



MUSINGS

# Syed Ismail Hossain Siraji: A Tribute

ANWARUL KARIM

Syed Ismail Hossain Siraji (1880–1931) is one of the pioneers of the Muslim Renaissance in the subcontinent. He was born in an illustrious Muslim family at Sirajganj town in the then Pabna district in 1880 and also died in the same place in 1931. Poet Nazrul, born 19 years after his birth was greatly inspired by his speech and the books he published at that time, most of which were anti-British and caused Siraji to suffer much at the hand of the British who imprisoned him and then confiscated his book *Anal Probaho* (Waves of Fire). He was an activist and worked for many parties and organizations. These included: Indian National Congress, Muslim League, Anjuman-i-Ulamah-i-Bangala, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, Swarajya Party and Krishak Samiti.

Siraji worked for the emancipation of the Muslims during the British rule in order to regain the lost heritage. As the Muslims were lagging behind the Hindus in regard to the learning of English language and thereby losing facilities of job markets and other facilities from the British, he inspired them to learn English and also to set their work-positions in accordance with their capabilities and talent. He did it because he wanted to bring about a change in the Muslim community who did not adopt themselves in the English education system and thereby were denied some crucial civil rights. It did not mean that he was with the British and supported their exploitation of the county, he was rather of the opinion that learning about English and the English education system would actually help them understand their politico-economic position in the society and accordingly, they would be able to organize themselves against the British.

Ismail Hossain Siraji was a writer, orator and peasant leader who called for many communal movements against the British. He suffixed the term Siraji with his name for his love of the place where he was born. Siraji, though extremely bright, could not prosecute his higher studies in the college because of financial stringency, but this could not deter him from growing into a knowledgeable and enlightened person. In his young age, he learnt Persian in school and also studied Sanskrit privately and was quite well versed in Sanskrit grammar and literature. He also studied Hindu scriptures like *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, and *Upanishads*. And right here, we find some points of similarity he shares with Nazrul himself. Nazrul studied Hindu scriptures, learnt Shyama and Kirtan sangeet (music), composed poems on Hindu myths as well. Both Siraji and Nazrul were chief exponents of Hindu-Muslim unity. Nazrul joined British army because of poverty and organized the Indians against the British, many of whom later on joined the Azad Hind Fauz of Netaji Shubhas Chandra Bose. Siraji, too, joined the Khilaphat Movement to fight against the British. He went to Turkey with a medical mission when Turkey was involved in the Balkan Wars in 1912.

Siraji was one of the most prominent figures in the Bengali Muslim reawakening in the British India. He encouraged Muslims to learn English

and to go for higher education to regain their position equally with the Hindus. He also worked for women to undertake English education, believing that this would help strengthen their socio-economic position in the society.

Siraji believed in religious tolerance between Hindus and Muslims who used to live side by side for generations together. He also thought that Hindu-Muslim unity would be of utmost need to create a strong Bengali society to fight against the tyranny and oppression of the British. His writings inspired many nationalists and revolutionaries. The name of Syed Ismail Hossain Siraji is thus specially remembered for all his efforts to the cause of the Muslims and none had suffered like him in the hands of the British for securing the rights of the Muslims in Bengal.

In the same strain, he inspired Kazi Nazrul during his life and his son Syed Asaduddowla



Siraji accorded him one of the biggest receptions in Bengal at Sirajganj, Pabna. He organized an 'All Bengal Conference of Muslim Youths' under the name 'Bangiyo Muslim Tarun Sammelon' at the Theatre House in Sirajganj town on November 5-6, 1932, one year after the death of Ismail Hossain Siraji. Syed Asaduddowla Siraji personally went to Kolkata to invite Kazi Nazrul Islam to attend the program at Sirajganj as the Chief Guest. Eminent folk singers like Abbasuddin, Sufi Zulfikar Haider and Giashuddin Ahmad of Mymensingh accompanied Nazrul to the conference. Here the Rebel Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam delivered his most memorable and greatest Presidential speech addressing the youths of Bengal. The speech was afterwards published in *The Saugath*, edited by Nasiruddin in its 1339 edition as "Jauboner Daak." It was later published in many journals as "Taruner Swapno." On the concluding day, Nazrul visited the residence and also the grave of Ismail Siraji himself, while paying his deep respect and homage to him. Here, I cannot help quoting from a poem writ-

ten by Ismail Hossain Siraji, a piece that successfully caught the attention of all freedom loving men in Bengal:

The Land of My Birth  
- Ismail Hossain Siraji

May he be the most wise and the top-wealthy,  
May he enjoy the super-power, limitless  
Let his magnanimity be equal of the unfathomable Indus, great  
May his Talent glitter unhindered  
No matter if he lives majestically in his mansion  
May he stay meticulously dressed amidst glamorous jewelry  
May his beauty be shining as that of the Moon  
And heroism no less than Rustom  
Tens of hundreds kiss his feet as slaves  
And be flattered with songs in praise of him  
But he who never did anything good for his motherland  
Or worked little for his community  
Tell that scoundrel as quick as possible  
He is condemned as heartless, savage, base.

