

32nd death anniversary of our National Poet

Understanding Nazrul

In conversation with Mafizul Islam

SADAF AFREEN MALLICK

Mafizul Islam has a right to feel disgruntled whenever discussions about the state of Nazrul Sangeet come up. Although not a household name, Islam has been a lifelong follower and practitioner of Nazrul Sangeet, more intent on maintaining its pristine quality in his renditions of the songs than seeking limelight. Trained under the most reputed artistes of his generation, Islam has recorded some of Nazrul's most brilliant and little known compositions. His renditions are marked with minute intricacies.

I consider myself fortunate for having listened to live performances of some of the legendary singers such as Angur Bala, Shiddeswar Mukhopadhyay, Dhirendrachandra Mitra, Kamal Das Gupta, Deepali Naag and many more. But it was only recently that I had the good fortune of meeting Mafizul Islam just as he finished performing at the Nazrul Institute on the occasion of the poet's birth anniversary. Islam was in his element, performing an uncommon Nazrul song, *Kon shey shudurey, Ashok kanan-e bandini tumi Seeta, Aar koto kaal jalibey amar bukey biroh chita*. The brilliant delivery reflected the magic and mastery of the Nazrul song. I, along with a full house audience, listened with rapt silence.

Islam, however, had a different view of how he had been perceived, not in that hall, but throughout his career. "Despite all my efforts, I feel I have more often been 'victimized' than 'appreciated' by the critics," he says.

Why so? "I am beyond the comprehension of many artistes: I feel if artistes devoted more time towards culturing their understanding of Nazrul, rather than seeking instant popularity, I could better identify myself with them. Having a different aim than most, I feel many artistes don't naturally understand my goal of pursuing Nazrul Sangeet as a lifelong career. Which is why I often tend to lose my temper when discussing the finer points of Nazrul's works," he says.

"Waheedul Haque used to call



PHOTO: STAR

Mafizul Islam

me 'Khepa Durbasha' (Durbasha was a stern ascetic, well known for his fiery temper and taking his anger out on people)," says Islam.

Despite his "anger" at the state of Nazrul Sangeet, Islam had devoted much of his time training generations of artistes. He initially started his career at Calcutta Radio in 1942, subsequently joining the erstwhile radio station of Dhaka. Later, he taught music at the Azimpur Girls School for almost two decades and also joined the College of Music and taught aesthetics. Islam also took pains in training students outside the city under a programme conducted by Shilpakala Academy.

Mafizul Islam's passion for training students might have developed from his own experience as a pupil under one of the celebrated artistes of his generation, the inimitable Chitta Roy. Roy worked as an assistant to Kazi Nazrul Islam, and the chance to train under him came about as a twist of fortune.

While traveling by train one day in 1943, Islam noticed Roy in the

second class carriage. When Islam understood that Roy had not been able to secure a seat, he offered his own and even paid a fare of three paisa on behalf of Roy. Although Islam frequented Radio Calcutta, he had not been able to meet the musical genius till then. But now it was Roy, who in appreciation of Islam's gesture, offered to meet with him. Islam's eagerness to learn Nazrul Sangeet and his talent in performing them was apparent. Very soon, Islam became a student of Roy.

For the next four and half years, Islam regularly trained under the renowned composer, who lived in Bhabanipur. "Previously many other prominent artistes were turned away by the ill-tempered Chitta Roy," went on Islam "so I was grateful for the opportunity."

Mafizul Islam's love for music multiplied by the day. He composed several songs such as *Ke duranto bajao -- jhorer byakul boshori*, in *teen taal* and *raga Hindol* which expresses the essence of the ferocity of a storm; *Bono pothey ke jai*, in *raga*

Chandrakosh and *Ajo modhuro boshori bajey*, a song in *raga Bhimpolosi* also in *teen taal*. Till date the performers find it difficult to satiate the listeners with the *aadi suur* (original tune) as compared to these songs.

Mafizul Islam also composed the tune of *Elo oi bonantey pagol boshori* -- in *raga Paraj Basant* in *teen taal*, which is 'yet another' example of his brilliance. The tune has been taken from the *Faguna brij dekhana* -- a *khayal* presented by none other than maestro Abdul Karim Khan Saheb.

Islam wrote four episodes of *Swaralipi Grantha* and a book of notations titled *Hindol Swaralipi Grantha* in the year 1967. He has in his possession several original records of Nazrul that he considers "priceless".

Islam's respect for Nazrul's work has not dimmed with time. "Nazrul was very liberal with his songs. He allowed the artistes of stature to make variations in terms of style. The authentic songs have to be presented on a regular basis in the media. This way the songs

would be popular amongst the general listeners," says Islam.

