*Nazrul Jayanti Special*

# Nazrul as Precursor of Liberal Mind

**by Nilratan Halder**

OF all the great Banglaee poets, Nazrul is perhaps misunderstood most. This is because a sort of emotion gets the better of our analytical faculty in the appreciation of the poet. Nazrul has been branded as the Rebel Poet. Apparently there is nothing wrong in putting such a special stamp on the composer of "vidrohi". But the danger of branding a poet as such lies in the fact that only one side — a fractional one at that — inadvertently surpasses other enduring qualities that constitute the complete poetic personality. Over time, nobody recognises the inconsistency in giving the poet a partial identity.

How the emotion works can better be illustrated by the usual practice of mentioning Nazrul whenever Rabindranath is the subject. Why this is done is not quite unknown to the participants of such a discussion. It is a sort of mental fixation rather than a necessary exercise to bring in a comparison between them. That is what is unacceptable. Nazrul has reaped enough literary harvest to earn him a permanent place in the history of our literature. There is no point confusing literature with partisan and religious considerations. We cannot be a party to such a one-eyed literary appreciation.

It is exactly where misunderstanding Nazrul starts inviting all sorts of troubles. He is distorted, and even abused, by opportunist quarters. The poet's clarity of vision has been overlooked to portray him as a poet of a particular community. No greater injustice could be inflicted upon a poet who hated religious priesthood and strict doctrines that declaim the reasonable demands and appeals of the heart. No wonder, religious fundamentalists were prompted to call him *kafir* (Heathen). With time, those detractors pose to be the sole promoters of the *'kafir'* as an Islamic poet. But this time keeping the knife wrapped in cloak.

That the obscurantists and forces opposed to secularism are engaged in such a deviant campaign is not at all surprising. What is surprising is the moderately educated people's unwitting steps into the trap. The result is disastrous both for the poet and society that strives to attain its civil status at par with the developed democracies. For the poet it is harmful, because it is not only an incomplete portrayal, but also a distortion of his basic ideas, principles and philosophy. A partisan appraisal of the poet blurs the vision to the extent that a sort of personal cult is built instead of getting into what he stands for.

At heart romantic, Nazrul is a humanist of no mean measure. He looks straight into things. Therefore, without being a socialist or Marxist in the ordinary sense, he has all through espoused the equality of man and social justice. Politics was none of his subject but he did encounter the endless list of ills of a repressive colonial rule. His was an angry response — all the same very timely and most useful — to that inhuman dispensation. No use looking for subtle political analysis and sophisticated didactive discourses in his writings. But, nevertheless, he has his own style — simple, understandable to all and easily identifiable — of dealing with political issues. He is certainly at his best in the task of imbuing people with the fighting spirits for a cause.

This he can, because he is a vigorous man, highly emotional but with a heart of gold. He can love profoundly and hate intensely. Less cautious, hardly worldly — so far as economy and conventional socio-religious matters are concerned — prolific in creative exercise, Nazrul should not fit in the narrow social customs. His boundless joy in life's vitality — akin to Walt Whitman's identification with an excelling in life-force — goes beyond the boundary of the ordinary world vistas. He is for creation, regeneration and places man's quality of heart at the top of everything. He is anti-establishment, because he is anti-evil.

It is therefore no surprise that Nazrul came hard upon vested interest groups, both religious and ruling. His poetic instinct could easily detect the evils in those areas. He demonstrates more courage in declaring that it is man who is the creator of religious scriptures, not the vice versa.

*Manush eneehhe grontha*
*Grontha enenko Manush kono.*

The message is loud and clear. Religious conservatism cannot help considering this sacrilege. In essence, Nazrul goes to contend that man has invented God not the other why round. A man so liberal alone can dare stamp his foot on the bosom of the creator (*Ami bhagawan buke eke dei padachinha*). Is it the poet's audacity or challenge to God? Sounds like irreverence? Perhaps, but only on the face of it. The poet is celebrating man and to him no religion can match the religion of man.

