic indivisibility among fellow human beings, which could be considered somewhat similar to Marx's conception of "species-being." They aim to educate the body, to ignite its innate but dormant capability of opening itself up and connecting all beings in the world, nature, and the universe. They provide desire with a sublime goal.

Fakirs' practices of educating desire invite us to rethink the modern conceptions of the self and sociality. The underlying split between (private) egoistic self and (public) juridical self exemplifies modern arrangements of sociality. Modern sociality is predicated upon both the isolation of humans into egoistic beings, and the perpetual enmity among them as competitors. The state apparatus including laws plays a crucial role in restricting the enmity to a manageable level often by using force. However, the use of force is supposed to rationalize the rival demands of the self in order to ensure the highest possible maximization of egoistic pleasure. Marx identified the primacy of egoism in the modern world, and Ghazali's writings help us point out the fragile foundation of a juridical subject without the necessary ethical grooming. Fakirs' conception of sociality presupposes an ethico-political training of the self that longs for the annihilation of egoism and cultivation of the organic indivisibility among all human beings. However, I observed, Fakirs at times seemed to be jealous of their fellow adepts' prominence and fame. Interestingly, instead of defending such actions, they usually lament their limitations in living up to the ideal. What stands out about the worldview of the Fakirs is the sincere attempt to constitute a radically different sociality that refuses to split the self into conflicting camps and also forestalls the perpetual enmity among their fellows. Fakirs' heterodox life-practices, especially of sanctifying desire, invite us to be both radical and optimistic about rethinking sociality and the nature of human beings.

I conclude by reflecting on Kant's observation on the relationship between human nature and sociality:

Man has an inclination to associate with others, because in society he feels himself to be more than man, i.e., as more than the developed form of his natural capacities. But he also has a strong propensity to isolate himself from others, because he finds in himself at the same time the unsocial characteristic of wishing to have everything go according to his own wish. Thus he expects opposition on all sides because, in knowing himself, he knows that he, on his own part, is inclined to oppose others. This opposition [...] which awakens all his powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness and, propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw. (Kant 1963: 15)

Long time ago, Kant succinctly pointed out the basic assumptions of a modern sociality: self-centric, egoistic, or rational desires of individual humans and the need for society to manage the conflicting desires of those egoistic beings. Hobbesian Leviathan also represents similar assumptions about human nature. Although these assumptions were narrated long time ago, they still deserve careful considerations in understanding the characteristics of the dominant socialities of our times. Fakirs, on the other hand, constitute a subjectivity and sociality that is opposed to Kant's fundamental assumptions about modern sociality. Fakirs consider humans neither as essentially selfish nor primarily competitive beings. While Kant considered the egoistic desires of humans as prerequisites of a sociality, the practitioners' goal is to negate the very idea of an individuated self and its egoistic interests. Fakirs' sociality presupposes the desire to embody the indivisibility of all humans. Their desire is not to earn recognition from or a higher rank than others. The initiates' impetus for constituting a sociality is the selfless devotion and unconditioned love for all beings including humans, who are the embodied manifestations of God. While self-interest constitutes the driving power of a modern sociality, the desire for the negation of self makes the Fakirs' ethico-political subjectivity possible. Kant acknowledged that humans by nature embody "the unsocial sociability," but posited our apparently egoistic

tendency to be the powerhouse of humans' creativity and productivity. Moreover, that unsocial, selfish desire is the reason why a society is needed and constituted. Society and the state in Kant's observation function as managers of the irrational, animalistic desires of human beings. Marx was precisely pointing towards this "assurance of egoism" as the fundamental problem of the modern configurations of the state and sociality. The Fakirs also assume that human beings naturally embody six vices, and they combat them as enemies. Unlike Kant, the vices of the body never play any positive role in the Fakirs' praxis. Fakirs' sociality, which is predicated upon the negation of the self and its egoistic desires, is an enigma to the modern sensibilities described by Kant. Despite being marginalized, apparently apolitical, Fakirs' alternative tradition—selfless subjectivity and sociality—deserves careful attention of social scientists in rethinking desire.

While the importance of the unorthodox praxis and wisdom of the Fakirs is widely recognized, how those minority cultures can survive, coexist, and flourish has become a crucial issue, especially in our ages. With rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the expansion of information-technologies in contemporary Bangladesh, the previously remote places and relatively isolated communities are becoming directly connected to the majority cultures. While it is expected that the relatively isolated groups will change over time in their own ways, how the majority groups influence the marginalized traditions remains a matter of debate. In the last chapter, I describe the relatively recent changes in terms of the practices of the Fakirs in Bangladesh.

