

The Heart as the Seat of the Divine: Conceptual Metaphor Schemas of Qalb in the Bengali Fakīrī Song Tradition

Neela Parvej

Research Scholar

Abstract

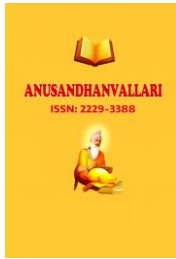
Within the devotional universe of the Bengali Fakīrī song tradition, the Arabic term qalb — designating simultaneously the physical heart and its mystical double as the innermost seat of divine presence — is far more than a theological concept borrowed from Sufi cosmology. It is a structurally generative metaphor, one that organises the practitioner's understanding of embodiment, knowledge, and the proximity of God with a consistency and cognitive depth that repays sustained linguistic scrutiny. Yet despite the richness of scholarly attention directed at the Bāul-Fakīr tradition from the perspectives of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and religious studies, the cognitive architecture underpinning qalb-centred symbolism has remained largely unexamined. This paper addresses that gap through the analytical lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as foundationally articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and developed in relation to embodied image schemas by Johnson (1987) and primary metaphor theory by Grady (1997). Working through the close reading of a central composition by Lalon Fakir — supplemented by oral performances collected through fieldwork in West Bengal and Bangladesh — the paper traces four interrelated metaphor schemas through which qalb is cognitively elaborated: the heart as a dwelling place, the heart as a reflective surface, the heart as a navigational instrument, and the heart as a locus of concealed knowledge. These schemas are not arbitrary poetic ornaments. They are, as the analysis demonstrates, grounded in sensorimotor experience and then culturally elaborated through the syncretic Sufi-Vaiṣṇava cosmology that has historically shaped the Fakīrī milieu. The paper ultimately contends that in this tradition, metaphor is epistemology — the way the heart is spoken of is inseparable from the way divine knowledge is understood to be accessed, embodied, and performed.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor theory; qalb; Bengali Fakīrī tradition; embodied cognition; image schema; Sufi devotional poetics; cognitive linguistics

1. Introduction

Somewhere between the village performance grounds of rural West Bengal and the ḍerā-s of itinerant fakīr-s in northern Bangladesh, a particular word recurs with remarkable persistence. Singers invoke it while addressing their own chests, pressing a palm inward as though reaching for something housed beneath the sternum. The word is qalb — Arabic in origin, Sufi in theological resonance, yet thoroughly domesticated into the Bengali devotional imagination — and it carries, in performance, a weight that no single translation adequately renders. It is the heart, yes, but it is also the site where the divine is understood to reside, the organ of spiritual cognition, and the primary metaphorical resource through which Fakīrī singers articulate their entire cosmological orientation.

That such a term should generate rich metaphorical elaboration is perhaps unsurprising. Cross-cultural cognitive-linguistic research has consistently shown that the heart occupies a privileged position in conceptual systems across languages and traditions, serving as a source domain for emotions, moral character, and inner life (Kövecses, 2000, pp. 21–25). What is more remarkable about the Fakīrī case, however, is the density and



systematicity of the metaphorical structure built around qalb — the way in which multiple, coherent image schemas converge on this single term across song after song, practitioner after practitioner, from the districts of Murshidabad and Birbhum in West Bengal to the regions of Kushtia and Sylhet in Bangladesh. This is not the scattered symbolism of individual poetic imagination. It has the character, rather, of a shared cognitive infrastructure — a set of conceptual mappings through which an entire community of practice organises its understanding of the body, knowledge, and God.

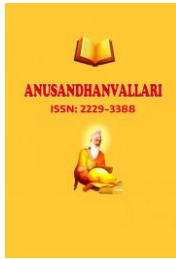
The present paper examines that infrastructure through the analytical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Since Lakoff and Johnson's foundational argument in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) that metaphor is not a feature of language but of thought — that the conceptual system through which we understand and act in the world is fundamentally metaphorical in nature — CMT has been productively extended to religious and ritual language (Charteris-Black, 2004), to non-Western cognitive systems (Yu, 1995; Kövecses, 2005), and to oral poetic traditions (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). Yet the devotional songs of the Bengali Fakīr tradition have not, to date, been subjected to sustained CMT analysis. The closest scholarly engagements with this tradition have approached its symbolism from religious studies and anthropological perspectives — most notably Openshaw's (2002) nuanced ethnographic reading of Bāul-Fakīr body philosophy and Salomon's (1991) foundational textual and translational work on Bāul song — but the specifically cognitive-linguistic dimension of how metaphor structures knowledge and practice in this tradition remains an open question.

