

108th birth anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam

The undying flame

Nazrul's illustrious career in music

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

IT is difficult to imagine a time when Kazi Nazrul Islam could have been locked away in a world of anonymity. Yet it is true that when he became involved in the anti-British movement, Nazrul who had given his heart and soul to a nation, came very close to such a situation.

Despite his rising popularity, the Gramophone Company of India was ready to turn down the chance to record any of his songs once his rebellious activities came to light. However, when Nazrul's first record, a compilation rendered by reputed artiste Harendra Dutt, was sold out, he irrevocably stamped his presence on the cultural scene. The Gramophone Company could no longer overlook the mass hype, and he was soon asked to record songs for them.

The job offer was a heaven-sent opportunity. The association with the company marked an astonishing period of creativity. He also recorded for Senola, Pioneer, Regal and Twin.

The Gramophone Company better known as HMV provided a platform for talented lyrist, composers, trainers and singers. Once Nazrul joined the HMV as the chief trainer, it gave him the opportunity to work with a talented group of musicians of that period (1928-1932). It also provided an income he could use to continue the treatment of his son Bulbul, something that the meagre royalty from books could never provide.

Though best known as the 'rebel poet', Nazrul's *ghazals* were as masterful as they were works of delicate composition. In 1928, for the first time

two of Nazrul's finest *ghazals* were recorded. Legendary singer Angur Bala sang *Eto jol o kajal chokhey* and *B h u l i k e m o n e y*. The songs proved to be an instant success and brought Nazrul further into limelight. But his musical life truly flourished in the 1930's.

This was also the time of Talkies. Audiences were demanding songs between sequences in movies. Until then Bengali poets were composing songs for a very narrow segment of the audience. Now the record companies had to produce records for the masses. Nazrul took deep interest and worked tirelessly in directing and composing music for theatre and movies.

Romanticism was the dominant theme of this new musical trend. Nazrul directed the music in the film version of Tagore's famous novel *Gora*. He had also directed music for several classic films like *Dhruvo*, *Patalpuri*, *Shapurey*, *Bidyapati*, *Nandini*, *Chourangi*, *Dikshul*, *Chattagram Astragar Lunthan* and *Shri Shri Tarakeshuwar*. Apart from composing an astounding 18 songs for *Dhruvo*, Nazrul also appeared in the role of 'Narad' in the film.

Nazrul's yearning to be both



original and creative was legendary. For one particular film, *Patalpuri*, based on the life of coal miners, Nazrul travelled all the way to Raniganj, his ancestral home, to get a better understanding of the theme and tunes atypical to the region. He lived with the local *Santals* for a week and returned with some *Santal* tunes

on which he composed several songs in *Jhumur* form.

Nazrul also conducted radio programmes on All India Radio, Kolkata titled *Haramoni*, *Nabarag Malika* and *Geeti Bichitra*. In *Haramoni*, Nazrul presented songs based on classical melodies, which were fast fading out. In the

programme *Nabarag Malika*, Nazrul is said to have developed 17 new *ragas* such as *Nirjhorini*, *Udasi Bhairab*, *Arunranjani*, *Shiv Sharaswati*, *Asha Bhairavi*, *Benukuntala* and more. He also created 6 new *taals* or rhythms. Renowned musician Jagat Ghatak who worked closely with Nazrul wrote on how Nazrul painstakingly worked

on the new *ragas* well into the wee hours. Nazrul is said to have conducted 80 such programmes.

When Nazrul came to Dhaka to attend the first anniversary of the radio station in 1940, he conducted a programme titled *Pubali*. Among other artistes, Shuprobha Sarkar accompanied him. Speaking on

Nazrul's spontaneity, Shuprobha said, "At Gosalondo, we were waiting on the deck, when we saw a few women leap from one boat to another. I asked, 'Aren't they afraid?' To which Kazida (Nazrul) replied, 'They are from East Bengal, they are fearless.' While we were talking, a young bride looked at us for a few

moments. Kazida instantly wrote a song and composed a beautiful tune - *Purobo desher puro nari*.

