

29th Death Anniversary

Remembering our National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam



Angur Bala

Immortalising Nazrul's ghazals | A titan among Nazrul artistes

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

URING the mid '70s, our finals at Chhayanaut music school had begun. Among the panel of experts, music exponent Laila Arjumand Banu was present. Soon it was my turn to face the board where I was asked to present classical and Nazrul songs. My last presentation at the exam was a ghazal by Nazrul.

"Can you explain what a ghazal is?" questioned Arjumand Banu. While I was looking for words, she explained in simple words, "Ghazals originated from Persian poetry based on love. It was Kazi Nazrul Islam who introduced Bangla ghazals that created a massive impact in the music scene. The songs with an exclusive pattern and melody took the music lovers by storm. This was in the year 1926. Nazrul was then hardly 27." There is no end to learning, I thought to myself. That day is firmly etched in

It was in the same year ('74) that the virtuoso singer Angurbala visited Dhaka. She was the first to record two of Nazrul's ghazals Eto jaal O kajal chokhey and Bhuli kemoney in 1929 for the Gramophone Company that stirred the music aficionados to great heights. Never had they heard such songs with such passionate lyrics and tunes. Surely Nazrul's genius was unparalleled.

As I hurriedly entered the gates of the radio office at Shahbagh Avenue, I met the eager eyes of the other artistes who had flocked to the big auditorium to hear the living legend.

Angurbala was about 70 at that time. In a simple white cotton sari and a gold bead necklace she looked frail as she took the stage Placing her hand softly on her right ear she sang, "Jarey haath diye mala ditey paro nai, keno money rakho tarey, Eto jol o kajal chokhey, Ey bashi bashorey, Choiti rater and a few more songs, mostly from the genre of ghazals. Her voice wasn't stereotypically melodious. It was raspy, yet powerful--age was catching up, according to many. However, the applauding audience marvelled



Sometimes he would just explain the notations and then say in his usual manner, 'Angur, it's now up to you

> to add the sweet angur (grape) flavour of your voice.

she presented the songs. Nazrul exponent Shiddeswar Mukhopadhyay accompanied her on the harmonium and Madon Goplal Das from Bangladesh was on

In between her presentations. she spoke of her days at the Gramo-

Eminent artistes such as Sachin Dev Burman, KL Saigal, KC Dev, Tulsi Lahiri, Pronob Rai, Abbassuddin Ahmed, Kamol Das Gupta, Juthika Rai, Angur Bala, Indu Bala. Kamala Jharia and many others involved with the recording company directly recorded songs

turned into legends themselves. It was however, Dilip Kumar Rai, an eminent singer and son of DL Rai,who had first popularised Nazrul's ghazals

Angurbala continued in the same vein. In her words, "When I recorded for the first time for the gramophone, I was dead nervous. There was a myth that artistes were cut into pieces and put inside the machine from where they performed. After a lot of persuasion, I agreed to sing in a closeted room, which resembled a gas chamber you might have seen on TV. I was equally thrilled when I heard my own voice immediately after I performed in front of a long pipe, which I later came to know was a microphone," she went on in front of the crowd, which burst into laugh-

Angur was equally proficient as an actress on stage and talkies. It was a time when women were not allowed to cross the boundary of their household, not to speak of performing in public. Angur was attached to the Minerva Studio. Here she donned the role of Bibek (conscience) in many theatres and acted in Maan Bhanjan, Shobhoda, Shajahan, Tulsi Das, Atmadarshan and Nartaki among others. In the play Kinnari, she essayed the lead role.

Angurbala had recorded about 300 songs for the Gramophone Company of which 50 were Nazrul songs. "The most interesting experience was when I met Kazi Shaheb for the first time," went on the legendary artiste. Recalling those eventful days, Angur said, "We waited impatiently to meet him. We thought that he would be a bearded man, dressed up in alkhella, with a toopi on his head. However, we were charmed to see a completely different person attired in a gerua panjabi, a yellow silk turban and strings of beads around his neck. A creative genius of his stature never seemed

"Kazi Shaheb would compose tunes focusing on the speciality of the artiste. Sometimes he would just explain the notations and then say in $\dot{\text{his}}$ usual manner 'Angur, it's now up to you to add the sweet angur (grape) flavour of your voice.' That is Angurbala

Sohrab Hossain

KARIM WAHEED

Ranaghat, West Bengal: A 9-yearold boy hears someone singing at a gathering. Drawn to the voice, the boy makes his way through the crowd to take a look at the singer. He is fascinated not only by the words--Durgamo giri kantar maru dustar parabaar hey, but also the zeal with which the artiste renders the song. It was as if, one could not separate the artiste from his song.

