

Nazrul's protest poetry

SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

KAZI Nazrul Islam addressed the undying sense of self respect of the common man that persists, even as a hardly perceptible undercurrent, in the most trying of circumstances. He recognised that the weakness of the elitist centre meant a corresponding strength of the subaltern periphery, since through a series of strange binaries, the ebb and flow of the two mutually locked segments of our population shows each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Nazrul believed that the more oppressive the state machinery became in colonial India, and the more supportive the native elites were towards the establishment, the more they showed their weakness. This ebbing of strength was not so much physical as it was moral: since the oppressive measures that the colonialists and their local collaborators took in silencing any dissent were repugnant and morally indefensible. Even the mighty landlords who substantially contributed towards the upkeep of the colonial machinery and were given generous favours in return often found themselves alienated from their own people. Thus, after a series of peasant uprisings had weakened the zamindars of North Bengal in the 1920s, the zamindars had to employ private security to ward off any possible attack, thus severing the last link with their people. Many chose to settle down in Calcutta and become absentee landlords. The peasants, on the other hand, although hunted down by the police, rarely left their land. Fugitives they became, but not migrants. Migration was a later phenomenon, occasioned more by economic rather than political reasons.

Nazrul 'voiced' these subalterns, not through a patronising, 'speaking on their behalf' attitude, but by actually speaking with them. What he spoke was what they spoke; besides, his poems articulated what the subalterns had always spoken out, in their supposedly inarticulate and inaudible voice. There was no invention involved here, no gap between his and their voices, or any self-satisfaction that at last, the people had spoken through him. What impresses one most about the protest poems of Nazrul is the absolute honesty of his approach.

Nazrul has written many protest poems which called for an end to inequality and exploitation, even exhorting the oppressed to rise up in arms against the mighty oppressors. The tone of these poems is strident and passionate, but at times pleading and logical too. He often draws upon history and social narration to build a case for the justness of the subaltern struggle. But each of his protest poems is full of an intense love and admiration for the peasants and workers. Many of his titles also give out his commitment to the marginalized and the oppressed, for example,

Bidrohi (The Rebel) from *Agnibina* (1922), *Chor-Dakat* (Thieves), *Barangona* (The Whore), *Nari* (Women) and *Kuli-Majur* (Labourers and Workers) from *Samyabadi* (1925); *Chashar Gaan* (The Song of the Peasant) from *Nirjhar* (1938); *Otho Re Chashi* (Wake Up, O Peasant) from *Natun Chand* (1945) and *Krishoker Gaan* (The Song of the Peasant) [not published in any collection of poems]. Except for *Bidrohi*, however, the other poems do not foreground the element of protest: it assumes substance as the poems draw to a close. Protest in these poems implies first a rejection of the condition of poverty, neglect and servitude, and, secondly, a call to arms. In many poems, the tone is openly hostile and dismissive of authority/power: in others, Nazrul instigates the subaltern to take up arms to end exploitation. *Bidrohi*,



perhaps the best known poem of Nazrul, and the one that instantly provided him with the eponymous title *Bidrohi* was written in 1921. It is a meticulously crafted poem with immaculate control of rhyme and rhythm and appears to be a more passionate version of Whitman's *Song of Myself*. The *Bidrohi* of Nazrul's poem is the eternal crusader against injustice, falsehood and oppression: he is the defender of the poor and the powerless, of the marginalized masses of rural Bengal/India. And on the level of action, the *Bidrohi* is a Swadeshi -- a patriot -- fighting to end the British Raj. The double meaning implied in the *Bidrohi*'s iconoclastic pronouncement: 'I etch my footprint on the bosom of God,' could not have been lost on the authority, since Bhagaban (God) also meant the ruler of the land, an ironic term that problematized and directly questioned the legality of colo-

nial rule.

The 139-line long poem, spoken in first person by the *Bidrohi*, begins with the assertion of his hero-hood, and a series of impossible actions that are however quite routine for him. "I tear all bonds, all rules and regulations/I don't care for any laws," he says, since "I am Bedouin, I am Chengis/I don't bow to anyone else other than myself." The poem pulsates with the raw energy and passion of the *Bidrohi*. He is both an individual and the magnitude, both man and god, love and hatred, victim and victimiser, proto-subaltern and the man who will empower the subaltern. The poem *Bidrohi* is finally a vindication of the subaltern position, since the *Bidrohi* categorically says:

Great war-weary rebel / I, shall be quiet that day / When the cry of the oppressed will no more resonate in the air / The oppressor's sabre will / not rattle on the fierce battlefield / War-weary rebel / I shall be quiet that day . . .

