

NAZRUL'S 114TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

The Great Rebel

SYED ASHRAF ALI

Known as the “Rebel Poet” all over the sub-continent, our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was indeed a versatile genius. Rebels sometimes create great literature, but seldom contribute to the other aesthetic needs of man. Nazrul was a notable exception. He was a man with a wide range of talents, interests and pursuits. Besides being a brilliant poet, he was a successful social critic, an irrepressible journalist, an outstanding lyricist, a superb composer, a bold and upright thinker, a fearless patriot, and to crown all, an indomitable champion of truth and justice. But in every sphere of activity and in every domain of thought was he out and out rebel. No wonder Tagore called the great rebel “the mutinous child of the Goddess of the Universe.”

Nazrul’s formal education never transcended the boundaries of a school but his unquenchable thirst for knowledge far outstripped the bounds of classroom. Like a wild horse he would not be yoked, he must graze at will in what pasture he liked. He taught himself Persian and Arabic and Sanskrit and acquired a deep knowledge of the lore and philosophy expressed through these rich languages. As a result, though his mind refused the narrow discipline of a school, it absorbed from the culture of his new environment, from his wide readings in classical and vernacular literature, from his remarkable proficiency in Arabic and Persian and Sanskrit, thoughts and ideals that embodied the finest elements of the national genius. Upon these his mind worked, and out of them it created a literature the worth of which undoubtedly deserved universal acknowledgement.

Nazrul was still a young man in his early twenties when he took the literary world of Bengal by storm with his flaming editorials and essays in the daily Nabajug. He had already attracted notice as a promising poet, but these valiant and bold prose works, which were something new and unique in the Bengali language and literature, marked him out as a Rebel of outstanding abilities. Rarely indeed had there been such a combination of rhetoric and eloquence, of wit and acumen, of courage and conviction, of biting sarcasm and lofty idealism. Had he not composed a single poem, the burning and inimicable prose works of Nazrul would have entitled him to the gratitude and admiration of his people for all time to come.

The cause of liberation was the first to stir the heart of the young rebel. “What I want,” declared he with a dauntless spirit, “is that not one square inch of Indian territory shall remain in the possession of the foreigners.” Like a torrent came forth verse after verse, song after song, spreading his own intense fever of nationalism. Vibrant words set to exhilarating music, his marching songs spread far and wide and inspired youths not only in Bengal but in every nook and corner of the subcontinent, urging them to rise from their slumber, to unite and to overthrow the imperial yoke by “tearing apart, piercing, smashing” if necessary, “even the Sun, the Moon and the planets.” His was the clarion call to the youth – “Balo Bir, Balo Unnata Mamo Shir” – “Cry out aloud Brave – My head is held high.” “I am the Power, I am the Storm, I am the Creation, I am the Death.

I am the Volcano in the bosom of mother Earth, I am the Fire, the God of Fire, and I growl and rumble in the Ocean of Entrapped Inferno.”

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the legend-

ary hero of the I.N.A. and the heart-throb of the Bangalees, responded to the historic call and gratefully acknowledged : “On our way to the war.....we shall sing his songs and proceed.” No wonder, the defiant poet’s call also inspired the 75 million “East Pakistanis” and prepared their imagination for the glorious vision of a sovereign Bangladesh, the valiant freedom fighters marching triumphantly to emancipation and victory with the songs of the Great Rebel on their lips.

But it was not only the political tyranny which agitated the young rebel, the fiery flute also saw and opposed injustice and oppression in every walk of life – in social customs, in caste and creed, in orthodox



ideas and dogmatic practices in religion. In a series of poems entitled “Shamyabad” (Egalitarianism), he rose against every form of unfair distinction and unjust division. Each of the poems started with “Gahi Shamyar Gan” ((I sing the song of equality) and they were devoted to God, to men, to women, to sin, to workers, to mankind, and even to the prostitutes. To the prostitutes, he wrote, “Some call you beautiful, yet spit on you. Perhaps some Sati as pure as Sita gave birth to you, and your progeny shall perhaps be no less than ours.” The Rebel went a step further and defiantly asked, “Are we not all the products of lust and desire? – Yet what vanity and pride do we display!” That is not all. With the indefatigable spirit and the indomitable courage of conviction, he had the guts to challenge the age-old concept and unhesitatingly declared : “If an unchaste mother’s child is called a bastard, so should be the son of an unchaste father.”

