

28TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

TRIBUTE TO OUR NATIONAL POET

Kazi Nazrul Islam

Preserving Nazrul's treasure troves

Sudhin Das, the renowned exponent of Nazrul songs for over half a century, has almost single handedly worked painstakingly to authenticate the original notation of Nazrul Sangeet, the 'swaralipi'. For his untiring commitment, he has achieved a revered status at home and abroad. He has been awarded the Ekushey Padak, Nazrul Gold Medal, Nasiruddin Gold Medal, Zebunnessa-Mahbubullah Trust Gold Medal and the Altaf Mahmood Gold Medal and felicitations from Shilpakala Academy and Bangla Academy amongst others. Nearly 30 years after Nazrul's death, Sudhin Das is still as committed to his task as he was when he first started. Excerpts from his frank and insightful interview...

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

It was a sweltering day, when I entered the Nazrul Institute. Sudhin Das was as usual, sitting deeply engrossed behind stacks of old gramophone records and busily instructing a group of young students. There was a gleam in his eyes as he noticed my surprise, listening to the popular lyrics of the song, albeit a slightly different tune. 'I never tire from teaching the original tunes,' he said. As we settled down, he explained the nature of his work.

The disks, as you know, are collected through different sources.

tampered beyond imagination,' says Das.

He went on to add, 'I was myself a victim of circumstances. I taught the students the songs which I could easily gather from West Bengal. These works had gained immense popularity by then. But as time went on, we realised that a group with a shallow understanding of Nazrul were adapting the songs, and commercialising it for profit. This group was at the heart of distorting the poet's heritage. It was then that we started our campaign for authenticating Nazrul Sangeet notations.'



Sudhin Das

between words,' says Das. He adds: 'As an ardent fan of the five main poets of Bengal (The Pancha Kabi) I took it as my prime responsibility to work on Nazrul's creative works which was at a risk of extinction.'

'Distortion was rampant in Nazrul songs, more than in songs of other famous composers,' added a despondent Das.

Tagore's creations are guarded against distortion under the copyright of Biswa Bharati. However, the same was not applicable for Nazrul's literary pursuits. Nazrul's legendary popularity, his immense stock of songs and the lack of copy-

right secretary of Nazrul Academy inspired me to work on the authentic notations of Nazrul and offered me a platform. From then on, I took the initiative to work on this difficult yet challenging work. But this project failed to continue after five publications, due to a difference of opinion,' says Das.

In 1982, the then-Executive Director of Nazrul Institute Md. Mahfuzullah took over and requested Das to work for a project in the Authentication Board of the Nazrul Institute. Stalwarts like Laila Arjumand Banu headed the board for 10 years. Other experts on the field like Sheikh Luthfur Rahman, Sohrab Hossain, Bedaruddin Ahmed and later on Ferdousi Rahman joined in as members in the Board. Much later eminent singer Feroza Begum took over as the President of the Board.

'So far I have worked on more than 500 songs. Each song takes several days to decipher,' adds Sudhin Das. Eminent composer and singer Sheikh Luthfur Rahman, his students SM Ahsan Murshed, Rafiqunnabi and Salauddin Ahmed have followed Das in making authentic notations from the original disks recorded before Nazrul fell grievously ill.

'But there is more to accomplish in terms of preserving Nazrul's work. TV and Radio should have a cell from where Nazrul's original songs should be scrutinised. If strict measures are taken for a year the authentic tunes will once again be practised by all,' he says.

The National Poet's songs are timeless gems. One can only hope that future artists and exponents of Nazrul Sangeet would continue to adhere to the original tune, and appreciate the true genius that was Nazrul.



L-R: Kanan Devi, Dilip Kumar Roy, Angur Bala and KL Saigal—the legendary artists of Nazrul Sangeet

Most often, they are in such a dilapidated condition, that it is a painstaking job to even grasp the words, let alone the delicate intricate filigree works of the different styles of Nazrul songs. The songs range from anything from classical to the folk, Ghazal to modern and one has to understand the exact technical nuances to carry on with the task,' said the eminent artist.