6.0 COOPTATION OF THE HETERODOX LIFE-PRACTICES OF THE FAKIRS

Although the Fakirs are small in number, their songs are popular in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. Thousands of people attend their performances during the annual ritual gatherings in Cheuria, Kustia at the *dharm* of Lalon. Understandably, they have attracted the attention of both the mass media and public authorities. The relationship between the initiates and the state and non-state apparatus has been uneasy. In this chapter I argue that to their dissatisfaction, Fakirs' heterodox life-practices have been gradually coopted by the public authorities (by co-managing the sites and administering annual observances), commercial mass media (by promoting noninitiated singers), and civil society stakeholders (often by calling for preservation of the tradition as a local heritage). However, the involvement of local administration in organizing the annual programs seems to have positive impacts as well, such as maintaining the law and order at the site, facilitating direct communications between the practitioners and members of civil society and the government, and securing public funding for the events.

Living with the practitioners, I witnessed how the followers of Lalon appreciate the incumbent government's initiatives in preventing possible attacks against the Fakirs by dogmatists, but strongly discourage the undue interference in managing the *dharm* of Lalon, where the annual gatherings take place. Sadhus at once welcome the growing attention of educated youth and dislike some of their tendencies to exploit Fakirs' liberal culture as a license to sensual gratification. While the adepts appreciate the increasing attendance of people on

different occasions, such as Lalon's death anniversary, they are unhappy about both the possible violations of the sanctity of the site, i.e., Lalon's *dham*, and the paucity of veneration among the attendees.

In this chapter I draw on my experience of attending the ritual gathering of the Fakirs in Cheuria, Kustia, on the anniversary of Lalon's "*tirodhan*" ("disappearance"), which is regularly held on the 1st day of the Bengali month of *Kartik*. In 2014, the ritual gathering started on 16th October and continued for five days. I first describe how the local government authorities have taken away the exclusive right of the Fakirs to manage the most sacred site of the followers of Lalon, the place where Lalon's mausoleum is located. Lack of management rights also mean that the Fakirs have lost their sole authority in deciding how to accommodate non-initiate attendees in the ritualistic programs at the sacred site. In this section I show how one of the most important annual ritual gatherings has almost become a conventional cultural gathering or a festival, where people from different classes entertain themselves by listening to music, watching the decorated site and the Fakirs, shopping around, eating together, and by just being part of the huge crowd.

6.1 FAKIRS APPEAR FOREIGN IN THEIR HOME

In this section, I discuss two important aspects of the Fakirs appearing foreign in their own home. First, I focus on how the practitioners lost their exclusive authority over managing Lalon's *dham* (sacred site), and then I describe how the local government authorities organize popular cultural programs simultaneously with the Fakirs' ritual gatherings.

Lalon's *akhra* in Cheuria, Kustia, had been managed solely by the practicing Fakirs. However, in 1984, a local government official claimed that the Fakirs' practices were not

properly Islamic, and the official eventually ordered them to evacuate the place. The Fakirs refused to leave their most important spiritual space (Masahiko 2013). Consequently, they were beaten by the police and forcefully removed from their sacred site. Many of the Fakirs were injured, and one of them, Birat Shah, died of the injuries several days later. Since then the Fakirs have been in an uneasy relationship with the local authorities and often with the state. The Fakirs also filed a lawsuit against the government and the responsible authorities. The court gave verdict in favor of the Fakirs, but the verdict has never been implemented. Moreover, in 1997, the then government announced their plan to construct a multi-storied building right beside Lalon's *dham*. To protest the unwanted intervention of the government, a national committee was formed in the capital city, Dhaka. The committee included the National Poet, Shamsur Rahman, and several prominent university professors including the widely respected Sirajul Islam Chowdhury. Despite the outcry, the government eventually completed the construction of the building, seriously offending the Fakirs. Since then the Fakirs have become in a way alienated in their own home, as the local government continued to intervene and influence the ritualistic events of the initiates at their most important site.

Why does the state insist that it must be a part of the management of the Fakirs' sacred site?⁴⁵ I assume it's the state's manifest intention to preempt any potentially adverse force that might work against the dominance of the mainstream culture in the long term. As the attendance at Lalon's *dham* has been increasing and the Fakirs' have been increasingly attracting national and international visitors, scholars, and institutions such as UNESCO, the governments in Bangladesh want to ensure that they are not only aware of the course of the events but also active

⁴⁵ It is important to note that two main political parties in Bangladesh, who have ruled the country mostly, seem to have agreed to continue the government's intervention in managing the Fakirs' events. Both parties also seemed to agree to not comply with the verdict to restore the exclusive authority to the Fakirs.

in planning the events from the very beginning to the end. Moreover, as the annual gatherings at Lalon's *dham* attract numerous visitors and the events are widely reported by the media, local and national political figures find the focus on the Fakirs' events as an opportunity to popularize themselves as important local and national figures. Furthermore, ruling political parties are always keen to making sure that their political rivals stay off the focus of such an important occasion. These are the tentative reasons the public authorities in Bangladesh insist on securing their significant role not only in motoring the events but also in organizing them.