(Translation: Anwarul Karim)

This sample piece reflects Siraji's great patriotism and utmost love for his country, Bengal. He paid great tributes not only to his homeland but also criticized those who betrayed their Motherland. He was not at all hesitant to condemn boldly those who took pride in having power and position, name/fame or wealth in the society and never did anything worthwhile for the community. The prolific writer also wrote in many contemporary journals such as, *Al-Eslam*, *Islam Pracharak*, *Prabasi*, *Pracharak*, *Kohinoor*, *Soltan*, *Mohammadi*, *Saogat*, *Nabajug* and *Nabanur*. Most of his writings tended to glorify Islamic traditions, culture and heritage. His books of verses include *Anal Prabaha* (1900), *Akangkha* (1906), *Uchchhas* (1907), *Udbodhan* (1907), *Naba Uddipana* (1907), *Spain Bijoy Kabya* (1914), *Sangit Sanjibani* (1916), *Premanjali* (1916) and some of his notable novels, *Ray Nandini* (1915), *Tara Bai* (1916), *Feroza Begum* (1918), and *Nooruddin* (1919).

It was indeed very much surprising that with his limited education, Siraji could produce such great works of art including poetry, prose, novels, travelogues, and essays. During the British rule, the Muslims were most often ignored and occasionally looked down upon, but the works of Siraji, along with the great ones of Nazrul, proved beyond doubt that a great writer may arise from any background. In fact, his *Anal Probaha* was the first collection of poems which encapsulated the feelings and sentiments of the tormented people of the region in verse and ended with a hopeful note for the emancipation of the Muslims as a nation. We remember this great man today with utmost respect on the occasion of his 138th birth anniversary, which was in July, 2018.

The writer is at present the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Northern University, Bangladesh.



POETRY

3 POEMS BY PIAS MAJID

TRANSLATED BY SONALI CHAKRABORTY



## Cognition

Dandelions of moonshine have blown in clutster,  
Finding you unfading there, I dive into the golden error.

Flashing incubus of thirty springs,  
I have been waiting sitting at the shore,  
In this survival of eternal summer,  
The fancy of fate only flavoured me with fervent flood.

## The Progenitor of Demise

The dune,  
And the dormant tune.  
The horizon,  
And the crazy caper in expansion.

The birth of my corpse existence,  
Emerges always in the umbrage,  
Of such golden vortex.

## The Coffin Street

Permuting his artistry  
A mythic potter erects my sepulcher,  
Olive green with hues of silvery golden.

Darkness starts flaming over the horizon,  
A sylvan fay walks towards the mountain,  
Plaits of her hair contain  
Unreckoned chase,now in extinction.

I am nothing but a redolent skeleton,  
Floating in haem of those embryonic rapine,  
Who looks upon and finds  
You in fraction,  
A night, mysterious yet livelong;  
Beaten by the morn.

Pias Majid is a poet and writer.  
Sonali Chakraborty is a poet and translator from West Bengal, India.

## REVIEWS

# A "Philosophical Worldview" in *Nature and Life*

Md. Munir Hossain Talukder. ISBN: (10): 1-5275-0920-6. Cambridge Scholars, 2018

REVIEWED BY MUHAMMAD A SAYEED

Doing 'deep ecology' by any academically trained philosopher might be daunting insofar as it involves the task of conceiving environmental crisis in philosophical terms. If there is anything warranted by this task it is the intention of thinking the relationship between nature and life by way of explicating the 'unity of the world.' But 'philosophy,' for Jürgen Habermas, 'can no longer refer to the whole of the world' particularly in the sense of 'totalizing knowledge.' How then a philosophical worldview of nature and life (in the sense of its totality) is possible? The answer to this question can be found in the philosophical approach of Md. Munir Hossain Talukder who invites us to take the universe in its totality as a way of correcting the metaphysics of 'self' and its relation with the nature.

