109th anniversary of our National Poet

The relevance of Nazrul today

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

Any discussion on Kazi Nazrul Islam gets weighted down with superlatives. His incomparable writings, in a very short spell, established Nazrul as a genius in the arena of Bengali literature.

The 109th birth anniversary of our National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam is being celebrated in the capital and elsewhere in the country today.

Nazrul was born on this day in Churulia, Burdwan, near Asansol, West Bengal. His father Kazi Fakir Ahmed was the Imam of the local mosque; his mother was Zaheda Khatun. Nazrul's family was quite poor, and Nazrul was often referred to by the locals as Dukhu Miah (the ill-fated one).

Nazrul ran off from home at a young age but trouble never ceased to follow him. He worked for a while at a bakery in Asansol, where his literary talent first came to light. At the age of 18, whilst still a secondary school student at Raniganj (in West Bengal), Nazrul thought of joining the distant World War I. He joined the Bengal Regiment as a *habildar* (corporal) and was posted in Karachi. Although the regiment was never in the thick of battle and was disbanded in 1920, the lilt of the soldier's parades and marches permeated much of his writing.

Nazrul emerged at a time when the presence of Tagore loomed large on the Bengali literary scene. He was a great admirer of the latter. Tagore reciprocated by admiring the young talent. The morning after composing *Bidrohi*, Nazrul rushed to Tagore's house and read out the poem to the maestro. Nazrul had a powerful voice -- at times embodying the swaggering rebel, and at times the gentle, creative poet -- diversity reigning supreme in his songs.

In addition to his poetic corpus, Nazrul, who was a gifted musician, composed over 3,000 songs, which constitute a complete genre in Bengali music today, under the name of Nazrul Sangeet, and remains immensely popular, with a large number of artistes and an active recording industry, both in West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Nazrul lived in conflict-ridden times. Communalism was on the rise, possibly fuelled by elements in the British administration. Muslims felt disenfranchised and alienated. There were a number of Hindu-Muslim riots, culminating in reckless carnage when the British Empire was divided into two parts on religious lines. Through all this, Nazrul remained secular, writing both *Hamd*, in praise of Allah, and *Shyama-Sangeet*, devoted to Kali. He married Pramila Devi, and chose Sanskrit names for his sons. In later years, his liberal views on religion came under attack from the Muslim Right.

Nazrul was a true patriot, humanitarian and rebel. It is worth mentioning that Nazrul was a fearless voice for the oppressed. It was he who bravely rendered the songs of freedom, in view of socio-economic emancipation. He heroically rebelled against the colonial exploitation by the British Raj. People under the grip of colonial rule were deeply stirred by the poet's inspiring work, igniting flames of rebellion.

Nazrul's literature can hardly be separated from his politics. After achieving fame as a poet, Nazrul started editing a weekly political and literary magazine called *Dhumketu* (The comet). It was launched with adulation from Tagore: *"Aai choley aai rey dhumketu, andharey baandh agnishetu."*

Dhumeketu openly opposed British rule in India, and soon enough, it was shut down and the ones publishing it, Nazrul foremost, were imprisoned. Over the years, Nazrul was incarcerated several times, and some of his best literary pieces originated from his experiences in prison:

Ei shikol pora chhal, moder ei shikol pora chhal

Ei shikol porei shikol toder korbo re bikol

Now is the right time to delve deep into the spirit of Nazrul's poetic and rebellious vision in the wake of persisting socio-ethical deterioration. The national needs to resort to Nazrul's philosophy of secularism and social justice. The poet's revolutionary message can be a remedy for the rampant maladies in the society.

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A Hymn to Life

I sing of them
who deliver to the earth
the message of harvest.
Under whose hardened,
blisterous palms
from merciless labour
the earth offers the gift
of baskets full of fruits and
flowers.
Under whose rule this
earth
abounding in ferocious,
wild beasts
and awful death and
decrepitude
transforms into a
beautiful,
blossoming garden!

