



essay

Nazrul in World-Languages

by Khondakar Ashraf Hossain

KAZI Nazrul Islam had many misfortunes. The worst of them is probably that he did not get a good translator. Tagore's fate was slightly better, firstly because he had just enough knowledge of the English language to translate himself into English. His English translations of *Gitanjali*, though much maligned against, served the immediate purpose of catching the attention of the West and thus paved the way for a Nobel Prize. Moreover, one remembers Yeats' brilliant preface, Tagore's own image as a sagely India, the Colonial English intelligentsia's condescending applause. Nazrul had none of these to base his poetic fame upon; he came from the poorest section of the Indian poor, had no formal education, to *zamindari* to support him. Above all, he was unashamedly and unrepentingly anti-British and anti-colonial. There was no reason why the ruling British, and for that matter, the Anglophiles of Calcutta, would feel interested in promoting his works through translations.

But yet Nazrul was translated into English, and that also under the aegis of the British government in India. Many of his poems, many significant portions of his prose-works were translated into English as soon as they were published. Under the directives of the Home Ministry, the DPI of Calcutta instructed one Professor Akshoy Kumar Duttgupta to translate the seditious and anti-government poems and essays of Nazrul. The purpose was undoubtedly non-literary and the quality of translations was also lamentable. Mr Duttgupta had no literary pretensions; his sole purpose was to please his colonial masters by bringing to their notice the 'harmful' and 'seditious' contents of Nazrul's works so that they could be proscribed and banned.

Nazrul's 'Bisher Banshi' was translated by Akshoy Kumar within one month of its publication. He sent the English versions of poems and songs of *Bisher Banshi* to the DPI with the following comment:

"That the publication is of a most objectionable nature, the writer revelling in revolutionary, sentiments and inciting young men to rebellion and to law-breaking.

A few months later the Police Commissioner of Calcutta, the infamous Charles Tegart, made his comment on *Bisher Banshi* poems in his letter to the

The literary translations of Nazrul Islam into English had to wait until 1952 when three of his poems were included into Pakistan Pen Miscellany, published from Karachi. The poems/songs were: Beloved! Come and be my queen; the song that I sing, and *ghazal* ('বুলবুলি তুই ফুল শাখাতে') A book-length translation of Nazrul poetry came out in 1955; the translator was Mizanur Rahman. In 1957, one poem of Nazrul Islam was collected in Humayun Kabir edited Green and Gold. The name of the poem was 'Thieves and Robbers' ('চোর ডাকাড' from 'Sarbahara.'

Chief Secretary:

"The contents of the book as would appear from the extracts of translations are dangerously objectionable and I recommend the immediate proscription of the same.

The same process was adopted in the proscription of Nazrul's four other books. These translations, as I have said earlier, have little literary value, but they must be noted at least for the sake of history.

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In 1961, Pakistan Writers' Guild published an anthology titled *Presenting Pakistani Poetry*. Four of Nazrul's poems were anthologised: The Rebel, The Destitute and Awake. The first was translated by Yusuf Jamal Hossain and the rest by G Allana, the editor of the volume. Bangla Academy, Dhaka published Kabir Chowdhury's selected poems of Nazrul in 1963.

Among other notable English translations are:

1. Abdul Hakim: The Fiery Lyrics of Nazrul Islam
2. Kabir Chowdhury: The Morning Shanai, Nazrul Institute
3. Abu Rushed: Selected Songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam
4. Kabir Chowdhury: Kuhelika
5. Rafiqul Islam edited: Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bangla Academy

6. Sajed Kamal's recent translation, published, by Nazrul Institute.

When I say 'Nazrul did not get a good translator' I do not forget the innumerable translations of his works that have come out since his death in 1976. The English translations of Nazrul are more or less a recent phenomenon; during his life-time, more appropriately during his active life in the twenties and thirties, not much of his works was translated into English or other languages. Recently, there seems to be a spate of English translations of Nazrul, mostly with the financial assistance of the Nazrul Institute of Dhaka. This is not the time and place to judge their merits, because some of the translations leave much to be desired. There have been too many hacks around, and some busy-bodies who dabble in everything. This is true about Tagore translations as well.