On 16th October 2014, in the evening, I traveled from Dhaka to Cheuria, Kustia to attend one of the two biggest ritual gatherings of the Fakirs, named Lalon's *tirodhan dibosh* (the day of disappearance). It is interesting to note that the Fakirs do not say Lalon died; their use of the word, *tirodhan*, reflects their understanding life and death not as beginning or ending rather a transition from one phase to another. They also seem to believe in reincarnation. While I was heading towards the site, I noticed from the entry point it was packed with people of all ages. When I was about half a kilometer away from the site itself, I saw the various makeshift stores on the sideways selling foods, musical instruments, books, and toys. While trying to enter the site itself, right from the main gate it was so crowded at times I had to literally push people to make my way into the building complex. As the vendors on the both sides of street occupied the sidewalks of the relatively narrow entry, the visitors, including myself, moved in and out of the site usually by forming single-file lines. Hundreds, if not thousands of people, had to rub their shoulders to move around. There was almost no empty space inside. Following the crowd, I was finally able to enter. I immediately noticed there were two sides of the gatherings. On the left side of the entry point, I saw the famous site where Lalon was buried. Right beside that there was a white building, the first floor of which was literally packed with people. One could notice only

a small number of people wearing white garments, the Fakirs, sitting in circles. The circles of the Fakirs were surrounded by numerous visitors. It was surprising to observe only a small number of Fakirs or initiates in the middle who were the main attractions of the event.

As evident in the following picture, the entire building was lit up with colorful lights. There were two buildings inside the area. As they appear in the picture, the leftmost building was a museum constructed by the local government and the main building in the middle was where the Fakirs were sitting. During the gathering, I noticed some Fakirs, including Fakir Doulat Shah, found a place to sit in the corridor of the museum. I also came to know that Fakir Nohir Shah sent his disciples three days prior to the event to make sure he had a place to sit in the main building, which was right beside Lalon's burial site. When I entered in this part of the area following the trail, I noticed that there was a small site in front of the big building. That small site was where Lalon's mausoleum was located. Right beside Lalon's tomb, there was the tomb of Motijan Bibi, the female spiritual guide of Lalon. People entered there and kissed the tomb on the side to show their love and respect to him. Many of the visitors also likely prayed for Lalon's blessings. Most of the visitors that I observed were non-initiates. Many of them came from a distant place. Another notable aspect of the gathering is the attendance of people loosely labelled as Baul. Some of them were wearing ochre robes, which is not the preferred dress of the followers of Lalon. Some of them were followers of Sufi traditions, and some others belonged to Vaishnavism. Many others following diverse spiritual traditions also came to the site on that great occasion. Some of them wearing ochre robe sat in the two sides of the entry road, making the site appear diverse, lively, and friendly.



Figure 2: The front side of Lalon Complex in Kustia, Bangladesh

Once I entered the building in which the Fakirs were surrounded by numerous visitors, I noticed the Fakirs perform Lalon's songs almost on a regular basis. They stayed in the building almost always. Many of their disciples came and kissed their Guru's feet ritually. Some of them engaged into discussions on Lalon's songs and other spiritual practices. Once again it was noticeable that a few Gurus were sitting in the middle surrounded by a handful of disciples amidst the overwhelming flow of visitors. While conversing with me at the site, Shamsul Fakir expressed his frustration and suggested the authorities should think about managing the crowd in a way so that the practitioners staying inside the building could perform their rituals without such overwhelming and continuous flow of visitors.



Figure 3: A few Fakirs in the middle surrounded by visitors inside Lalon Complex

As seen in picture 3, the visitors inside the building literally surrounded the few practitioners. The Fakirs both were happy and worried about the presence of the overwhelming number of people even within their sitting area. While the Fakirs often felt happy about the interest of numerous people from across the country in Fakir Lalon and his followers, the practitioners were worried that they often lacked the proper milieu of practicing the rituals. This is also important to note that the physical proximity and close interaction between the Fakirs and the visitors have been important in their culture. The Fakirs need physical proximity to be able to interact, talk, and discuss various issues related to their spiritual life. In addition, the initiates and the visitors bow down before a Guru, and a Guru in turn often places his/her hands on the head of a visitor. Physical proximity plays an important role in cultivating the important relationship

between Gurus and disciples. I observed that the key components of a typical relationship between a Guru and devotees, i.e., physical proximity, relative quietness, and lengthy interactions, were virtually impossible in this setting.



Figure 4: Performing Fakirs at Lalon's *dham*

As seen in picture 2, Hridoy Fakir and his team were performing Lalon's songs within the building. A few things are important to note here. While it is typical for the Fakirs to sing songs at the site during the gatherings, the presence of live TV cameras is not. Hridoy Fakir told me that the performances of his group were broadcast live on a national television channel. Hridoy Fakir himself is a college graduate and former employee of local corporations. He has close contacts with journalists working for both newspapers and television channels. That's how he managed to live broadcast his performances. Hridoy Fakir is one exceptional practitioner who

became an initiate and left his former urban middle class life. Given his educational qualification and social status as a former corporate employee, Ridoy Fakir has developed a close relationship with the local public authorities, the members of annual observances organizing committee, and local and national newspaper and TV journalists. He once told me about his vision, “We want to create a new trend among the Bauls by attracting more educated youth to the practices of Fakir Lalon.” He also told me that many of the practitioners do not know why their practices are important. He then said, “I can scientifically explain to you why all of the things we do are important.” He continued by showing that he wore *khrom*—a specific type of shoes made of wood that was believed to be used by Lalon himself. Ridoy Fakir said with great confidence that all the Fakirs should wear only *khrom* and avoid any other types of shoes. While he seemed to stick to orthodoxies, Ridoy Fakir is remarkably proactive in giving interviews at TV channels or newspapers. Ridoy Fakir also told me that he helped making a documentary on Lalon’s *dham* named *Hoker Ghor*. More interesting is the case that the local government authorities organize a parallel cultural program in a nearby field. That state-sponsored parallel program draws often more attention of the local and national newspapers and television channels.