Source: *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selected Works*, translated by Sajed Kamal

Nazrul In Sylhet

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, *Sylhet*

In 1926, the "rebel poet" visited Sylhet for the first time. In his memoirs, Dewan Mohammad Azraf narrates how the idea of bringing Kazi Nazrul Islam to Sylhet developed. While studying at the Sylhet Murari Chand College (commonly known as MC College), Azraf came up with the idea and one of his classmates named Aziruddin inspired him in this regard. One fine morning, Nazrul was spotted on a train at Kulaura station. Starting from Gauhati via Lamding, he was on his way to Chandpur as part of his trip to Calcutta. Despite repeated requests from many, he could not make a stopover, as it was urgent for him to reach Calcutta on time.

Later, the then student leader Amiya Kumar Nandi and Azraf were given the responsibility to persuade the poet to come to Sylhet and join a students' convention. The venue was Raja Girish Chandra High School and Editor of *The Bengali* Shyam Sundar Chakravarty and Nazrul were invited. But, the organisers returned disappointed from the station, as Nazrul did not turn up. Another attempt to bring him to Sylhet, made for a programme organsied by the Assam based Muslim Students' Association, met with a similar fate.

The weekly *Jugabani* in early April, 1926 published a story claiming the poet was coming to Sylhet to attend a programme organised by the Congress. And so he did. Harendra Kumar Chowdhury arranged the programme and the poet resided at the house of Raibahadur Ramanimohan Das at Nayasarak area. Suffering from a bout of fever, followed by chicken pox just within a day or two, he remained confined in the house. Nazrul was therefore unable to attend any programme that time.

The poet had to stay in Sylhet for about a month due to his illness. Khan Bahadur Dewan Eklimur Raza (son of legendary bard Hason Raza), in his article *Nazrul in Sylhet*, writes, "The poet insisted that before any one else contracted the disease, he should be sent back to Calcutta. Accordingly, everyone complied."

Invitations were sent again to Nazrul, along with A.K. Fazlul Haque and Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah to attend a programme by the Assam Provincial Muslim Students' Association in Sylhet, in September, 1928. Nazrul was at Krishnanagar then; Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah was in Calcutta and Fazlul Haque was practicing at the Calcutta High Court. Saiful Alam Khan contacted the poet. Khan was the secretary of Sylhet Association in Calcutta. Khan writes, "We went to invite the poet who used to stay at Bibekananda Road. He accepted the invitation graciously."

Khan Bahadur Muhammad Bakht Majumdar was made chair of the reception committee and the weekly *Jugabani* Editor Maqbul Hossain Chowdhury was the secretary. Abdul Muhit Chowdhury was sent to Kulaura Station, 30 miles away from Sylhet to welcome the guests.

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah's son, Muhammad Shafiullah, who was accompanying the entourage, narrates, "We were on our way to Sylhet via Chandpur. We were having launch on a steamer. My father had just returned from Paris. He was habituated to using fork and spoon. It was a little difficult for me. Nazrul observed my predicament and said, 'Eat with the spoons which Allah has given you." Fazlul Haque chimed in, 'Is there anything easier to eat with than hands?'

"We all boarded a train at Chandpur. As the train reached Sylhet in time, we noticed that the station was over crowded with the admirers of all ages.

"Nazrul stayed at Maqbul Hossain Chowdhury's home at Dargah Mahalla and Fazlul Haque stayed at the bungalow. In the afternoon the guests joined a programme at the Raja GC High School. As the poet was about to start singing, a *maulvi* asked, 'Is music *jayez*?' Fazlul Haque took the opportunity and said, 'It depends on the singer and on his intention. If he does it to charm people, it wouldn't be jayez, if it is done to inspire them for a great cause, it would be alright.'