The other poems mentioned above have different themes; their perspectives are also different; but these are united by a common understanding of the subaltern -- his condition, his pangs and pains, and his victimhood. The four poems from *Samyabadi* celebrate the four groups of subaltern: thieves and robbers, labourers and workers, prostitutes and women. Thieves and prostitutes carry with them the social taboo and a permanent seal of disapproval, while labourers and workers are condemned to a life of drudgery. It is, however, the women who are condemned to fight a protracted battle against multiple domination. If, under the British Raj, men had to contend with domination and colonisation on a social and political level, the women had to endure an equally pernicious domestic colonisation. In the protest part of *Samyabadi* and other poems, Nazrul wishes these various forms of domination and colonisation to go. He also categorically rejects the elite society's classification and convenient labelling of women and other outcasts and subalterns.

The protest in Nazrul's poems involves a total rejection of discriminatory social and human conditions, and in offering an alternative in the form of a society based on equality, fair play and justice, where the subaltern is the arbiter of his own destiny.

Voicing the subaltern, for Nazrul, was an attempt to transcend a condition of historical situatedness and claim the lost identity of the *dalits* (oppressed) and the marginalised. It was both a critique of the elitist idea of social progress as well as a justification for subaltern protests and uprisings to firmly establish their identity in a perpetually shifting social and political landscape.

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Lessons from a father

NEELIMA ISLAM

LOVE is an inimitable feeling that illuminates the soul. We all have a basic need to be loved. When we are children we are content with our parents' love and familial bonds. As we mature and form different relationships that deepen with time, we feel an innate need to love and be loved in return.

I am writing today in fond memory of my father who passed away nearly thirteen years ago. I remember my father when I write about love because he was the one who sowed the seeds of love in my heart. Someone had described a father as 'a banker provided by nature'. I would agree to that.....not only because my father was a banker in the literal sense but as a human being he seemed to have accumulated so much wealth out of his life that he was never empty in giving - whether to family, or friends, or colleagues or even to strangers and that wealth was his 'love'. I am still enjoying the wealth he has deposited in my heart and this wealth has made me so rich that even amidst the most turbulent phases of life, my faith never faltered. I feel I have grown stronger over the years. I have learnt from him that love not only enriches your soul, it rinses off all vices like falsity, greed, violence, jealousy and vindictiveness. My ability to love has always kept me motivated, optimistic and protected me from any sense of insecurity or lack of confidence - at the personal and professional domains. Self-confidence and self-respect, in turn, have kept me above any greed, jealousy and malice. This is how I have been paying homage to my father's spirit.

Going back to the subject of love, it is a fact that no one is exempt from doubts of whether the love is reciprocal. Even if told at some point, there is no guarantee that feelings won't change. Therefore, there is the need of constant re-assurance that the lovely feelings are still there. The reassurance could come in the form of expressions, acts or words. My father taught me, 'When you love someone, you don't just say, you do things for that person - you sacrifice, you go out of your way to make that person feel exceptional'.

Building a relationship is not enough, you have to retain it with loyalty and trust which go hand in hand. Any relationship requires reciprocity. In a mutually satisfying relationship both parties should be able to talk and listen. They should take time to acknowledge their feelings and points of view. Listening is an important step in building a relationship - it means you are paying atten-

tion, your eyes, ears, body and feelings are all focussed on that person at that time. We often take listening for granted, never realising what it means to really listen to the one we love.

However, many of us find it difficult to express our feelings and often leave it to others to fathom our feelings. One may ask, is it necessary to express? I would say, yes it is. Expressing your feelings makes all the difference. In words or in deeds your loved ones should know that when they are lost in darkness and searching for light, everything around fails, you are there to help them through. That you are there to lean on when they are not strong, and that you will help them carry on, for it won't be long till you need somebody to lean on. A word of love can change a frown into a smile and sometimes a hug is worth a thousand words. Simple lines can do wonders like - 'it seems your eyes are troubled, care to share your time with me?' or 'no matter how busy I am, I'll make time for you' or 'I am there for you; what if the whole world isn't?'

Famous lyricist Sahir Hoshairpuri says in his song, "Kaun kehta hai mohabbat ki zaban hoti hai, yeh haqeeqat to nigahon se bayan hoti hai....." [Who says, love has a language? It is a reality, which is expressed through the eyes]. Again this is a kind of expression where words may not be used - yet much is said.

