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take me across  
songs on drifting land  
in Bangladesh



### musicians

Bipin Chandra Ray: flute  
Narayan Chandra Ray: dotara  
Holi Charan: khamak  
Sujan Kumar: dhol  
Jhahir Uddin: violin  
Shyamol Chandra Ray: ektara  
Badsha Alam: mandira

Badsha Alam: collection of songs  
Shamim Hasan: recording and mixing

Studio: Arshi Nagar, Lalmonirhat, Bangladesh,  
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### the land

The songs presented in this CD come from a region that has a distinctive landscape of rivers, ponds, and mud roads still, and an old and mainly unwritten social, religious and literary history.

The region of north Bangladesh, called *uttar anchal*, the northern fold, like the richly patterned part of the saree, has many dialectal variations of Bengali and strong elements of the old Sanscritic *sadhu bhasa*. Far from the capital, it is still rich in oral traditions that express the amazing variety, sometimes the confluence, and always the co-existence of devotional ways of life and mind. Tolerance is still a way of life in some places.

In this vulnerable as well as fertile land, between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal, flow the Brahmaputra, the Tizta, the Dharla and many smaller rivers. They make a landscape of rivers, *shimul* trees with intensely red and orange flowers in spring, paddy fields ploughed by buffaloes, and jute with its particular smell in the rainy season.

The beauty of Bengal is in its hospitality, religious and other, the intensity of emotional moods, religious or secular, the diversity of names for the Invisible, and the many forms of worship.



## the songs

All the songs on this record are not local. They may originate in other parts of greater Bengal, east and west of the Indian/Bangladeshi border. They may be loosely categorized as love songs, devotional songs, songs about, or to, the *guru*, *pir* or *murshid*, the master on the inner path, like those by Lalan fakir (d. 1890, Kusthia), by many considered one of the finest of all Bengali poets.

The distinctive songs of this region belong, first of all, to the tradition of *bhabaya*, with its root *bhab*; emotion. *Bhabaya*, it is said, is as old as Krishna's love for Radha and Radha's for Krishna. Muslims sing this too.

The main emotion in these songs is love, often as felt in separation. *Bhabaya* may comment about familial issues, for example a girl being married off to a man other than the one she loves, or of a girl too poor to have prospects to marry. Many songs comment on the journey a girl has to make, from the house of her father to the house of her husband, often with the rhythm of a moving vehicle.

The devotion to the *murshid*, *pir* or *guru*, the teacher that can carry the blind, or almost-blind and almost-deaf, human being, human singer, across the river-of-troubles that is human existence, seems to be a common energy.

Rehana sings about her *murshid chand*, her *praner murshid*, the only one who can ferry her across the ocean of life. Sharifa, with the words of Lalan fakir, sings to her seen or unseen guru of the desire of being taken across the river to the other side.

## the artists and the project

The singers are young (aged 14-16). They have learned the songs with local master teachers. Songs like these cannot be learned in music academies, or in the big cities. The girls were born in villages, three of them on sand islands in the river of Brahmaputra. They have all been taught the old texts and rhythms, now almost vanishing, within the context of "a song preservation project" which started in 2004-2005. The project has grown to become an organization with the aims of archiving, of teaching and of serving the traditional folk music and musicians in the northern region of Bangladesh. This organization is called Arshi Nagar. Arshi Nagar is working in villages on the mainland as well as on islands in the big river of Brahmaputra.

This is the first CD made by Arshi Nagar, a grassroots project which has invented, though far from perfected, a method whereby musical and textual knowledge can be transmitted, and courage and strength given to girls and boys, mostly very poor, whose desire is to sing. Arshi Nagar also has boy-artists. The songs of the boys and the old singers will be recorded soon.



We in Arshi Nagar are aware of the fact that the oral knowledge may be lost by those who have studied in formal schools. But our girls willingly acquire general and "respectable" knowledge through the formal system in order to get the courage to sing in public. These girls study in class 7, 8 and 9 at the time of the recording.

The songs are vessels for their mind, and for their life's journey.

## take me across

People need to remember their own life's context, and to find ways to express their pain and their quest to go beyond troubled waters, and people need joy.

