

Kazi Nazrul Islam, variously referred to as the rebel poet of Bengal and the national poet of Bangladesh, was born on 25 May 1899 (11 Jaishtha by the Bangla calendar). In his hugely productive, multi-faceted career, until it was cut short by a debilitating illness in the mid-1940s, Nazrul composed thousands of songs, wrote innumerable plays and stories and penned articles on issues of grave public concern. He died in August 1976.

Star Literature takes this opportunity to pay tribute to the literary giant whose hold on the Bengali imagination has been nothing less than mesmerising.

--- Literary Editor

ESSAY

Nazrul . . . in the eyes of Benoykumar

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

I am no expert on Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the national poet of Bangladesh, but I do believe that his literary achievements are yet to be properly evaluated. While reading the excellent book by Winston E. Langley, Professor of International Relations and Political Science at Massachusetts University, Boston, I could not but reflect on it for hours together. The only question that hovers over me is why we, the 160 million people of Bangladesh, or to be more specific 300 million Bangla-speaking people of the world, could not evaluate the poetry of Nazrul from the point of view that Langley has approached it from. Quite sometime ago, I tried to evaluate that great critic in the literary page of the *Daily Star*. The extraordinary and inconceivable commentary in the book, titled *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness*, has made the western scholar a relative of our soul. In a recent article published in *daily sun*, I have focused on the deep-rooted influence of Nazrul on the poetry of Laxmiprasad Devkota (1909-1959), the Mahakavi of Nepal. Very recently I have discovered a book written by a Bengali scholar, published from Berlin in 1922, which has mention of Nazrul in it.

It is a well known fact that 'Bidrohi' (The Rebel), the most talked of and most appreciated poem of Kazi Nazrul Islam, was composed in the last week of the year 1921. By then, criticism of his poetry had begun to appear in the literary journals, which began to earn him a good reputation, to a point where he was able to get a welcome note for his newspaper *Dhumketu* from Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). *Dhumketu* made its appearance on 12 August 1922 with a note from the Nobel laureate. On 30 August, the Kolkata-based English daily *Amrita Bazar* wrote: 'The editor (Kazi Nazrul Islam) has already made his mark as a powerful poet and some of his recent poems, particularly the 'Bidrohi', are among the most well-known in Bengali literature...' It is indeed interesting to know that in the same year a work, titled *The Futurism of Young Asia*, was published from Germany and spoke of 'Bidrohi' and Kazi Nazrul Islam in the chapter, 'Recent Bengali Thought'. The

writer of the book is a noted scholar of Bengal, Professor Benoykumar Sarkar (1887-1949).

Before the publication of 'Bidrohi', Nazrul had the volume of short stories called *Byathar Daan* and the novel *Bandhanhara* along with a good number of poems --- 'Kemal Pasha', 'Anwar', 'Moharram', 'Kheyaparer Toroni', etc. --- published. These were enough to exhibit the intellectual genius of the Rebel Poet before the world, leading in time to the creation of a new epoch in the literary world of the Bengali. Benoykumar Sarkar had an opportunity of going through 'Bidrohi' while he was in Berlin and came to comprehend the blazing literary genius in the young man.

Through reading a few pages of *The Futurism of Young Asia* by Benoykumar Sarkar, one can assume that the author did not fail to evaluate the poetic quality that is so much a definitive characteristic of the poems of Nazrul. To Benoykumar Sarkar's credit it can be said that he did not hesitate to praise the young and at the time little known poet in his English language work, which in any event devoted only a few pages to literature written in Bangla.

Originally hailing from Bikrampur of Dhaka district, Benoykumar Sarkar established himself as an eminent intellectual in Calcutta society of the time. He joined the teaching profession at the age of twenty and wrote prodigiously on many different aspects of education. He is one of the very few Bengali intellectuals whose books have been published in the United States, China, Japan, Britain and Germany. In the year 1912, his work, *The Science of History and the Hope of Mankind*, was published in Britain. His English language works that were published in the following years were *The Aids to General Culture Series* and *The Science of Education and the Inductive Method of Teaching Series*. His *Love in Hindu Literature* and *The Beginning of Hindu Culture as World Power* were published in 1916 in China. Meanwhile, *The Bliss of a Moment*, an anthology of his English poems, came out from America.