It is that question this paper takes up. Drawing on Salomon's (1991) edited corpus alongside oral performances collected during fieldwork across West Bengal and Bangladesh, and reading these through the theoretical coordinates of CMT, primary metaphor theory (Grady, 1997), and Johnson's (1987) image-schema framework, the analysis identifies and examines four conceptual metaphor schemas through which qalb is systematically elaborated in Fakīr song. In doing so, it argues that the metaphorical treatment of qalb in this tradition is neither decorative nor incidental. It is, rather, a cognitive technology — a structured way of knowing the divine through the body — and understanding it as such has implications not only for cognitive linguistics but for how we approach the relationship between language, embodiment, and spiritual epistemology in South Asian devotional cultures more broadly.

2. Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Metaphor, Embodiment, and the Cognitive Life of Devotional Language

The intellectual starting point for this paper's analytical approach is a deceptively simple claim made by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980: that metaphor is not an ornament of language but a structure of thought. In *Metaphors We Live By*, they demonstrated that the conceptual system through which human beings understand and navigate their experience is organised, at its deepest levels, through systematic mappings between domains — between the concrete and the abstract, between the bodily and the ideational. We understand argument through the structure of combat, time through the structure of space, emotional states through the structure of physical containment. These are not poetic flourishes. They are the scaffolding of ordinary cognition, and they leave their traces in the patterned regularities of everyday language.

What makes this framework particularly productive for the analysis of devotional song is not simply its breadth but its insistence on the body as the primary site of meaning-making. Johnson's (1987) development of image schema theory pressed this point further, arguing that pre-conceptual, sensorimotor experience — the felt sense of containment, of balance, of verticality, of movement through space — provides the experiential templates from which more abstract conceptual structures are built. A child who has repeatedly experienced the physical sensation of being inside and outside a bounded space carries that schema forward into increasingly abstract conceptual



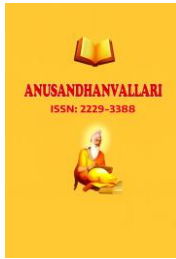
territory: ideas can be in or out of a framework, arguments can have holes, the self can feel enclosed or open. The body, on this account, is not merely the vehicle of cognition — it is its source.

Grady's (1997) refinement of this picture through the concept of primary metaphors added a further layer of analytical precision. Where Lakoff and Johnson described conceptual metaphors at a relatively high level of abstraction, Grady argued for a stratum of more elementary mappings — primary metaphors — that arise directly from recurring correlations in embodied experience. AFFECTION IS WARMTH, for instance, emerges from the consistent co-occurrence of physical warmth and nurturing contact in early life. KNOWING IS SEEING arises from the correlation between visual perception and the acquisition of information. These primary metaphors serve as the basic units from which more culturally elaborate conceptual structures are compounded, which means they offer a tool for distinguishing what is universal in a metaphorical system from what is culturally specific — a distinction that matters considerably when the object of analysis is a tradition as syncretically particular as the Bengali Fakīrī.

The cross-cultural applicability of CMT has been demonstrated most rigorously in Kövecses's (2000, 2005) comparative work, which showed that while the primary experiential grounding of emotion metaphors tends to be consistent across cultures, the elaboration of those metaphors — the specific entailments, the culturally salient extensions, the conceptual emphases — varies significantly. Yu's (1995, 2009) parallel work on Chinese conceptualisations of heart and mind made a closely related argument: that the body-part concept at the centre of a culture's emotional and cognitive vocabulary is not merely a linguistic label but an entire conceptual complex, shaped by medical cosmology, philosophical tradition, and social practice. Taken together, this body of work establishes the theoretical warrant for treating qalb not as a borrowed Arabic term that Fakīrī singers happen to use, but as a culturally elaborated conceptual structure with its own internal architecture — one that CMT is well positioned to describe.

Two further theoretical coordinates are worth establishing before the analysis proceeds. The first concerns the relationship between metaphor and epistemology in religious language. Charteris-Black's (2004) corpus-based work on religious and political discourse demonstrated that metaphorical patterns in such contexts are rarely neutral — they naturalise particular ways of knowing, authorise particular claims to truth, and organise communities of belief around shared conceptual frameworks. This insight is directly relevant to the Fakīrī case, where qalb-centred metaphors do not merely describe spiritual experience but actively constitute the epistemological framework through which that experience is rendered intelligible and communicable. The second concerns the specifically oral and performative dimension of the corpus. Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) have argued that figurative language in oral and poetic contexts operates with a density and structural coherence that differs from ordinary conversational metaphor — that repeated, ritually embedded metaphorical schemas accrue cognitive weight through performance, becoming not just ways of speaking but ways of knowing and being. The Fakīrī song tradition, with its emphasis on transmission through apprenticeship, oral repetition, and embodied performance, exemplifies precisely this dynamic.

