

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

PEOPLE AND PLACES

SUMMER DAYS IN AMERICA

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

EVERYTHING was smooth at the San Francisco airport. The immigration officer looked through the letter of introduction I was given at Dhaka, and the question he asked showed that he was observing a mere formality. No question at all at the customs, and just outside the barrier, the expected placard-waving young lady greeted me with the warmest of smiles, showed me where to wait till she found the other person. When the other person finally emerged, well, I had noticed him joining us at Narita airport. From Narita to San Francisco, during those eight or nine hours, while I was trying to snatch some sleep, I noticed him with his eyes fixed on a book. The studious passenger turned out to be Dr G L Peiris, Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Law of the University of Colombo. We were on the same mission.

We were twenty-nine of us — exactly the number of Chaucer's pilgrims who had met, quite accidentally, at the Tabard Inn. What kind of pilgrims we were, I cannot

tell. While their destination was Canterbury, and the mission was to 'seek' the holy, blessed martyr Thomas Becket, we first assembled in San Francisco, and later moved to Santa Cruz, a quiet little town on the Pacific.

Chaminade, Santa Cruz was ideal as a conference centre, almost idyllic — a wide stretch of undulating ground, dotted with separate cottage-like buildings for guests, and a central building where you met for conference and took your meals. Chaminade could hold and take care of half-a-dozen groups of our size or a single large group of two hundred and fifty people. Away from the din and bustle of a big city, this was a perfect retreat for thirty-odd people, nearly half of them American academics, and the rest drawn from Asia, East Europe and Latin America.

The Democratization Project Core Group meeting provided an opportunity to us, the participants, of exchanging views and experiences regarding the process of democratization in Asia. Scholars and practitioners met and discussed, and at the end of it all I

Iowa, with its twelve hundred acres, had its river cutting through the campus. It had its gently rising hills, its woodland look, and the old Capitol building which it received as a gift from the State government when they shifted the capital to another city.

had a feeling that though our concern was the same, the path to democracy was going to be different for each one of us. I could not get Burma out of my mind, one close neighbour, but a world away from us!

On my two earlier visits, San Francisco meant both an exotic city and the University of Berkeley. This time, Chinatown or the sea front with its restaurants serving lobsters the size of the diameter of a full plate, or the Berkeley campus on the slope of a hill — all this eluded me. It would have been foolish of me if I hoped to relive my first encounter with this city in 1958. Even 1982 was different, moving with a group of academics, and spending long hours in the university book-store. Returning from

Santa Cruz, on way to Madison, Wisconsin, San Francisco was reduced to its airport only and the city was just an aerial view.

By this time, I was overcoming my initial distaste of air-journey. I do not remember how I took my first air-journey — Dhaka to London — in 1952, by a BOAC Argonaut. I think the excitement had buried whatever other feelings might have been there. Later trips by air, and some of them pretty long ones, left me unconvinced about the virtue of saving your valuable time by the quickest mode of transport. My fondest memories are those of my three sea-voyages, each lasting eighteen days. In an air-journey, the person occupying the seat next to you is a stranger, and is determined to remain a stranger. You come to realize, at your cost,

that air is not weightless after all, and the most delicious food and drink served, if you are obliged to address them in a special posture, may turn sour, and take away all your appetite.

After I had my fill of democracy at Santa Cruz, I felt a vague longing for something rather different: comparative literature. In both the areas, I was less a scholar and more of a practitioner. In fact, I had joined the group at Santa Cruz rather as a practitioner of democracy or so I thought. In Madison, and later in Iowa city, it was vacation time, but both the universities remained alive in a peculiar way. I missed the usual crowd of undergraduates on the streets, and the corridors of academic buildings, but there is always available a fraction of the student body, and a segment of the faculty. A few appointments were fixed up for me at both the places. My meetings with professors of comparative literature at Madison and at Iowa city were marked by genuine warmth. We discussed ideas, courses, and the inevitable changes that were taking place all the time.

Scholars in this area called themselves 'comparatists', and unlike at Jadavpur — the only Indian University with a Department of Comparative Literature, these comparatists in America sounded, quite

confident of their standing, not only in the world of scholarship but also in the job market.

Madison claimed that it was the fourth largest campus in the US. With its more than two thousand acres, it could very well be. The town appeared to be very proud of its university, and one felt the presence of this august institution everywhere. Sprawling along the largest of the four lakes, Lake Mendota, the university could pride itself of a most beautiful site. Iowa, with its twelve hundred acres, had its river cutting through the campus. It had its gently rising hills, its woodland look, and the old Capitol building which it received as a gift from the state government when they shifted the capital to another city. The golden-domed building standing on a hill dominated the entire campus.

What I liked about Iowa campus best was its extensive network of side-walks. Here was a city for pedestrians.

