

# IMPRESSIONS

## Nazrul - - - a universal poet

MARIA HELENA BARRERA-AGARWAL

In our days, so pervaded by false celebrity, how many poets can assume to be loved by their countrymen? How many can be certain that their works will inspire their fellow citizens? How many, indeed, can anticipate that their verses will be repeated, with unchanged fervor, for generations to come? Few, very few poets are able to reach such heights. Kazi Nazrul Islam can be counted among such privileged. Even today - four decades after his death, seven decades since an unknown illness brought his literary labors to an end - Nazrul's words and example remain ever important wherever the Bengali language is esteemed.

Unlike Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul's name is not well known within Spanish-speaking circles. I happened to discover his work one day, in a cab, in New York City. The driver was listening to a tune that I could not identify - whose indelible quality continues to accompany me to this day. 'What are you listening to?' I asked. 'Ah, these are the songs of a great poet', he replied. During the rest of the cab ride, he was generous enough to instruct me in the most relevant features of Nazrul's life, quoting verses from memory in their original, harmonious Bengali, and commenting on them in English. Further exploration took place at the New York Public Library, where copies of Nazrul's works are available, including the essential publications of Dhaka's Nazrul Institute.

Nazrul's poetry was a revelation for me. His voice was different from Kobiguru's. His concerns were certainly more immediate. His passion for freedom was timeless and universal. The concepts he put forward are as valid today as they were during his lifetime, the passage of time having done nothing to diminish their original appeal. This is a poet whose strength is to combine the humblest life experiences with the most crucial ethical principles. This is a writer who proclaims the equality of human beings and condemns all prejudices caused by fortune, religious differences, and gender. This is a versatile artist, who could work with equal ease as a composer, as a filmmaker, and as a social activist. Most admirably, Nazrul was no armchair idealist. He could have sold his talent in exchange for a comfortable, bourgeois life. Instead, he chose to face imprisonment, hate and poverty for his beliefs.

### 1. The crucible

Nazrul lived in exceptionally hard times. English colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent was a pervasive reality, seeping through every deed and relationship. Anyone wishing to endeavor creative activities was subjected to great disadvantages: the empire did not encourage original thought which could, naturally, become subversive. Few could evade the obstacles imposed by such a reality. As the examples of Srinivasa Ramanujan and G. H. Hardy, in mathematics, and Tagore and Yeats, in poetry, demonstrate, sometimes talent and humanism were able to forge links above colonial barriers. This, however, was rare. The vast majority of intellectuals and artists endured a dual burden: their condition was affected not only by the overall prejudice, but also by the

colonial policies directed to bridle freedom of expression.

Writers who harbored nationalist aspirations were forced to act with extreme caution. Some chose self censorship, limiting their works to that which could not be labeled as seditious. Others used pseudonyms to pursue dangerous career paths. A good illustration of this is the great writer Dhanpat Rai, who was forced to take the pseudonym Munshi Premchand to evade police prohibitions. The price of dissent was high: fines, confiscation and destruction of books, imprisonment, and newspaper closures were common repressive measures. Vaikom Basheer's numerous jail terms were not the exception but the rule. Paradoxically, such severity pointed to the British Crown's fear of the influence that artists could wield in the struggle for independence.

These fears were justified. Poetry, in particular, was to play a leading role in the quest for self determination. Survival of the national spirit in the subcontinent had been, for millennia, closely linked to poetic expression. Under British rule, the work of poets such as Ram Prasad Bismil, Chinnaswami Subramanya Bharati and Ajit Singh was to kindle great pride and patriotic fervor - sentiments that could inspire action. One the martyrs of independence, Bhagat Singh, went to the gallows singing a composition of Bismil, the glorious 'Mera Rang De Basanti Chola' ('O Mother! Dye my robe the color of spring'). In Bengal, Kobiguru and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay spearheaded the patriotic lyrical dawn. Tagore conceived two poems that eventually would become the anthems of India - 'Jana Gana Mana' - and Bangladesh - 'Amar Shonar Bangla'. Chattopadhyay's 'Vande Mataram' became India's national song par excellence, used in many different contexts as a patriotic statement.

### 2. Freedom's poet

In that context, Nazrul's destiny was to create a special sense of patriotic yearning, predicated on an uncompromising quest for freedom. No one could have anticipated this: Nazrul started his career as a young man of twenty-three. He lacked the money and the protection that a wealthy and influential family could provide. Having lost his father at a young age, he had worked in the most diverse and humble realms. His formal studies had been frequently interrupted by the need of earning a living. These and other deep disadvantages mattered little. From his very first publications, Nazrul deployed what will be later known as his trademark virtue: he was a fearless visionary who spoke truth to power. In a word, he was Bidrohi.

