

Remembering Nazrul

34th death anniversary of the National Poet

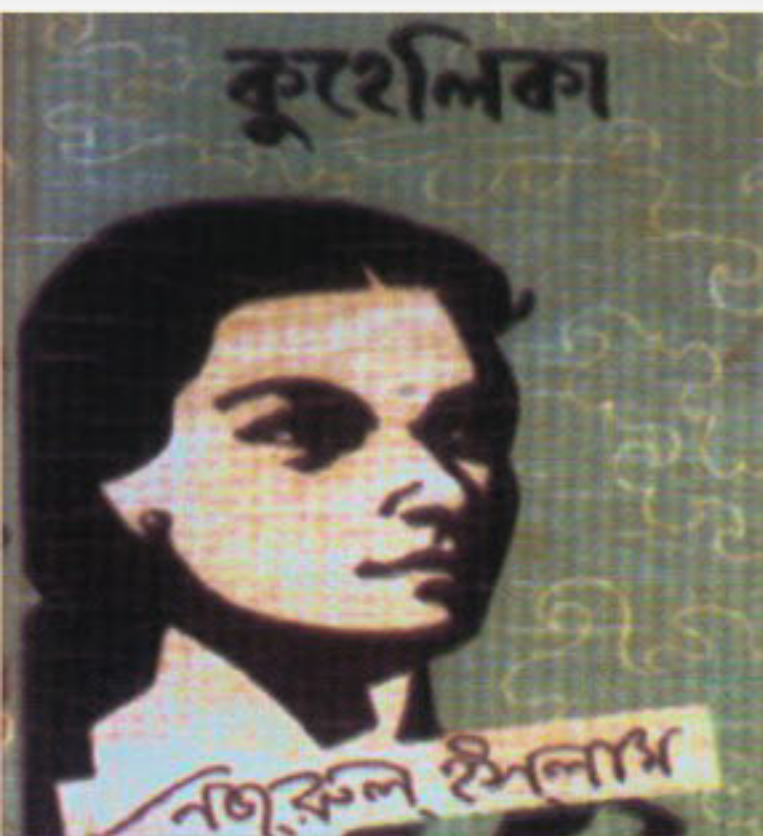
Nazrul: The ever-shining beacon

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, our National Poet 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 political activities came to light. However, when Nazrul's first record, a compilation rendered by reputed artist 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

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 *Bhuli kemoney*. 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 Talksies. 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

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



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 lyricists, 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

version of Tagore's famous novel *Gora*. He had also directed music for several classic films like *Dhrubo*, *Patalpuri*, *Shapurey*, *Bidyapati*, *Nandini*, *Chourangi*, *Dikshul*, *Chattagram Astragar Lunthan* and *Shri Shri Tarakeswar*. Apart from composing an astounding 18 songs for *Dhrubo*, 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

programme titled *Pubali*. Among other artists, Shuprobha Sarkar accompanied him. Speaking on Nazrul's spontaneity, Shuprobha said, "At Goalondo, 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.

Retrieving national treasure from trash

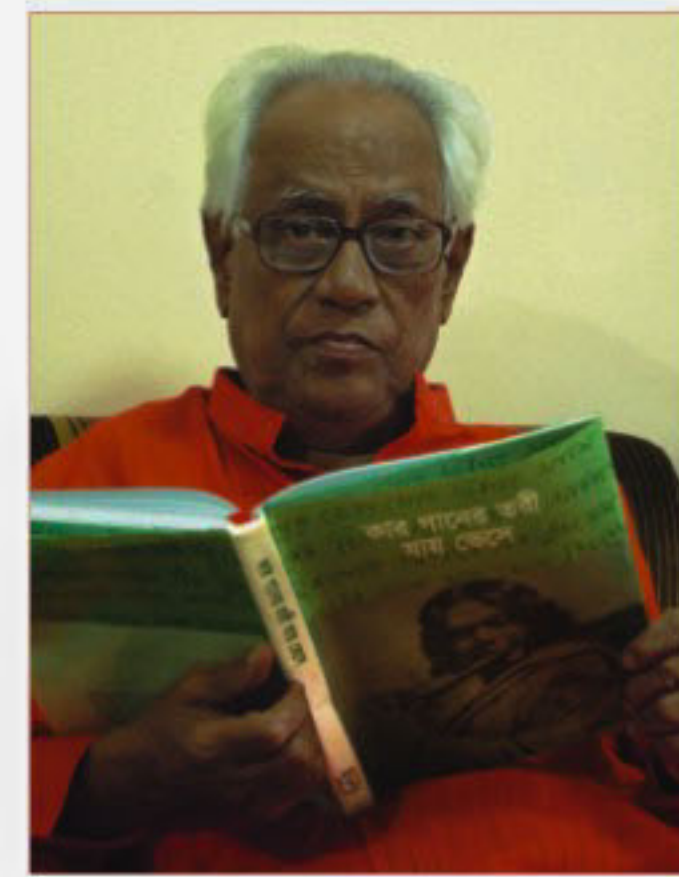
In conversation with Nazrul researcher Asadul Haque

KARIM WAHEED

"Nazrul was the music director of the film adaptation of Tagore's 'Gora'. Visva Bharati, however, objected to the release of the film; the charge was that music arrangement of one of the Rabindra Sangeet used in the film was improper. The film's release got stalled and producer of the film begged Nazrul to intervene. Nazrul went straight to Visva Bharati, met Tagore and presented the predicament. Tagore apparently was surprised by the allegation that Nazrul did 'injustice' to his song and right away gave written consent, which enabled the film's release. The producers wanted Nazrul to include one of his original compositions and the poet-music composer wrote the song, 'Usha Elo Chupchupi'. One of Nazrul's students, Bhaktimoy Dasgupta recorded the song and a scene was created in the movie for the number..."