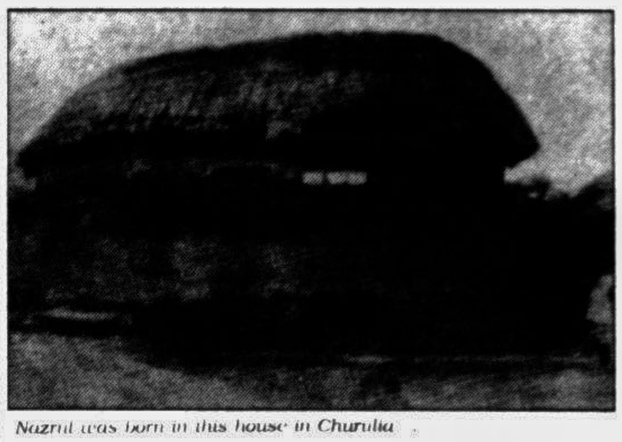
Here he raises the fundamental question where he wants to keep separate life from the after-life. He is not one to advocate rites and rituals for rewards in the life after. Humanity encompasses a universal togetherness based on equality and richness of heart. All religions enshrine in principle this universal virtue of man but the agents and coteries have, through their misinterpretation of religion greed and intolerance, brought about a decline in the spirit, both in terms of form and substance.

As far as the substance is concerned, it has not changed much; for the basic thrust is on the furtherance of fundamentalist as against secular causes. Form-wise, however, the approach to life has undergone a sea of change. Poet Nazrul was lucky not to deal with the organised aggression of the fanatics. In his time the attacks never took the physical form on one's person for contradicting the *mullahs* or religious priests. Today the religious hardliners and so-called followers of some rotten left ideology (!) have found them under the same flag to issue war calls against secular and liberal ideals. They talk of Islam with knife ready to slit the throat or vein of all who, they consider, are their opponents. Taslima Nasreen, Ahmad Sharif and Shamsur Rahman have come under attack not for nothing. Compared with Nazrul's more provocative views, theirs are very moderate. Nazrul could have been in trouble for sure.

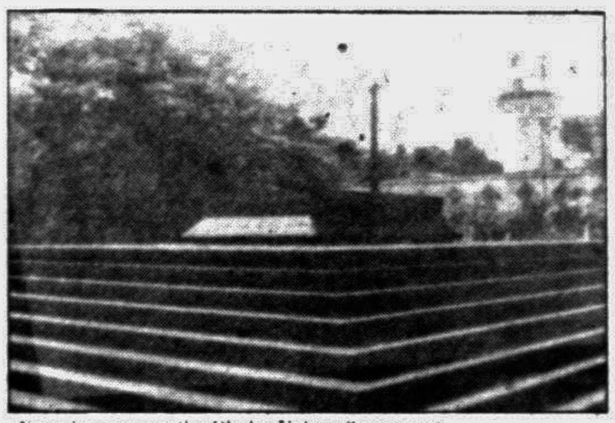
The difference in form is also discernible — though subtly — in the power-wielders' attitude to the issue at the state level. There is the same old story of power-sharing by the priests and state power. An understanding between the two allows them to work independently in their respective domains. The state power turns a blind eye to the excesses the agents of religion resort to and in turn the former can count on the latter's support in crisis. But that is only for a short time. Over a long period, the organised religious hardliners want to see themselves capturing state power. Thus the form also has changed.

Even if that threat is not imminent, the immediate damage is wrought in the form of social retrogression. One must take into account the fact that Nazrul could be so open because of the time that it was. Indeed, it was the time of a Bangalee — or for that matter sub-continental — renaissance. On the eve of the 21st century we are confounded to see darkness descending all around us. We are almost entering back into the dark middle age. What a colossal mental and social loss ! Today Nazrul as the precursor of a most liberal and modern approach to life is what we need most of all. But one Nazrul cannot remove the darkness fast enveloping society. We need a number of them to do the job.