The analytical sections that follow draw on all of these coordinates. The four conceptual metaphor schemas identified in the corpus are each examined for their image-schematic grounding, their primary metaphorical components, and their culturally specific elaboration within the Sufi-Vaiṣṇava cosmological framework of the Fakīrī tradition. The goal is not a comprehensive inventory of metaphorical language in these songs but a demonstration of the cognitive systematicity — the internal coherence and epistemological consequence — of the way qalb is thought and sung.



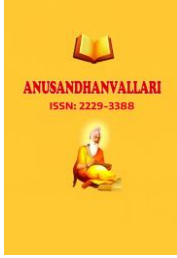
3. Qalb in the Fakīrī Tradition: Historical and Cosmological Context

The presence of Sufi Islam in South Asia is not a story of simple transplantation. When the first Sufi orders began establishing themselves across the subcontinent from roughly the twelfth century onward — the Chishtiyya in the Gangetic plains, the Suhrawardiyya in Sindh and Punjab, the Qādiriyya extending eventually into Bengal — they encountered religious landscapes that were already densely populated with their own contemplative traditions, their own theories of the body, their own vocabularies for the relationship between the human and the divine. What followed was not the displacement of those traditions but something considerably more interesting: a long, uneven, and often doctrinally uncomfortable negotiation that produced, in different regions and different centuries, genuinely syncretic forms of religious thought and practice. The Bengal delta was one of the most generative sites of that negotiation, and the Fakīrī song tradition is among its most enduring expressions.

Bengal's particular religious ecology made it unusually hospitable to syncretic formation. By the time Sufi missionaries arrived in significant numbers — especially following Bakhtiyār Khiljī's campaigns of the early thirteenth century and the subsequent establishment of the Sultanate in Bengal — the region already held a complex layering of religious traditions. Vajrayāna Buddhism, which had flourished under the Pāla dynasty and produced the contemplative and esoteric Sahajiyā tradition, had left a profound imprint on the region's devotional culture even as its institutional structures declined. Vaiṣṇava bhakti, particularly in its Gauḍīya form following Caitanya Mahāprabhu's transformative movement in the sixteenth century, had elaborated a theology of devotional love — prema — centred on the interiority of the practitioner and the intimate accessibility of the divine. Śākta traditions, with their emphasis on the body as a site of cosmic power, contributed further to a religious culture in which embodied experience was never peripheral to spiritual knowledge but was, rather, its primary medium.

Into this already syncretic landscape, Sufi thought introduced the concept of qalb — the heart as the organ through which the divine is apprehended, purified, and ultimately realised. In the metaphysical framework of figures like Ibn 'Arabī, whose influence percolated into South Asian Sufi thought through the Chishtī and later traditions, the heart was understood as uniquely capable of containing the infinite because of its essential mutability — qalb shares its Arabic root with the verb meaning to turn or transform, suggesting a heart that is constitutively open, always in the process of becoming a more adequate vessel for divine presence (Chittick, 1989, pp. 106–109). This theological conception found remarkably fertile ground in Bengal, where both the Sahajiyā Buddhist notion of the sahaja — the innate, naturally occurring state of enlightenment accessible within the body — and the Vaiṣṇava emphasis on the heart as the dwelling place of Kṛṣṇa provided conceptual frameworks that were structurally consonant with the Sufi understanding of qalb, even as they remained doctrinally distinct.

The Fakīrī tradition that emerged from this confluence is neither straightforwardly Islamic nor straightforwardly Hindu — a fact that has made it simultaneously fascinating to outsiders and marginal to orthodox religious establishments on both sides. Fakīrī practitioners have historically drawn on Arabic and Persian Sufi vocabulary, Bengali Vaiṣṇava poetic forms, and Sahajiyā body-philosophy simultaneously, weaving them into a devotional practice whose defining characteristic is precisely its refusal of doctrinal boundary. Openshaw (2002) describes this not as confusion or compromise but as a principled epistemological stance — a deliberate cultivation of the bhed (distinction) between outer religious identity and inner spiritual reality (pp. 14–18). It is within this stance that qalb becomes such a generative conceptual resource: as a term that is recognisably Islamic in origin yet resonant with the body-centred, experiential epistemologies of the region's older contemplative traditions, it serves as a kind of conceptual hinge — a word around which multiple cosmological frameworks can be simultaneously activated and held in productive tension. The songs that are the subject of this analysis are, in this sense, not simply devotional performances. They are sites where a centuries-long conversation between Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism continues to take place, encoded in the metaphorical architecture of a single, remarkable word.