The Rebel had no illusion about what is today glibly called progress and has to be synonymous with multiplication of luxuries and worship of mechanized living. By progress he meant the increasing provision of facilities, material and moral, for the all-round development and free expression of the human personality, without discrimination. He believed in life only when it is progressive, and in progress only when it is in harmony with life. He preached the freedom of man from the servitude of the fetish of hugeness, the non-human.

Not only in prose and poetry, but in his unusual ability to set his songs to music also was our beloved Doyen a genuine rebel. Music, like all other arts in the then undivided India, had become stereotyped, almost fossilized. There was the classical tradition, whether of the North or of the South, which had, within its limits, attained near perfection. But it was music, pure and abstract, and like all abstract art its appeal was limited to those who had taken pains to understand what might be called its mathematics. It could be very beautiful, hauntingly so, in the hands of a rare master but ordinarily and as practised by virtuosos its appeal was limited. Its counterpart for the popular

taste was the traditional religious and folk music. Bengal had its own coterie of folk melodies, soft and unique in its blend and vastly enriched by the prodigious outpourings from the great Tagore. While caring for both the traditions, the Rebel respected the inevitable sanctity of neither and freely took from each what suited his purpose. He added to richness by introducing Ghazals and Thumris into Bengali music – in exquisite lilting adaptation to the melody of Bengali songs. Music was no longer confined to a handful of connoisseurs and maestros. Nor were his songs confined to fire and brimstone. There were hundreds which spoke of tender love, of compassion, of exaltation, of ordinary joy and happiness, sorrows and sufferings. As a result, among the modern writers in the subcontinent he is almost unique (barring the towering personality of the great Tagore) in that while the sophisticated individuals delight in his exquisite verse and prose and learned professors and scholars write volumes on them, the simple unlettered folks in the congested lanes and streets of cities like Dhaka and Chittagong or in the remote villages of Bangladesh sing his songs with rapture. They are sung in religious gatherings no less than in concert halls. Patriots have mounted gallows and freedom fighters have braved the bullets and mortars with his songs on their lips; and young lovers unable to express the depth of their feelings hum his songs and feel the weight of their numbness relieved. It is really remarkable that each change of the season, each aspect of the country’s rich landscape, every modulation of the human heart, in sorrow or in joy, has found its voice in the songs of our national poet.

It is all the more remarkable that though the voice of the Great Rebel, which roared words and soared in songs, was muted in life for than three decades, the songs which emerged from the fiery flute exceed even that of Tagore who was fortunate enough to pour out song and poem till the last week of his long and illustrious life.

Let us once again remember today that although Kazi Nazrul Islam adorned a splendid period of Bengali literature, neither did he leave any literary descendant nor did he mark a stage in the development of Bangla literature - the Great Rebel like the loftiest peak in the mountain stood all alone. In religion, in literature, in politics, in the highways of thought, in whichever direction the Rebel went, he went alone, and on no road did he travel with the caravans of the age. Not that he forsook his fellow-men but his caravan moved fast and could not afford to wait for those whose feet were blistered. His rapid advance raised blisters on his own feet as well but his feet cleared the road of many a encumbrance which littered it. It is indeed a cruel irony of fate that in the daring march forward the thunderous voice was suddenly muted in life in eloquent silence.

Now that even the eloquent silence is no more, let us try to fulfill the work of our beloved rebel. What was being done by him may perhaps be accomplished by a million jointly. But let us always strive to look in the direction shown by the Great Rebel, towards untarnished truth, towards selfless action, towards non-communal practice and propagation of own faith, towards tolerance and respect of other faiths, towards objective learning, towards mutual understanding, and towards love of real human values.