On the right side of the entry point to Lalon’s *dham*, there is a huge open field which is where the state-sponsored parallel cultural program is usually held. When I first saw the huge stage and thousands of people in front of the stage I wondered if that was a different program. In fact, it was not a different program. It was the state-sponsored program on the occasion of Lalon’s *tirodhan*. There is a committee that includes both the Fakirs and the representatives of the local government. However, the committee is always led by local District Commissioner. That Committee officially organizes the events. The events typically include speeches by the local government representatives, sometimes ministers, and scholars and public intellectuals, and

performances of popular singers. What makes the program widely popular to the people is the live performances of famous singers. That is one reason local television channels often show video clips of the performances of those famous singers.



Figure 5: State Sponsored Cultural Program in Cheuria, Kustia

The popular stage symbolizes the growing popularity of the Fakirs' among people in general. Yet it is the same reason the Fakirs often worry about the increasing tendency of transforming the Fakirs' important ritual gathering into a conventional cultural program. The few practitioners sitting inside the building were like an attraction of a popular exhibition. On the other hand, the huge stage, the presence of popular singers, and government officials tend to divert the attention of the mass people more into the popular version of Fakirs' practices. The Fakirs, specifically Lalon, are undoubtedly more popular among the people of Bangladesh now-

days, but the popularity has come at a cost, which is the lack of interest in their actual spiritual praxis.



Figure 6: Thousands of Attendees at the State-Sponsored Parallel Cultural Program

The number of people appreciating Lalon's songs has been soaring in contemporary Bangladesh, but few have become practitioners. Yet, something rarely seen in the past has been happening in recent times: University educated youth such as a journalist of the leading vernacular newspaper, a promising filmmaker, and a former employee of a private company named Ridoy Fakir including his wife became disciples. However, Ridoy Fakir expressed his concern about the presumed lack of sincere and wise Sadhus in his times. Sadhus also generally complain about the lack of sincerity and devotion among the novices. They also are worried about the commercialization of the supposedly spiritual musical performances. As Rowshan

Fakir lamented, among his disciples almost none of them would possibly excel to earn *Khilka* (being recognized as an adept). The scholar practitioner Farhad Mazhar predicted that Lalon's tradition might even disappear soon, and it would not be surprising during the rapid expansion of capitalism in Bangladesh. Interestingly enough, Lalon's philosophy has also generated certain forms of intellectual activism by both criticizing the colonial heritage often packaged as modernity and highlighting the indigenous philosophical traditions in the greater Bengal (Mazhar 2008).

In the remaining section, I describe two other key changes in recent times in contemporary Bangladesh that have direct consequences on the Fakirs' praxis.

6.2 POPULARITY ACCOMPANIES ANXIETY

Fakirs certainly have become more popular among the people of Bangladesh, but the popularity has also accompanied one serious concern for the Fakirs. The concern is about the fact that although the number of general enthusiasts is rising, few of them are interested in becoming devotees. Even if some become disciples, most of them fail to continue practicing the rituals for a long time. Fakir Nohir Shah and Rowshan Fakir repeatedly told me that they were concerned about the recent trend of the rise of popular Baul singers, who lack genuine interest in the actual practices of Fakir Lalon. The Fakirs also specified that whereas now-a-days an increasing number of TV programs, newspaper features, popular cultural events, and national institutions highlight Lalon's songs, hardly any of them pay adequate attention to the spiritual practices of the Fakirs. Fakirs specifically worry that the popular performers who sing Lalon's or Baul songs often are not initiated by a Guru. Those popular performers also lack sufficient understanding of

the message of the songs. Moreover, those professional performers tend to isolate Lalon's songs from the spiritual practices. Non-initiate performers sing Lalon's songs about bodily practices of initiates for non-initiate audience, which is strongly discouraged by the Fakirs. One of the main reasons is that those who are not disciples of a Guru are likely to misinterpret the meanings of the verses, which are meant to guide a practicing couple. Moreover, popular performers fail to realize that the songs (except *Doinya*) are supposed to be guidelines for the spiritual practices. Singing the songs for the audience who are not aware of the rituals are likely to misinterpret the meaning of the lyrics. *Doinya* songs of Lalon are, on the other hand, can be performed for everyone as those songs are generally about the inescapable state of helplessness of human beings. Those *Doinya* songs are also meant to encourage people to understand the significance of the Fakirs' spiritual praxis.