*Nazrul discussing tune of his songs with composer Kamal Das Gupta.*



*Nazrul was born in this house in Churulia*



*Nazrul's grave on the Dhaka University campus*

# Nazrul and Anti-establishment Journalism

**by Mohammad Amjad Hossain**

KAZI Nazrul Islam is one of those major poets in Bengali literature whose works are better appreciated when seen against the background of the poet's life. Being the sixth child of a poor family, Kazi Nazrul Islam, known as the 'Rebel Poet,' lost his father at the age of 8 only, and when his mother got married to his uncle, he became parentless for all practical purposes. Thus, he began a struggling life at an early age. He did not have the privilege to have regular schooling because of financial constraints. Although he did not have formal educations, he had developed a habit of reading anything he could lay his hands on.

Apart from serving in a mosque as a *Khadem* in the village called Churulia, Nazrul Islam was closely associated with an opera for which he used to write verse-plays. He also worked as a cook and a bakery boy. He started earning his livelihood at a time when any child of his age went to school.

Nazrul was a runaway person who left his home twice during his childhood. Since his childhood, he had remained an incurably restless vagrant who, ultimately, did not have his permanent abode. Nomadic and bohemian as he was, he continued to live in abject poverty throughout his life.

While in Asansol, Nazrul sought the help of the Head Master to study as a free boarder, but the Head Master did not accede to his request. Having been thus disappointed, he spent the night with one of the boarders, and composed a poem out of frustration, the script of which he kept under his pillow. His companion found the poem after Nazrul had left for home, and handed it over to the Head Master. The Head Master was impressed by the poem, and called Nazrul back, and gave him admission into the school. Since his early days, Nazrul Islam consistently demonstrated his passion for writing. Nazrul's appearance on the literary scene was a surprise, when Rabindranath Tagore's universally acknowledged literary career was at its peak. Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, when Nazrul Islam was only 14. In his poems, short stories, songs and novels, Nazrul Islam courageously raised his voice against the forces of tyranny and upheld a rich, secular heritage in Bengali literature. He not only drew upon Islamic myths accompanied by Arabic and Persian words, but also made use of Hindu myths. Since poverty was part of his life, its images and experiences were amply reflected in his poems and songs. But, he did not yield to poverty: he only mastered poverty to become rich not materially, but spiritually. In his 'Ode to Poverty', one of his oft-cited poems, Nazrul Islam said: "O Poverty! Thou hast made me great/ Thou hast honoured me with the honour of christ / By conferring on me the crown of thorns."

One sees that Nazrul's poetry or songs, whether they deal with the human or the romance have a spiritualizing effect true, Nazrul's poetic and musical career certainly overshadowed other preoccupations he had in life, including his journalistic career. Now, it is about this career I want to speak in brief, for much has not been said about it so far. In 1920, Nazrul Islam began his journalistic career, when he joined a daily newspaper called *Nava Jug* (New Age) of A K Fazlul Huq, as it joint editor with Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed. Nazrul Islam proved his worth and competence in writing editorial columns as well as in copy-editing news and features. The style of the paper was new, and the paper enjoyed considerable popularity. A K Fazlul Haq founded the *Navajug* to project his political image, while Nazrul Islam and Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed tended to disseminate the ideology and the message of a social revolution. Therefore, the owner of the paper and its editors were pole apart in their purposes. True, the cause of the toiling peasants and workers was editorially endorsed and projected. Soon, the views of the paper incurred the displeasure of the British government. Following the decision of the British Government to forfeit the security deposit, the newspaper ceased its publication. The British government's decision to forfeit the security deposit reflected a colonial trend of silencing the free press. A K Fazlul Huq was persuaded to deposit a large amount of money to resume the publication as demanded by the administration, but Nazrul Islam refused to stay with it, as his ideology and views were no longer in harmony with the desire of A K Fazlul Huq.

