

31st death anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam

# Re-evaluation of Nazrul: Need of the hour

**TDS: What is the current state of research and other activities on Nazrul and his works?**

**Dr. Rafiqul Islam:** In 1999, we celebrated the Nazrul centenary in Bangladesh and India. In fact it was celebrated at different places all over the world. North America Nazrul Conference celebrated the centenary in 1999 and 2000 in New York and Florida. In England, a Nazrul Centre was reopened in East London. In India all the secular political parties celebrated the centenary in New Delhi. In West Bengal, Bangla Academy, Sahitya Academy, Visva Bharati and Netaji Research Institute celebrated the centenary with due solemnity.

In Bangladesh, the centenary was celebrated in 1999 and 2000 under a national committee headed by Poet Sufia Kamal. Nazrul Institute, on this occasion published several books and anthologies. Most important of these was the reprint of Nazrul's bi-weekly publication *Dhumketu* and weekly *Langol* and *Gonobani*. Nazrul Institute also released CDs featuring reproductions of 400 earliest gramophone records along with notations of Nazrul Sangeet. Bangla Academy, West Bengal brought out *Nazrul Rochonaboli* in seven volumes. Bangla Academy, Dhaka, who had published *Nazrul Rochonaboli* twice before in the '70s and '90s, is republishing *Nazrul Rochonaboli*. Already four volumes have been published and four more are in the pipeline.

For a re-evaluation of Nazrul a

well-researched and unbiased biography is a prerequisite. I published the first biography in Bangladesh titled *Nazrul Jiboni* in 1972 (published by Dhaka University) and waited for young researchers to take it from there. Unfortunately however, in the last three decades, no other Nazrul biography has been published. I have started rewriting the biography of Nazrul, which I plan to publish next year.

As far as evaluation of Nazrul's contribution is concerned, most of the works are done in Bangladesh and in India. Till the end of 20th century no international evaluation of Nazrul was done, but in 21st century we find an excellent evaluation titled *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness* by Winston E. Langley of Massachusetts University, USA. For the first time, a western scholar has evaluated Nazrul, considering the international situation of 21st century. He has compared Nazrul with the great

est poets, thinkers and philosophers of all times. In the conclusion of the book, Langley remarks, "The book has sought to acquaint its readers with one of the most remarkable poets of all times and likewise with one of the world's most morally provoking artists of the twentieth century. Additionally, he is perhaps the most prolific composer the world has come to know. Taken together, what I hope the eight chapters have shown, is a human being whose thinking touched on almost every major aspect of human concerns." I think that Langley's evaluation will change the course of the academic research on Nazrul being pursued in the subcontinent and will herald a new international vision to judge Nazrul's contribution.

**TDS: Why do you feel the need to rewrite Nazrul's biography?**

**Dr. Rafiqul Islam:** I started my research on Nazrul in the late '50s. At the very outset, I went to Kolkata and interviewed people



Dr. Rafiqul Islam

who had known Nazrul during different periods. The results of these interviews disheartened me because by then most of them had been rendered incapable of proper recollection. Meanwhile, I got a Fulbright scholarship to Cornell University for higher studies in Linguistics. Returning home I prepared an exhaustive bibliography of Nazrul's writings and compositions both chronologically and alphabetically that Bangla Academy published in 1970 as *Nazrul Nirdeshona*.

Then I started tracing Nazrul's life based on facts and documents rather than popular legends and hearsay. Dhaka University published the work with the title *Nazrul Jiboni*. On the basis of these two books, I analysed Nazrul's literary works exhaustively and submitted a thesis entitled *Life and Literature of Nazrul*. I was awarded a PhD for that dissertation and it was published in Dhaka and Kolkata. Till now three editions have come out. While writing the

thesis and publishing it, I revised Nazrul's biographical section three times on the basis of new documents I gathered from various archives in Bangladesh, India and UK. I feel this is high time to rewrite the poet's biography and publish it not only for the general readers, but also for the new generation of researchers. I consider it to be my sacred duty to present a biography of this great poet whom I have discovered through his works and creations supported by valid documents.

**How important is the re-evaluation of Nazrul and his works?**

In this century, in the backdrop of globalisation, free market economy and information highway, the urgency of re-evaluating Nazrul is essential. When the existence of languages and cultures of the disadvantaged nations are at stake, life and works of nationalist revolutionary poets and thinkers like Nazrul can show us the way to uphold our heritage, traditions, values and ethnic uniqueness. From Nazrul we can learn how to combine nationalist values with international ideas. We can guard our national identity following Nazrul's way of thinking, resisting the external aggression on our culture.

**Despite echoing universal sentiments, Nazrul's literary works have not received much deserved world attention. What do you think is the main reason for that?**

Nazrul has not been translated

widely. There have been English translations mostly by Indian and Bangladeshi translators. Though there have been attempts to translate Nazrul's work into Russian, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi and Tamil, Nazrul has yet to receive a proper global exposure. We have not yet been successful in motivating the few western translators who understand Bangla. Apart from that, most of our English scholars are apathetic towards Nazrul. Probably they consider him as "subaltern", rather than a major poet of the first half of twentieth century.