After Nazrul was incapacitated by neurological illness in 1942, his works fell into the hands of the so-called intellectuals and well-wishers who took advantage of the situation. From then these were

During 1976-77, a noted publication house of India, had printed a third edition of 900 songs of Nazrul. However, a careful scrutiny revealed that most of the songs in the book were not authentic. It was then that Sudhin Das visited Kolkata and challenged the works by Abdul Aziz Al Aman, the author of the notation book.

'Do you think one would ever be allowed to add a few brush strokes here and there to the original works of Rembrandt, Picasso or Michelangelo? Or change the lyrics or tunes of Tagore, according to his taste? That would be a clear distortion of

the creativity; in short, it would be a crime,' he said.

'Nazrul was very liberal with his songs and allowed eminent artists to make variations keeping the original form intact. But, he hardly imagined that the immortal songs that he composed in *Bhairabi Raga* would be tuned in *Bagesree*, or some of his classic songs would be sung according to whim. Singers preferred the classical genres where one could implement their own style. This was in contrast to Tagore songs which were structured; the singers had no option to change the style or even breathe in

rights was certainly at the core of the problem.'

Three authentic notation books titled Nazrul Swaralipi, Sur Mukur (by Nazrul) and Surilipi (by Jagat Ghotok) were printed before Nazrul's illness. A low spot in his life was in 1927, when he faced grave financial crisis. He was deceived by the publishers. He found it difficult to make ends meet and often sold his songs for a meagre amount.

'With such differences of opinion amongst experts, how difficult was it to start this initiative? I asked.

Talim Hossain, the founder gen-



The chemistry of Nazrul-Abbasuddin duo

HARUN UR RASHID

Eid-ul-Fitr is never complete for the Bangali Muslims without Kazi Nazrul Islam's wonderful song *O mon Ramjaner oi rojar sheshey elo Khushir Eid*. The appropriate lyrics and the sweet jovial tune of the song absolutely fit the merit of the occasion. The importance of the song is that it was the first Islamic song of Nazrul to be recorded on LP. And the singer whose brilliant voice turned the song into a phenomenon was Abbasuddin Ahmed.

'One day my father went to Nazrul Islam,' says Ferdousi Rahman, the proud daughter of Abbasuddin Ahmed and renowned artist of Nazrul Sangeet and Bhawaiya songs, 'and told him if Islamic songs could be recorded in Bangla in the manner of Urdu Kavalis, which were extremely popular at that time.' Abbasuddin pointed out that such Islamic songs would make Nazrul popular to the Bangali Muslims to whom he was like a heretic. 'At that time, Muslims considered music as unholy,' explains Ferdousi.

Considering Abbasuddin's proposal, Nazrul asked him to talk to Bhagabati Bhattacharya, the Rehearsal-in-Charge of the Gramophone Company. 'At first, Bhagabati Babu became very angry about the idea,' writes Abbasuddin in his autobiography, *Amar Shilpi Jiboner Kotha*; for, Bhagabati thought it wouldn't be accepted by the music lovers.

However, after six months, at a favoured moment, Abbas once again mentioned the proposal, and 'this time the old man nodded "yes",' says Ferdousi as she heard from her father. 'After the recording, Abba (father) went home for Eid-ul-Fitr. On his way back to Kolkata, he heard several times that people were humming the song.' Abbasuddin wondered how these people learnt about the song at all! In Kolkata, Abbasuddin found an overwhelming situation; the LP, which also contained another song—*Islam-er oi shawda loye*, sold thousands of copies. Abbasuddin Ahmed and Kazi Nazrul Islam became an unparalleled duo.

The song *O mon Ramjaner oi rojar sheshey* is further important because it drew the then Bangali Muslim community towards music which they considered profane. 'Nazrul and my father enhanced this improvement more by songs like *Allah amar probhu*, *Elo abar Eid phirey*, *Khodar premer shorab piye*, *Tribhubaner priyo Mohammad*, *Shono shono ya Elahi*, *Allah naamer bij buncchi*, *Allah-ke je paitey chaay* and many other famous songs,' says Ferdousi.