His rare aptitude is already in full bloom in 1922, when



he published his first few works, which were quickly suppressed by the British government. Among these is included the remarkable poem 'Anandamoyee Agomoney' ('The Coming of the Goddess Durga'), which cost him a year in prison. It is this hardship which inspired his 'Rajbandir Jabanbandi' ('The Testimony of a Political Prisoner'), a piece of remarkable audacity and scope. Read almost a century after the facts, the testimony of Nazrul is not only a personal statement. It speaks of a mind which, even in the most critical personal situation, is able to draw abstract propositions relevant to humanity as a whole.

The poet contemplates the subcontinent's plight, and explains why justice and God are on the side of the subjugated and why imperial power is a misguided enterprise. He goes further, and dares to imagine transposing the condition of subjugated people into the colonial masters. It is a view without precedent: If India was the colonial power and Britain the colonized country, the British would revolt and fight as we Indians do now, he claims, and they would be justified in doing so. One can imagine the effect of such a comparison on the Empire's agents, educated to relish their superiority at all times. It is a direct challenge to the aberrant frame of mind inherent in colonialism and prejudice: It dwells on the common humanity shared by the oppressor and the oppressed, and calls for everybody to inhabit the place and the condition of the "other" - the foreigner, the outsider, the enemy - before assuming righteousness.

The same capacity to empathize is found in Nazrul with regard to other, equally complex subjects. Essential to the imagery of his poems and his prose is a deeply felt call to overcome religious differences. He produced a superb body of works dedicated to Islamic themes, based on a profound knowledge of his faith. Additionally, he was familiar with the Hindu tradition, used its symbolism in his poems, and expressed his belief in the need for tolerance and respect in matters of belief. Such a show of unity had to be particularly disturbing in the eyes of the British authorities. They had applied a 'divide and conquer' policy to rule India; anything that threatened the success of that system was deemed dangerous. Nazrul's views were not limited to that problem. He wrote against every symptom of oppression, including prejudices of caste and class, contempt for women, and abuse of authority, exercised as a game of narrow, personal interests. His concerns were those of humanity, unimpeded by bigotry.

### 3. A voice for the world

I have attempted to translate Nazrul's poetry into Spanish. It

has been an enlightening task, as difficult as rewarding. From the very beginning, I have been aware that no translation can transpose the virtuosity of his style, or reflect but in a small degree the reverberation of his verses. Nevertheless, I feel it was indispensable to try and offer to the Spanish-speaking public the wonders of poems such as The Rebel - one of the pinnacles of Bengali poetry. Declared in its original language, it is not just a protest; it is, in itself, a cry that invokes freedom and embodies freedom. Bursting with energy, Nazrul's composition uses symbols which favor the sublime over the mundane. Religious and secular elements from various traditions are claimed to subvert the reader's expectations. Written when the poet was only twenty-two, it shows already an astonishing mastery, a mind open to the most dissimilar influences, capable of transmuting a host of varied materials into a wholly original text.

The poet's voice in Bidrohi is, at the same time, singular and collective. It incarnates itself, at times, within the individuality of ordinary beings, whose life experience is invoked in all its hidden value. In other instances, the spirit of the poet takes on mythic proportions, appropriating divine and natural forces, and inhabiting them. For these and other details, the importance of the influence of Walt Whitman on the work of Nazrul has often been stressed. There is evidence, in the writings of the Bengali poet, of his knowledge and admiration for the American. However, in light of the Nazrul's history, I believe *Leaves of Grass* should be considered one of the many sources of inspiration for The Rebel, not the most decisive.

It is imperative to remember, in this regard, the circumstances in which Bidrohi was created, to better appreciate its originality. Whitman produced his verses as a citizen of an autonomous country, a man who had led a life in which basic civil rights were his natural due. The circumstances were different for Nazrul. He writes in a context of unspoken subjugation, which involves the imposition of both material and spiritual oppression by a foreign power. His rebellion projects, therefore, aspects that are nonexistent in Whitman. It is imbued with an immense anger, with desire for freedom that is not joyful, but poignant. An anger that comes from personal experience, sublimated into one of the most memorable poems ever written.

I sincerely hope that Nazrul's voice and genius reach, in Spanish as in other languages, the audience it deserves. It would be only fair. Poet Mohammad Nurul Huda has written that "Nazrul was - and remains - a poet of the world." This is a great truth, which echoes the words of the poet himself. A passionate defender of literature as a universal art, he insisted in proclaiming that "literature is for all humanity, not for a single person." He also wrote that "the heart of the literati, writers and poets should be open as the sky." His heart was certainly open to humankind; it is only fair that more people get the opportunity to dwell on his legacy.