4. Corpus, Method, and the Metaphorical Architecture of Qalb

The analysis that follows is anchored in a single composition by Lalon Fakir — *Dil dariyāy ḍube dekh nā* (Song 68, p. 316) as edited and translated in Salomon's (1991) *City of Mirrors* — supplemented by oral performances documented during fieldwork in the regions of Murshidabad and Birbhum in West Bengal and Kushtia and Sylhet in Bangladesh. The choice to read one song with sustained analytical depth rather than survey a broader selection is methodologically deliberate. Cognitive linguistic analysis of oral devotional poetry earns its credibility not from the quantity of examples it processes but from the closeness and layering of its reading — the demonstration that metaphorical structure is not scattered but systematic, not ornamental but load-bearing. Lalon's song repays this kind of attention with unusual generosity. In four compact verses it activates, interweaves, and ultimately pushes beyond four distinct conceptual metaphor schemas, making it an exceptionally clear window into the cognitive architecture of qalb as it operates across the broader Fakīrī tradition.

The method follows the standard CMT analytical procedure: identifying source and target domains, tracing the structural correspondences between them, examining which entailments of the source domain are foregrounded or suppressed in the mapping, and attending to the image-schematic grounding that motivates each schema's intuitive force. Where schemas interact or nest within one another, those relationships are themselves treated as analytically significant rather than as complications to be smoothed over.

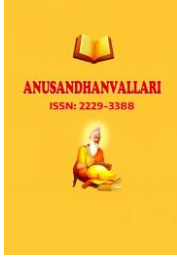
4.1 The Heart Is a Navigable Body of Water

The song opens with an imperative that establishes its central metaphorical architecture in a single line: *dil dariyāy ḍube dekh nā* — dive into the ocean of the heart and look. The source domain here is a vast, deep body of water — *dariyā*, which carries in Bengali the sense of both river and ocean, boundlessness and flow — and the target domain is *dil*, the Persian-Urdu cognate of *qalb* equally current in Fakīrī devotional vocabulary. What is cognitively significant about this particular elaboration of the heart-as-water mapping is its directionality. Navigation here is not the lateral, compass-like movement toward a distant destination that characterises the PATH schema in its most familiar form. It is vertical — a downward submersion into depth. The practitioner is not asked to travel toward the divine but to descend into it, which fundamentally reorients the epistemological logic of the journey: the divine is not at the end of a road but at the bottom of something the practitioner is already standing in.

The refrain's second line delivers the epistemological payoff of this submersion: *ati ajān khabar yābe jānā* — the most unknown news will become known. The primary metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING is active here, but crucially modified. Ordinary seeing happens at the surface, in the light. The knowledge that *dil* contains requires descent beneath the surface, into the dark. This modification is not incidental — it encodes the Fakīrī conviction that divine knowledge is structurally inaccessible to ordinary cognition and requires a specific, disciplined act of interior immersion to reach. The navigational schema and the concealed knowledge schema are thus shown, from the very opening line, to be not separate structures but nested ones — the imperative to dive motivating and giving access to the knowledge hidden in the depths.

4.2 The Heart Is a City and a Workshop

The second verse dramatically expands the spatial scale of *qalb* through a second source domain: *ālakḥānār śāhar* — the city of *alakh*. *Alakh* derives from the Sanskrit *alākṣya* (that which cannot be perceived or marked) and is the characteristic invocation cry of the Nāth yogī tradition, here absorbed seamlessly into Lalon's syncretic Fakīrī vocabulary. The heart is no longer an ocean to be dived into but an entire city — immense, densely populated with activity, governed by its own interior logic. Within that city, the verse tells us, there is *ājab kāriguṛī* — wondrous craftsmanship — and the heart is simultaneously a *kārahānā*, a workshop or factory where that craftsmanship is ongoing.



This elaborates the CONTAINER schema that underlies the dwelling place metaphor but extends it considerably. A dwelling houses a guest; a city sustains an entire ecology of life; a workshop is a site of purposeful, skilled production. The entailments activated by this expansion are significant: if the heart is a city, it has quarters and districts, centres and margins, areas of activity and areas of neglect. If it is a workshop, something is being made within it — and the practitioner's spiritual discipline is implicitly figured as the labour of that making. The cognitive weight of this schema lies in what it implies about spiritual practice: not passive receptivity to divine presence but active, skilled, ongoing interior work. The paradox embedded in the same verse — *uttarāy pāni nāi, bhiṭe ḍobe bhāi* (to the north there is no water, yet the homestead floods) — introduces a logic that exceeds ordinary spatial reference. We have crossed, without announcement, from the geography of the external world into the interior topology of *qalb*, where the physical entailments of familiar schemas no longer hold.