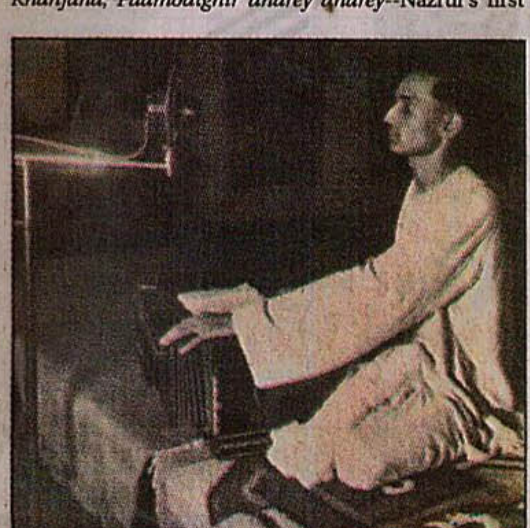
'Once Abba was invited by the students of Joypurhat but he was requested not to use harmonium as people considered it irreligious,' says Ferdousi. 'Abba came on stage and told the audience that he was going to talk only rather than sing. Then he described how the whole world rejoiced Prophet Mohammad's (SM) birth, and started to sing, without any instrument of course, Nazrul's famous song *Tora dekhe ja Amina mayer koley*. After singing another song Abbasuddin wanted to leave the stage, but the audience was won over by that time. Then he im-

provided a little music by using tabla and sang another religious song, *Amar Mohammader naamer dhyani hridoye jar roy*. Thus Abba helped music gain acceptance to the Bangali Muslims,' Ferdousi says.

She tells the story of another famous song, *Hey namaji amar ghorey*. 'One day while waiting at Nazrul's place, Abba wanted to say his prayer. Nazrul Islam became very concerned, as there was no *jainamaz* (prayer mat) in the house. He finally gave Abba a clean shawl to use as *jainamaz*. After his prayer, Abba found that Nazrul Islam had meanwhile written the beautiful song.' The song offers to the pious heart of the poet as a prayer mat.

Another important aspect of Nazrul-Abbasuddin combination was that through their songs they helped retain the peaceful cohabitation of the Hindus and the Muslims when communal riot broke out in the region. 'Together abba and Nazrul produced anti-communal songs like *Bharater dui nayan tara Hindu Musalman*, *Hindu ar Muslim mora dui shahodar bhai* and *O bhai Hindu Musalman*,' says Ferdousi.

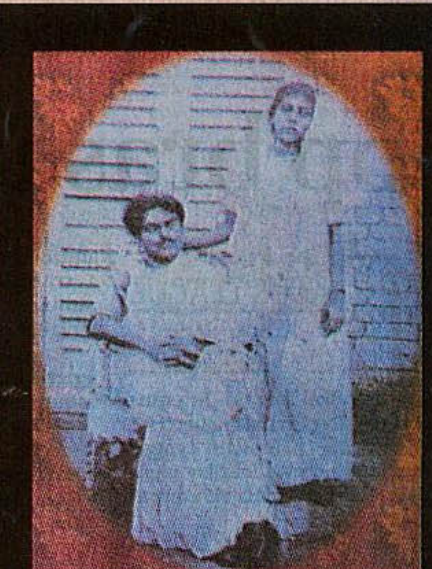
Abba also sang many of Nazrul's folk songs and these instantly became widely popular, especially with the urban audience who didn't have much access into the realm of Bangla folk music. Nazrul also liked his voice and style of rendering Bhawaiya songs. So, he wrote songs like *Nodir naam shoi Anjana Nachey teerey Khanjana*, *Padmodighir dharey dharey*—Nazrul's first



Young Abbasuddin Ahmed during a recording session of Kolkata Radio

folk songs to be recorded,' informs Ferdousi.

Abbasuddin recorded hundreds of Nazrul's songs, which enjoyed tremendous popularity at that time and still are. His first record of 'Adhunik' Bangla song, *Laili tomar eshechhey phiriya* has become an icon of modern Bangla songs.