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# NON-FICTION

## An icon of civil rights

HARUN-OR-RASHID

BORN in a priest family on January 15, 1929 at Atlanta in the pro-slave state of Georgia in the South, Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) was an American Gandhian. He was best known for his contribution towards the advancement of civil rights of the disadvantaged minorities especially blacks ending racial discrimination through recourse to non-violence as a method of protest.

As an extraordinarily talented student MLK skipped two classes at school entering the Morehouse college at the age of 15 without formally graduating from high school. In 1948 he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the same college. He had his second graduation in divinity from Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania in 1951. He obtained his Ph.D. degree from Boston University in 1955 for his dissertation in the field of Theology.

Engaged himself as a Minister in a Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at age 25, King was greatly attracted to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Bible leading him to dedicate his life to the service of humanity fighting against all injustices.

America has been an extremely heterogeneous society inhabited by peoples of divergent characters in terms of race, ethnicity, religions, country of origin and geographical variations. Slavery was an integral part of American society and economy for historical reason until it was abolished in 1865 in the aftermath of Civil War fought between the pro-slaves and anti-slaves states of the North and South over the issue. It was paradoxical that slavery persisted in some form or other whether as a social taboo or under a different pretext, mostly in the Southern States, despite constitutional guarantee of equality and legal abolition of the system. As a result, African-Americans or black minorities were subjugated to continued maltreatment, indignity, deprivation and discrimination in all spheres of life. In denial of equal rights and opportunities, they were subjected to segregation be it in public transport, school, store, church, lunch counter, housing, neighbourhood and so on and so forth under, what was called, Jim Crow Law.

Against this backdrop, King came to engage himself in Civil Rights Movement understanding that 'freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.' However, the course of action that he followed in steering the movement was peaceful non-violence. In this respect, Mahatma Gandhi (1868-1948) had a great influence on him. Before his visit

to India in 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to learn about Gandhi including his ways of carrying on struggle against apartheidism in South Africa and the British Colonial rule in India through his father's classmate at Morehouse college, who was also his early day educator, theologian Howard Thurman, who had personally met with Gandhi during his missionary work in abroad. King's visit to Gandhi's birthplace in India left a profound impact on him deepening his understanding of Gandhi's philosophy including his tactic of non-violent resistance through non-cooperation and mass mobilisation. As King, in a radio address made before leaving India, maintained:

Since being in India, I am more convinced than ever before that the method of nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity. In a real sense, Mahatma Gandhi embodied in his life certain universal principles that are inherent in the moral structure of the universe, and these principles are inescapable as the law of gravitation.

In his 13 years of Civil Rights Movement, Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), Albany Movement (Georgia, 1961) against segregation, Birmingham campaign (Alabama, 1963) against segregation and economic injustices, demonstrations in St. Augustine (Florida, 1964), defiance of Selma injunction (Alabama, 1965) barring campaign on voter registration, March on Washington (1963) for jobs and freedom, Civil Rights Marches from Selma to Montgomery (1965) resulting in Police brutality, commonly known as "Bloody Sunday", several marches on different parts of Chicago (1966) in demonstration of support for slums dwellers and protest against racially discriminatory processing of housing intending to spread the movement to the North, Anti-Vietnam War rally (King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, 1967) and Poor People Campaign on Washington D.C. (1968) on demand for 'economic bill of rights' in aid to the poorest communities were the major events that deserve special attention and scrutiny in understanding King's ideas, leadership and role in the movement.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which lasted for 385 days in protest against Rosa Parks' arrest on charge of non-compliance with 'Jim Crow Sign' in favour of a white passenger, created a situation akin to a miniature version of Gandhi's Boycott Programme (1920) against the British or Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Non-



cooperation Movement during 2-25 March 1971 against the Pakistani ruling Junta in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence. Further King's several marches joined by a huge number of protesters resembled Gandhi's Satyagraha movement, say, Salt Satyagraha (1930), from Gujrat to Dandi as a case in point.

Guided by the fundamental principle of non-violence, in his Civil Rights Movement, King adopted various tactics and strategies which included, inter alia, boycott, marches, confrontational courses provoking mass arrests, decline of bail, temporary occupation of public spaces by marchers and sit-ins in open violation of law or injunction, stand-offs with authorities, recruiting children and youths on special circumstances to join demonstrations, drawing media attention to police brutalities on demonstrators coming to be shocking to many among white Americans, too, halt to a demonstration as and when these turned to be violent, and creating a compelling situation for the authorities to open the door to negotiation.