SYED ASHRAF ALI IS FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL, ISLAMIC FOUNDATION BANGLADESH.

Nazrul ... in our times

RASHID ASKARI

Bangladesh is a melting pot of races and religious communities. Starting from the Dravidian-speaking tribe called 'Bang' that settled in the area around 1000 BCE down to the post-independence population, a wide variety of people has settled in this delta of the Ganges and Jamuna. As time went by, they have come in contact with different religions of the world. Ancient Bengal was the seat of Buddhism. This religious trend continued for centuries, and was followed by the revival of Brahmanical Hinduism under royal patronage of the Sena rulers. The long Pala period and the practice of Buddhism produced an admixture of Hindu-Buddhist culture which resulted in the evolution of the sahayiya and tantric cults. The Palas introduced a heritage of socio-cultural and religious synthesis which played a vital role in building the religious harmony afterwards.

Finally came Islam in the early years of the 13th century by way of collective conversion of numerous Buddhists and Hindus caused by the resentment towards the Hindu caste system and Kulinism (caste supremacy). Although these religious communities are never completely devoid of inter-religious and intra-religious feuds, the popular religion in Bengal often displays syncretism-- a fascinating mix of Hindu and Muslim folk beliefs, deities, and practices. The peaceful coexistence of this great religious diversity over the centuries has left the society deeply embedded in mutual tolerance and communal harmony and consolidated the growth of our ethnicity.

This long-borne religious amity was, however, frustrated time and again. The extremist factions of the religious communities have always tried to make the parade of their racial supremacy trampling on other's feelings. The most extreme example of this is seen in the pre-independence autocratic regime of the Pakistan rulers. In the name of saving religion they were trying to push Bengali culture into the danger of extinction. East Pakistan's Governor Monayem Khan was against everything associated with the culture of the Bengalis. He declared all Bengali ethnic activities 'un-Islamic' and 'anti-Pakistan' and tried to suppress them with the state might. He banned the age-old custom of wearing vermilion along the hair-parting of Hindu women. He also prohibited the rendering of Tagore songs on the radio and the television. But he could not stop the spontaneous observance of our cultural activities.

It is very unfortunate for us that in post-independence Bangladesh too, we could not ward off the ills of religious extremism which always kept gnawing at us hindering the smooth holding of our cultural activities. The bomb blasts, grenade attacks, and casualties in Jessore Udichi cultural functions (6 March 1999) and Ramna Batamul (14 April 2001) were calculated terrorist attacks targeted at our culture. In recent times, we, once again, see the evils of extremism corroding our cultural exercises. The sudden outburst of the extremist religious forces, their demand for the demolition of the Liberation War sculptures and their harsh criticism of the common cultural activities like mongol shovayatra are the very antithesis of what Bengali culture needs for its nourishment.

To save Bengali culture from the claws of religious extremism and to make sure that our society exists as a cultural unity in the midst of religious diversity, one sure recourse is to fall back on our great literary icons like Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. If Rabindranath is the life-force of Bengali culture, Nazrul is its lifeblood. I hate to think who is superior to whom. It is the lunatic fringe who raised this stupid debate between two pillars of Bengali literature, and tried to divide them down the middle in imitation of the 'two nation theory'. The Muslim fanatics tried to usurp

Nazrul and the Hindu bigots clung to Rabindranath. The orthodox Muslims who never liked Nazrul during his lifetime for his unorthodox views, and dubbed him as Kafer (infidel) or murtad (apostate) are now his staunch supporters. But unfortunately for them Nazrul could not be divided. Annada Shankar Ray assured it in his rhyme: "All else has been divided but for Nazrul" Nazrul was never what the fundamentalists thought him to be. His position is the polar opposite of that of his pseudo supporters. He has been made our national poet on consideration of his liberal attitudes and patriotic zeal. A real secular poet, who equally wrote Islamic GAZAL and Hindu devotional songs-- Shyama Samgeet, Bhajan and Kirtan, and indiscriminately borrowed imagery from Islamic allusion and Hindu mythology, must not be labeled as a sectarian poet. He also composed a large number of songs on invocation to Lord Shiva, Goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati and on the