Kazi Nazrul Islam at different stages of his life: (left) An early portrait of the poet (centre) Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman presenting a garland to the poet upon his arrival in Bangladesh; (right) the poet with his wife Pramila

Prevent distortions of Nazrul Sangeet--Khalid Husain

NOVERA DEEPTA

Khalid Husain, an eminent Nazrul singer, recently talked about different aspects of Nazrul Sangeet. On the occasion of the death anniversary of the poet, he talks about its popularity, importance of its promotion as well as the negligence of this genre.

Khalid is of the opinion that the practice of Nazrul songs has undoubtedly increased during the last 20 years. Yet, problems regarding controversy on the original tune and maintaining the originality of these songs still persist. To quote Khalid, 'Among the 4000 songs, of which Nazrul composed, not all the songs were recorded before he fell ill. Which is why very few original records are available in the market.'

Collectors of these rare songs like Ershadul Haque and Abdus Sattar owned these and later on handed them over to the Nazrul Institute.

The Nazrul Institute sorted out some of the notations and released them in the market. But Khalid Husain points out that these nota-

tions are unusable for laymen whose aim is to listen to the songs. He adds, 'For the listeners the original records or the undistorted remake versions by the modern day artists should be in the market. But the record companies or the artists are not really keen in releasing such records. That's why it has not been easy to generate wide spread popularity. An easy way would be to release Nazrul songs on a mass scale and in a manner which is comprehensible to the general listeners.'

Khalid Husain regrets that the Nazrul Institute has done very little to promote Nazrul songs because of their limitations while putting in an effort to further his other creative works. As a government organisation, he says, the Institute has difficulties and limitations in promoting Nazrul Sangeet.

The media is also indifferent towards Nazrul songs. The radio and television media have earmarked a tiny spot for Nazrul songs and that is also not in the prime time. Expressing his regret at this phenomenon, Khalid says, 'It is very unfortu-



Khalid Husain

nate that the television channels have chosen to ignore Nazrul Sangeet. Likewise, artists who feel that they will be more popular in the country are getting uninterested about Nazrul songs. Similarly, the artists feel that they will be more popular by singing modern or contemporary songs rather than Nazrul songs.'

Because of the non-availability

of the original tunes, some scheming artists of our neighbouring country are releasing Nazrul songs with distorted tunes. As Khalid says, 'They have a lame excuse that the new generation listeners are interested in a new style and they have to do accordingly. However, the classic songs of Nazrul, DL Roy, Rajanikanto, Tagore and Atul Prasad should not be distorted even if people are not appreciative of the original form. It is our responsibility to preserve the songs of Nazrul as he is our National Poet.'

According to Khalid, there is very little effort to protect the original Nazrul songs from any kind of distortion. To quote him, 'I don't find any valid reason for this negligence in promoting Nazrul songs. Cheap entertainment has no relevance to Nazrul songs. Nazrul songs should be practised with respect.'

Khalid complains that our National Poet is not focused duly even in the government organised tours. Khalid strongly believes that the appeal of Nazrul songs is everlasting. As he maintains, 'While Bengal

was overwhelmed by the songs of Tagore, DL Roy, Rajanikanto and Atul Prasad, Nazrul brought a new dimension in music with his diverse appeal. He wrote about 35 varieties of songs like folk, ghazal patriotic songs and much more. And he wrote 4,000 to 4,500 songs from 1921 to 1942 while he also created 20 new ragas and six new taals.'

To quote Khalid, 'To promote Nazrul songs effective and innovative measures like music videos and CDs should be released. The onus lies on the audience as well. Nazrul Institute, the most suitable institute for research and preserving Nazrul songs, does only one tenth of what it should do to further Nazrul songs.'

In a fitting tribute to Nazrul, Khalid quotes the late poet: 'Music is the realisation of my heart. Whatever you say about my other works, don't say anything about my music.'

On his death anniversary on August 27, music lovers should take a pledge to prevent the distortion of Nazrul's songs.