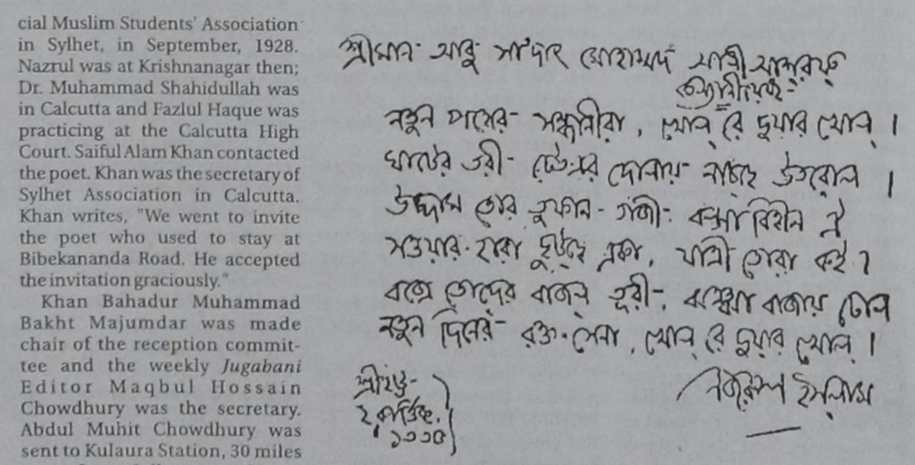
"Nazrul then said in his nonchalant manner, 'A cuckoo sings at it's will in the spring. When a crow chases it, the cuckoo leaves the place but doesn't quit singing. I will sing. If you chase me away, I will leave. This seemed to pacify the heckler. Then Nazrul sang -- *Bajlo kirey bhorer shanai, Chal chal chal* and *Durgam giri kantar maru.*"

During his second visit, the poet stayed almost a month in Sylhet. Almost every day he used to attend formal and informal programmes and gatherings. All the teachers of MC College and their wives joined him at dinner at the residence of Vice Principal of the college, Khan Bahadur Abdullah Abu Sayeed. A number of musical soirees were arranged during that trip; the poet sang at some.

During the first trip Nazrul had made commitments to visit the house of Hason Raja. But in 1928, Eklimur Raja was on a trip to Madras. Young poets like Abdur Razzaque and Abdul Gaffar Dutta Chowdhury met Nazrul who admired their writing.

COURTESY: MUHAMMAD NASIRUL HAQUE

Kazi Nazrul Islam (3rd from right, front row) at the office of *Jugabani* in Sylhet. The photo was taken in 1926.



COURTESY: KHADIJA ASHRAF

Poem composed by National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (in his own handwriting) during his stay at Sadir Bhaban, Ambarkhana, Sylhet, on 2 Kartick 1335 BS (1928 AD).

The legacy of Nazrul Sangeet

AUREEN AHSAN

National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam had contributed immensely to shape our culture and literature. His works remain popular and as esteemed as they were decades ago. On the occasion of Nazrul's birth anniversary, *The Daily Star* spoke to a few renowned singers of the country, who shared their views on Nazrul Sangeet and steps that are necessary to preserve and continue the legacy of Nazrul.

Subir Nandi: *I basically started my career with classical and Nazrul Sangeet. Artistes often shift to Adhunik songs from Nazrul Sangeet. Primarily, it is the artiste's decision. But, the media definitely has a major role in shaping the taste of the masses. Although, nowadays I do not get the opportunity that often, I really enjoy singing and listening to Nazrul Sangeet.*

Abida Sultana: *Practice and popularity of this genre has increased remarkably over the years. Being a judge on the show "Channel-i Shera Kantho," I have come across several young talents who have the potential to become skilled Nazrul singers. It is our responsibility to guide them towards the right direction. Hence, it is very important to conduct researches on the works of Nazrul and at the same time take measures to preserve and promote them.*

Shakila Zafar: *My love for Nazrul Sangeet started with a record of Nazrul Sangeet that I received as a gift when I was young. I learnt mostly by listening extensively to Nazrul Sangeet. Bangladesh Betar Kendra has regularly invited me to sing Nazrul Sangeet, and I am extremely grateful to them for giving me this opportunity. Among my favourite songs of Nazrul are "Peye keno nahi paye hridoy momo", "Amar jabar shomoy holo" and many more. I have plans to record an album of my favourite Nazrul songs some day.*

Kanak Chapa: *My initiation to music happened with Nazrul Sangeet. I consider myself fortunate to have been trained under legendary singer Feroza Begum and Ferdausi Rahman. The reason why I think that Nazrul's songs are unique and special is because of their diversity. Nazrul Sangeet has melody, portray a range of emotions, and highlight the richness and depth of poetry. Another special trait is its broad spectrum of perception, which makes songs relevant today.*

Subir Nandi

Abida Sultana

Shakila Zafar

Kanak Chapa