This was classic Nazrul -- impulsive, inspired and tirelessly creative. It truly is difficult to visualise the world of our culture without Nazrul giving it such a sparkle.

Nazrul: An ardent lover of humanity

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUEL ISLAM

Nazrul once said, "Even though I was born in this country (Bengal), in this society, I don't belong to just this locale. I belong to the world". He may be considered a pioneer in the post-Tagore scene. He was by nature and conviction a people's poet. His work, full of vitality, brought a new note of robust optimism in Bengali literature.

Nazrul was keenly sensitive to the ongoing social injustice. His songs and poems are full of hope for the exploited and oppressed. He advocated the ideal of equality in a very vigorous manner. His works honestly represent the life he led -- his struggles with poverty, his intense patriotism, and bohemian life. The 'rebel poet' was crowned in 1972 as the National Poet of Bangladesh.

Nazrul made his mark as a revolutionary poet through poems such as *Bidrohi* (Rebel) and *Bhangar Gan* (The Song of Destruction). Nazrul's writings explored themes such as love, freedom, and revolution; he opposed all forms of prejudice, particularly fundamentalism and gender discrimination. The patriotic stance expressed in his publications like the *Dhumketu* (Comet), got him incarcerated, but even there he wrote fiery pieces such as *Rajbandir Jabanbandi* (Deposition of a Political Prisoner). He is best known for his songs, in which he pioneered new forms such as Bengali *ghazals*. Nazrul wrote and composed nearly 3000 songs, which constitute the body known as *Nazrul Sangeet*.

Nicknamed 'Dukhu Miah', Nazrul began attending the *maktab*, where he studied the Quran and other scriptures, Islamic philosophy and theology. After the sudden death of his father in 1908, at the age of ten, Nazrul had to start working to support his family. He later became the muezzem at the local mosque, leading the community prayers.

Unable to continue paying fees, Nazrul left his school and joined a group of *kabiyals*. Eventually he took up a job at a bakery and tea stall in the town of Asansol. In 1914, Nazrul joined the Darirampur School in Trishal, Mymensingh District. He spent several years there. Amongst other subjects, Nazrul studied Bengali, Sanskrit, Arabic, *Farsi* literature and classical music under teachers who were impressed by his dedi-

cation and skills.

Nazrul read extensively and was deeply influenced by Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, as well as the Persian poet Hafiz. His first prose work, *Baunduler Atmakahini* (Life of a Vagabond) was published in May, 1919. His poem *Mukti* (Freedom) was published by the *Bangla Musalmaan Shahitya Potrika* (Bengali Muslim Literary Journal) in July 1919.

Settling in Kolkata in 1920, Nazrul joined the staff of the *Bangiya Musalmaan Shahitya Samiti* (Bengali



Muslim Literary Society). He published his first novel *Bandhanhara* (Liberated) in 1920. The initial works received critical acclaim, giving the young poet his first taste of fame.

In October 1921, Nazrul went to Shantiniketan with Muhammad Shahidullah and met Rabindranath Tagore. Despite many differences, Nazrul looked up to Tagore as a mentor and the two remained in close association. In 1921, Nazrul got engaged to Nargis, niece of a well-known Muslim publisher Ali Akbar Khan, in Daulatpur, Comilla. But on June 18, 1921, the day of the wedding, Nazrul suddenly left without any explanation.

Nazrul catapulted to fame with the publication of *Bidrohi* in 1922, which remains his most famous work. At the time of publication, no other poem since Tagore's *Shonar Tori* had met with such spontaneous acclaim and criticism for the

radical approach. Set in a heroic meter, the verse invokes images from Hindu, Muslim and Greek mythology.

