Ever since Islam came to Bengal in the 13th century (and probably earlier, through individual Muslims’ interaction with local bearers of other traditions) it participated, through the means of Sufi imprints, in the various strands of Vaisnavism, Bhaktism, and local folk cults, in a very rich blend of religious beliefs and practices in the lower strata of the society.

The Fakir, as a sub-section of the Bengali Baul with a more or less defined Muslim identity, are at present the largest group in Bengal perpetuating this form of ‘Islamic syncretism’. To use Asim Roy’s phrase,1 in the complex picture of present-day religious politics of East and West Bengal, and in the context of Bangladesh and Bangladesh (as it is, a frontier land from an Islamic, cultural, economic, and developmental point of view. As long as the spirit of Lalan is alive, say the Fakir, there is much this counterculture can contribute.

Notes
4. I owe this information to Syed Samiullah, a Dhaka film-maker and a knowledgeable source on Baul-Fakir matters. I have witnessed similar interaction in northeast Bengal.
5. Such as Manik Ali of Kushita, a mainstream erudite who helps at the holydoo Fakir approach in parts of his Secret Kesen book, published perhaps about 30 years ago.

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