

114th Birth Anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam

Saga of the Relentless Rebel

It was one particular day of Ashwin. Preparations for Durga Puja were well underway and there was excitement in the air. The black clouds looked to break into a heavy shower any moment. Late at night, while everyone lay in a deep sleep, poet Kazi Nazrul tossed in his bed.

As soon as the first drops of rain splashed on to the roof, Nazrul could contain himself no longer. The poet took a piece of paper and began to write "Bolo Bir Chiro Unnoto Momo Shir", the first few lines of the poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel), the masterpiece that inspired millions.

Such was the temperament of Nazrul that earned him the title "firebrand" poet; impulsive, inspirational and tireless in creativity.

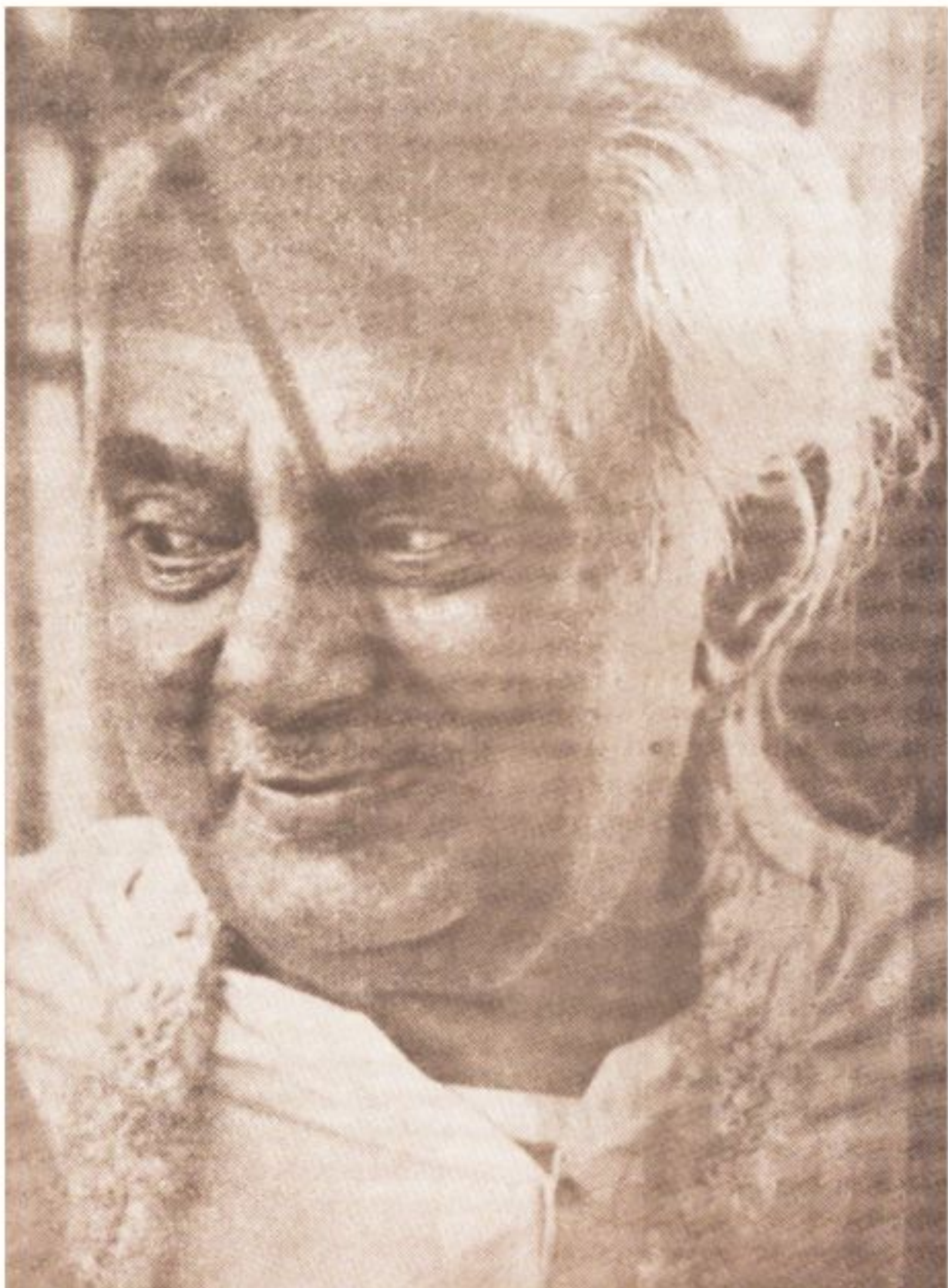
Early in the morning, he called his friend and comrade Muzaffar Ahmed and set out for Jorashanko, to meet Tagore. Upon reaching, Nazrul called out aloud, "Guruji, Guruji, come and look what I have for you." Tagore hurriedly came out of his room and sat with rapt attention as Nazrul read out his work from the night before. This was in 1922 and Nazrul was only 23.