6.3 LIVING TRADITION TURNS INTO A CULTURAL HERITAGE

While it is common in recent Bangladesh to observe the rise of non-initiate performers of Lalon's songs, Fakir or Baul as a practicing tradition has been passing a critical phase mainly because of the decreasing number of practitioners. In 2008, UNESCO included Baul songs on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.⁴⁶ UNESCO also launched a project to "safeguard" Baul songs. The title of the project was interesting to note: "Action Plan for the Safeguarding of Baul Songs." The title itself shows that Bauls songs are considered to be at risk. The concern is more explicit in the following sentence: "The project

⁴⁶ A brief description of the project is accessed from here on March 9, 2017:
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/projects/action-plan-for-the-safeguarding-of-baul-songs-00047>

aims at ensuring the proper transmission of Baul songs through a series of workshops bringing together Gurus and young Baul apprentices.” UNESCO recognized the Fakirs’ songs and expressed their interest in contributing to the “proper” transmission of the songs to a wider public. It is unclear exactly what UNESCO considers “proper transmission.” On the one hand, the “proper” could indicate the authenticity of the lyrics. On the other hand, it may have less to do with content and more with receiving instructions from a Guru, the only people authorized to instruct disciples about the proper way of singing the songs. Surely, the practicing Fakirs follow the instructions of their Gurus in singing the songs, but Gurus often differ regarding both verses and ways of singing. More importantly, UNESCO seemed to suggest that they would organize “workshops” in attempting to ensure the proper transmission of the songs. This suggestion assumes that the proper way of transmitting the songs is workshopping. One must remember that among the Fakirs, Guru is the ultimate authority. Only a Guru can teach disciples the proper way of learning the songs and translating the messages of the songs into practices. It is dangerous to propose that a long-term relationship between a Guru and a disciple is not essential to safeguard Baul songs. The proposition that Gurus and disciples need to attend workshops to ensure the proper transmission of Lalou’s songs undercuts the legitimacy of a long-term practicing relationship between a Guru and disciples. Although the project did not seem to replace the conventional Guru-disciple relationship, it is counter-productive to propose workshops, instead of the long-term cultivation of a practicing relationship between a Guru and disciple. This proposition also seems to ignore the fact that the songs and the actual spiritual practices of the Fakirs are closely intertwined; separating them undercuts the link between the two significant components of a spiritual praxis.

In brief, the growing attention of the national mass media, the increasing participation of urban, educated middle class, and the well-organized interventions of the state have largely changed the popular image of the Fakirs' in contemporary Bangladesh. Interestingly in West Bengal, India, there has also been a fairly similar pattern observed among the Bauls. Benjamin Krakauer (2015) analyzed how in West Bengal, India, affluent Bengalis appropriate the tradition of Bauls and in doing so "ennoble" the folk tradition. However, the important point the author made was that because of the ennobling process, the practitioners became more vulnerable as the Bauls suffered from "a loss of respect and loss of income" (Krakauer 2015: 356). The author analyzed the case of a middle class singer and practitioner Parvaty Baul, who sing Baul songs differently than the actual practitioners. Parvaty Baul sings the songs in a way that appeals the middle class, educated people. Krakauer also observed that because of this kind of "ennobling" of a folk tradition, the traditional practicing Baul singers often lose the respect and financial support that they usually have from the mass people. In Bangladesh, there has also been a similar phenomenon, where Farida Akhter, a professional singer, has made Lalon's songs widely popular. The important thing is that Farida Akhter has not strictly followed the practicing Fakirs' style of singing Lalon's songs, but with her unique improvisation she became the most famous singer of Lalon songs especially among urban, educated middle class in contemporary Bangladesh. However, by popularizing Lalon's songs among the educated class, Farida Akhter may have put some of the practitioners into the risk of losing income and respect but on the other hand created a large group of young, educated people interested to know and discuss more about the broader praxis of the Fakirs, and sometimes to become actual practitioners.

The growing interest and attention of modern, educated people to the marginal traditions such as Fakirs' has indeed been significant. In recent times, scholarly research has been done on

Lalon and other indigenous figures. Increasing number of young educated people create spiritual alliance with rural, uneducated people. In a way, a resurgence of folk tradition has been underway in contemporary Bangladesh. However, this resurgence at the same time poses significant risks of coopting those local traditions and transforming them into a different type of commodity. Fakirs have been facing this challenge in recent times, and so far, there is no clear indication that they will be able to successfully resist the tendencies of cooptation and commodification of their spiritual resources. The question that seems to be quite important in this regard is that how this relationship between the Fakirs and the broader community can be managed in a way that serves mutual interest of the Fakirs and the broader community and the state.