Rehana's voice was the first singing child whose voice I heard in Bangladesh, after having spent much time with the bauls of West Bengal. The girl was about eight years old, in 2002. I was struck by the authority in her voice – and was "captured". I had been captured four years before, in 1998, when a group of *marfati* women sang for me on a remote island in the Brahmaputra. At this time I knew enough about the precariousness of the baul tradition in West Bengal to want commit myself to a small kind of "rescue effort" for vanishing oral traditions in northern Bangladesh. This, of course, could only be done in association with local and knowledgeable musicians.

I do believe that songs, and these songs in particular, may guide, serve or comfort people haunted by rising food prices, by floods, by forms of religious doctrine that do not allow song or the freedom of speech of girls and women, not to mention the simple co-existence of Hindus and Muslims.

The singing girl may belong to a Muslim or a Hindu tradition but when she sings she is fully one with the words and the *bhab* of the song. She sings as she breathes as she tries to understand love, as she moves on into adulthood that is pre-defined for most women, especially among the poor.

Some of the girls in the project may want to go on singing, one or two may search for a guru with whom they can dive even deeper, and some may study and serve their people in other ways.

May our girls be allowed to go on singing and be blessed by people who want to listen. May they be allowed to think that the old songs this time offered by them can open up a space of remembrance, knowledge and deep emotions in listeners. May these not be their last songs in public.

The girls are presented by first name only. The photographs show the work-in-process in some of the *guru grihas*, the song-and-music schools in selected villages, as well as some of the local instruments.



### Acknowledgements

Without the singer and grassroot organizer Badsha Alam, the co-ordinator of all work done within Arshi Nagar (with the help of his wife and his son), nothing of this sort would ever have been possible. Without the loyalty, courage and competence of the field-workers, first of all Shyamol Chandra Ray, and all the local master teachers, as well as the musicians who so generously gave of their time during an extremely hot month of July 2010, repeating part of the effort in April 2011, and the knowledge put in by Shamin Hasan, this CD would not have been produced. We are grateful.

Since 2004, a very faithful, loosely interconnected, group of people in Norway has enthusiastically supported the effort to strengthen traditional musical forms and songs in northern Bangladesh. Without them, now organised as "suno-norge", this CD could not have been produced. I am grateful.

I am also grateful to Linda Staines who carefully read and corrected my English text for this CD.

Wera Sæther, Oslo, July 2011

[www.suno-norge.org](http://www.suno-norge.org)

## 1. Rehana

*song of love in separation*  
by Razzak Deoan

time passed  
the friend of my heart did not come back  
time passed  
the friend of my heart did not come back

it was late it was night  
the cuckoo called from the branch  
I am the unhappy one  
pain is burning hurting  
to whom can I show my sorrow  
oh friend-witness my sorrow

if the friend of my heart comes back  
to the house of this unhappy one  
make him a necklace of the black  
kajol marks from my weeping eyes

and, friend-witness, tell mad Razzak  
that the one who loved him has gone forever

## 2. Mousumi

*song of love in separation*  
anonymous

you I will make into Radha<sup>1</sup> tenderly make you  
into my Radha  
and I will become Dark Moon<sup>2</sup>  
and prove that love

leaves marks, love  
makes wounds

I will make you into a decent girl  
and show her the pain of separation  
show her the pain of separation  
how will she be able to stay  
in-doors and at home  
and keep her self-respect

when I am sitting at the bank  
of the Jamuna river  
at the foot of the kadam tree  
playing my flute and calling for Radha Radha  
then you will understand the pain of love  
how devastating  
is the poisonous flood

## 3. Nupur

*song of love in separation*  
by Soharab Hosen

oh bird from the land of my friend  
tell me about my friend  
for how long can I be waiting  
waiting for how long dreaming  
I could see my friend at my side  
but my dream was broken  
and I knew it was all just a lie  
like the female deer in a burnt-out jungle  
I am running around  
burnt up from within

oh for how long must Soharab  
burn from within

## 4. Sharifa

*bhabaya*  
anonymous

oh how to tie up my young life  
I have neither silver nor gold  
to put around my neck as a jewel  
oh how to tie up my young life

I have neither banknotes nor coins  
to tie up in the knot of my saree  
oh how to tie up my young life