However, Fazlul Huq resumed its publication again in 1935. But, against his will, Nazrul Islam had to join the paper as its Chief Editor as he was in a financial crisis and passing through mental agonies caused by the death of his beloved son, Bulbul, and partial paralysis of his wife Pramila Nazrul. Subsequently, Nazrul Islam himself brought out a bi-weekly magazine called *Dhumketu* (Comet) in 1922. As its editor, he wrote against the oppression and injustice of the British rulers. The magazine practically evoked sharp reactions from the British government, while attracting a considerable readership. Nazrul was prosecuted on a sedition charge. He did not defend himself , but gave a long statement explaining his position, which was later published under the title 'Rajbandhir Jabanbandi' (Confessions of the Royal Prisoner).

The statement is a pice of excellent literature. One is tempted to quote here: "I am on trial for sedition. The Royal crown is pitted against the comet's flame. The accuser is king, sceptre in hand; the accused is truth, justice in hand. The King is supported by his salaried servants; my support is ever-awake God, who is truth eternal, and the king of kings and the judge of judges. The king's voice, however, is but a bubble, but mine is a limitless ocean, for I am a poet sent by God to express unexpressed truths and to give shape to shapeless creation .... India is now in bondage. This is undiluted truth. But under the present administration, it is sedition to call a slave a slave, and to describe wrong a wrong. Can such administration last long? Am I guilty simply because the anguished call of captive truth found expression in my voice? But mine is but the agonized cry of the oppressed universal soul. This cry cannot be suppressed by coercing me. It will ring again in somebody else's throat."

While in jail, Nazrul went on a hunger strike. He resisted the requests of many friends to give up this hunger strike. Poet Rabindranath Tagore also sent a telegram to Nazrul in jail, saying: "give up the hunger strike: our literature claims you." Nazrul Islam finally broke the hunger strike after forth days, and got released from the jail on completion of a one-year term.

The next journalistic venture of Nazrul Islam was the publication of a weekly entitled *Langal* (The Plough) in 1925. This weekly projected the view-point of the *labour swaraj* group of the Indian National Congress. This group was committed to the independence of India on the theory of equality of all men and women in political, social and economic terms. As many as 16 issues of this weekly were brought out. *Langal* was later changed into *Gana-vanee* (the Voice of the Masses), following the emergence of this political group as the peasants' and workers' party of Bengal. Nazrul Islam became a member of the party's working committee. Communal riots were order of the day in 1926, when Nazrul was editing the paper. He wrote editorials voicing against religious fanaticism and underscoring the need for communal harmony. His editorial comment did not fail to attract a wide readership and stimulate its conscience. Indeed, the quality of efforts that Nazrul put in to bring out a standard bi-weekly can be gauged from the memoirs of Achintya Kumar Sen Gupta, who wrote: "On Saturday evenings, we would, like many others, wait at Jagubabu's market for the hawker to come with his bundle of *Dhum Ketu*. As soon as he reached scramble started to reach for the paper. Perhaps we thought the editorial pen had dipped in blood and not in ink. What a language! They were not written to be read alone or read once."

With virtually no experience and education in journalism, Nazrul Islam had left an indelible mark in journalism, while espousing the ethos of a people-centred, secular, anti-establishment journalism in this part of the world.

# Our Debt to Nazrul

*Continued from page 9*

respectability to words of Muslim origin, he extended the expressiveness of our language. Also, he introduced and popularised in Bengali literature Muslim myths, legends and stories. It would not be incorrect to say that Nazrul Islam's contribution was even greater than Rabindranath's in the work of making Bengali literature, which had hitherto been the exclusive preserve of only one religious community, non-communal. With him literature in Bengal came to be a matter of pride for both communities.