His recently published book, *Nature and Life: Essays on Deep Ecology and Applied Ethics* (which has been published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK in 2018) is the culmination of all his efforts so far at portraying a philosophical image of life while not giving up the totality of the nature or the universe as linked together. The book begins by drawing insights from the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess' 'deep ecology' (or ecosophy) that considers all organisms — human/other life forms and plants/other natural entities — as a 'total-filled image', and suggests that 'our goal should be a rich life that is harmonious with other forms of life' (p. 8). In order to dissolve the anthropocentric (or man-in-environment centric) understanding of environment, it

thus argues in this part for establishing a more symbiotic relationship between nature and human as foundational to the attainment of what he calls 'ecological wisdom.'

The book develops this argument in chapter 2 through a conversation about Naess's 'Self-realization' and its potential in dismissing any hierarchical chain among the human beings and the non-human world. It accepts that the 'Self' with a capital S stands for the totality of individual 'selves,' which denotes the realization of the 'organic wholeness' as well as some sort of 'rectification' of our selves. While defending it as a morally neutral phenomenon, this chapter argues that 'Self-realization' is an extension of Plato's view of self-development and Aristotle's biocentric holism. The position that Self-realization is a 'morally neutral virtue' is further justified by its fit to Gandhi's non-violence theory and Buddhism. In doing so, Professor Talukder's use of Aristotelian virtue ethics vis-à-vis self-realization (as elaborated in chapter 6) and its Kantian reading appears to be quite revealing. Chapter 3 is designed to demonstrate "identification" as a common environmental

value "which exists in various forms in both the Western and Eastern cultural traditions" (p. 45). By analyzing both these traditions, it therefore argues how valuing "identification" can help us construct a correct metaphysics of "ecological self" through which human beings can feel/achieve a harmonious coexistence with nature. This is followed by an illuminating discussion in chapter 4 which explores the Asian (Chinese and Indian) attitude towards natures. While describing the companionship with nature in Asian perspective, it argues that "[...] Asian environmental ethics is neither anthropocentric nor non-anthropocentric. We may call it place-based and 'kin-centric' because kinship relations not only

imply equality or ontological continuity, but they also ensure an emotional bond with place that is in addition to mutual respect" (p. 59). It is for this attitude that the book finds "Asian holism" as very promising for a complete reconstruction of environmental ethics.

Seeking identification and holism, Professor Talukder turns again to the question of virtue to provide us with a significant

guideline as to how we should understand our relationship with broader moral circle such as the environment. Engaged in the debate on "balanced caring," he criticizes Michel Slotte's idea of "intimate caring" that moralizes more caring for those who are intimates or closer in degree. Slotte's scheme of priorities seems to leave the environment at the bottom of the list. Professor Talukder has therefore refuted this scheme even by reversing the priorities according to which caring for those who are less close — here caring for the environment — rather than favoring oneself is thus a virtuous character trait.

In the latter half of the book (chapter 7-11), Professor Talukder deals with some issues of health care and bioethics which are closely aligned to the question of the life and nature as broadly understood in his project. It examines the ethics of inducement in health care in order to argue that inducement does not necessarily violate informed consent. Offering a philosophical reflection on the concept of "personhood" in bioethics, the book proceeds to explore the ethical determinates of the patient-physician relationship in which informed consent can be ensured as the "natural outcome" of such relation. It further identifies the limitation of different models for patient-physician relationship, and calls for an alternative or "context sensitive" model that could be developed through "relational autonomy" as understood from the perspective of care ethics.

Apart from this, the book also devotes one

important chapter on multiculturalism, which defends "geo-cultural identity" by criticizing Will Kymlicka's view of minority rights in multicultural society. The argument in this chapter is crucial for it involves, albeit tenuously, the sense of quality life inasmuch as it relates to people's "psychological identification" that they have with their land and culture. The book is concluded with an inquiry into the question of whether an ethical expertise is possible in both epistemic and performative sense. While arguing that such expertise is possible only in epistemic sense, it seems to delimit the boundaries of ethical expertise in linking the life with nature in one hand, and contextualizing the ethical determinants of relations among the human beings as involved, among others, in the question of minority culture, bioethics and health care, on the other.

Of all the far reaching insights, the one most relevant of Professor Talukder's book is his engagement in exploring the issues of values, virtues and attitude towards life and nature through a common lens of culture in which the "quality of life" is emphasized not only as a logical outcome of "Self-realization" but also as a common denominator of (bio)ethical choice. This way of thinking as such would contribute profoundly to the ongoing dialogue about deep ecology and applied ethics, generated from the renewed interests in transforming the metaphysic of self into a philosophical worldview of life and nature.

The reviewer teaches philosophy of law at Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka.