Benoykumar Sarkar was a world traveller and visited some twelve countries beginning in 1914. During his tours he served at a number of European, American and Far Eastern universities. His travel writings covering Japan,



China, France, England, America and Ireland have been published in thirteen volumes. He has more than twenty four thousand printed pages to his credit. Apart from writing in Bangla and English, he also produced works in French, German and Italian.

What was the genesis of *The Futurism of Young Asia*? A speech at Clark University in America, delivered in 1917, suggests that it was symbolic of a revolt against European attitudes to Asian cultures. Perhaps that was one reason why Benoykumar decided to include the fiery poems of Nazrul in his discussions.

What did Benoykumar Sarkar write on the newly emerging poet? The book has a chapter called 'Currents in the Literature of Young India' with the subtitle 'Recent Bengali Thought'. There Benoykumar highlights the emergence of Muslim writers in Bangla literature. He strongly emphasizes the fact that it is not only in journalism, but in creative literature as well that the significant presence of Muslim authors can be noticed. In this regard he cites from 'Bidrohi', presenting some lines of the poem in his own translation. Benoykumar's translation reads:

Say, Hero!

Say! 'Erect is my head!

Seeing my head that Himalayan peak

Bends low in shame'

He also writes: 'One feels that Bengal is now on the eve of a great literary outburst, an abandon in self-expression and lyrical enthusiasm which we have sought in vain during the last decade.' It would really be amazing to note that Benoykumar has never been mentioned in connection with Nazrul criticism though he was a sincere reader of the rebel poet's writings and made very non-traditional comments in regard to his writings.

Those who have taken a look at the two-volume *adda* (conversations) book, published under the title *Binoy Sarkarer Boithoke*, will realise the significance of it. In the book Nazrul has been referred to about twenty times. Benoykumar Sarkar considered Nazrul as an epoch-making poet. More than that, it was Benoykumar who first compared the Rebel Poet with the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). According to Benoykumar, Nazrul had surpassed Whitman in many aspects.

Benoykumar says: 'The 'I' in the poem 'Bidrohi' is not the poet Nazrul himself; rather it is the person who reads the poem'. Thus 'Bidrohi' attains a new dimension, without question. He discovers the root of the self of Nazrul's 'Bidrohi' in the Atharva-Veda: 'Mighty am I, 'Superior' (uttara) by name, upon the earth, conquering am I, all-conquering, completely conquering every region'.

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The Futurism of Young Asia, published in a distant land in the year 1922, was no doubt a milestone in the study of Kazi Nazrul Islam. Benoykumar Sarkar, then a globally reputed scholar on Indology and popularly known as *shobjanta*, that is, 'all-knowing' to the Calcutta literati, has remained ignored during the last nine decades. We believe it is time for Nazrul enthusiasts to rediscover Benoykumar Sarkar and so add to the richness of future studies on the life and achievements of Kazi Nazrul Islam.

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MUSINGS

Passions of the poet



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Nazrul takes you back to the valley of songs. You wander across the deserts of time, images of the beloved creating a festival of light in your mind; and you sing *amar aponar cheye apon je jon / khunji tare aami aponae*. That is where romance comes rushing back into your life. Or you might well ask if the romantic soul in you had ever deserted you at any point in your life. Nazrul, he who gave us *Bidrohi* and electrified us with *chol chol chol*, does not quite forget to inform us that beyond politics, beyond that historically underpinned spirit of rebellion in the heart, comes tenderness bathed in melody. And melody is but another expression, at once simple and potent, for the calling of the heart.