This is how Sohrab Hossain recalls his first encounter with Kazi Nazrul Islam. An aged Sohrab may not remember the accurate dates but the memories remain ablaze. He says, "That song Durgamo

made an immense impact on me. Not just me, the song became a phenomenon during the 'Quit India' Movement. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose once said about the song, 'No other song motivates me through our struggles. If it's up to me, I'd make this our anthem."

Calling Sohrab one of the pioneering Nazrul singers of our country would not be an overstatement. After the Partition, except for Abbasuddin, Feroza Begum, Laila Arjumand Banu, Bedaruddin Ahmed and Sohrab Hossain, there were hardly any quality Nazrul artistes in this land. Sohrab has been an integral part of the revival of popularity of Nazrul songs and maintaining the correct notations of the songs after they went through major distortion during the '40s and '50s. A breed of talented Nazrul artistes that include Shaheen Samad, Dalia Nausheen, Sadya Afreen Mallick, Sabiha Mahbub and Kamol Rodrigues have trained under him.

Reminiscing on the days of yore, Sohrab says, "I was born in Nodia, West Bengal. Before the Partition I used to go to Kolkata often. Artistes--K Mallick, Bedaruddin Ahmed, Bazlul Karim and I, had our get-togethers there. I had the

The Institute was founded in 1972,

when Bangobandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman brought the ailing Nazrul

from Kolkata to be settled in Dhaka.

According to Shikdar, "Former

President Ziaur Rahman, who

patronised Nazrul Institute, wanted

more research on Nazrul's life and

work. There was need for discus-

sions and seminars on the National

Poet. Books, tapes, CDs on his work

had also to be arranged and cata-

logued. His songs and poems need

to be made more popular. Awards

should be given to those who have

"The Institute seeks to preserve

and spread Nazrul's songs and

literature. Before Ziaur Rahman

could establish the Institute in a full-

fledged manner, he passed away.

However, the work that he had

Institute was fully established, and

begun was continued. In 1985 the

the trustee board's first chairman

was one of Nazrul's friends Moham-

med Nasiruddin, the editor of

Mahfuzullah was the executive

Up to the present, Shikdar says

they have preserved and brought

together about 2,000 old gramo-

phone records of Nazrul songs

Mohammed

Saugat ,while

director.'

done unusual work on Nazrul.

FAYZA HAQ

works



I used to like different genres of songs but as I heard more and more Nazrul songs, I felt a strong affinity

> towards the Rebel Poet's work.

opportunity to hear the legendary divas--Angurbala and Indubala. rendering Nazrul's songs. And how they used to perform those songs! I'd also been to the staging of the popular play *Nawaab* Sirajuddoula. Most of the songs

featured in that play were written and composed by Nazrul. I used to like different genres of songs but as I heard more and more Nazrul songs, I felt a strong affinity

towards the Rebel Poet's work." The veteran artiste continues,

'Whatever I have achieved, wouldn't have been possible without the tutelage of Zainul Abedin, Kiran De Chowdhury and Muhammad Hossain Khasru. Shudeerlal Chakravarty was my trainer for Adhunik songs. For Nazrul songs I trained under Abbasuddin and Gireen Chakravarty.'

About the current state of Nazrul songs and artistes in our country, Sohrab says, "The standard of contemporary Nazrul artistes is fair. In fact, I do think that the standard of Nazrul artistes is better in our country, than in West Bengal. However, there is still room for improvement. Some artistes get a 'swollen head' from the adulation they receive from their admirers and this can be a potential block to their growth as singers.

"About the state of Nazrul's music, I must say most music schools are not doing a commendable job. Trainers in charge of molding aspiring artistes should be competent. Then there is the issue of distortion. While some ignorant hopefuls are trying to blindly imitate certain artistes and in the course, picking up inaccurate notations and styles that ruin the essence of Nazrul's songs, some popular artistes are willingly distorting the songs.'

Sohrab continues, "The media also has a major role in maintaining the standard of the songs and artistes. Artistes in different parts of the country performing Nazrul songs for the divisional radio stations, don't seem to follow a uniform style.

His favourites among Nazru songs are: Phooler jalshae, Ami chirotorey doorey choley jabo and Shobar kotha koiley. Nazrul was too busy to give Sohrab some of his time in his days of glory. The poet wasn't himself any more due to a neurological illness when he eventually had time. But as Sohrab says. "To me Nazrul is very much alive through his songs."