To the educated members of his community Nazrul Islam brought a massage of hope. They felt, as they had never felt before in this century, that they were not inferior to anyone and that they need not be ashamed of themselves. But the message was not confined to the reading public alone; through his songs, which were very popular, it reached even those who could not read or write. To say this not to suggest that his role was wholly, or even mainly, negative. Because he not only dispelled the feeling of inferiority prevailing among the Muslims but also created in them a desire to achieve glory in life. When Ismail Hossain Shirajee, a great orator and a writer of considerable talents, wired ten rupees to the poet, saying "Don't refuse; I would have sent you ten thousand if I could", he did something which most of his Muslim readers had felt like doing. The gesture was characteristic of the passionate man that Shirajee was, but the sentiment that the gesture epitomised was shared by the entire body of middle-class Bengali Muslims.

True, there were some who were initially hostile to the poet. They were opposed to the practice of the arts on what they called moral and religious grounds, and to them what was religious was also moral, and vice versa. But once they had read his poems or, as more likely, heard his songs on Islamic subjects they had to surrender. He did not take much time to make the conquest of his community complete. After Nazrul Islam, Bengali Muslims were not what they had been before.

Others, politicians and writers, had tried contemporaneously with Nazrul Islam to rouse the Muslims. But their success could hardly be compared with his. A K Fazlul Huq worked for and among the Muslims, but so far as the creation of a new awareness is concerned Nazrul Islam had done more valuable work than Fazlul Huq. Shirajee was a great organiser, he had spoken to large gatherings, and had written oratorical prose urging Muslims to rise up and occupy their rightful place. But Nazrul Islam's appeal was far greater in both dimension and effectiveness.

Between him and the Shirajees of Bengal there was yet another difference. For the Shirajees were revivalists wanting to go back to a mythological and imaginary past which they had painted with all the colours they could think of. That the past had sunk beyond recovery was a fact they were not prepared to admit. It is true that Nazrul Islam had also sung to the past, he could hardly avoid doing that, but he did not sing in the strain of an impoverished aristocrat boasting of his ancestors' wealth. He knew that the past was dead, but he also knew that the past could be used to measure the indignity of the present. That is why the past and the present work out a parallelism in his writings. His eyes were firmly planted on the present; and more than the physical glories and grandeur of the past, he loved and cherished the values that he thought gave the past its glory. He wanted the present to be overhauled in accordance with those values. His reply to a letter Ebrahim Khan had written him states his position very clearly :

Whether the Bengali Muslims are poor in material wealth I do not know, but I have the painful realisation that they are really poor in mind and that to excess ... It is not true that I have not won recognition from the Muslims. The love and affection with which the young Muslims -- the real life of the country -- have received me have buried all the thorns of depreciation underneath. The real vitality of Islam lies in its recognition of the worth of the people, its democratic ideal, and its faith in universal brotherhood and equality of man. The uniqueness and greatness of Islam is recognised not only by me, but also by those who are not Muslims. This great truth of Islam can be the theme of not only a poem but an epic. An insignificant poet that I am, in many of my writings I have tried to sing the glory of Islam. But these efforts have never overstepped poetry, nor can they. In that case they will cease to be poetry ... I know that the greatest good of the country lies in the uplift of the Bengali Muslims. The fact that the awakening of their self is yet take place is the greatest obstacle in the way of the independence of India.

We see Nazrul Islam's greatness very clearly if we place him beside his contemporaries, both Muslim and Hindu. Ghulam Mustafa was envious of Nazrul Islam's reputation, and had parodied him in one of his poems. The difference between the two poets does not lie only in their technical skill, although that difference is not small; it lies also in Nazrul Islam's wide-awake acquaintance with what was happening around him and, more importantly, in his ability to grasp the new spirit that was abroad in Bengal after First World War. That Ghulam Mustafa should turn into a sort of an official poet of the Pakistan government, serve on a committee set up for devising means for harming the Bengali language, and devote himself to the work of bringing about Pakistanisation of Nazrul Islam need not surprise us. For he suffered from middle-class opportunism, as did many others of his class. Ebrahim Khan, who had a great admiration for Nazrul Islam and had written plays on the heroes of modern Turkey, became first a Muslim Leaguer and then a member of the National Assembly set up by Ayub Khan. Jasimuddin had written excellent poems of life in Bengali villages, but his increasing alienation from that life made it finally impossible for him to continue to write in the manner which had brought him his fame; and after the establishment of Pakistan his reputation of being a poet and his actual writing of poetry moved in contrary directions.