**What actions do you think should be taken to draw the current generation towards Nazrul's works?**

We can stir their interest initially through Nazrul's music. Our electronic media features only a few artists who repeat a limited number of songs throughout the year. Had there been a conscious effort by the artistes and the media to introduce the audience to the variety and richness of Nazrul's creations, I'm sure our young music lovers would have been more interested in Nazrul. That would eventually convince them to study others forms of Nazrul's works like poetry, novels, short stories, and essays. It is also the responsibility of the parents and the schools to motivate our young ones to read Nazrul and to sing his songs. And that would enrich their vision, broaden their outlook and make them complete human beings.



## Nazrul's love affair with Bengali theatre

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

Draped in his favourite 'gerua' khaddar panjabi, a bright yellow silk turban wrapped around his head and a row of beads around his neck, Nazrul was often seen frequenting the theatre where he was constantly sought-after by the directors. Apart from writing and composing songs for theatre he took deep interest in acting as well. As chief trainer of The Gramophone Company of India, Kazi Nazrul Islam occupied a very important place in the music arena as leading artistes trained under him. This was in the year 1932 and he was hardly 33.

It was the theatre companies of Bengal that profited most during this time as audience flocked to listen to the newly composed songs by Nazrul.

The songs appealed to the theatre lovers as they were often based on romanticism and human emotions, as opposed to the religious hymns that were composed mostly for a particular niche of the society.

Bengali theatre is indebted to Nazrul for his compositions, which popularised Bengali music amongst a broader audience. His songs inevitably added to the quality of plays that were staged and more often than not, contributed to their success.

Nazrul composed songs for plays including *Jahangir* and *Annyapurna* by Monilal Gangopadhyay; *Siraj-ud-Dowla*, *Jhorer Porey* and *Jononi* by Shachindranath Sen Gupta; *Mohua*, *Karagar* and *Shoti O Shabtrii* by Monmoth Roy; *Shymolir Swapno* by Probodh Kumar Sanyal; *Blackout* by Birendra Krishna Bhadra and more.

In her memoirs, legendary singer-actress Indubala recalls the heyday of her career: "Nothing could deviate Kazida (Nazrul) from his world of creativity even if it was in the crowded rehearsal rooms. He would train the artistes

one after another, each with different compositions that suited him/her best. We watched in awe at how he could alienate himself from the entire crowd and concentrate in writing or composing songs that ranged from *Kirtan* to *adhunik*, light classical, *ghazal* and more."

Indubala adds that Nazrul was deeply involved with the Monomohon Theatre. The diva herself had joined the Theatre Company. "Kazida composed songs for the play *Jahangir* for which the audience showered me with heartfelt appreciation.

every encore till the audience was totally content," Indubala says.

The minstrel also mentions an anecdote behind the play *Aleya*. The proprietors of Monomohon Theatre had requested Nazrul to work on a new play. A week had passed and Nazrul paid little heed to finish the play. The organisers were enraged. "Is he a Kazi of *paji*? He has already gone through betel leaf and *zarda* worth Tk 100 (a handsome amount in those days) and there is no sign of a new play yet," they alleged.

They soon worked out a plan

Angurbala writes in her memoirs, "I was a regular performer at the company. Sometime around 1928, Nazrul joined the company as an exclusive trainer. We waited impatiently to meet him. We thought that he would be a bearded fellow dressed up in an *alkhella*. We were relieved to see a person who was like a friend to us all and we referred to him as *Kazida*."

In Sachindranath Sengupta's play, *Roktokomol*, noted theatre actress Sarju Devi performed in the role of Momota. The actress

Nazrul began talking to me on different subjects until my inhibitions died down and I started to hum a few compositions with him. His constant encouragement put me at ease. Within the next couple of hours five new songs were composed and before long I was ready for the stage."

Noted director Birendra Krishna Bhadra in his memoirs writes about staging Nazrul's musical *Modhumala*: "After we initiated a new theatre company *Natyabharati*, unexpectedly a few stars left for Mumbai and we stumbled on difficult times. Although noted actors Johar Ganguli, Santosh Singha and Sabitri Devi were there, the absence of star actor Ahindra Chowdhury put the company in quandary.

"It was then that Nazrul came up with his musical which had little need for stars but demanded two proficient singers. Initially senior actors opposed to the idea but Godadhar Mallik, a successful director and proprietor of the company, wholeheartedly embraced the idea of staging a full-fledged musical. Such productions were long absent in the theatre arena of Bengal.

"In the evening, Nazrul was escorted to the new theatre company. The master set designer, Nanu Babu, worked on the set while actors and dancers rehearsed with new determination. Nazrul worked relentlessly for seven days, with little time to spare. A record number of 22 songs were performed in which eminent artistes Radharani and Harimoti did cameos. The musical was a roaring success."

According to Birendra Krishna, in those days Nazrul songs had a tremendous influence in popularising theatre.

Kazi Nazrul Islam had selflessly served the Bengali theatre and took it to great heights, seldom seen since.