The British poet-translator William Radice has proved a boon to Bangla literature in many ways. It seems that this scholarly man has genuine love for Bangla; his works on Modhusudhan Dutta and Rabindranath are an ample proof of his sincerity. His translations of Tagore have created a new interest in the forgotten Nobel-Laureate in the west. Fortunately, Radice has shown some interest in Nazrul also and we can fervently hope that, some day, he will translate at least some parts of Nazrul's works. In an essay titled, 'Sampling the Poetry of Nazrul Islam,' Radice evaluated Nazrul in the following words:

"Before I started to read Nazrul, I expected that he would be crudely rhetorical, tub-thumping, sprawling, sentimental, vulgar — and he is indeed often all these things. But he also has great energy and originality, and the values that his poetry propounds are courageous, positive and life-enhancing.... He acknowledged the influence of Walt Whitman, and sometimes he is like the

beat-poets of the sixties.... *Bidrohi*, 'The Rebel', is usually regarded as Nazrul's most characteristic poem, and only he could have produced its blend of exuberant rhetoric, metrical turbulence, social idealism and romantic egoism. It must have seemed sensationally original when it first appeared in 1922 in the book *Agnibina* ('Veena of Fire')."

Radice included some excerpts of *Bidrohi*, *Chhatroder Gan*, *Sindhu*, *Daridrya*, *Jhinge Phul* and *Bijoyini* from *Dolanchampa*. Radice called his translation of the quoted excerpts as experimental drafts only. Radice's essay was published in the Nazrul Institute Journal, November 1989. I cannot resist the temptation of quoting a few samples of Radice's translations:

From *Bidrohi*:

বল বীর
বল উন্নত মম শির
শিব নেহারি আমারি নত শির ঐ
শিবের হিমাদ্রির
বল মহাবিশ্বের মহাকাশ কাড়ি
চন্দ্রস্বর্গে ধরে তারা ছাড়ি
হুলোক দুলালক পোলক ভেদিয়া
খোদার আসন অরশ হেদিয়া
উঠিবাছি বিখ্য আমি বিশ্ববিধায়ী
মম লগাটে বন্দু ভগবান ছুলে
রাজসূত্রিকা দীপ্ত জয়শ্রীর
বল বীর চির উন্নত শির

A Hero am I—
I hold my head high—
Hear how I cut through space,
How I crack the curves of earth and
heaven, race
Split moon, sun, planets, stars,
Splitting the throne of Allah as I
rise.
Perpetually surprising my cosmic
Mother!
The royal mark of a fiery victor—
A Hero am I—
With my head ever-high,
From 'Sindhu':

O sea, my friend, you are an exiled lover.

Always unsatisfied, what is this anguish
Conveyed to our ears by your surging swell?

What is it you wish us to hear, my friend?

Is it that you long to overwhelm the shore wity your blue water?

Among the native English speakers who translated Nazrul's poems is AG Stock, a renowned Yeats-scholar, and a former teacher of Dhaka University. She translated Nazrul's 'Palli-Janani'. The first two lines of the poem were: 'আমার শ্যামলা বরণ বাংলা মায়ের রূপ দেখে যা আমারে আয়/পিরিদিবী বনে মাঠে ধান্তের রূপ ছাপিয়ে যায়।' 'Stock's translation runs thus:

See how lovely she is, Bengal my deep-green mother
Her beauty overflows mountain and cave, forest and field and the waste lovely places.

Another translator is John Thorpe who translated 'Bidrohi' in rhyme. One sample of his translation can be had in these four lines:

"আমি গোপন প্রিয়ার চকিত চাহনি ছল করে দেখা অনুবন
আমি চপল মেয়ের ভালোবাসা, তার কঁকন হৃতির কনকন"
I am the secret lover's startled glance
seeking every chance to cheat!
I am the wanton woman's love
Her bracelet-bangles wembling beat.

Outside Bengal, Nazrul found the most favourable readership in the former Soviet Union. AUM Fakhruddin informs us in an essay published in the Nazrul Institute Journal that Kazi Nazrul Islam remains the second most widely-read poet of the subcontinent in Russia after Rabindranath Tagore. Four collections of poems of the rebel poet in Russian have been published. B. Botvinnik of Leningrad was the first among the Soviet translators to introduce Nazrul to the readers in the Soviet

Union in 1958. In the following year, an anthology of Bangla poems was published in Russian translations which included twelve more poems of Nazrul. But the greatest credit goes to poet Mikhail Kurgantsev whose "Selected Works of Kazi Nazrul Islam" appeared in 1962 and was an immediate success. The Samyabadi voice of Nazrul had an infinite appeal to the Soviet reading public and they were quick to find resemblances between the fiery voice of Bengal's rebel poet and that of their own poets like Mayakovsky. Kurgantsev published his second book of translations titled "Selected Poems of Kazi Nazrul" in 1970 and another comprehensive volume on Nazrul after the poet's death in 1976.