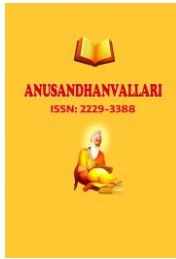
4.3 The Heart Is a Mirror

The mirror schema does not appear explicitly in Lalon's lexicon in this song but is structurally implied by the epistemological logic of the refrain. The imperative *dekh nā* — look, or see — combined with the promised reward of hidden knowledge becoming visible, activates the reflective surface mapping through its entailments rather than its vocabulary. The *dil dariyā* at sufficient depth becomes still; still water is a mirror; a mirror returns an accurate image of what stands before it. In the broader *Fakīr* corpus collected during fieldwork in Birbhum and Murshidabad, this schema appears with explicit lexical marking — singers speaking of polishing the heart, of the divine face reflected in a properly prepared interior surface — and it connects directly to the Sufi theological tradition of *mir'āt al-qalb* (the mirror of the heart) elaborated by Ibn 'Arabī and transmitted into Bengali devotional culture through the *Chishtī* and *Qādirī* silsilas (Chittick, 1989, pp. 106–109). What is cognitively significant about the mirror schema is the discipline it implies: a mirror must be actively maintained. Neglect clouds it. The practitioner's relationship to divine knowledge is therefore not guaranteed but contingent — perpetually dependent on the ongoing labour of interior polishing that the workshop schema also encodes. The two schemas are, in this sense, mutually reinforcing: the workshop is where the mirror is made and kept.

4.4 The Heart Is a Site of Concealed Knowledge

The third verse of Lalon's song escalates the epistemological stakes through a cascade of impossibilities drawn from the *ulṭābāṃśī* tradition: *bobāy kathā kay, kālāy śunte pāy* — the mute speaks, the deaf can hear. A boat races without wind. Gold is tested for half a coin. Each of these images takes an image schema whose entailments are so deeply grounded in sensorimotor experience — SPEECH REQUIRES A SPEAKING BODY, MOVEMENT REQUIRES A MOVER — that their systematic violation produces an immediate and unmistakable cognitive disruption. That disruption is, from a CMT perspective, analytically significant rather than merely poetic. *Ulṭābāṃśī* — literally upside-down language, a mode of paradoxical expression shared across the *Sahajiyā* Buddhist, *Nāth yogī*, *Sant*, and *Fakīr* traditions — functions here not as decorative difficulty but as a cognitive boundary marker. It signals to the listener that the knowledge concealed within *qalb* is not simply hidden in the way that an object might be hidden in a container, waiting to be found by someone with the right key. It is concealed in a more radical sense: it is structurally incommensurable with the ordinary conceptual apparatus through which image schemas organise experience. The schemas of ocean, city, mirror, and journey have brought the practitioner — and the listener — to the edge of what metaphor can do. *Ulṭābāṃśī* marks that edge.

The final *bhaṇitā* verse makes this explicit with a directness unusual even within a tradition comfortable with paradox. *Kahibār yogya naṃ se kathā* — that which must be said cannot be said. Lalon signs his name to an impossibility, which is itself a cognitive claim of the highest order: the *fakīr* who has dived into the *dil dariyā* does not emerge with communicable propositions. He emerges transformed — with a different relationship to the limits of knowledge rather than with new knowledge of the ordinary kind. The concealed knowledge of *qalb*, this verse suggests, is not a proposition to be transmitted but an experience to be undergone, and the song's entire



metaphorical architecture — the ocean, the city, the mirror, the boundary-marking paradoxes — has been, from the beginning, an elaborate preparation for the moment of its own necessary silence.

5. Conclusion

What this analysis ultimately reveals is that qalb in the Bengali Fakīrī song tradition is not a borrowed theological term that happens to generate rich imagery. It is a structurally coherent conceptual complex — a convergence of image schemas, primary metaphors, and culturally specific elaborations that together constitute a full epistemological system, one through which practitioners organise, transmit, and perform their understanding of how the divine is known through the body. Lalon's song demonstrates that this system is not static but dynamic: its schemas nest within and motivate one another, building toward a moment — marked by *ulṭābāṃśī* — where metaphor deliberately exhausts itself and points beyond its own limits. That moment is itself, this paper has argued, cognitively meaningful. In mapping the architecture of qalb, CMT does not merely describe a devotional vocabulary. It illuminates the cognitive conditions under which embodied experience becomes a path to the divine.

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