Published in the *Bijli* magazine, the poem caused a popular sensation. Nazrul stormed into Tagore's residence, jokingly declaring, "Gurudeb, I have come to finish you off". The rebellious language and theme found resonance with public consciousness of the time. Nazrul explores a synthesis of different forces in a rebel, destroyer and preserver, expressing rage as well as beauty and sensitivity. Nazrul fol-

lowed up, and his first anthology of poems, *Agnibeena* in 1922, which enjoyed astounding and far-reaching success. He also published his first volume of short stories, the *Byathar Dan* (Gift of Sorrows) and *Yugbani*, an anthology of essays.

A political poem published in *Dhumketu* in September 1922 led to a police raid on the magazine's office. Arrested, Nazrul entered a lengthy plea before the judge in the court.

On April 14, 1923 he was transferred from the jail in Alipur to Hooghly in Kolkata. He began fasting to protest mistreatment by the British jail superintendent. Nazrul broke his fast more than a month later and was eventually released from prison in December 1923. Nazrul composed a large number of poems and songs during his imprisonment and many of his works were banned in the 1920s by the British authorities. The poet became a critic of the *Khilafat* strug-

gle, condemning it as a hollow, fundamentalist movement. His stance earned him the fury of thousands of conservative Muslims.

It was during his visit to Comilla in 1921, when Nazrul met a young Hindu woman, Pramila Debi. They married on April 25, 1924. Pramila belonged to the *Brahmo Samaj*, which criticised her marriage to a Muslim. Nazrul in turn was condemned by Muslim religious leaders and continued to face criticism for his personal life and literary work.

Nazrul professed faith in the absolute gender equality, a view his contemporaries considered revolutionary. In his poem *Nari* (Women), Nazrul repudiates what he sees as the long-standing oppression of women, proclaiming their rights. He stunned the society with his poem *Barangana* (Prostitute), in which he addresses a prostitute as 'mother'. Nazrul explored woman's emotions eloquently in many of his popular songs like *Mor Ghumoghore Elay Monohor*.

Nazrul was shaken by the death of Rabindranath Tagore on August 8, 1941. He spontaneously composed two poems dedicated to Tagore's memory, one of which was *Rabihara*. Within months, Nazrul's physical condition worsened and he gradually began losing his ability to speak. His behaviour became erratic and spending recklessly, he found himself in financial difficulties. He became embittered by the sudden loss of his active life.

He was living a reclusive life with no care in a shabby, over-crowded cottage in Calcutta. West Bengal government did not even arrange a bed in any recuperative home for the poet who was suffering from irreversible brain damage. On June 30, 1962 his wife Pramila died. Nazrul remained in intensive medical care. He soon succumbed to his long-standing ailments on August 29, 1976. In accordance with a wish he had expressed in one of his poems, he was buried next to a mosque on Dhaka University campus.

Nazrul remains a symbol of youth, valour, creativity, liberation and indomitable human spirit, and most importantly, an ardent lover of humanity.

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KARIM WAHEED

A university in Trishal, Mymensingh and a major street in Dhaka have been named after our National Poet. Special programmes on both regional and national level are held on his birth and death anniversaries. His music, recitation of his poetry and plays based on his stories are aired on those two days on different TV channels. But is that enough?

It has long been a common complaint of Nazrul exponents, artistes and aficionados that the National Poet has never been given his due - not in his lifetime, and certainly not now.

Three artistes who are making a name for themselves shared their views with *The Daily Star* on why or how Nazrul is being sidelined and impediments Nazrul singers face:

"The biggest issue we, Nazrul singers, face is ensuring that certain Nazrul songs are rendered according to their original tunes," says Anup Barua. A 'Sangeet Visharad' degree holder (from Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, India), Anup has been teaching classical music at Chhayanan since 1998. His album of Nazrul songs, *Jago Kholo Go Aankhi*, received much acclaim.