Nazrul had in-depth knowledge of Indian classical music. He experimented with a wide range of ragas, many of which were not much in vogue and in danger of becoming extinct. Accordingly, he composed 17 ragas such as *Udaashi Bhairavi, Arunranjani, Devjani, Asha Bhairavi, Shibani Bhairavi, Rudra Bhairav, Roop Manjari, Arun Bhairav, Sandhyamalati, Neerjarani* and more. Nazrul was equally adept in composing *Baul* songs, *Bhatiyali, Jhumur, Sintaali* and *Shyama Sangeet* or songs devoted to the Goddess Kali. Islamic songs in Bangla were introduced by Nazrul Islam.

With such a wide-ranging spectrum of songs, Mafizul Islam feels artistes would fail to reach the pinnacle of performance without a deeper understanding of the compositions and Nazrul's philosophy.

According to *Geet Govinda*, "A song reaches its philosophical depth only when the lyrics, rhythm and phonetics blend together. It would otherwise be like an unadorned woman, a sea without water, or a tree without leaves."

"The first and foremost quality of an artiste depends on aptitude and fascination for music. Nazrul's *ghazals* are simply unparalleled. Before him, only Atul Prasad composed around eight *ghazals*. But Nazrul made the Bengali songs more akin to *ghazals* by inserting Arabic and Persian words in it. His songs were composed brilliantly with wonderful phonetic combinations of Arabic and Persian languages and often intertwined with sweet and subtle Arabic melody," he says.

Now in his 80's, Islam has had to restrain his passion for performing on the stage. His passion for Nazrul Sangeet, however, remains as fierce as ever. And even today, his dream remains that artistes would develop a wholesome understanding of Nazrul Sangeet, so that they are able to not only perform in their highest potential, but also retain the compositions in the mantle of greatness where it rightfully belongs.

POETIC LICENSE

Bridging home and the world



Need of the time Drawing the young to Nazrul Sangeet



Swami Zubayer

AUREEN AHSAN

A frequent scenario today is the young generation attending rock and pop concerts. One often wonders why they are not captivated by the vivacious tunes of Nazrul. Going over this issue, The Daily Star talked to some young artistes who have a sound foundation in Nazrul Sangeet.

Swami Zubayer:

"My initiation in music happened with Nazrul Sangeet, and it was quite spontaneous. Kazi Nazrul was an exceptionally gifted poet and I have always admired his works. I wish to make an album of Nazrul songs some day, and present to the contemporary listeners a modern version of Nazrul. In order to reach a wider audience, I believe it is important to motivate and inform the young on our National Poet and



Anup Barua

AUREEN AHSAN

A frequent scenario today is the young generation attending rock and pop concerts. One often wonders why they are not captivated by the vivacious tunes of Nazrul. Going over this issue, The Daily Star talked to some young artistes who have a sound foundation in Nazrul Sangeet.

Swami Zubayer:

"I have a spiritual connection with Nazrul Sangeet. Be it his *ghazals*, *bhatiyali* or *baul* songs, each composition is a harmonious mélange of heart-touching lyrics and soulful melody. Recently, one of my albums, *Jago, Kholo Go Ankhi*, was launched. I have also participated in a music conference in Canada, and it was quite overwhelming to witness the posi-

tive response of the audience there. It was a moment of pride to see them appreciate and enjoy our music so immensely. I feel it is our failure that this genre is not appealing the young. Cultural development is teamwork, and we should all unite to find out why the youngsters today are more fascinated by pop or rock music. For that, I believe, it is important to carry out surveys and determine the causes. We should join hands to work towards the enrichment of our cultural heritage, and ensure that Nazrul lives on in our hearts."

Anup Barua:

"I have a spiritual connection with Nazrul Sangeet. Be it his *ghazals*, *bhatiyali* or *baul* songs, each composition is a harmonious mélange of heart-touching lyrics and soulful melody. Recently, one of my albums, *Jago, Kholo Go Ankhi*, was launched. I have also participated in a music conference in Canada, and it was quite overwhelming to witness the posi-



Tanveer Alam Shawjeeb

AUREEN AHSAN

A frequent scenario today is the young generation attending rock and pop concerts. One often wonders why they are not captivated by the vivacious tunes of Nazrul. Going over this issue, The Daily Star talked to some young artistes who have a sound foundation in Nazrul Sangeet.