In Nazrul, you spot an entirety of feminine beauty encapsulated in song. Dwell, a little, on *mor priya hobe esho rani / debo khonpae tarar phool*. Move through the lyrics, take in the words and what you then have before you is a comprehensive definition of the beauty of woman. It is the woman you wait for, even as the rain falls in silence on an autumnal night. Perhaps she will come? Then again, perhaps she will not, cannot? And thus the sadness flows from you: *shaono rate jodi / shorone aashe more / bahire jhorh bohe noyone baari jhore*. Your sadness at the absence of the loved one crosses the frontier between light and dark, to recall the evening of the tears which flowed down the cheeks of the woman you keep waiting for. *Amaro ghore moleen dipaloke / jol dekhechhi jeno tomaro chokhe*. You speak of her long-ago tears, even as your eyes glisten in tears about to break free of imprisonment, to course down your weather-beaten face.

The poet in Nazrul speaks of the glorification of woman in passion. The pristine comes into play as you exult in the beauty of the one who lights up your world. As you sing, in the rising light of the moon, *tumi shundor tai cheye thaki priyo / shey ki mor oporadh*, that certain blush on her cheeks rises from the roots of her being . . . to give you cause for an enhanced showering of love. But love must pass through baptismal pain; and anguish must underline the desire for the company of the one you cannot do without. And therefore does Laili sing of the tortuous path she has travelled for union to bind her to Majnu: *boner horeen horeeni kaandiya / poth dekhayechhe morey*. Laili has returned. Majnu only needs to rise from sleep, from torpor, even from the shadows of death, to know she has come home to his heart.

But then comes autumn, with nary a sign of the lover on the horizon. The waiting has gone too long, will move into winter and past it and yet the longing soul will wait on the banks of the river or along a mud path cutting across a hamlet. You feel the sadness knifing through the air as the lover, Majnu-like, narrates his tale of woe in song: *shaon aashilo phire / shey phire elo na*. And yet the lover often turns inward, almost into seclusion, with *tumi shunite cheyo na / amar monero kotha*. Nothing can be more tragically poignant than the sadness of separation . . . of the lover from his woman, of the parent from the child. Emotions get to be in a constricted state and the only sounds you hear flow from the broken strings of the violin playing *shunno e buuke / pakhi mor aaye phire aaye*.

Songmakers give a lilt to the throbbing heart in you. They light you up somewhere inside of you as a woman in blue swishes past. Small wonder, then, that the soul breaks forth into *nilambori sharee porhe / neel Jamuna-e ke jaaye*. Or ask the damsel dancing her way through the pastoral paths even as she goes nowhere why she lets a thousand flowers bloom in her being. *Jaani na jaani na jaani na*, she blows the answer at you. Hear the melody wafting across from her and through the rainbow colours of the woods . . . *keno mono boney maloti bollore*. You watch her, for life has energised her inasmuch as it has electrified the world she inhabits.

The silence of passion, a softness borne on the wings of desire, sends a woman into indefinable rapture as the faraway strains of a flute reach her yard and move on to caress the heaving bosom of her rising passion. The breeze sweeps gently by, the ripples in the pond circle away from one another in widening circumferences. She cannot, will not resist an urge to ask a question of the distant flute player: *ke bideshi mono udashi / baanshero baanshi bajao bon-e*.

The night gathers pace. Somewhere in the spaces of the timeless, she waits under the stars for you. She tiptoes into your dreams, bends low to watch you sleep, startling you into frenzied awakening. The dreams are no more. But a sudden song brings you tidings of her, she in whose tears you have spotted monsoon cloudbursts of explosive romance. In *gobhir nishithe ghuum bhenge jae / ke jeno amare daake / shey ki tumi* you reach out to her. Your Nirvana is here.

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REFLECTIONS

Nazrul's ghazals and Angurbala

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

In the mid 1970s, our finals at Chhayana music school had begun. Among the panel of experts, music exponent Laila Arjumand Banu was present. Soon it was my turn to face the board where I was asked to present classical and Nazrul songs. My last presentation at the exam was a ghazal by Nazrul.