These and many other remarkable anecdotes -- that most of us are perhaps not aware of -- involving the National Poet live on through the recollections of Nazrul researcher and song collector Asadul Haque.

Haque had collected original records of Nazrul Sangeet, handwritten (by the poet) notations and lyrics, letters and documents, often from very unlikely places.



Asadul Haque

One such incident according to Haque: "It was in the '50s. I was browsing the shops at Chorbazar in Kolkata. I saw a man stuffing a big sack with old papers. He was a *raddiwala* (one who buys rubbish or recyclable items in bulk). In the sack, I noticed a green piece of paper and the handwriting looked familiar. I looked closely and there it was! Nazrul's handwriting! I recovered 163 pages from that pile of 'trash'. These papers included songs, notations, descriptions of ragas, random thoughts etc. Quite possibly, All India Radio was in possession of these papers. Imagine that, what should be considered national treasure

ending up in trash!" These have been published in the form of a compilation, aptly titled "Kar Gaan-er Tori Jaye Bheshey". As a reminder of the discovery, the colour of the pages is light green. Among the highlights are: "Jam Jojona-e Kodi Madhyam" (an explanation of ragas created specifically to be rendered at certain hours); a speech in support of novelist Bankim Chandra; a translation of Amir Khusrow's "Nowruz-ka" and designs for LP covers.

Another intriguing discovery: Haque's profession (foreign service) took him to different corners of the world. In the '60s while he was posted in Turkey, Haque made friends with the director of a folk music research centre. One day, Haque came across an old Turkish folk song, "Uskudara Gideriken Aldida Bir Yagmur" and it hit him; he knew the tune.

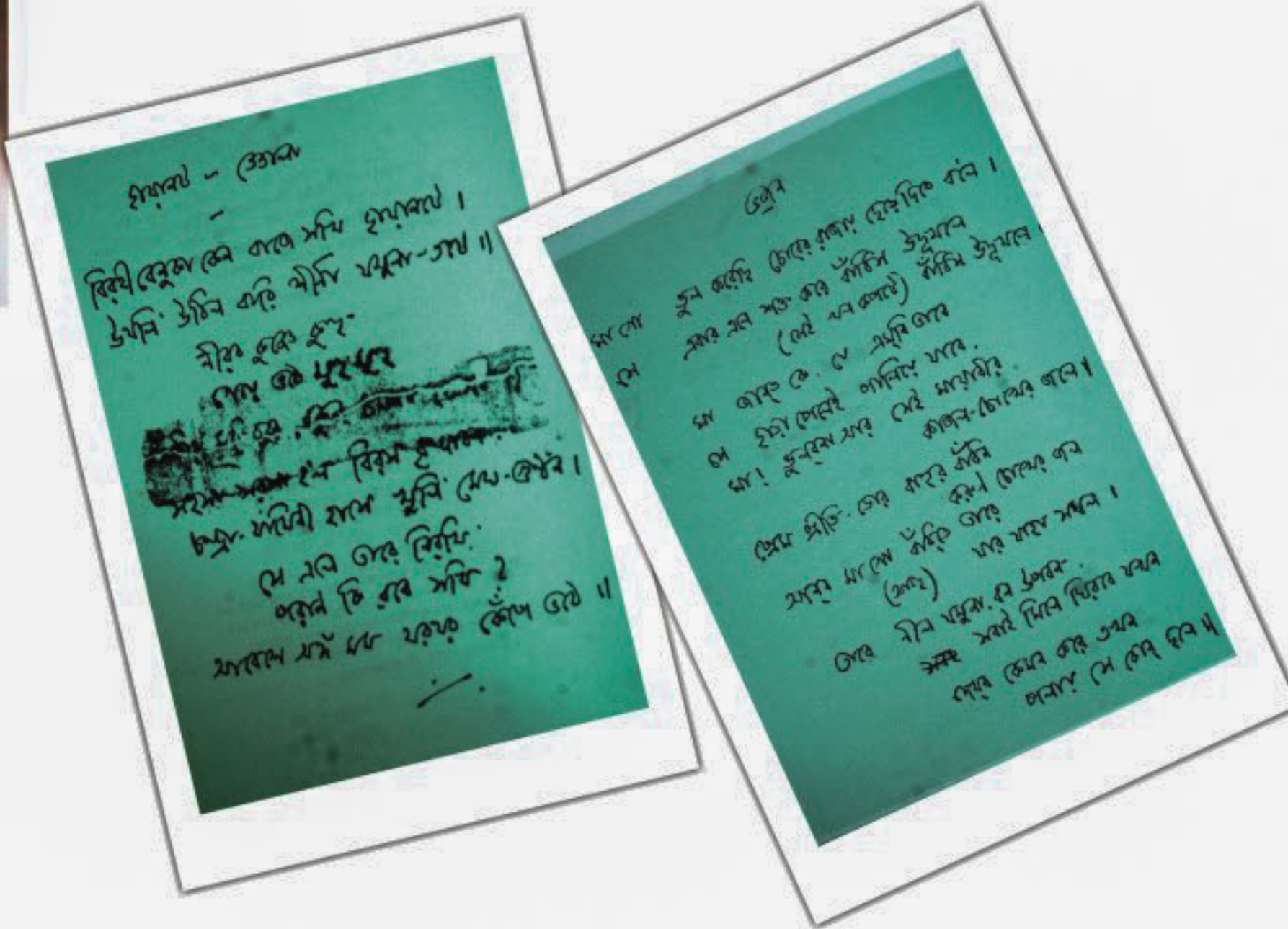
As Haque hummed the first line of the Turkish song and the ever-familiar Nazrul Sangeet, "Tribhubon-er Priyo Muhammad Elo Rey Dunia-e", the striking resemblance was apparent.