Swami Zubayer:

"My initiation in music happened with Nazrul Sangeet, and it was quite spontaneous. Kazi Nazrul was an exceptionally gifted poet and I have always admired his works. I wish to make an album of Nazrul songs some day, and present to the contemporary listeners a modern version of Nazrul. In order to reach a wider audience, I believe it is important to motivate and inform the young on our National Poet and

the same time take Nazrul Sangeet to the world. The government could play an important role here in sending Nazrul delegates abroad; I have had the privilege to accompany noted Nazrul artiste Khaifur Anam Shakil on one such trip (to Pakistan). Collaboration with international production houses could also mean promotion of Nazrul Sangeet overseas. We should all volunteer to preserve and promote the works of Nazrul because of the great personality he was."

Tanveer Alam Shawjeeb:

"I started training in Nazrul Sangeet way back in 1986 at Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts. Initially, I was attracted to this genre because of its versatility, and since then an affinity for Nazrul Sangeet has developed. Yakub Ali Khan, Ferdaus Ara, Yasmin Mushtari and Fatema-tuz-Zohra are a few of my favourite artistes.

KARIM WAHEED

Compared to Rabindranath or other pioneering poets/lyricists/writers of his time, Kazi Nazrul Islam's travel credentials would not be considered that impressive. The furthest he went was Karachi, where he was posted after joining the 49 Bengal Regiment in 1917. This experience however, provided him with an exposure to other cultures and languages -- an exposure that would have a major impact on his poetic style. During his stay in the army, Nazrul learned Farsi (Persian). Son of an *imam*, Nazrul's introduction to Arabic happened at an early age. As an adolescent he joined a *leto* group and developed a skill in composing poems and songs at short notice. Through his association with the *leto* group, he also began learning about the Hindu *puranas*.

Combined, these experiences helped Nazrul devise a vocabulary and subjects unheard of in Bangla poetry. His poems and songs became a melting pot of Hindu and Muslim traditions. He used Sanskrit and Arabic words as effortlessly as he did traditional Bangla ones. His works are marked with Persian as well as Hindu archetypes.

Consider the song *Bulbul neerob nargis bon-e*. *Bulbul* (nightingale) mutes in a garden of *nargis* or narcissus (commonly known as daffodils) is an alien image to the average Bengali. But the image becomes more profound as Nazrul delves deeper.

Shiraz-er nouruz-e Phalgun

maash-e, jeno taar priyar shomadhir paashey... Shiraz (in Iran) is known as the city of poets, wine, nightingales and flowers (including *nargis*). Shiraz also happens to be the birthplace of legendary poet and mystic Hafiz whose works had a major influence on Nazrul. *Nouruz* (literally meaning "new day") is a traditional Iranian celebration, marking the first day of spring and the beginning of the Persian year. "Phalgun" appropriately links the imagery to the *deshi* psyche.

Again a Farsi influence, *Saaqir sharaab-er pyaalar porey*, is followed up with Bengali elements, *Shakorunastur belphooljhorey*.

In the song *Shawon ashilo phirey*, Nazrul introduces a North Indian folk genre, *Kajari*, to the Bengali music enthusiast. *Kajari* has its roots in Uttar Pradesh and highlights the season of monsoon. Mirzapur in eastern Uttar Pradesh is considered to be the real home of the genre. As a legend goes in Mirzapur, there was a woman named *Kajali* whose beloved was in a distant land. Monsoon arrived and the solitude became unbearable; she started crying at the feet of a goddess and these wailings subsequently took the form of *Kajari*. Case in point:

Shawon ashilo phirey, shey phirey elona
Borsha phuraye gelo, asha tobu gelona...

Kajari kajal megh path pelo khunjiya
Sheykipherar path pelo na...

In *Aaji mon-e mon-e lagey hori*, Nazrul adapted the North Indian semi-classical genre *Hori*. The song incorporates unmistakable allusions of *Braj Bhasha* wrapped in the identity of Bengali romantic sensibilities. Sample:

Rang-er ujaan chaley, kalo jamunar jol-e
Abir rang aholo mayur mayuri...

Bon-e bon-e lagey hori...

Nazrul's *Dwipantar-er Bandini* features a poetic depiction of the infamous "Kalapani" (literally "black water", a term for the deep sea and hence exile) or the "Cellular Jail" situated in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The prison was known to house many notable Indian activists during the anti-Raj movement. The desolate conditions and the inhuman torture (fortunately for Nazrul, he was not exiled there) are epitomised:

Shatdal jetra shatodha bhinno
Shastro panir astro ghaye,
Jantri jekhane shantris bhoiye
Beenar tantri katichey haye...

Allusions to places where he had never been, depiction of legends he had never witnessed and incidents he might have never experienced -- examples abound. Nazrul truly utilised his poetic license, perhaps with more finesse than his contemporaries. The result: a mystical bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, home and the world.