"After Nazrul Institute was established and the organisation started collecting and researching on original records, noted Nazrul exponents and veteran artistes came to an understanding that tunes and at times lyrics of several Nazrul songs had been distorted over the years," continues Anup, "it took almost a decade to familiarise music students, teachers and artistes all over the country with the authentic tunes."

Zannat-E-Ferdousi, a talented upcoming Nazrul artiste says, "This realisation, as needed as it is, has created a mass confusion. Nazrul *sangeet* by legendary artiste Manabendra Mukharjee are virtually banned now; apparently the tunes had been distorted." Zannat, now a researcher on *adibashis* in Bangladesh,

completed five-year courses on Nazrul *sangeet* from Jago Art Centre and Chhayanan. She had received extensive training from Nilufer Yasmin, considered an institution on Nazrul songs. Zannat's album of Nazrul *sangeet*, *Neel Jamunar Jol*, produced by Bengal Foundation, was launched recently.

"There are several Nazrul songs that were once popular but due to the whole debate about 'authentic tunes', we cannot sing them any more. I have been in situations where young singers were stopped in the middle of renditions because apparently they were following the 'distorted' tunes. The irony is after the 'sermon' no one bothers to teach these singers the authentic tunes. I doubt it that majority of Nazrul artistes in the country know the authentic tunes. I'm afraid without any exposure these songs will be lost into oblivion," says Zannat.

"I was disqualified at a few singing competitions for rendering 'distorted' versions of Nazrul songs," remembers Sumona Bardhan. Sumona, originally from Rajshahi, is fast attaining popularity for her *adhumik* songs. With over 17 years of training in classical music, Sumona refuses to categorise herself according to any specific genre.

"I'm one of many artistes who pick up tunes of Nazrul songs from albums of seasoned artistes. Among the different styles, Nazrul's *Kabyageeti* appeals to me the most. Nazrul Institute's drive to familiarise the authentic tunes is certainly commendable. However, many of these records are literally inaudible. I learnt a *thumri*, *Bhanga Mon*, listening to Indrani Sen's rendition. I tried to listen to the original record, rendered by Kanan Debi. Due to the sorry state of the record, I couldn't understand the lyrics, let alone the *taal* and grammar," says Sumona.

"Nazrul Sangeet Shilpi Parishad (NSSP) was formed in 2003 and since then the organisation has been working to bring together Nazrul

artistes from all corners of the country. However, I feel, the collective efforts are not organised," says Anup.

"Rabindra Sangeet Sammilan Parishad (RSSP) had Waheedul Haque as a driving force who went to every nook and corner of the country, grooming young singers and giving all the Tagore artistes a platform. We desperately need a guiding light like him in NSSP. There is no lack of talent among Nazrul artistes but we don't have a proper platform that will guide young ones and bring together everyone," says Zannat.

"As an artiste trained in Rajshahi, I feel that there are not enough skilled Nazrul *sangeet* trainers outside Dhaka. Why must everything be Dhaka-centric?" -- questions Sumona.

"There is an unmistakable reluctance and lack of interest among production houses and TV channels when it comes to Nazrul *sangeet*. Major production houses never show any interest in working with upcoming Nazrul artistes; we often hear, 'These songs are too slow. They won't sell...etc.'"

"There's also this popular concept that unless you demonstrate *kalowati*, you're not skilled enough to be a Nazrul singer. I remember an analogy my teacher Nilufer Yasmin used: 'If you look good in light trinkets, why would you want to wear *jarawa*?' " says Zannat.

The singer goes on to point out the prevalent lack of interest in Nazrul among the TV channels, "BTV airs programmes featuring Nazrul songs at odd times, at 5:20pm for instance. How many working individuals watch TV at 5:20pm? Songs and plays written by him, namely anything by Nazrul is always left out from the 5-day long fetes on all TV channels on both *Eids*."

So the question remains, what needs to be done and by whom, to honour our National Poet with more than just two days of special programmes, a university and a street?



Anup Barua



Sumona Bardhan



Zannat-E-Ferdousi