Source: Nazrulgeeti Proshongo by Korunamaya Goswami

## Preserving original records of Nazrul Sangeet: A lost cause?

NADIA SARWAT

Octogenarian Md. Abdus Sattar has worked tirelessly for the last few decades to collect original records of Nazrul songs and has made significant contribution in promoting authentic tunes and lyrics.

He received an honorary award from Nazrul Sangeet Shilpi Parishad in May this year. The songs of Nazrul, especially the unpublished ones were his life long passion. He always worked behind the scene without any expectation of recognition. The researcher recently shared his feelings with *The Daily Star*.

Sattar has a rare collection of Nazrul songs, many of which he came across while conducting his research. *Nazrul Geeti Shandhaney* (1970) by Sattar was much appreciated by Nazrul enthusiasts. Nazrul Institute published *Nazrul Sangeet Abhidhan* edited by Sattar in 1995. A singer himself, Sattar concentrated strictly on the original tunes and lyrics of Nazrul Sangeet throughout his extensive research.

How did he conduct his research? "I started with collecting any gramophone record containing Nazrul Sangeet. I went to the remotest of places in the then undivided Bengal, whenever I received information that someone in that area has some original Nazrul Sangeet record. I approached families and bought all the records they had. Then I sorted out the original compositions after repeatedly listening to the records.

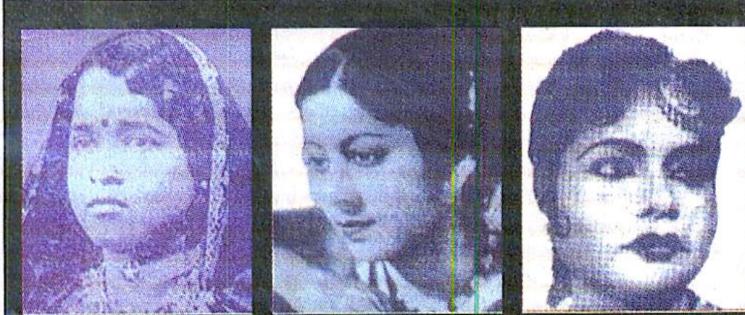
Then I wrote down the notations. Between 1929 and 1942, before the poet became severely ill, more than two thousands songs written and composed by Nazrul were released by eight record companies."

"Most of the singers of the recent times deviate from the original compositions of Nazrul Sangeet," says the researcher. People have little concern about the authentic tunes of Nazrul Sangeet these days, he says.

The researcher devoted a lifetime to the subject but now, at the age of 83, he has become rather frustrated and discouraged. Battling with age-related ailments and financial restraints, he does not want to talk about his work anymore. His wife passed away a few months ago.

"I don't have much time, I know. I've done the best I could. This generation has to figure out whether they want to know about the original notations of Nazrul Sangeet or not. I just want to go peacefully now," says Sattar who cannot see or hear well anymore.

Going over the fate of his collection of original records, Sattar says that his sons now take care of them. He didn't deny the possibilities of damaging the records, as his family cannot afford the costly preservation process. Nazrul Institute can play an active role in taking up this responsibility, he concludes.



(From left) Indubala, Kanan Devi and Sarju Devi - artistes who worked with Nazrul

"Sometime later it was decided that *Roktokomol* by Sachindranath Sengupta would be staged. Kazida wanted me to perform the lead role in the play. Four new songs -- *Phagun raater phuler nasha*, *Keu bholey na keu bholey*, *Bhanga mon aar jora nahi jaye* and *Ghor timirey* -- were composed by him and I sang them before every act."

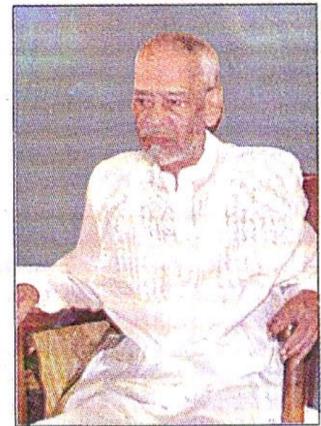
"Responding to the ovation I had to repeat each song at least 5 to 6 times, as that was the trend in theatre in those days. There was no way out but to perform with

and accordingly locked Nazrul in a room. Food, betel leaf and *zarda* were supplied to the room for the next few days, and miraculously Nazrul had penned an astonishing 22 new songs for the play! *Aleya* saw the light of the day and the songs played a vital role for its success.

Angurbala, another virtuoso singer-actress on stage was attached to the Minerva Studio. She had recorded around 300 songs for the Gramophone Company out of which 50 were written and composed by Nazrul.

reminisces, "I had been a great admirer of popular Nazrul songs such as *Rumjhum jhum jhum*, *Shukno patar nupur paye* and more. But to perform his compositions in plays were totally an out of the world experience for me. Donning the lead role was not tough but to sing five different Nazrul compositions was quite a challenge!

"After repeated assurance from Probodh Guha (proprietor), we finally made it to the rehearsal room where Nazrul was seated. Suspecting my nervousness,



Md. Abdus Sattar

PHOTO: STAR