Besides, in 1963, Anwar Alim Zhanov published selected poems of Nazrul with 33 poems and the biography of the poet.

Professor AP Gnatyuk-Danil Chuk has been quoted by Fakhruddin as saying:

"The popularity of Nazrul's poetry in the Soviet Union is gradually growing."

This statement can be justified by the fact that over the past several years the Rebel poet has been translated into a number of Soviet languages — Kazakh, Uzbek, Ajarbyzan, Georgian, Turkman, Tazik, and so on. Towards the end of the seventies Soviet musicians Yevsiey and Losov set tune to some of his poems. In 1981, musician Yevgenni won an award for setting tune to Nazrul's poem titled "Sankalpa" (ambition).

Why did Nazrul find such a hearty reception in the Soviet Union? The answer is not hard to find. Professor Danilchuk mentions how Nazrul came under the impact of Bolshevik Revolution soon after its occurrence. As early as in 1920, Nazrul, in one of his short stories, 'Byathar Dan,' made his protagonist join the Red Army and vow to defend the cause of the exploited people by fighting the exploiters. More significant is the fact that the hero of the story was modelled on Murtuza Ali, a great fighter during the October Revolution. Nazrul's Samyabadi was fired by Marxist ideas.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain is Associate Professor of English at Dhaka University.

To be continued

book review

Environmental Politics or, Politics of Environment

By I M Faisal

Environmental Politics in Bangladesh by Mahfuz Ullah. Published by Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD), priced at Tk 200.

THE Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD) has recently published *Environmental Politics in Bangladesh*, a book authored by Mr Mahfuz Ullah, an eminent journalist-cum-environmental activist. As we begin our journey through the new millennium, this is a very important and timely publication. With an ever growing population, and the consequent depletion of resources along with the emission of pollutants, environmental issues are taking the centre stage all over the world. In this context, this book provides a comprehensive coverage of the major environmental issues of Bangladesh and how these are linked with the past and present political systems of the country.

The book begins with a ground-setting discussion of the major environmental concerns and the government's response to these concerns through the formulation of policies, acts and laws. Since policies and laws are made by the politicians, the role of politics immediately becomes evident. The book presents an interesting analysis of how environment issues have gradually made their way into the five-year plans (FYP's) since the adoption of the first one in 1972. With growing awareness and pressure from both home and abroad, the most recent five-year plan for the 1997-2002 period includes very encouraging statements, its objectives being to "promote, nurture, protect and expand nature and natural resources and link all development activities with the environment for improving the quality of life."

Of course, there is a world of difference between incorporating lofty ideals in national plans and implementing some of the ideas to protect and enhance the environment against the impacts of growth oriented traditional economic activities. Thus, very few specific environmental laws exist in Bangladesh to help materialise the policies and no one has ever been punished so far for any

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kind of environmental infraction. Many government officials think that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) is just a waste of time and resources, and the Planning Commission has never rejected a project on the ground of not having an EIA even when it was needed.

Against this backdrop, the author takes up case studies on waste dumping,



relocation of tanneries, polybags, flood control, encroachment of the Buriganga, the Magurchara explosion, genetically modified crop and the Osmanli Udyan. All these issues have been covered in depth and the role of politics has been appropriately identified along with the role of the general public.

Each of these concerns is attentively dealt with in separate chapters in the book. Each chapter begins with an introductory paragraph focusing on the salient points pertaining to that chapter. This has significantly improved the readability of the book. For example, the chapter on flood control projects and plans rightly begins with the statement that 'Despite millions of Taka spent to fight the hazard, the issue of controlled flooding and applying traditional knowledge of living with the floods remain out of agenda.' This shows the technical bias and influence of the concerned organisations on the one hand, and the lack of awareness and understanding of the complex environmental issues by the decision makers of the country on the other. Unfortunately, this weakness is fully exploited by foreign companies, which was exemplified after the gas field explosion at Magurchara on June 15, 1997. The author correctly points out that "In a bid to invite foreign investment for oil and gas exploration, the cause of the environment to a great extent has been compromised. Now the government is finding it difficult to penalise the foreign companies devastating the environment." The Inquiry Committee appointed by the government estimated that the economic value of the damages incurred due to the accident amounted to about Taka 6090 million. More than two and a half years have passed since then and negotiation for compensation is still going on.