Dr I H Zuberi, the first Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University, spent a year or so at Iowa, an exile from Pakistan in the mid-sixties. As I remembered this, I was wondering if anybody here might have known him. I met one, a comparatist at Iowa, who said he had heard of him.

Dr Zuberi had taught with reputation at Iowa, and died here, a couple of years before this gentleman came, but his (Zuberi's) memory was still fresh in the Department of English.

My last port of call was a small town in the Mid-West, Kirksville, Missouri. Beyond the university — my son teaches here — and the famed Osteopathic Medical College, Kirksville has very little to offer. But I feel fully compensated, because my ten days in this quiet town gave me the perfect feel of small-town America.

For permanent residents, life in a small town means you are involved in practically everything that happens here.

You have your church, provided you are a Christian, and you are expected to attend the services of your church.

You cannot hope to remain incognito in your neighbour-



Chaminade : Santa Cruz.

hood. Kirksville's country-side is all farm-land, and in fact, a furlong away from my son's house — he calls it a modest cottage — I could smell cow-dung, and I could see a number of cows in the yard adjoining houses that had a farm house look about them. It was like living in a village, where you could not pass someone without being greeted by him or her. That was exactly my experience in my morning walks. It would be bad form, I thought, if you did not look up, and return the greeting.

Here at Kirksville, I had a meeting with the President of the University, an economist, and one of the Vice-Presidents. Naturally enough, they talked about their institution, and its development.

The university, I was told, had recently been raised from its status as a regional university to a state university, and, over the last several years, it was consolidating its position as a liberal arts college, with emphasis on quality in its enrolment, and on building up a faculty with an international composition. Indeed, the number of non-Americans on the faculty, and the diversity of their nationality, was impressive, considering the fact that Kirksville was a small-town university, with the nearest cities over two hundred miles away.

One of the foreigners on the faculty I met was Dr Ben Bannani, a Moroccan, a Muslim, who had his early education in Beirut, and who had first come to this country on a Fulbright grant. He graduated from a good Liberal

Arts College — one of the Ivy League — and later did his graduate work in New York. He too is a comparatist but he teaches in the English department. He is a poet too, and has translated extensively from Arabic into English. His twenty years in America, his American wife, and his two daughters born in America, have not dimmed his vision of some day returning to where he comes from, Morocco.

With Ben Bannani, and other comparatists I had met at Madison, and Iowa City, out talks turned on the excellent prospects of developing similar programmes in our universities. The multi-lingual situation of the Indian sub-continent, the existence of literatures in all the major languages, offered excellent ground for developing this discipline. We also discussed academic linkage, American optimism coloured our discussion, and with our growing association with US universities, these talks may not all of it end in smoke.

An eminent educationist and columnist, Zillur Rahman Siddiqui served as the Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University, and lately as the Education Advisor to the erstwhile caretaker government of Bangladesh.

MY WORLD

Due to his other professional commitments, S. M. Ali will take a break from writing his column 'My World' for next few weeks. He hopes to resume in early October.

