

FILM

Moner Manush

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Gautam Ghose uses traditional methods—single, extensive takes, shot largely on outdoor location, harnessing natural light—in the secular, folk musical, "Moner Manush—soul man/The Quest" (India/Bangladesh, Bengali, colour, 150 mins). In 1889, on a houseboat owned by Rabindra-nath Thakur, adrift on the Padma river. Rabindranath's elder brother Jyotindranath (Priyanshu Chatterjee) is conversing with old Lalan Fakir (Prosenjit Chatterjee), a secular, spiritual folk singer. Based on a story by Sunil Gangopadhyay, Gautam Ghose's script keeps shifting time, in delineating the enlightened and tolerant philosophy of an illustrious Baul singer. Points of references recur on a vast river, with isolated small boats and fishing nets. Sketching a portrait of Lalan, Jyotindranath is overwhelmed with curiosity on the singer. Questions persist on sacred practices, and Lalan explains that sacred habits rest inside the soul. Young Lalan Chandra Kar (Jisan) with a beard, is on horse back with wife, Golapi (Tathoi), and sings-'Who broke the water into waves?' as they pass through woods and ponds. When Lalan returns the white stallion to the 'Kaviraj' (ayurvedic doctor) Zamindar (Hasan Imam) the servants of the Zamindar accuse him of theft. Lalan is made to chop trees by the riverside, as punishment. In the woods one day, Lalan hears Guru Gosain singing, 'Where to drop the burden of life'. For the Guru, the word 'poor' has no meaning, for everybody is poor. Old white haired Lalan peers into the past, and his young wife flashes by washing clothes. Folk songs abound, though not necessarily as an elaboration of the tableau depicted. When the zamindar offers a job for Lalan, to take care of the white horse, and accompany the zamindar on a Ganga darshan (view and exploration) pilgrimage, Lalan's mother panics, as Lalan's father had died on a pilgrimage. The job nature is inauspicious. At night on the boat travel, Lalan sings to the zamindar.

Somewhile later, Lalan is afflicted with high fever. The maid, Bina (Deepa Poddar) tends to him on the floating boat. The kaviraj zamindar diagnoses Lalan's small pox and high fever, as a visitation of goddess Kali. Since it is an infectious illness, poor village boys put Lalan afloat in a bamboo raft, on the Ganges. The raft strikes a bank, where goats are bleating. Cut to present, Jyotindranath and old Lalan, leave the boat and walk up to a cottage. Young, ill Lalan is taken care of by Muslim villagers. The Muslim village elder's wife, Rabayya (Rabeya Prachi) gets to know Lalan's Hindu identity while changing his clothes. A Muslim saint Siraj Sai (Raisum Islam Asad) sings and dances to songs of Kali, Ali, and the master of the soul at cremation grounds and graveyards. Siraj remembers hearing Lalan singing in the forests, some years earlier. He convinces Lalan that seeking oneself is the foremost seeking. The transcendental offers winds, mirrors and strange birds. Lalan leaves Anwar's hut with Siraj, for the sea of the soul. In middle age, Lalan becomes a baul folk singer and fakir (religious). Influenced by Pantheism, he searches for others, for God, and the soul man, Guru Gosain, who appears and disappears. One day, Lalan returns to his old village, and meets his wife, Golapi by the river bank. Golapi, dressed in white, cries. Lalan's mother is in disbelief, as Lalan has lost his faith and dined with Muslims. The villagers are aghast, as they had left Lalan floating in the waters, without the last rites being performed. Since Lalan has forsaken his religion, he cannot be kept in the house of Radha, Krishna and Lakshmi. Lalan walks away from home. Guru Gosain had warned Lalan not to return to his past. Lalan's wife declines a journey to a land where there is no division between Hindus and Muslims. The fakir broods and sings 'Mercy of the benevolent', on a thatched boat without walls.

Abandoning the charm of a home, Lalan returns to Siraj. During the rambling travels on foot and river boat, Lalan finds desire and ecstasy in Mayur (Shormi), a swarthy girl. Soleiman / Kaloa (Chanchal Chowdhury), who lives in forests after being beaten by Hindus and Muslims, and poses as a madman, shares a sugar cane with Lalan. Injured Kaseem (Gautam Mukherjee), a Muslim married to a Brahmin widow, Kamli (Paoli Dam) seeks Lalan and Soleiman's help. Widow Kamli cooks for everybody, and Lalan, Soleiman, Kaseem, and Kamli eat from the same pot. Poor and utterly helpless, the mystics are adrift in an endless river. Priests, kings, plebeians and serfs are all caught by death. A forest becomes the abode of the banished. At night in the village, widow Kamli plays on the tanpura, sings and dances. The song comes alive, but there is no tune to match misery. When Kaseem is asleep, the widow Kamli hugs Lalan and finds Lalan's desire is intact. She withdraws crying. Later when Soleiman smashes the huts built by him, Lalan tells Kamli to save him. Soon Mamiruddin and Bargakhepi (Bibi Russel) join the musical 'akhra' (hamlet). When Lalan is catching fish on the banks of Triveni river, Harinath Mazumdar (Shantilal Mukherjee) and Mir Hussan (Anirban Guha) who are editing a liberal journal, 'Village News', meet him. The journal is about peasants. Lalan and his mendicant friend sing songs in all villages. The liberal friends apprise Lalan about the rights to settle in forests, as all land is owned by the Thakurs, who are educated and enlightened zamindars. There are claims of revenue. Lalan is a common man without a full name, and shares a meal with the visitors.

There is peace in Lalan's rural settlement, where his followers sing and dance. Attacks build up from all over. The Brahmins and orthodox priests are provoked. The mullahs call singing a sin, and demand no singing on day of Eid. Lalan and his friends train with sticks. Even though the East India Company has banished 'Sati', one day a young rich widow, Bhanumati (Shuva Kundu) is about to be burnt on her husband's pyre. She is rescued by Lalan and his friends. The widow Bhanumati joins Lalan's hut as a maid, and gives her jewellery to Lalan, which he returns. Shimultala village becomes an abode of joy and Chuadanga is transformed to a land of 'Kirtans'. Kamli, Bargakhepi and Bhanumati sing and dance, with flowers on their heads, at Aatjharia festival. Debates, fights and skirmishes follow. The Hindus allege that Lalan and his followers were violating traditions of caste and instructions of Manu, the Vedas and the Puranas. The Moulavis condemn the Bengali songs as blasphemy. Hindu widows with Muslims incite more condemnation. The women accuse the Hindu leaders as philanderers. The critics attack with violence and a villager Kalua dies. There are protests from the Thakurs who promise that the villains will be handed over to the police. Lalan pleads for forgiveness. Kalua's dead body is rowed on a boat, by Lalan and his disciples. The Thakur landlords transfer the village to Lalan fakir. Gagan (Sumit Thakur), the postman delivers letters and copies of Lalan's songs. There is mist over a river, and Lalan with Gagan and his wife sing and dance, with strains of Muslim prayers. Fate stands in the way, even as Lalan's lyrics and ektara create beautiful melodies. □□□