I believe, therefore, it is imperative to say, express or do things for the ones you love. Leave no space for regrets. Surely, there is always tomorrow to make up for an oversight and we do get a second chance to make everything right. There will always be another day to say our 'I love you's' and certainly another chance to say, 'Anything I can do's'? But what if we don't get the second chance? Today is all we get. Tomorrow is not promised to anyone whether young or old. So, please don't wait for tomorrow. Take some extra time for a smile, a hug, and words of reassurance. Do not hesitate to say 'I am sorry, please forgive me' or 'Thank you', or 'I miss you' or 'You are in my thoughts', or 'You are wonderful', or 'I want to be with you', or 'Please don't leave me'. There is no shame in admitting you are wrong. It makes you only human but the payback is enormous - it elevates you to a position incomparable.

You will find within yourself the difference. The relief and the magnanimity will display the wonders of life as nothing else can!!

Neelima Islam studied literature, loves music and writes.

Birth of the Phoenix

SANGITA AHMED

IT was the second time the white car passed us by. That was way back sometime in mid March 1985. My fourteen year old sister and I were in our father's car which had suddenly decided to halt right in the middle of Dhanmondi road 3. No amount of pressing the accelerator or pulling the choke would make it change its mind. I had just got my British driving licence and had come to Dhaka for a month's holiday. To be honest, I found it highly amusing when people used to stare at this pretty young girl (being myself) navigating a car through the streets of Dhaka. Believe me, this was not a common sight twenty four years ago. But on that breezy evening the car was letting me down. This wasn't supposed to happen to a young and confident nouveau-driver! My cockiness began to somewhat deflate. The white car passed us for the third time. In the dark purple twilight I saw a tall, well built young man in a white shirt come out and walk towards us. "Oh God!" I thought. I hadn't bargained for another problem. Why hadn't I listened to Abba and taken the driver?

"Anything wrong?" I rolled down the window just an inch, pretending not to be nervous. "It's okay. The car has just stopped, it'll soon start, I'm sure", I said, frantically turning the ignition for the fortieth time and pressing the accelerator. "Where do you live?" the gentleman asked. I could hardly make out his face in the disappearing evening light. "Banani". "Well, you could leave your car here and have someone pick it up. I was going in that direction so I could drop you two, if you like." "Out of the question", I thought, but I put on a brave smile and politely declined. "Would you allow me to try to start it?" he patiently said. I signaled to my sister to get out of the car and we both stood on Dhanmondi road 3, while the young gentleman pushed our car with one hand and pressed the accelerator with his other hand. The stubborn vehicle finally decided to give in and with a few grunts and chokes the engine revved up. The sound was like music to our ears. "I think it'll be okay now, but I would say it's not a very good idea for you to drive alone at this time", he said. "You're telling me!" I thought. This was definitely the last time of me behind the wheels after 5pm, especially in an old Toyota Publica!

On 18 January 2009, I got a call from an unknown number on my cell phone. I was busy choosing a book as a gift for my cousin's birthday. After rummaging through philosophy, poetry, ayurvedic and the classics, I finally got what I was unconsciously looking for. *A Golden Age* by Tahmina Anam. I promptly picked two from the shelf, deciding to buy one for myself. The call was from BDR Headquarters. The caller, Col. Anisuzzaman, asked me if I would be free to perform as Master of Ceremonies (English) at the annual parade on the occasion of BDR Week 2009. I said I was free and would be honoured to do so.

On 16 February 2009 at 8am I entered BDR Headquarters for the first of many consecutive rehearsals. This time my driver was at the wheels! Twenty four years had made me a little wiser. The compound was beautifully manicured. Even the huge trees, their green spring leaves rustling in the Falgun breeze, seemed to salute everyone who passed by. Were they also trained to perfection?

After the parade practice we met the officers who were coordinating the event. From that day, for the next one week, each morning my alarm would ring at 6.20 am and I would reach BDR Headquarters at 7.50 am, feeling fresh, chirpy and ready for another rehearsal. Three other members were in the announcement booth. Quickly we all blended in and became one very determined team - the BDR Annual Parade 2009 had to be a success and we felt proud to be part of this beauty and precision. One snag, the steps leading to the booth were a bit rickety and it was a bit difficult to climb,



especially when one is wearing a crisp cotton sari and high heels! I politely explained this to Major Mizan, who was our direct coordinator, silently thinking, "This is Bangladesh; by the time they do anything about these stairs, the parade will be over and I will be sitting home, hopefully with my two legs intact!"