Magazine Editor

The Gift

Waqar A. Khan

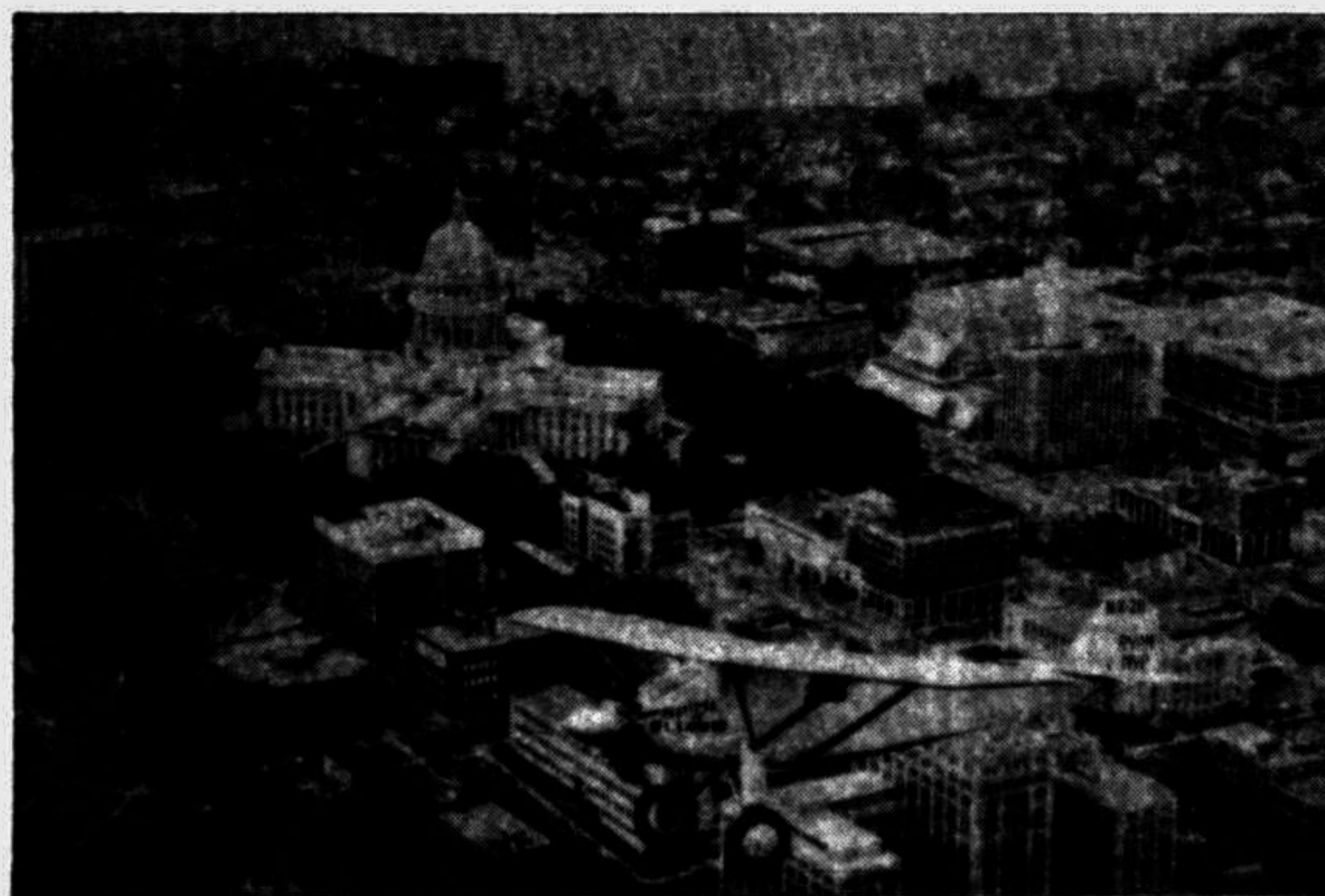
He leaps upon the stage and begins a dance for the cheering pack who come to take pieces of him home. It makes up for their own emptiness.

The clown smiles modestly through his paints and feathers.

He mimics the penny pinching money lender and his body exaggerates a laugh at the fat baker eating the morning pastries.

Roaring with glee, the audience applauds the righteousness of cruelty to dirty beggars and starving thieves.

He shows them to themselves and sheds a tear to lose his laughter and be left with their sorrow in exchange.



An aerial view of Madison Wisconsin.

Kazi Nazrul Islam: A Poet of Outstanding Genius

by Mohammad Mahfuzullah

KAZI Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is widely acclaimed as the epoch-making Rebel-Poet of Bangla literature and is regarded as the National Poet of Bangladesh for his spectacular and distinctive contribution in the reawakening and rejuvenation of the masses of this part of the globe. Contributions of Nazrul in the fields of Subcontinental politics, Bangla literature, culture, music and also to Muslim renaissance and their impact on our national life is wide, varied, deep and unique.

One of the great architects of the independence movement of the Subcontinent as well as the resurgence in the social and cultural arena, Kazi Nazrul Islam enriched and glorified the Bangla language, literature, culture and music by his creative talents. Though a romantic, Nazrul — the soldier-poet as he was, used his mighty pen as a weapon against British rule, bondage of all sorts of oppression and suppression, social, economic and other forms of exploitations, superstitions. He expressed his sentiments in his poems, songs and other writings.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, a poet of the highest order, was a lyricist, composer and musician of outstanding genius. His several thousand songs on varied themes, forms and mood manifest the poet's creative power and sensibility and are regarded as treasures of Bangla literature and music. When analysed, Nazrul's musical compositions present a wide variety of themes, we find in them beauty and love, romantic agony, spirit of revolt against colonial domination, social injustice, patriotic inspi-

ration, Muslim renaissance and craving for the emancipation of the distressed humanity.

Though primarily and predominantly a poet and lyricist Nazrul was a versatile genius and he enriched almost all branches of literature and made his mark as novelist, short-story writer, playwright, essayist as well as a journalist of a heroic stature too. His various prose-writings also embodied the same spirit and characteristics of a rebellious and romantic writer in various forms and technique which are clearly portrayed in the excellence of his poems and songs.

The above estimation and evaluation of Nazrul's poetic genius and his unique contributions are inadequate and poor by any standard of judgement. It is a mere pen-picture which corporates the essence of the greatness of the mind of the rebel-writer. To deeply understand the poet and his poetic mind and genius, as well as his love for the countrymen in particular, the background of Nazrul's advent in the literary horizon and on the social scenario, need to be accounted for and presented in brief.