Bangabandhu with the poet in May 1972

eternal love lost between the mythical lovers-- Radha and Krishna. On the other hand, he explored the holy book of Islamic religion and the life of Islam's prophet, and created imagery and symbols from the historical Muslim figures like Qasim, Ali, Umar, Kamal Pasha and the like. In fact, he tried to make a happy synthesis of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian values, and

by doing this, added a new dimension to Bengali culture as a cultural catalyst. In 1920, Nazrul expressed his vision of religious harmony in the editorial of Joog Bani. To quote: "Come Brother Hindu! Come Mussalman! Come Buddhist! Come Christian! Let's overcome all obstacles, let's dispel all meanness for good, all lies, all selfishness, and let's call brothers brothers. We'll have no quarrel any more." [Trans. added].

Nazrul was an outspoken critic of fanaticism in religion. He puts it in his article entitled 'Hindu Mussalman':-- "I can accept Hinduism and Islam, but I can't stand Tikism (Tiki is a bunch of uncut hair held closely together on the head by some Hindus) and beardism (the practice of growing a beard to show off as a Muslim). Tiki doesn't mean Hinduism... nor does a beard mean Islam." [Trans. added].

Nazrul here criticizes the sectarian attitudes and underlines the need for a unification of all people irrespective of castes, creeds and religions, and this spirit should be the guiding force of Bengali culture which the poet himself preached and practised. Despite being a Muslim, he named his sons using extra-religious compounds, i.e. Krishna Mohammad, Arindam Khaled, Kazi Sabyasachi and Kazi Aniruddha. He was more a humanist than a practicing Muslim who wished to see his country (and the world) as a conglomeration of people coming from different streams of races and religions and living together in peace.

There is no denying the fact that Bangladesh today is stepping backwards like a wounded apparition plunging into the abyss of backwardness and reaction. The cultural progressivism which was seen even in the pre-liberation period is being increasingly absent from the present society. In addition, a pressure is mounting on the society for theocratic rule and women confinement. At this crucial juncture, teachings of Nazrul can show us the way forward. The quest for a secular, democratic and forward-looking Bangladesh and a holistic approach to life and culture can be explored in our national poet Nazrul—who is still undivided amid deep divisions in our society. The great poet confirmed that ours is a pluralistic society and an umbrella culture which can easily accommodate different religions and races, varied views and ideas, and contrary opinions and arguments without creating any huddle.

DR. RASHID ASKARI WRITES FICTION AND COLUMNS, AND TEACHES ENGLISH LITERATURE AT KUSHITIA ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY. EMAIL: RASHIDASKARI65@YAHOO.COM

TRAVEL

Darjeeling: demographic divide

RAANA HAIDER

In Resorts of the Raj: Hill Stations of India, Vikram Bhatt (1998) provides us with nuggets of information. The hill-station was the home away from home – whereby one moved from the 'Valley of Death to Paradise' declared one Walter Campbell. William Blake declared: 'Great things are done when men and mountains meet.' Paraphrasing Kipling, Bhatt terms Simla as the 'abode of the height and mighty.' Gillian Wright in her immensely informative book Hill Stations of India (1991) questions why Simla – categorised by Rudyard Kipling as the 'abode of the little tin gods' – was chosen over Darjeeling as the summer capital of the British Raj. In the chapter 'Hill of the Thunderbolt', Wright puzzles: "...why a closer look was not taken at another hill station, only two hundred and fifty miles away. For Darjeeling, a name now synonymous with fine tea the world over, was founded over twenty years before the inaugural trek to Simla. Had the central government chosen to summer in Darjeeling, they would have enjoyed a window seat at what is generally acknowledged as the finest of all hill station panoramas, the view of Mount Kanchenjunga...To quote Mark Twain, "The one land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse – would not give that glimpse for the shows of the rest of the world combined." He visited Darjeeling in 1896 at the age of sixty-one.