Qazi Emdadul Haq was a competent novelist, but while Nazrul Islam wrote on working-class life and movement, he wrote on problems of social adjustment between the different sections of the Muslim middle-class. These writers were incapable of growth, they lacked a consistent way of looking at life. Nazrul Islam's superiority was more qualitative than quantitative.

Nazrul Islam stands also above the contemporary and urbanised Hindu writers whom we mentioned earlier. It is to be noted that the most successful writers in Bengal have been those who had a proper understanding of, and contact with, life beyond the middle class. Michael Madhusudan Dutt and had become a Christian, travelled to Europe, and taken a European wife. But the strength of his epic lines did not come from Europe alone, it came primarily from life in his contemporary Bengal which included life in the villages. Without the creative energy that found expression in his two farces, in which he holds up to ridicule excesses of the young and the old alike, he could not have written his epic on the death of Meghnad, the son of Ravada of old mythology.

Bankimchandra was a great novelist because he knew the whole of Bengal. He had written not only on fictitious history, but also on the tillers of the soil and on the necessity of establishing social justice. The same is true about Rabindranath and Saratchandra. And it was here that despite his remarkable gifts of imagination and control over language, Buddhadeva Bose was circumscribed; for he was unable to go beyond the class to which he belonged. It has been pointed out that his heroes do not have any contact even with their servants, let alone those who live outside the social circle. A part of the poetic greatness of Jibanananda Das is attributable to the poet's turning to the villages of Bengal as distinguished form the towns. Nazrul Islam belonged to this class of writers. He will live; because he was more than a member of the middle class. He was freer than those who proclaimed that they were uninhibited and claimed that they belonged to the large European tradition. He dreamt of a happy and liberated society; his poetry makes us see this society as also to aspire for it.

We have more than one reason to be grateful to Kazi Nazrul Islam.

# Nazrul and Cultural Struggle

*Continued from page 9*

was that he knew his class and people well, and that he could capture and articulate, in both poetry and politics, the experiences and the aspirations of a people suffering under the yoke of tyranny, or under the dominion of an offshore power. Right from the stories whereby he marked his debut in the 1920s, through his first but most-talked-about volume of poems called *Agni Vina* (The Fiery Lute) down to the novels and the numerous songs he wrote, Nazrul never lost sight of his class and people, and their aspirations.

As was indicated earlier, Nazrul was fully committed to an anti-colonial cultural struggle in which he was both poetically and politically involved. Edward Said, one of the finest post-colonial cultural critics writing today, has recently initiated a lively discussion on what he calls "decolonising cultural resistance," and argues that at least three great topics emerge in the process of decolonisation, namely, "the insistence on the right to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally"; "the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history", and, of course, "a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation." It is interesting to observe that more than seventy years ago, Nazrul intensely and actively accommodated these topics in his poetry and songs which were for him a cultural struggle made visible. Although he knew well that national liberation was the strategic first step towards the liberation of the masses from social and economic oppressions perpetrated and perpetuated by feudalism and colonialism, Nazrul was not, a nationalist in the ordinary sense.