How or where did Nazrul hear a Turkish folk song? Haque's theory: When Nazrul was in the army and was stationed in Karachi (in the late 1910s), he came across soldiers from several nations. He must have heard this song from some Turkish soldier.

What triggered this interest in collecting Nazrul's songs? "Initially curiosity," Haque's response. "In 1951/'52, I learnt this Nazrul song, 'Ami Jani Tobo Mon, Bujhi Tobo Bhasha.'" I was awed by the depth of the lyrics and then I heard some critics labelling Nazrul's songs as 'itorjon-er gaan' (asinine songs, or considered distasteful for the standards of music connoisseurs). I wanted to study his songs and closely examine the dimensions of Nazrul's creativity."

My research is far from completion but it has been a thoroughly fulfilling experience.

Disappointments? "Virtually no project was ever initiated on the government level to collect Nazrul's songs or original records. Whatever have been recovered, were personal endeavours. I gave around 250 records to Nazrul Institute and the organisation doesn't even recognise them as my contribution," a disgruntled Haque says.



Life and times of a rebel

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

Kazi Nazrul Islam was born on May 25, 1898 at Churulia in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal, undivided India. Nazrul said, "Even though I was born in this country (Bengal), in this society, I don't belong to just this country, or society. I belong to the world." He was by nature and conviction a people's poet. He excelled both as a writer and musician, a rare genius who cannot be matched, except of course, Rabindranath Tagore.

Nazrul was keenly sensitive to social injustice. His songs and poems are full of hope for the exploited and oppressed. All his works truthfully represent the life he led, the struggles throughout a deprived childhood, his intense patriotism, and bohemian urges as a poet. He is popularly known as the Bidrohi Kobi, 'The Rebel Poet', as many of his works express an intense rebellion against oppression and meaningless traditions.

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

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.

Leaving the army in 1920 and settling in Kolkata, Nazrul joined the staff of the Bangiya Muslim Shahitya Samiti (Bengali Muslim Literary Society). He published his first novel "Bandhan Hara"

(Freedom from Bondage) in 1920.

In October 1921, Nazrul went to Shantiniketan with Muhammad Shahidullah and met Rabindranath Tagore. Despite many differences, Nazrul looked to Tagore as a mentor and the two remained in close association.

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, this long poem invokes images from Hindu, Muslim and Greek mythology. Nazrul won admiration of literary

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 the period of imprisonment and many of his works were banned in the 1920s by the British authorities.

It was during his visit to Comilla in 1921, that Nazrul met Pramila Devi. 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 professional works.

As a result, Nazrul's works began intensely attacking social and religious dogma and intolerance. His poems also spoke in philosophical terms of romantic love, and the complete equality of men and women.

In his poem "Naree" (Women), Nazrul repudiates what he sees as the longstanding oppression of women, proclaiming their equality. He stunned society with his poem "Barangana" (Prostitute), in which he addresses a prostitute as 'mother'.

Nazrul was shaken by the death of Rabindranath Tagore on August 8, 1941. Within months, Nazrul himself fell seriously ill and gradually began losing his power of speech. His behavior became erratic, and spending recklessly, he fell into 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 and crowded cottage in Kolkata. West Bengal government did not even arrange a bed in any recuperative home for the poet who was suffering from irreversible brain damage and living nearly a vegetative life. 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 Bangladesh.

classes by his description of the rebel whose impact is fierce and ruthless.

Nazrul explores a synthesis of different forces in a rebel, destroyer and preserver, expressing rage as well as beauty and sensitivity. Nazrul followed up, and his first anthology of poems, the "Agnibeenaa" (Lyre of Fire) in 1922, which enjoyed astounding and far-reaching success.

The patriot, poet, composer, writer edited a politico-cultural magazine *Dhumketu* on August 12, 1922. 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.