Unlike Gandhi or many other leaders, MLK maintained equidistance from party alignment which he thought was very necessary for some one to play the role of a kind of conscience keeper. However, in order to muster strong moral support behind the Movement and provide organizational leadership, in 1957 he along with a few other Civil Rights activists founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) out of black churches with himself at the top.

In carrying out the movement, King inflicted a lot of sufferings on himself in the forum of hit by thrown bricks or bottles while on a march, arrests (as many as 29 times in a period of 13 years), jail, fine, prohibition on entry by author-

ity, police violence, continued life threats before his final assassination on April 4, 1968 in the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. In an era of cold war, at one stage he was held to be a "communist" suspect by the authority for his professed support to the poor, demand for redistribution of wealth and resources for social wellbeing and opposition to military spending and Vietnam War, coming to be closely followed by FBI agents to wiretap him. Despite all sufferings and adversities, on a number of occasions during his Civil Rights Movement, King succeeded in creating a situation forcing the local authorities to end segregation in public buses or in some other public places and punish repressive policemen or to take similar actions (Montgomery Bus Boycott, Birmingham Campaign referred).

The March on Washington on August 28, 1963 for Jobs and Freedom was a great event in King's Civil Rights Movement as well as his own life on which occasion he made his most famous 17 minute "I have a Dream" speech at a crowd of more than a quarter of a million in front of the Lincoln Memorial onto the National Mall and around the pool. In his address, King at first made some specific demands, such as, (i) an end to racial segregation in public schools; (ii) civil rights legislation prohibiting racial discrimination in employment; (iii) protection of civil rights workers from police persecution; (iv) a minimum \$2 wage for all workers; and (v) self government for Washington, D.C. Then he proceeded to tell extempore the crowd about his dream:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

In a sense the occasion was comparable to that of March 7, 1971 when the Father of the Bangali Nation and the architect of Independent Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made his historic 18-minute address in the course of his struggle for national emancipation from the Pakistani rule in front of a crowd over a million at the Race Course Maidan (current Suhrawardy Uddayan), Dhaka, in which he said:

I have come before you today with a heart laden with sadness ... Today the people of Bengal desire emancipation, the people of Bengal wish to live, the people of Bengal demand that their rights be acknowledged ... you cannot keep seventy five million people in bondage. Now that we have learnt to die, no power on earth can keep us in subjugation ... God willing, we shall free the people of this land. The struggle this time is a Struggle for Emancipation. The struggle this time is a Struggle for Independence.

Both addresses came to be regarded as one among the best speeches in history.

Martin Luther King, Jr. has become a national icon of civil rights and liberties in the US. The Federal Government declared a national holiday known as King Day being observed in the third Monday of January every year since 1986 in his honour. Hundreds of streets, institutions and other public places have been named/re-named after him throughout the US. He received many

honourary degrees from universities in home and abroad. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and Congressional Gold Medal in 2001. King became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 (age 35) awarded in recognition of his contributions toward establishing civil rights in the American society especially for blacks through peaceful non-violent means. His Civil Rights Movement resulted in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1965 Voting Rights Act by the US Congress.

It was true that King fought for equal rights and opportunities for blacks ending all kinds of racial discrimination. However, his engagement in Civil Rights Movement was not inspired by any sectarian consideration. He stood by all hapless and disadvantaged peoples regardless of caste, creed, colour, race, sex, cherishing universal values inherent in humankind that 'all men are created equal'. He had profound belief in Freedom for one and all, full not truncated to be meaningful, holding, "Freedom is one thing. You have it all or you are not free." He was for genuine integration of society founded upon the principle of universal brotherhood through moral change without regard for anything cosmetic. He was a forerunner of the world peace movements. He was a visionary, too. The election of Barack Obama as the first black President of the United States of America has come in line with his vision.

Speaking once about how he wished to be remembered after his death, what King stated are most pertinent. After the request not to mention his 'awards and honours' at funeral, he continued:

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give life serving others ... that I tried to be right on the [Vietnam] war question ... that I did try to feed the hungry ... that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked ... that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Perhaps nobody else could have written his own epitaph so accurately and eloquently than King himself. We pay our homage and deep tribute to this great son, great humanist, the Mahatma of the United States on this occasion, marking the 50th anniversary of his "I have a dream" speech. King's life and philosophy would continue inspiring the multitudes throughout the world in their struggle for equality, justice and freedom.

PROFESSOR DR HARUN-OR-RASHID IS VICE CHANCELLOR, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH. HIS ARTICLE IS THE KEYNOTE SPEECH HE DELIVERED AT A RECENT COMMEMORATION IN DHAKA OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S 'I HAVE A DREAM' ADDRESS DELIVERED IN WASHINGTON ON 28 AUGUST 1963.