True, Nazrul began with his class, but decisively turned to human beings as a whole. While he spoke on behalf of the oppressed and the proletariat, he never confined them to any particular nation, but thought of them only globally, a fact exemplified in his poem 'Vidrohi'. In his yet another famous poem called 'Man', Nazrul took a more "integrative view of human community and human liberation" — that standard topic Said identified for decolonising cultural resistance. It was in this poem that Nazrul, like Chandidas and Lalon Fakir, dispensed with all those discriminations characteristically activated by class-systems, caste-systems, gender hegemony, and of course, by nationalism. In the poem 'Man', Nazrul became not only a poet of the present, but also a poet of all times and climes, as he could sing : "Of equality I sing./Man comes first./And there is nothing nobler than him./Differences of caste or creed./of ages or nations/matter little".

Thus, Nazrul's outlook was essentially international. But, the point is this : it was his essential rootedness in his time and history, and also his strong class-consciousness undeterred by middle-class nationalism which made Nazrul a truly internationalist poet.

Nazrul's insistence on the right to see the community's history wholly and integrally is well borne out by the fact that he explored and exploited, with the characteristic strength of a great artist, all possible lexical and mythical resources made available to him by his tradition. Brahma's sounds and the mighty roar of Israfil's bugle, the cruel axe of Parshurama and the sword of Ali, both Krishna and Muhammad — in other words, both Hindu and Islamic myths and histories including Sanskritic words and Arabic-Persian ones were integrated and fused into his creations untrammeled by either a nationalist or a communalist historiography, and thus, Nazrul broadened the horizon of both poetic language and historical experiences with a peculiar force and intensity that could only generate from one's faith in, and commitment to, none but man. Besides, it was Nazrul who, perhaps more intensely than any writer in Bengali literature, struck at the root of all forms of fundamentalist hegemony — grammatical, semantic, metrical, mythical, historical, scriptural, religious, racial, sexual, class hegemony, and national, and his alternative view of human history lay in "equality and that happy land,/where all artificial differences are resolved." Shelley, the English romantic poet, also looked forward to such a world in *Prometheus Unbound;* but, he envisaged this world in his highly charged, ethereal imagination and mostly in abstract terms. Nazrul, on the contrary, had the prerogative of the imagism of the concrete, the imagism of the here-and-now (not the kind of imagism Ezra Pound *et al* would habitually advocate), for Nazrul not only realised but also lived the need for dispensing with discriminations. While Shelley's imagination is essentially ariel, and his movement vertically upward, Nazrul is unmistakably earthy and his movement is always horizontally close to the soil. True, in the poem *Vidrohi*, the "I" of the poet tends to soar heavenward, even "pushing through Almighty's sacred seat"; but, neither Heaven nor God is his destination. The "I" ultimately returns to the "battlefields" and "the oppressed" — in other words, to earth and man which always constitute his concerns.

A poet of unusual courage who could declare the death of all scriptures that are used against man's freedom ("Why then dost thou .../Pour over the carcass of dead scriptures?"), and a man of inordinate zeal and zest for life, Nazrul lives still today in the hearts of men and women longing for freedom.

# *Nazrul as the National Poet*

*Continued from page 9*

the road to socio-economic development. The exploiting ruling classes, in order to hide their game of self-advancement at the expense of the impoverished masses, have found, in the true Pakistani fashion, religion a very handy weapon. To further their cause, they have actively encouraged and sought the help of the ultra-right, communal and fundamentalist elements — the very forces against which the Bengalis waged their bitter and bloody war of liberation for so long. And Nazrul, had he been alive today, would have been the first person to launch into a rebellion for the second time against these forces. Just to quote him once more, "let me say just this much, what I have written are poems rather than messages of shariat. It would be sheer chaos if one attempts to judge poetry by the yardstick of religion or holy scriptures. Poetry can neither be created nor can they survive or prosper — in an environment stultified by religious extremism. This is why in post-Islamic puritan Arabia, we do not find the emergence of real poets worth their names." This was Nazrul writing to one of his friends in 1915.

It is a tragedy of no mean significance that Nazrul, the supreme personification of all the ideals that have became the noble and glorious heritage of our nationalist struggle, has come to suffer such an ignominious fate in the hands of our ruling classes