Inclusion of the issue of genetically modified (GM) crops in the book is a particularly substantial one. The gen-

eral public and many environmental activists are also not aware of the consequences of using HYV and GM crops. Seeds of GM crops terminate their own ability to reproduce once mature! This means that the farmers using GM crops will remain dependent on the few multinational suppliers forever. There are two other major negative impacts. One, GM seeds require heavy doses of pesticides and a commonly used variety called Roundup, which is a broad spectrum pesticide that kills just about everything in the field. Two, GM crops may make some local cultivars sterile through cross-pollination in the long run. In short, GM crops are basically recipes for an ecological disaster. Due to the lack of understanding and unlawful collaboration with the multinational lobby, high government officials have recently issued statements in favour of the GM crops in the name of obtaining food self-sufficiency. How can we become self-sufficient in food if we need to import all of our seeds and required pesticides from outside?

It can be said that the case studies highlighted in the book are very important and relevant. Even readers with interest in environmental problems alone will find much valuable information in the case studies. However, one minor short fall that I have noticed is the heavy reliance on newspaper articles and reports and less reference to more authoritative sources. While discussing issues like GM crops and the biodegradation of polybags, a little bit of technical information would have made the book a more useful reference.

After covering the case studies, the book presents two of its key chapters — Rule of the Political Parties and People's Action Groups. As expected, the role of the political parties has not been a commendable one so far. In the election manifestos of 1991, there was no mention of any environmental issue at all. After coming into power, BNP took a few initiatives such as passing the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act of 1995 and representing Bangladesh in various international forums. They also banned the export of frog legs that was destroying the local ecology. But once out of power, environmental issues were forgotten again.

Despite awareness building seminars and workshops with the parliamentarians, communiqué of the 1996 general election were disappointing with only casual mentions of tree plantation programmes and pollution prevention. The idea of traditional economic growth is still very much embedded in the psyche of the politicians of Bangladesh. These people are yet to come to grips with the notion of sustainable development. The author smoothly summarises the overall situation as 'Environment is an area where the parties are gradually intervening but the intervention is limited to words than action.'

In this regard, people's response can play an important role. Environmental activism has made significant impact in alleviating local environmental crisis. One of the many examples is the case of noise pollution at the Kazitola Intersection in Sylhet. A few journalists who participated in a workshop on

the environment took a bold initiative here. With the help of local club members, they managed to convince taxi, tempo and bus drivers not to honk unnecessarily at the intersection. Club members took rides on these vehicles and monitored that the drivers follow ed the suggestions. This move was a great success and the noise problem at that intersection is now almost gone. And we all know the fate of the trees of the Osmanli Udyan. They were saved only because of the pressure created by various public groups including the Citizens Committee lead by Professor Sirajul Islam. Owing to mounting pressure from home and abroad, the government finally decided to relocate the proposed conference centre away from the park.

Ultimately, the small-scale local movements have to be co-ordinated and turned into national issues. Only then can we expect some serious attention and commitment from the politicians who are too busy securing their re-election. The role of an intermediate group, the bureaucracy, is also vitally important as they work as the implementing body of the government. It is encouraging that recently the government has taken some steps to introduce basics of environmental impact assessment in the training programme of officers at various levels.

In addition to the political perspectives, the book includes some useful tables and charts that have added to the usefulness of the book. Examples include a Table on the status of various environmental laws and a map of the environmental hotspots in Bangladesh. In conclusion, I have found the book well written, informative and interesting. The strength of the book is its rich composition of examples and anecdotes from Bangladesh. These stories depict the problems we are facing and infer how the problems can be addressed, particularly by the politicians. I enjoyed reading the book and wish it a wide circulation among both political and non-political readers.

I. M. Faisal is Associate Professor and Chairman, Environmental Studies...