In the same year, with hardly Rs 250, Nazrul started a bi-weekly publication. Not surprisingly, he named it "Dhumketu" (The Comet). When it was launched, Tagore sent a message of blessings:

"Come, ye comet
Come to build a bridge of fire
Across the dark
Hoist up your flag of victory"
From the very first issue "Dhumketu" became extremely popular, particularly amongst the youth. Like its name, it sparked the deep rooted patriotic sentiments through stirring writings against colonialism. National revolutionaries hailed it and it became a common voice of protest.

On 26 September that year, Nazrul's poem, "Anondomoyee Agamoney" was penned for the first time in Dhumketu, demanding India's complete freedom from colonial rule. Then came "Agni Bina" (The Fiery Bina), a collection of poems, and the rebellious "Juga Bani" (The Message of the Age), a collection of essays. Both were quickly banned by the British government.

Two months later, on November 23, Nazrul was arrested in Comilla and sentenced to a year's rigorous imprisonment for spreading anti-British feelings through



his writings. He was sent to Presidency Jail, as an under-trial prisoner but was kept there for two months before being produced in court. Later on he was shifted to Hoogly Jail from Alipur central jail.

The imprisonment stoked national outrage even more. To the masses, Nazrul came to be seen as a symbol of the resistance, a propagator of freedom. Tagore, who did not fail to recognize the personal sacrifices of Nazrul, said "Nazrul has brought spring in the life of the nation. So I have dedicated my newly published play 'Boshonto', (Spring) to him."

In April, Nazrul went on a hunger strike for 40 days to protest the ill-treatment of political prisoners. Novelist Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya and political leader Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das requested him to give up the hunger strike. Sharat wrote, "I am taking the 1 o'clock

train to Hoogly, to try to convince Kazi to quit hunger strike. Otherwise I see no other alternative. Kazi is a great poet after Tagore and I see no other as great as he in the horizon."

The jail authorities tried in vain to forcibly feed him, give him medication as he had lost 25 pounds during the hunger strike. Tagore sent a telegram from Shilong urging Nazrul to give up the hunger strike, but the message was never delivered to the poet. Nazrul was released from jail in December.

After a year, in 1923, Nazrul married Pramila (Duli) and moved off to Hoogly. His first collection of songs and poems "Bisher Bashi" (The Poison Flute) and "Bhangar Gaan" (The Song of Destruction) were published, but as before, were soon banned.

Nazrul faced hardship in his personal life also. His publishers failed to pay him his dues, and he found it difficult to make ends meet. But he wrote on at a prolific rate, penning some 3,500 songs, 25 books of poetry, 3 novels, 29 plays, 3 books of translation and much more.

In fact, it was at the end of 1926 that Nazrul gradually stepped into the exclusive realm of music. Nazrul's association with the Gramophone companies began in 1928. He was also involved with Senola, Megaphone, His Masters Voice (HMV) and Twin.

