



# COOPTATION OF THE UNORTHODOX FAKIRS IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

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# Fakir Lalon Shah (1774–1890)

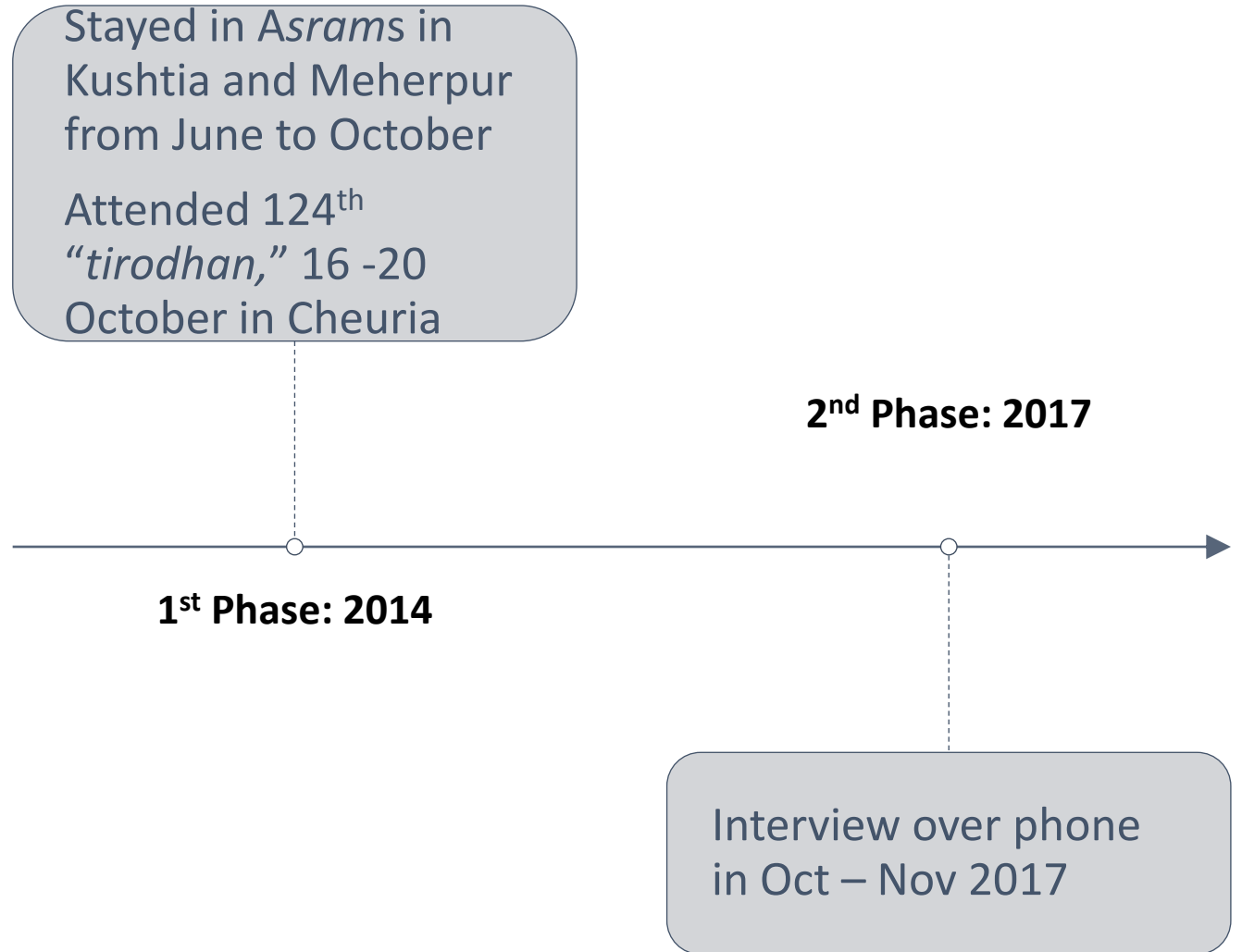
- Most influential “mystic minstrel” in Bangladesh and West Bengal
- Illiterate but composed about 500–1000 songs
- Thousands of initiate followers and numerous sympathizers all over the world
- Vehement opposition to caste prejudice, insular religiosity, and misogyny



# Research Question

How do the interventions of the state and non-state apparatus impact the Fakirs in contemporary Bangladesh?

# Methodology



# Key Findings

- Fakir appear foreign in their own home
- Performers outshine practitioners
- Living tradition turns into cultural heritage

Foreign in  
their own  
home

lost control  
over Lalon's  
*dham*

Parallel  
cultural  
program

## Battle over *Dham*

- *Lalon Mazar O Seba Sadan Rakkha Committee* since 1890
- In 1984, local DC blamed Fakirs as not really Islamic
- Fakirs were beaten and forcefully ousted
- Birat Shah died

# Laws Ignored

Fakir Montu Shah  
filed lawsuit

Legal battle won  
but to no avail

Instead, public  
authorities  
implemented  
alternative plans





## Parallel Cultural Program

# Popularity accompanies anxiety

- White dress
- Uncut hair or beard
- Not part of Fakirs' program
- Image of Lalon



Practitioners  
Ignored



# Performers vs. Practitioners

Farida Parveen

“most people fascinated by Lalon believe in the guru of knowledge, I accepted the guru only in respect of singing”

Popularized Lalon's songs at the cost of the spiritual praxis

# Amateur Fakir

“the bigger danger is that someone who doesn’t have any Guru grows beard-mustache, wears white dress, sings Lalon’s songs or doesn’t, lives life in his/her own way, they are *soukhin* [amateur] Bauls..too many *soukhin* Bauls. [--] When someone asks who their Gurus are, then they say, ‘I am still searching for Guru but haven’t found any.’ Haven’t found, how come you have changed so much? [..] Such a craze among young generation is that they must sing Lalon’s songs even if the instrument is just a guitar; must have long hairs like the followers of Lalon, and must attend programs at Lalon Sainji’s place twice a year”

-- Hridoy Fakir

# Cultural Heritage

UNESCO recognized Baul  
songs as Intangible Cultural  
Heritage of Humanity

2008

2008–2010

UNESCO financed “Action Plan  
for the Safeguarding of Baul  
Songs”

Four workshops in Kustia

“to spread *Baulsangeet* among the young generation” (Haq 2010: 13)

Workshopping instead of Guru-disciple praxis!

Workshopping  
with Gurus!

“Ennobling”  
Folk  
Tradition

glorifying  
“authentic” Bauls  
and castigating the  
rest

“a loss of respect  
and loss of income”  
(Krakauer 2015:  
356)

Parvaty Baul  
(Kirtan) and Farida  
Parvin (Classical)

Middle class  
performers but not  
initiates



# Wrapping it up

De facto control  
over *dham*

Singers outshine  
Sadhus

Obsession with  
songs; oblivion  
about praxis

Hyper-  
marginalization?

Foucauldian  
power?

Apparently