Nazrul Institute phone Company when Nazrul was under the guidance of Nazrul and how I remember Nazrul," reminisced signed as an exclusive trainer. gained immense popularity and at the authority and style with which Preserving Nazrul's works

Sujit Mustafa

A devoted Nazrul singer

NOVERA DEEPITA

Sujit Mustafa, a popular Nazrul singer, has a music career that spans over two decades. The son of veteran lyricist and literary personality Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, Suiit is actively involved with the Nazrul Sangeet Shilpi Parishad (NSSP) since it was formed three years ago On the eve of the death anniversary of our National Poet, Sujit shared his ideas, observations and suggestions on the present state of Nazrul songs in Bangladesh.

Sujit says, "We are very fortunate that we have a national institute for our National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. However Nazrul has not been given his due as the National Poet. The only mentionable activity is the observation of Nazrul's birth and death anniversaries by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the national media BTV. Bangladesh Betar and Nazrul Institute. Unfortunately, most of these programmes are stereotyped. Most of the organisations have failed to produce and stage analytical, educative, informative and entertaining

programmes on Nazrul." According to Sujit, the media has a very limited interest in telecasting Nazrul songs, because electronic media gives preference to financia returns over art and culture. "Against this backdrop, there is very



little effort to promote the Nazrul singers, extend financial support and patronage for these genres of music. Although media exposure is a prerequisite to promote an artiste, the media is reluctant to promote

As Sujit observed, the institutes and senior artistes took very little interest in promoting fresh talent. To quote him, "Some orthodox artistes are unwilling to leave the privileged position they have held for years.

They are reluctant to make room for the new generation." Sujit points out that aspiring artistes have to struggle to get the attention that they

NSSP has several programmes to promote promising singers. Apart from Dhaka, the organisation has founded branches in Barisal, Chittagong and Khulna. Sujit adds, "We have organised workshops and training programmes in these locations. We got immense

response from the local people. Eminent artistes MA Mannan, Fatema-Tuz-Zohra, Yakub Ali Khan, Shahin Samad and I conducted these workshops attended by hundreds of youngsters.'

Sujit says, "NSSP has organised several stage shows to showcase the talented aspiring singers. These artistes are given the chance to render four or five songs in one show to establish their capability of singing Nazrul songs belonging to different categories." NSSP also has plans to release albums of the promising artistes from all over the country.

About the achievements of NSSP, Sujit says, "The NSSP artistes display immense unity and devotion. NSSP has arranged a three-day nationwide conference this year and the member artistes produce popular programmes on national and private TV channels. Sujit thinks that making music mandatory in educational institutes would be a very effective step to promote Nazrul songs.

A devoted Nazrul singer Sujit says, "No other composer has created so many diversified tunes on so many different themes. He has used about 50 type of tunes in his music. So, naturally it is very difficult for one single artiste to render all type of music that Nazrul has created. Different artistes should specialise in different categories of Nazrul Sangeet."

Here training is given in the most perfect way of rendering Nazrul Abdul Hye Shikdar, executive songs. Best known among the director of the Nazrul Institute says, teachers are Sohrab Hossain. "Just as we need air and water for Shudhin Das, Ferdousi Rahman our existence so we require Kazi and Ahsan Morshed. Today there Nazrul Islam's songs and writings are about 500 trained Nazrul singfor our development as a nation ers, Shikdar adds. There is a library Nazrul's whole life was like a river of in which books on Nazrul have been fire -- full of cries of protests. The preserved for study. In 1999, Kobi Nazrul Institute was set up to nur-Bhaban was an extension of the ture our culture through Nazrul's

However, when Nazrul was taken for treatment to PG Hospital, most of his possessions were removed. No one could trace these items. In the museum are some old framed photographs and manuscripts. There are also numerous portraits of Nazrul by well-known local artists. "The museum is not impressive currently due to lack of fund and initiative," says Shikdar. In the Nazrul collection there are 300 research works, cassettes, CDs and books on musical notes.

The Nazrul Institute is trying to increase its volume of work such as improving the printing and publishing of his writings. There are also efforts to increase the opportunities for recitation of Nazrul's poems, Shafi Kamal, Nasim Ahmed and Bhashwar Bandopadhyay being responsible for this among others. The Institute is also trying to arrange a tour of places associated with Nazrul's life such as Mymensingh, Comilla and Daulatpur. Simultaneously it aims to arrange a conference of Nazrul singers and experts on his writings. The organisation also hopes to revive and regularise the Nazrul Award.



The entrance of the Institute