6.4 THE FUTURE OF THE FAKIRS

Fakir Lalon and his followers have become so important in the cultural landscape of Bangladesh that neither the government nor the non-state authorities can afford to be indifferent to the events specifically the annual gatherings at Lalon's *dham*. At the same time, the number of visitors, well-wishers, and potential followers of Fakir Lalon has been becoming so big that it has become a practical problem for the initiates to continue their ritual activities in the same way as they are used to doing at their most important site, especially during the annual gatherings. Besides the problems of law and order, the Fakirs are reasonably concerned about the safety of Lalon's *dham* and the participants of the ritual gatherings, especially in the times when cultural gatherings have come under attacks, sometimes bomb blasts, in contemporary Bangladesh. While the Fakirs wish to keep themselves secured, in no way they would expect any loss of interest of the broader

community in Lalon and his followers. The state on the other hand is keen to act to secure dominance of the ruling political group(s).

Fakirs need the broader community and Bangladesh cannot afford to ignore them. However, one key source of tension that currently exists between the Fakirs and the public authorities is the unwanted intervention of the government in managing Lalon's *dham* and its annual events. On top of that the parallel cultural program that takes place right beside Lalon's *dham* has overshadowed the Fakirs' ritualistic performances at their most sacred site. The current mode of joint management of the events at Lalon's *dham* seems to be working well. However, besides the loss of exclusive authority of the Fakirs over managing Lalon's *dham*, a bigger problem surfaces. Fakirs' long-term practices of maintaining a calculated distance from the mainstream community and practicing an alternative subjectivity and sociality could be challenged in the long term if the ongoing process of cooptation continues.

The growing interest of larger population, especially the educated youth, in the Fakirs' practices has been both an opportunity and challenge for the practitioners. On the one hand, the interest of wider population creates the conditions of exploring the broader significance of the apparently private practices of the Fakirs. On the other hand, the popular trend of appropriating indigenous, local traditions to create newer set of choices in lifestyle poses a great danger to the spiritual core of the heterodox praxis of the Fakirs. As educated youth, journalists, professionals become interested to learn more about the Fakirs' practices (besides appreciating Lalon's songs), the Fakirs encounter relatively unfamiliar problems and prospects. As happens often in recent times, many of the enthusiasts including some devotees, do not leave their profession or home to join the community of the Fakirs. Instead they want to find ways of possibly combining their profession and spiritual practices. Farhad Mazhar, the scholar practitioner, in Bangladesh sets an

example in finding alternative ways of being a Fakir. Although he is an initiate and a prominent member of the Fakir community, he continues his profession as an intellectual, an entrepreneur, and a pioneer in “new agriculture,” which preserves local variety of seeds and avoids monoculture. However, Mazhar is criticized by his fellow Fakirs for violating the rules of their practices by owning private property, eating meat, and having a non-initiate partner. Despite the criticisms, Mazhar has become an influential figure in Bangladesh, who have encouraged many educated young people in Bangladesh to carefully think about Fakir Lalon and the Fakirs’ praxis. In fact, by reading Mazhar’s writings and listening to his lectures, I became deeply interested in knowing and eventually doing research with the Fakirs. Mazhar is also famous for encouraging people to go beyond the typical initiation process and instead think about the lessons of Lalon in the broader socio-political context.

Briefly, Fakirs in contemporary Bangladesh have been going through challenging times that could lead to significant changes mainly in two directions. Increasing interactions between the practitioners and broader community will produce an apparently chaotic situation but potentially significant breakthroughs in terms of explaining the verses of Lalon. This redefining of Lalon’s praxis aims to deal with contemporary socio-political issues more seriously and devise the spiritual practices accordingly. Farhad Mazhar can be taken as an indication of that kind of changes. However, the possibility of taking this turn currently is not strong. Despite sincere efforts of Mazhar, for example, there has not been any noticeable changes among his fellow practitioners in terms of redefining Lalon’s praxis that could address the challenges of our contemporary times. Another possible change is the continuation of an uneasy collaboration between the Fakirs and the local government authorities. However, this uneasy collaboration will significantly weaken the possibility of maintaining an apparent unity of the Fakirs, which has

traditionally been observed during the annual gatherings at Lalon's *dham*. The Fakirs would probably never stop visiting Lalon's *dham*, but the enthusiasm and dedication to perform the rituals as a community of the followers of Lalon could significantly erode. Fakirs admit that, in contemporary times, they have been suffering from the lack of influential and widely respected Gurus, who could unite all the practitioners, and boldly lead their community. The presence of such Gurus could perhaps revive the Fakir tradition in a way that effectively engages the border community without necessarily compromising the spiritual sanctity.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The current form of the praxis of Fakir Lalon and his followers' in contemporary Bangladesh may not be evident as a great resource for humanity, but it certainly could be. Lalon's insights and praxis can be useful not because the Fakirs offer ready-made solutions of our common problems, but because their strikingly different approach to life, society, and spirituality offer an opportunity to rediscover the diverse modes of thinking about human lives. Fakirs' praxis also shows a novel way of thinking about the relationship among fellow humans and non-human beings. Fakir's intriguing conceptions of the human body, human life, and the relationship between humans and non-human beings differs significantly from dominant worldviews of modern subjects. However, the radically different world of a Fakir is not entirely isolated from that of modern subjects. Despite the significant variations of different cultures, human beings have the capability of relating and communicating with each other. In this study, I aimed to explore how the praxis of a marginal heterodox group named Fakir can potentially be in a dialogue with mainstream conceptions of life, living, and sociality. Moreover, I showed that the Fakirs' insights are potent sources of alternative theorizations about the body, subjectivity, and sociality.