To my utter surprise, the next morning, 20 February 2009, a proud set of stairs was gleaming with new bright green paint in the pale yellow Falgun morning sun, moist with early morning dew. I thanked the major. That day, we got into conversation staccatoed by the rehearsals. I learnt that Major Mizan's wife, a beautiful young

woman, had suddenly died in June. She had a malignant brain tumour. They had two sons, Sami and Rami, aged between 3 and 9. I asked him how he managed between the demanding jobs of being a mother, a father and a soldier. He said to me "Apa, at the end of a long day, when I lie in bed with my two sons in my arms, I feel that this is all I need, nothing else matters"....

I used to come home each day and relate to my husband all that had happened during the day at BDR. I described how smartly Col Mojibul Hoque, the sector commander, commanded the parade during the rehearsals. Looking at him I could imagine what Stentor in Holmer's Iliad must have looked and sounded like. Ramrod straight, maybe even more that the sword he was carrying during the march past...eyes piercing directly into eternity he marched on....

On 24 February, the day of the Annual Parade, we were tense but also determined to give it our best. After the parade, among many others, Col Reza came up to congratulate me on my perfor-

officers to be awarded the Bangladesh Rifles Podok 2009, which is the highest gallantry award of Bangladesh Rifles. I did not get the opportunity to ask him what feat he had accomplished to have won this great honour. There is ample time, I thought, I'll ask him some other day when he is less busy. Col. Anis was an extremely handsome officer. During the parade practice days, I observed him on the parade ground. He used to stand out amongst the hundreds of men in uniform in his purple beret. Tall, fair, built like a true soldier, kind intelligent eyes, cleft chin with the hands of a pianist. I wondered how those beautiful hands held a rifle? But most of all I felt the strength of character of this very special man. In his dealings with the soldiers and his subordinates, he was unusually polite, soft spoken and patient. Quick to praise and apologetic yet firm and determined.

After lunch, before I left the Darbar Hall at around 1.30pm, Col. Anis called on Major Mizan's cell phone and thanked all of us for doing a great job. He apologized to me for not being able to thank us in person. We said our goodbyes, feeling a little sad that the excitement was over and it was time now to return to our daily lives.

Major Mizan came up to my car to see me off. He said, "Apa please come to my house with Jewel Bhai. Did you know my nickname is also Jewel?". I had decided in my mind to take him up on his word and strike up a family friendship with this young soldier who, inside his formidable uniform, was a lost, lonely father trying so hard to make up for the loss of the mother of his two beloved sons.

In course of time I had come to know that Col Anisuzzaman was the young man who had so chivalrously fixed my car 24 years ago on Road 3 Dhanmondi. At that time in 1985, he was just a kind person who had helped out a young woman in distress without intent or hesitation.

Today, as I think back, I assume he must have been a junior officer then. It was by some unfathomable desire of fate that our paths had crossed again after 24 years, days before his death.

The last time I saw or spoke to these officers was in the Darbar Hall during lunch on the afternoon of 24 February 2009, less than 24 hours before the BDR carnage.

Today, and for as long as we live, we shall bow our heads in utter shame. We have no answers for your questioning spirits, we do not have the courage to look your wives and children in the eye, we have nothing to offer them except the burden of guilt for being alive like helpless lambs in front of a greater evil that had intruded into our yards and our homes.

We salute you as soldiers and protectors of our frontiers, but most of all, as men who lived, learnt, laughed, cried and loved just like other men. We may have lost you forever. But you have risen in our hearts like the Phoenix. May you find eternal peace in Heaven....

Sangita Ahmed is a broadcaster, poet and critic.

Two poems from Nayeem Gahar

ASKANCE

Let me swallow the shredded anti-particles
Up in the void
With particles whizzing past my bodily form.
Now, somewhat erect on the gaseous clay
With fractionation working in me
I whiz past time itself leaving
Frozen moments that whiz past future.
In resonance of truth and absurdity
I call out askance in human voice,
'Who is there?'
In resonance it is ethereal 'I' eternally
existent,
An ever-repeating dimension of only
Fractionation, relativity of shine and
shadow,
Disfiguration of only earth and water!

Drowning and the Onlooker

When your drowned body
Drifts away with the tide of monsoon
flood
Like a chopped moon
Leaving home and hearth,
My shivering hands
Get tied in the nasty storm of weed and
moss
Every time I spread them to reach you
To save you and bring you by my side.
When I was too tired to make any move
any more
Suddenly the vista changed around us;
You got yourself together,
Your shining body was swimming in a
lotus lake.
Now you were a nymph, your silver
wings
Slowly spreading; smiling you gave me a
golden
Axe, then spreading your wings you flew
away
Towards the midnight sky full of stars.

Nayeem Gahar is a poet.