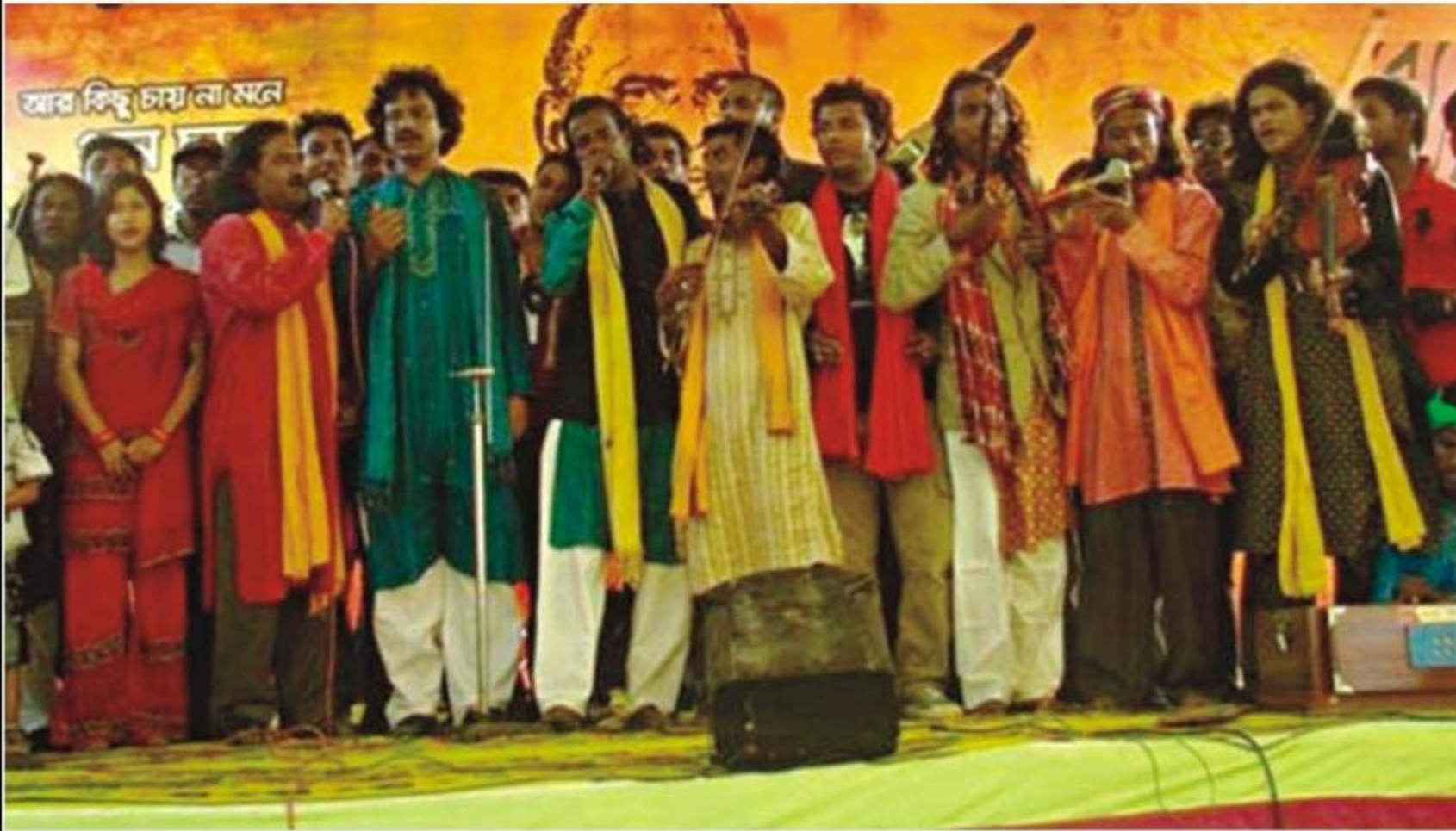


# Treading the enlightened path

## Music festival in honour of Shah Abdul Karim



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They start slowly, circling round and round. And then, gracefully, naturally, the speed picks up and the Dervishes are caught entranced in a transfixing otherworldly whirl. It is their form or worship, and it is powerful.

The Baul singers of rural Bangladesh are connected to the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey through Sufi tradition, a practice of mysticism through which adherents worship and purify their souls. Sufi Muslims are joined by Vaishnava Hindus in Baul music, which focuses on themes of devotion to both God and humanity through love. Such is the universal power of Baul to use harmony to promote love that in 2005 Baul tradition was added to the list of UNESCO "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

Shah Abdul Karim, who died last year, composed some 5000 songs and

was one of the greatest masters of Baul music. This past weekend a two-day festival was held in his honour at his home village, Ujan Dhol, in Sunamganj district.

Just driving to one of the most remote locations in Bangladesh, several hours from Sylhet down narrow winding roads, is a mystical experience. At the end of the track lies the small village with its serene riverside setting, and the house where the remains of Abdul Karim and his wife are honoured. A walk beside the river is a necessary prelude to the music: moments of relaxation and beauty to prepare for the elevation of the soul that is to ensue.

And what astonishing music making this was! In Dervish style, the event began on a relatively low key, but then spun itself up to heights of ecstasy. The performances were of an extraordinarily high standard, but the way the event as a whole was choreographed -- leading the audience to

states of ever deepening involvement -- was even more remarkable.

The *dhol* -- a colourful, playful drum -- seemed to be ever centre-stage. Its player, driven by the song, in turn carries the song along with ever more frenetic beats of joy as, caught up by the beat, he dances round the stage. The bamboo flute -- *bashi* -- adds a raw earthiness to the sound mix, its message exultant as it joins the *dhol* in urging the singer to take the path to enlightened love.

The singers were superb. Baul Bashiruddin Sarkar gave us rhythmically powerful moral messages. "Abdul Karim is saying be helpful to people. Oh my crazy soul, why do you misbehave? Why not understand the heart of people? Without the heart, we are nothing!" The message penetrated deeply, the piquant flute shooting the singer's plaint right at the audience's heart.

Rubel Sarker played the violin as he sang, his dramatic voice heightened

by fiery *dhol* playing as he lamented that "If I don't get my love I will burn to death."

Billal Udash brought a change of atmosphere, his rhetorical singing very involved, the flute accompaniment seductive. Then we heard Jamaluddin

Hasan Banna, the fragrance of love caught up in his intense tones; Hari Podo singing with clarity underlined by an abrasive *dhol* beat; and a boy, Mobin, of perhaps fifteen, who sang with innocent honesty but also stunning power as his voice was driving to heights of whirling ecstasy by an intimate, insistent, all-conquering *dhol* beat of love.

Things were to get even more unbelievably intense. Singer Koncoz sent out his words of song with a display of musical acrobatics, the *dhol* gone crazy with its adrenal beat. Was this mind-blowing experience taking us to madness or revelation, I wondered? Or is the seeming madness (and I note that the word Baul comes from the Sanskrit "Vatul" which means 'mad') a path to revelation? A taking away from the ordinary world to teach the meaning of love and leave its listeners as well as performers transformed?

And then Fakir Shahabuddin came on stage. Now everything was whirling! Fakir had complete vocal control and with all transcendent power took us beyond even ecstasy to sustained rapture. The stage was alive with sound of impossible power; the soul of the huge crowd was alive with the message of love. There was no escape from the brilliance of artistry, the depth of meaning, the spirituality and the humanity of the event.

The programme was sponsored by Banglalink.

The writer is a freelance contributor, and a consultant in Bangladesh.