On December 15, 1929 a grand civic reception for Nazrul was held at the Albert Hall in Kolkata. Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, an eminent Bengali scientist presided, while Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, the celebrated leader was the chief guest. Sir Prafulla C Ray said that the poets are normally timid and soft-spoken, whereas Nazrul's writings were fiery. Prison walls or chains did not stop Nazrul from writing for the Bengali masses and imbuing in them a sense of patriotism and unity.

In a way, this was the personality that out-marked Nazrul as incomparable. In all his work, the one common thread was its diversity. His writings spread from the patriotic to ghazals, from *Hamd-Naat* to *Bhajan*, *Kirtaan* and love songs. Though a poet at heart, Nazrul was also a dramatist, novelist, lyricist, composer, film director, actor, bard, brilliant public speaker and a maestro in different forms of music.

Nazrul wrote like he lived his life, full of vigour and optimism against all odds. And just like he sparked life into words, his works remain as the *dhumketu* on our horizon, in our minds and in our hearts.

The Dawn of New Creation (Aaj Srishti Shukher Ullashey)

Today at the Nativity of New Creation,
A thrill of joy runs riot in me,
My face is aglow, my eyes are radiant,
My blood boils and bubbles and dances in ecstasy
Today at the Baptism of New Life!

Today in the imprisoned well of my heart ?
A deluge arises and the flood-tide violently
breaks through the barriers.
There comes smile, there are tears,
Liberty appears, fetters follow,
I learn to speak, today, my bosom is
split up, there comes the joy of
my bitter sorrow,
Lo! There comes the sorrow of
a forlorn heart ?
Today at the Baptism of a New world!

There appear the deserted, there wail the
dejected,
And heart-rending lamentations beggar descrip-
tion,
The ocean is swelling, the sky trembling,
the wind blowing,
Vishnu's discus piercing the firmament,
the trident of Shiva being hurled.
Behold! The comet and the meteor
Out to subvert the Creation:
At this, in my breast are blossoming
now the flowers of million gardens,
Ay, at the prospect of a Millennium!

Translated by Abdul Hakim

Keeping the flame alive

Rashid Haider speaks about Nazrul Institute



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Executive Director at the Nazrul Institute, Rashid Haider is a distinguished writer and academic. In a conversation with The Daily Star, he elaborated on the Institute and its various initiatives that he has spear-headed as the ED of the organisation.

Haider said, "The institute has always taken a position against the distortion of Nazrul songs. We are taking several initiatives to preserve his timeless creations. Nazrul's literary works -- in particular the compilations, have great demand among Nazrul enthusiasts. We have always given priority to Nazrul's literature and lyrics."

The institute mainly focuses on the research and publications of the poet. It has so far published 463 books on the poet's life, literature and songs, and published 46 audio CDs.

In the past few months, the institute has published "Islamic Writings of Kazi Nazrul Islam" edited by Rashid Haider; "Life and Lyrics of Kazi Nazrul Islam" by Gulshan Ara Kazi; "Chokrobak" (Romantic Poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam), translated by Dr. Nashid Kamal; Biographical book "Nazrul Jiboni" by Dr. Rafiqul Islam; Jibon O Srijon by Dr. Rafiqul Islam; Nazrul Sangeet Swaralipi by Sudhin Das and others.

Haider emphasised the need for popularising Nazrul's works by establishing branches of Nazrul Institute in every district of the country. "Nazrul (research based) Institute was recently inaugurated in Comilla, where the bard stayed for some time. We have plans to set up an institution in Chittagong," Haider said.

The institute has a collection of 1224 original Nazrul records, and has published 36 books of swaralipi (musical notations).

The Institute has a rich library with all the books of Nazrul and a good number of books of biographies on the poet. Besides the publications it has a rich collection of the original gramophone records, audio cassettes, CDs and various souvenirs of the bard.

Nazrul Museum is one of the attractions of the institute which includes rare photographs and photocopies of rare books. The library also has a collection of the manuscripts in the poet's own hand writing. The museum has paintings on Nazrul, done by 50 celebrated painters of Bangladesh.