No visit to Darjeeling would be complete without a ride on the renowned historical Darjeeling Toy Train which enjoys UNESCO World Heritage Status. The two feet wide narrow gauge train rolled into Darjeeling in 1881. An ingenious engineering feat, the gauge track rises some 6500 feet in 30 miles. We walked downhill from the town centre towards the railway station with great expectation. My face fell when I came across the litter-strewn, tracks and building. The UNESCO marble plaque had pieces missing. The Special Waiting Room was locked. Once unlocked, an odour from the attached bathroom foreclosed any intentions of waiting within. The miniature heritage train makes a two hour round trip to Ghoom. It refuels here at the highest railway station in the world. Still steam-fuelled, it literally chugs its way across the town, whistling its way through the dense human and vehicular traffic. Bellowing clouds of smoke, it swerves across the rocky road, while just about brushing past the first step of stairs leading uphill to a house or shop. The narrow train track serves many a purpose. It provides seating space for taking in the warmth of the sun; a pedestrian path, a jogging track and

simply extra space for vehicles. A rude reminder of political realities appears in the burnt down Sonada station. Built in 1893, it succumbed to Gurkha-led agitations in the 1990s. A burnt-out shell still reveals the roof decorative markings of one of the station buildings while the area is cordoned off. The 'Pride of Darjeeling' is a less than fair claim to the title. Yet for all its less than well-maintained state, the joy ride on the officially named Darjeeling Himalayan Railway remains a reminder of a slower pace of life. The joke worth repeating remains: An elderly woman was walking her goat to the market. The train driver asked her to board the train. She replied astutely: 'It is faster walking.'

Innumerable are the luminaries who frequented Darjeeling. Sri Aurobindo received his early schooling at Loreto Convent. 'The Voice of BBC in the Subcontinent' Mark Tully had his early education in Darjeeling as World War II raged in Europe. The Fourth King of Bhutan attended St. Joseph's College. Swami Vivekananda in his visit in 1898 exulted: "Truly, the magnificence of Darjeeling is such that one is allured as a bee to the nectar." A frequent resident in the 1880s and 1890s was Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote in a letter: "...my ambition of being alone here remains somewhat unfulfilled as I am as much surrounded by people as I am in Calcutta." Even then for him, there was little scope for solitude. He was particularly fond of the quieter towns of Kurseong and Kalimpong. The Second Kumar/Sanyasi of Bhawal visited Daarjeeling in 1909. Did he die there or did he survive and return to Bhawal (presently Bangladesh) in 1920? A Princely Impostor: The Kumar of Bhawal by Partha Chatterjee explores the enduring mystery. Mahatma Gandhi paid a visit in 1925.

The Tea Horse Road was one of the most important trade routes connecting South China and India. Stretched over 4000 kms. across a good swath of Asia, its distant trail reached London. Selling tea for over three hundred years, Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly in 2012 celebrated its new Diamond Jubilee Tea Salon. Refinement being the name of the game, the opening was by Her Majesty the Queen. Our pleasurable indulgence took place at the historical 'colonial in the new millennium' Windamere Hotel in Darjeeling. A sensory delight while stepping back in time, we were on its remarkably well-preserved premises to take tea – tea being both the drink for the common man as well as the man of means. The vintage accommodation was built in the 1930s. The 'High Tea' was served in a comfortably welcoming tea-room oddly named 'Bearparks Parlour'

whose walls are mounted with photographs and paintings of the local scenery – the town and the mountains. However, all depicted an earlier era when space between Humans and Nature was ample. Many are sepia-stained faded visuals. I took note of a New Year's Eve gathering in which appears the American-born Queen of Sikkim, Hope Cooke. Taken in the 1960s, she held the global media's attention – as did another American-born – Princess Grace Kelly of Monaco. Sikkim was one of the three kingdoms in the 'Roof of the World' until 1975. Nepal ceased to be a kingdom in 2001. Bhutan is the only remaining kingdom in the Himalayan heights. De rigeur cucumber sandwiches and cake accompanied the pot of Darjeeling liquid gold – complete with tea-cosy and tea-strainer (tea-accompaniments not much in use anymore).