In doing this study I encountered an unusual problem. I felt at times alienated simultaneously from sociology, religious studies, and folk tradition studies. I often felt that my unconventional approach to studying a marginalized, spiritual tradition in Bengal puts my

research outside of conventional disciplines. While conducting a sociological study I significantly differed from conventional modes of researching indigenous folk traditions by area studies scholars. I also differed from typical sociological approaches in studying marginalized groups. To sociological eyes, often my study looks more anthropological than sociological, as it concerns an indigenous, marginalized group. My research also appears to belong to religious studies as it deals with spirituality. Furthermore, this research seems to belong to area studies scholarship as it is about a small group of people located in a specific area, namely South Asia. However, I deliberately tried neither to belong to any of those standard scholarly disciplines, nor to ignore them completely.

I attempted to explore the theoretical significance of an apparently religious praxis of a marginalized group in the Global South. I note two important points. First, I wanted to examine the broader theoretical significance of the beliefs and practices of a small, heterodox group named Fakir in Bangladesh. I examined what the Fakirs' insights tell us about, for example, subjectivity, sociality, and the relationship between the body and society. I suggest the Fakirs' insights help us conceptualize different ways of thinking about the body and the relationship between the body and its surroundings. Second, I attempted to explore ways of making possible a dialogue between the wisdom and praxis of the spiritual practitioners, located at the margins of a country in the Global South, and the mainstream, often Western, literature on embodiment. In writing this dissertation, I made some observations, pointed out theoretically promising leads. However, those are the results of a study that is just a beginning of a difficult but important task. I showed in this study how important it is to carefully study indigenous, local wisdom and praxis. The most important thing is not just to study but to do so from a very different perspective. My research could be, I hope, an example of that kind of a research perspective.

Finally, I specify major limitations of the Fakirs' praxis that I observed during my fieldwork. One major limitation of the practicing Fakirs was their lack of preparation to respond to rapidly changing socio-political conditions, specifically, the changing socio-economic characteristics of the potential practitioners, the growing interest of media in broadcasting the Fakirs' practices and performances, and the increasingly significant role of capital especially in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Fakirs seem to be less prepared to find appropriate ways of articulating the relevance of their praxis in the context of the radically changing conditions in contemporary times. It is increasingly difficult for the Fakirs to find a place that is relatively isolated from the mainstream non-initiate population in one of the most densely populated countries on earth, Bangladesh. In the context of increasing urbanization and industrialization, Fakirs also face the trouble of rising cost of subsistence even in rural remote areas. On top of that, the cost of arranging annual gatherings such as *Sadhusanga* has been shooting up. The number of participants, sympathizers, or onlookers increasingly gets bigger. Furthermore, the popular expectation of decorating the venues of ritual gatherings with colorful lights, loudspeakers, microphones, and comfortable sitting arrangements pushes the cost up significantly. I observed the Fakirs face informal pressure to comply with those popular demands. I even noticed the Fakirs often feel the peer pressure to make gatherings more noticeable, well-attended, better-decorated, and sometimes covered by local and national news media. The fame of a Guru, to some extent, depends on the fame and popularity of his or her *Sadhusanga*. Although it is not explicit, I noticed that the Fakirs sometimes expressed displeasure with the popularity of their peers.

Another significant limitation of the Fakirs is their failure to properly articulate the significance and relevance of their practices for our times. Many of the Fakirs, including Gurus

and devotees, became practitioners not through clear understanding of the fundamental principles of the Fakirs. They become Fakirs by already being a member of the community. They often follow their predecessors and maintain an initiate life without any substantial understanding of the underlying reasons of their practices. In recent times, however, the Fakirs tend to face more questions from unknown visitors coming from distant places. As visitors from diverse backgrounds and places interact with practitioners and ask questions, the Fakirs feel the importance of being knowledgeable not only about the initiates' own practices but the relatively recent developments in mainstream societies. More importantly, the increasing interest of the educated youth makes it more important for the Fakirs to be able to speak not only about Lalon but to make well-informed comments, comparative discussions about different traditions. Fakirs are generally knowledgeable about other religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but not so much about modern science, philosophy, or politics. As the initiates become more familiar with wider population, especially to modern educated people, the followers of Lalon feel the importance of being more informed and knowledgeable, at least about the seminal features of contemporary world.