Haider said, "This year, we are going to publish a voluminous souvenir titled, 'Nazrul-er Bangladeshey Ekshoto Bochor'. We have undertaken preparations to commemorate the 114th birth anniversary of the poet. We will begin the day by offering flowers on the mausoleum of the poet at the Dhaka University campus. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the celebration programme at Osmani Memorial Hall in the capital today. The institute will also organise a photography exhibition at the gallery of Bangladesh National Museum. The photographs capture some special moments of the poet with his family members, international personalities, friends and admirers."

Rebellion, Love and Humanity in Nazrul's creations

ZAHANGIR ALOM

Paying homage to our National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam on his 114th birth anniversary, noted elocutionists –Jayanta Chattopadhyay, Shimul Mustpha and Mahidul Islam – shared their views on Nazrul's poetic and musical genius along with other important aspects of poet's life and creations. Excerpts follow:



Jayanta Chattopadhyay

The poetic genius of Nazrul is diverse. The life, the surroundings and the varied professions that he pursued left a great impression on his poetic creations. Nazrul observed the lives of the downtrodden and exploited classes; he also faced myriad struggles in his life. Joining Bangalee Platoon during World War I and the independence of India left a lasting impact on the poet. We see that reflection in his Shammobadi Kabya (poetry). Through his poet's eyes, Nazrul saw a society free of class division, caste, creed and religion. It was no surprise that he was inspired to join the anti-British movement to contribute towards building a free society.

So many other influences play a part on his poetry. Nazrul was an incorrigible lover. He was a fearless rebel. He fought against superstitions and religious bigotry. He wrote timeless verses raising the profile of women's place in society. Nazrul was more of a musician than a poet. With equally gifted penmanship he composed Bangla Ghazal, Qawali, Hamd and Naat; again he composed *Shyama Sangeet*, *Bhajan* and songs on Radha and Krishna. If our National Poet had not suffered illness at 42, Bengali music would have reached greater heights. Nazrul was an unparalleled composer at HMV, India. His contribution to Bangiyo Shahitiya Shammilan was immense. The poet

played a significant role in reviving the dying art forms like *jatra* and theatre during his time. Nazrul also enacted the role of a Narod in the film "Dhrubo". The popular theatre production "Nawab Shiraj-ud-doula" (by Sachindranath Sengupta) is regarded as a great source of inspiration in moulding Bengali Nationalism. Nazrul led a frugal existence. Despite extreme poverty throughout his life, the versatile genius Nazrul was a strong voice for the deprived. His eternal affinity to nature, love for humanity, conscious stance against superstitions and bigotry have all found a permanent place in his literary work.



Shimul Mustapha

Nazrul stands tall as the most non-communal literary genius in Bengali literature. He composed *Shyama Sangeet*, *bhajan* and many pieces on Radha-Krishna; on the other hand, he wrote several *Hamd* and *Naat* as well. Bringing world religion on a single platform, he has sung the song of humanity. Nazrul is known as a Rebel poet, but "rebellion" has a negative connotation. Nazrul raised his voice against oppression, exploitation and deprivation. Through the verses "Ami Bidrohi Bhriku, Bhogoban Buk-e Enke Debo Podo-Chinho", Nazrul actually referred to the-then British rulers and not any supreme power. He advocated for the oppressed and downtrodden. Nazrul's "Bidrohi" is nothing short of a masterpiece. It is impossible to imagine that he wrote such a complex and in-depth tome in just eight hours. The poet started writing the masterpiece at 10 or 11pm and finished it at dawn. Nazrul was a great musician of the subcontinent. If Nazrul had not been born, we would not have a 20th century influential poet of the stature of Jibanananda Das, an exponent par excellence as Das was initially influenced by Nazrul.