## 5. Rehana

*murshidi<sup>2</sup>*  
Sha Alam Sarkar

I am sitting on the road looking  
for the teacher of my heart

I cannot just sit here any more  
so let me go and search  
for the friend of my heart  
what do you know about me  
how I am being torn into pieces  
who among you know  
the human mind and heart  
the pain that can overshadow it all

how can those who do not know pain  
in the marrow of their bones  
know what I am carrying  
how it falls down upon me  
making me naked  
if only I could get a friend who knows pain  
I would wash his feet  
with my tears forever  
if only he would remain beside me

has anybody in Braj<sup>4</sup> seen my friend  
if I could meet them  
and tell them I never meant  
to do him any harm  
if only I knew that he knew this about me  
I would be redeemed

## 6. Mousumi

*anonymous*

if you black Krishna  
would come to my modest hut  
one early morning during the month of rains  
I would sing for you  
play the harmonium for you  
if you came I would put out  
a part of my saree for you to sit  
and smilingly sing  
all the night for you  
happily make you happy  
with my own hands prepare paan  
delicately, on a tray for you

from you I would get the smell of rainy  
month's flower  
let heart blend with heart  
whisper words with no sound  
and flow with you in the river of love  
even without water

## 7. Sharifa

*Lalan fakir<sup>5</sup>*

I am sitting on this side of the river  
oh Merciful One take me across

I am sitting alone in the bathing  
step that goes down to the river  
the sun is setting  
without you I am in danger  
no way out  
take me across

I do not pray and I do not abstain from evil  
I have always walked on evil paths  
but I have heard about a fallen man  
who was rescued  
let me be like him  
take me across  
if the pathless one does not get a path  
who will then call you Allah

fakir Lalan says rescue the pathless one  
oh who can call you and tell you to  
take me across

## 8. Nilima

*bhabaya*

*Neel Kamal Mishra*

you who look after the buffaloes  
do not hope for me any more  
humiliate me as much as you want to

dear one who looks after the buffaloes  
marry another  
marry another one now

if a boy makes a mistake in the morning  
it will be forgotten in the evening  
if a girl makes only one mistake  
during her life-time

people will then repeat  
words about her mistake  
again and again, as the prayer  
belongs to a rosary  
you who look after the buffaloes  
marry another  
marry another one now  
do not cry any more  
with your beloved face in the handkerchief  
my father and my brother are holding me tight  
as if I were going to be burnt on the fire  
and they are marrying me away

dear one who looks after the buffaloes  
marry another  
marry another one now

## 9. Mukta

*Lalan fakir*

see oh see my beloved one  
how the heart becomes renewed  
in the company of sadhus<sup>6</sup>

will the sinner ever again be lucky like this  
and sit in the company of sadhus

where sadhus sit together  
there are millions of obstacles  
one gets into the company of sadhus  
only with great difficulty  
such is the true company of sadhus  
if you, my mind  
do not flee away from truth once more

what a grace there is in the teachings  
of the true Teacher  
there is no limit to that truth  
the sadhu has no address  
no street name and number  
if only you, my mind  
do not flee away from truth once more

a sadhu has the mind of wind  
and the smell of sandal  
from the tree of the jungle  
Lalan says what a richness  
the mind can share in  
in the close company of sadhus

## 10. Mukta

*folk song*

my soul is always thinking of you  
and weeping for you my friend  
Krishna, the friend of my soul

you have no mercy at all  
you have damaged my family name  
you crushed me  
and left me alone oh my friend  
heaping pain upon me with no regret

if only I had known before  
that you would be cruel like this  
not knowing the inner rules of love  
heaping pain upon me with no regret

<sup>1</sup> Radha is Krishna's beloved one. What the song seems to say is that the woman, only she, knows pain, and that the man can only know pain if he becomes "a radha".

<sup>2</sup> One of Krishna's names.

<sup>3</sup> Song to, and about, the murshid, the guru, or spiritual teacher, in the Muslim tradition.

<sup>4</sup> Braj is Krishna's place and a pilgrimage site.

<sup>5</sup> Lalan fakir, d. 1890, in western Bangladesh, a very fine poet and the most important author, though illiterate, of baul songs.

<sup>6</sup> According to history and tradition, the sadhu is the perfected one.