"Can you explain what a ghazal is?" questioned Arjumand Banu. While I was looking for words, she explained in simple words, "Ghazals originated from Persian poetry based on love. It was Kazi Nazrul Islam who introduced Bangla ghazals that created a massive impact on the music scene. The songs with an exclusive pattern and melody took music lovers by storm. This was in the year 1926. Nazrul was then hardly 27". There is no end to learning. I thought to myself. That day is firmly etched in my mind.

It was in the same year (1974) that the virtuoso singer Angurbala visited Dhaka. She was the first to record two of Nazrul's ghazals "Eto jol o kajol chokhey" and "Bhuli kemoney" in 1929 for the Gramophone Company that stirred music aficionados to great heights. Never had they heard such songs with such passionate lyrics and tunes. Surely Nazrul's genius was unparalleled.

As I hurriedly went in through the gates of the radio office at Shahbagh Avenue, I met the eager eyes of the other artists who had flocked to the big auditorium to hear the living legend.

Angurbala was about seventy at the time. In a simple white cotton sari and a gold bead necklace she looked frail as she took the stage. Placing her hand softly on her right ear she sang, "Jarey haath diye mala ditey paro nai, keno mon-e rakho tarey", "Eto jol o kajol chokhey", "Ey bashi bashorey", "Choiti raater" and a few more songs, mostly from the genre of ghazals. Her voice wasn't stereotypically melodious. It was raspy, yet powerful. Age was catching up, according to many. However, the applauding audience marvelled at the authority and style with which she presented the songs. Nazrul exponent Shiddheswar Mukhopadhyay accompanied her on the harmonium and Madon Gopal Das from Bangladesh was on the tabla.

In between her presentations, she spoke of her days at the Gramophone Company when Nazrul was signed as an exclusive trainer.

Eminent artistes such as Sachin Dev Burman, KL Saigal, KC Dev, Tulsi Lahiri, Pronob Rai, Abbassuddin Ahmed, Kamol Das Gupta, Juthika Rai, Angurbala, Indubala, Kamala Jharia and many others involved with the recording company directly recorded songs under the guidance of Nazrul and gained immense popularity and turned into legends themselves. It was, however, Dilip Kumar Roy, an eminent singer and son of DL Roy, who had first popularised Nazrul's ghazals.

Angurbala continued in the same vein. "When I recorded for the first time for the gramophone, I was dead nervous. There was a myth that artistes were cut into pieces and put inside the machine from where they performed. After a lot of persuasion, I agreed to sing in a closeted room, which resembled a gas chamber you



might have seen on TV. I was equally thrilled when I heard my own voice immediately after I performed in front of a long pipe, which I later came to know was a microphone," she went on in front of the crowd, which burst into laughter.

Angur was equally proficient as an actress on stage and talkies. It was a time when women were not allowed to cross the boundary of their household, not to speak of performing in public. Angur was attached to Minerva Studio. Here she donned the role of 'Bibek' (conscience) in many theatres and acted in "Maan Bhanjan", "Shubhoda", "Shajahan", "Tulsi Das", "Atmadarshan" and "Nartaki" among others. In the play "Kinnari", she essayed the lead role.

Angurbala had recorded about 300 songs for the Gramophone Company, of which 50 were Nazrul songs. "The most interesting experience was when I met Kazi Shaheb for the first time," went on the legendary artiste. Recalling those eventful days, Angur said, "We waited impatiently to meet him. We thought that he would be a bearded man, dressed up in *alkhella*, with a *toopi* on his head. However, we were charmed to see a completely different person attired in a *gerua panjabi*, a yellow silk turban and strings of beads around his neck. A creative genius of his stature never seemed distant.

"Kazi Shaheb would compose tunes focusing on the speciality of the artiste. Sometimes he would just explain the notations and then say in his usual manner 'Angur, it's now up to you to add the sweet *angur* (grape) flavour of your voice.' That is how I remember Nazrul," reminisced Angurbala.

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