Mahidul Islam

I see Nazrul as a great lover, passionately expressing his feelings for his beloved. Many compromise in this regard to preserve the gravity of art but Nazrul was different. The power that lies in Nazrul's rebellion coupled with his love of life and humanity was reflected in his poetry. He did not shy away from putting his deepest feelings to

words, a true extrovert in this regard. We don't find Nazrul constrained by religion, political group or geographical boundaries. For instance, Pablo Neruda wrote poetry advocating socialism. But Nazrul served no political group through his poetry. Nazrul clarified his position through the excerpt "Go(n)ra-Raam Bhab-e Nastik Ami, Pati Raam Bhab-e Confusi! Swarajira Bhab-e Naraji, Narajira Bhab-e Tahader Ongkushi!" (Amar Koifiot). Nazrul's poetry resonated wherever there was exploitation or oppression. Nazrul's love poems have limitations. Romanticism, melancholy and expression of emotion is over-exaggerated and all his love poems represent male perspectives. It's possible that Nazrul's personal life experiences are responsible for that. But, to be treated as an artistically encompassing piece, one must control his/her emotion. Unlike love poems, Nazrul Sangeet entertains us with multifaceted expressions. Repetition is frequent in several Nazrul's love poems including "Abhishap", "Pujarini", "Chaiti Hawa", though those don't follow any form. Say for example, we find a Japanese epic form [of theatre] in one of Jibanananda Das' poem titled "Hawar Raat" where a mundane emotion is expressed in an exaggerated manner. Repetition is rejected in modern and post-modern poems. One can say Nazrul's love for humanity and intolerance for social injustice find a more powerful expression than his compositions on love.

At the heart of Nazrul's melodies

In conversation with noted singers Khairul Anam Shakil and Nasima Shahin

FAHMIM FERDOUS

Secularism and equality in Nazrul's work:

Khairul Anam Shakil: Since the time of the anti-British movement, Nazrul realised the crying need for communal harmony. He believed the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous society lay on the society's ability to treat people fairly, irrespective of religion and race. He has also lamented the lack of mutual respect between religion and other communities, two forces that he contributed as vital to the development of the subcontinent. He felt it was his responsibility to urge for such an idealistic harmony, and he continued doing that for as long as he wrote.

Nasima Shahin: Even now, Nazrul's vision can sometimes be ahead of its time. Many people still misinterpret his messages of equality and coexistence. It startles me how he could have written and composed such songs and poems at that time. It surprises me more how people can listen to Nazrul's words and not be moved by them towards building a more tolerant and accepting society.

Khairul Anam Shakil: Nazrul always used his work to fight against all forms oppression be it social or political; defending any class of people he saw as being oppressed, whether they be the exploited labourer or repressed women.



The influence of religious subjects in Nazrul's writings:

Khairul Anam Shakil: Nazrul lived a life of struggle. To shoulder responsibility for his family's upkeep at a very early age, he became a *muazzen* at a mosque where he gathered knowledge about Islam. Then he joined the *leto* singing group, where he picked up the skill of writing songs instantly on any given subject. That is what I think prompted his massive volume of work over a relatively short time-span.

Nasima Shahin: He had a lot of respect for all

religions; he learnt about them, and wrote both *Hamd-Naat* and *Shyama Sangeet* -- songs of praise for both Muslims and Hindus respectively.

Khairul Anam Shakil: And it was not just about religion. Nazrul always looked to gain knowledge; He learnt about the Bengali literature and music in great depths.

Nazrul sangeet's popularity today:

Nasima Shahin: There is actually a lot of work going on with Nazrul's compositions. Artists are now travelling to far corners in the country spreading the music. Their work has not been highlighted much in popular media. The reason probably is that Nazrul's music is a little more intricate, and often not easy to master. One needs some musical training and knowledge to sing and appreciate the music.

Khairul Anam Shakil: I agree. The thing about a lot of Nazrul songs is that they are not very easy to sing-along. Even as a listener, to appreciate the whole volume of Nazrul's works, you need to be musically educated or have appreciation for classical based music. He wrote Bangla ghazals, various sub-genres of folk songs, including *bhawaiyya*, *bhatiali* and *jhumur*. You'll see the songs that have comparatively "easier" tunes are more popular. But Nazrul consciously prioritised the composition and musical aspects of his songs over the lyrics, and that is how I believe he has enriched Bengali music so much.