One relatively recent phenomenon that affects the conventional mode of Fakirs' praxis is the increasing difficulty in finding relatively silent and isolated spaces, mainly because of the growing density of population and thriving commercial activities even in the remote rural areas. Fakirs conventionally spend a lot of time with their fellow practitioners in relative isolation from the non-initiate community. However, in contemporary Bangladesh, it is becoming difficult to find a relatively remote place that is distant and quiet enough for the initiates to perform the rituals without being interrupted by the frequent presence of non-initiate visitors. Non-initiate visitors often require the Fakirs to spend more time introducing them to the initiates' life-world

in simple terms and within a very brief time. In the Fakirs' conventional praxis, long-term commitment in becoming an initiate and active participation in the rituals are two indispensable features. Those two fundamental features, however, tend to be some of the least popular aspects of the praxis, especially among the non-initiate sympathizers in the contemporary times. Many of the visitors, who love Lalon's songs and want to know more about the Fakirs, are employed, looking for jobs, or students. Those visitors meet and converse with the initiates only for a short time, as they quickly return to their daily lives soon.

Fakirs have yet to completely overcome the widely-condemned use of *Ganja*—a local variety of Marijuana—by some of the practitioners. Although I rarely observed the Fakirs smoking *Ganja*, they are generally known as heavy users of *Ganja* as part of their spiritual praxis. I must also mention that among the Gurus I worked with, the followers of late Fakir Loban Shah, the use of *Ganja* is generally considered an unacceptable deviation from Lalon's practices. Lalon himself also strictly opposed the use of *Ganja*. Yet it is still practiced by some of the practitioners mostly in their own private places. Furthermore, sometimes the youth, who become interested in Lalon's songs and Fakirs' praxis in general, end up being addicted to *Ganja*. Although most of the Fakirs that I observed strictly prohibit any form of smoking in their places, there are still some who do it regularly. The majority Muslim population usually portray the users of *Ganja* as deviants and morally bankrupt people. Although it is highly controversial even among the practitioners, I came to know that some of the initiates claim to use *Ganja* as part of their spiritual rituals. Keeping the debate aside regarding the potential adverse effects of *Ganja*, the followers of Lalon have endured enormous social castigation mainly because of the practice of smoking *Ganja* by some Fakirs in current Bangladesh. This image also distanced the

Fakirs from a large number of people in Bengal and raised doubts about possibilities for the broader socio-political significance of the praxis of Fakir Lalon.

Another popular perception of the Fakirs that hurts them a lot concerns sexuality. Fakirs are often condemned because of their heterodox sexual practices. Precisely because the sexual rituals of the Fakirs are supposed to be strictly confidential, rumors proliferate. Moreover, for the majority people in Bengal, the Fakirs' sexual rituals and conceptions of the bodily fluids, specifically about semen and menstrual blood, are literally shocking. Often the Fakirs' rituals get misrepresented or exaggerated. Lalon was not accused of "illicit" sexual practices by *Hitokori* (the prominent periodical in Lalon's time), but Bauls in general were severely castigated and condemned historically, for example, by prominent figures in Bengal, such as, Moulavi Wali, J. N. Bhattacharay, Akshay Kumar, Dayananda, Reazuddin, and Rabindranath Thakur (Jha 1995b: 221). Fakirs are aware of the anxiety. That is one important reason some of the Fakirs have either completely renounced the sexual rituals or significantly confined all discussions about those private rituals to their private spaces. As the Fakirs' have drawn increasing attention of the mass media, the practitioners have become more secretive and selective in practicing those bodily rituals. As I described earlier, the increasing focus on the traditionally marginalized group praxis has made many of the Fakirs value popularity more than the spiritual accomplishment.

Lastly, it is very difficult to have scholarly discussions with the Fakirs, mainly because almost always they only speak about their own spiritual discourse and are hardly aware of larger discussions on society, culture, governance, law, or the state. As I tried to have conversations with them, I immediately noticed they were not quite used to speaking with outsiders: it takes special effort to making proper communication between the two worlds of initiates and noninitiates, so to speak. While I tried to ask questions about the broader significance of the

intriguing insights prevalent in Lalon's songs, many of the current practitioners only focused on interpreting the lyrics of Lalon regarding their spiritual praxis. As a non-initiate researcher, I struggled to play the role of a mediator in making possible conversations between the two worlds. It has been a difficult task, but it is well worth continuing for a long time. My research is the beginning of an attempt to explore the broader theoretical significance of the traditionally marginalized group's praxis.

In the ages of the apparent dominance of neoliberalism, when it is almost impossible to conceptualize any meaningful and plausible alternative to market logic, individualism, and commodification of human relationships, the heterodox praxis of Fakir Lalon and his followers is a living example of heterodox conceptions of life, the body, subjectivity, and sociality. The alternative conceptions and practices of the Fakirs can potentially be great resources for social thinkers in reexamining dominant ideas and practices in modernizing societies such as Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, let me clarify that the Fakirs' praxis provides only interesting provocations to rethink the dominant life, not ready alternatives suitable for larger publics. Nonetheless, the practitioners' insights deserve careful attention of social thinkers, especially to appreciate alternative ways of thinking about life, subjectivity, and sociality. This research is only an initial step in the difficult but extremely important task of appreciating and carefully examining the wisdom and praxis of the marginalized people, especially in the Global South.

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