It is a well-known and unquestionably accepted fact that Nazrul appeared in the literary and cultural arena very sud-

denly like a blazing comet in the sky. He made his appearance in the 1920's, when the Nobel-Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, had been reigning supreme as a poet and literary personality. Rabindranath's unique and all-embracing genius and literary talent and his contributions in various fields, and the universal recognition he had achieved in 1913, made it all the more difficult, and almost impossible for his contemporaries and for the new-comers too, to tread in a non-Tagorian path and to make a headway in the literary field and in their poetic endeavours without being influenced and subdued by the great Tagore — both in language, form and also in spirit.

But it was Nazrul whose romantic feelings and exuberance coupled and blended with rebellious spirit and patriotic zeal did the impossible not only possible, but his poetic genius and unique contributions enabled him to make a very bold and distinctive mark as an epoch-making rebel-poet of Bangla literature during the life-time of Rabindranath Tagore who himself hailed and recognised the soldier-poet and the rebel-bard by dedicating a book of him in the name of Nazrul.

Nazrul had been able to do the unconceivable and splendid things and bring about a

variable and qualitative change in language, themes, forms and technique in various shades and dimensions, and create a new literary-course, because of his unique talent and creative genius and his identification with the national aspirations and freedom-movement of the Subcontinent against the British Raj. His participation in the political and social reawakening movement, against the backdrop of the non-cooperation movement of nineteen twenties, his ever-inspiring and pulsating poems and songs embodying rebellious spirit, as well as his prose-writings, and his personal sufferings and subjugation in the jails of the British, made Nazrul the symbol of freedom and national spirit itself. He eventually became an indomitable hero.

Nazrul, a romantic par-excellence, as well as an exponent of the philosophy of love and beauty, who has to his credit innumerable pieces of romantic and love-poems, did not only confine himself or his literary creations to the ideas and ideals. He genuinely and closely identified himself with the national spirit and aspirations, social expectation and reawakening spirit, patriotism, Muslim renaissance and above all with the down-trodden and oppressed humanity. And thus, Nazrul became a poet-soldier, who not only delineated the

hopes and aspirations of the people and the tolling masses, but also used his pen as a sword in the war waged against the British as well as against the oppressors at home.

Nazrul's unique success as a poet of nature, love, romantic agony, and above all of national aspirations and re-awakening lay in the unmistakable fact that he had deep personal experience of sufferings and anguish, he knew the pangs of betrayal and separation. He could discover the inherent beauty and symbolic meaning of nature, as well as their destructive power. And again, and above all, out of deep love and patriotic feelings and social responsibilities, Nazrul solely identified himself with the whole nation and especially the Muslims — his own community.

Nazrul's unique and unparalleled success in the field of literature, music and culture not only lays in the subject-matter, language, form, technique, prosody, similes and metaphors used by him in his literary creations — especially in his songs which have had made the foundation of the varied success deeper and permanent. It needs to be specially mentioned and elaborated that Nazrul is the love poet in the field of modern Bangla literature who could be



termed as the harbinger and ambassador of Hindu-Muslim amity not only in the political and social arena, but also in the literary and cultural fields.

Nazrul had accepted the old heritage of Bangla language, literature and culture which have distinctively embodied the elements of Hindu-Muslim tradition side by side.

He himself in the newer perspective and context, used them with mastery skill and newer significant meanings in different forms and techniques. Nazrul's poems and songs on Islamic themes and traditions, as well as his poems and songs on Hindu themes

and traditions are the outstanding examples of his literary success and open-minded attempt in delineating the heritage of Bangla literature.

In this connection special mention should be made of the fact that Nazrul had acquired deep knowledge about the Hindu-Muslim history, culture and literary heritage, he had the opportunity to study Persian epics, 'ghazals' and other literary works as also Hindu mythologies, Greek myths and modern world literature. As a result, when Nazrul devoted his poetic genius in literary creations, he achieved unique and tremendous success in delineating various

themes of different origin and tradition and in giving language and expression of the hopes and aspirations of the people, as well as the romantic agony.

Though Nazrul is no more (he died in 1976 after prolonged and protracted illness remaining sick and mute for more than thirty years), his chequered life and literary works embodying message of welfare of mankind and people's awakening are the perennial and unlimited sources of inspiration for humanity in general and for the nation in particular. There is no denying the fact that though Nazrul had been sick, mute and physically crippled from long before, his poems, songs and other writings stirred the minds of the masses and the freedom-fighters during our independence struggle and liberation war which ended in the emergence of the sovereign and independent Bangladesh, in 1971.

No doubt, Nazrul's inspiring writings will also imbibe us with the spirit of safeguarding our hard-earned independence and in achieving the emancipation of the masses in all fields in the true sense of the term.

Mohammad Mahfuzullah, Senior Assistant Editor of Dainik Bangla was the past Director of Nazrul Institute.