A charming anecdote appears in The Story of Tea by E. Jaiwant Paul (2001). "G. Brochard in The Book of Tea recounts the story of a gentleman who was a guest of Baron Rothschild. 'Early in the morning, a liveried servant entered my room pushing a huge table on wheels. He asked, "Would like tea or a peach, sir?" I chose tea, which immediately provoked another question, "China, India or Ceylon, sir?" When I asked for India tea he enquired, "With lemon, cream or milk, sir?" I opted for milk, but he wanted to know which breed of cow I preferred, "Jersey, Hereford or Sorthern, sir?" Never had I drunk such a good cup of tea.'

The 'Champagne of Teas' is the Darjeeling tea. For E. Jaiwant Paul in The Story of Tea, "The fine quality and delicate bouquet enables it to command a premium over all other teas. As a 'tea man' and a lover of Darjeeling tea, I wonder whether champagne not more appropriately be called the Darjeeling of wines!" Locals say that as you climb higher, the roads get worse and the tea gets better. The first tea bushes in Darjeeling were raised from China in 1841. Some ten years later, the first commercial garden had appeared. In a fast-track mode, by 1871 there were some 113 gardens. According to the Darjeeling District Gazetteer of 1876, it was the introduction of tea plantation in Darjeeling that led to the massive clearing of wooded tracts. Regrettably, we were unable to visit the Glenburn Tea Estate which was established in 1859 by a Scottish tea company. The 1600 acre plantation is owned and managed by fourth generation Indian tea planters. The regret was obliterated as we drove down winding roads from Darjeeling, approaching the lower altitude verdant camellia sinensis tea bushes whose sun-kissed carpeted symmetry was only broken by

soaring shade trees and the colourful scores of experts who read tea leaves and nimbly pick two leaves and a bud.

Established in 1959, the Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre is home to a school, clinic, craft workshops, home for the aged and an orphanage. The retail outlet includes the writings of The Dalai Lama. I come across a page posted on the door. I paused and pondered on the following composition:

We have bigger houses and smaller families
More conveniences, but less time;
We have degrees, but less sense;
More knowledge, but less judgment;
More experts, but more problems
More medicine, but less healthiness.

We've been all the way to the moon and back,
But have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor
We built more computers to hold more information,
To produce more copies than ever, but have less communication.
We've become long on quantity, but short on quality.
These are times of fast foods, and slow digestion;
Tall men and short character;
Steep profits and shallow relationships.

It is time when there is much in the window
And nothing in the storeroom.

These lines speak of another Divide.

A visit to the Bengal Natural History Museum proved to be the taxidermist's terrain. Stuffed and mounted fauna cover the walls of the late nineteenth century grandiose building. The receptionist in the cavernous hallway sat fixated - not at one of the fierce faces glaring down - but at the television. Screened were the incoming results of the US Presidential elections with the incumbent President Barack Obama gaining votes. I stood by her and we shared the moment. The following day as President Obama was declared the victor; in the hotel dining room – Bangladeshis, Bhutanese, Indians and Nepalis - hotel guests, the affable General Manager, the waiters, the chefs and kitchen staff were glued to the television. All of us rejoiced. Across seven seas, in the midst of the Himalayan heights - over this man, there was no Divide.

(CONCLUDED)

RAANA HAIDER IS A WRITER WHO TRAVELS. INDIA: BEYOND THE TAJ AND THE RAJ, UNIVERSITY PRESS LIMITED, DHAKA, IS HER FORTHCOMING BOOK.