

# From a Prayer to a Call to Arms and Action

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In December 1921, almost a hundred years ago, Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote what would be his most iconic poem: "Bidrohi." The poem would transform him from the Soldier Poet to the Rebel Poet. "Bidrohi" was unlike any poem written at the time as the very first lines reveal: "Bolo bir/Bolo unnato momo shir/Shir nehari amari, notoshir oi shikhor himadri" [Speak, Hero, say, My head is held high./At its sight the Himalayan peak hangs down its head.] The effect of the alliteration, the internal rhymes, the declamatory tone of the poem make it almost impossible to translate. The late Karunamoy Goswami noted, "it seldom happens . . . that one poem raises its composer to the pinnacle of glory. But it happened in the case of Kazi Nazrul Islam" (*Kazi Nazrul Islam: A Biography*).

who stands up against all forms of subjugation, prejudice, injustice.

In *Naivedya*, Rabindranath Tagore had written a remarkable poem titled "Prarthona," the first line of which reads "Chitto jetha bhoysunno, uchho jetha shir." Tagore would translate this poem – along with others – and include it in his English *Gitanjali*. The poem, read in the Bangla original or in Tagore's own English translation, is a prayer to the Creator for a country "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high/ Where knowledge is free. . . ." It is "Into that heaven of freedom" that Rabindranath prays his country might awaken one day. (Scholars have pointed out that the tone of the last few lines of the translation is milder than that of the original.)

During his sojourn in Karachi – between the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1920 – Nazrul became conscious of the situation in the Middle East and the subjugated condition of its people. Inspired by Pan-Islamist ideals, he wrote "Shat-il-Arab," "Rono Bheri," "Bajiche Damama," "Anwar Pasha," and "Kamal Pasha." "Shat-il-Arab" reflects on the fallen condition of the Muslims of Arabia, which reminds the poet of the situation of the people of India under the British. In "Bajiche Damama" – which is replete with martial images and notes – he calls upon Muslims to hold their heads high and reclaim their lost glory by holding firmly to the Quran and the kalma.

However, in the poem Nazrul wrote in December 1921, the Pan-Islamist ideal is forgotten. Though Nazrul would go on to write moving *hamds* and *naats*, as well as *shyama sangeet* and *kirtan* – devotional Muslim and Hindu songs – he would combine violence and destruction, Hindu mythology with Islamic allusions, in an exceptional way in this poem.

What changed Nazrul? Earlier that year, Nazrul had obliged the editor of a journal by writing "Agamoni," a poem celebrating the victory of Durga over Mahishashur, and ending with the nationalistic cry of "Bande mataram." Not to be confused with "Anandamoyee Agamone," which is also about the coming of Durga, the earlier poem invokes martial images and notes to celebrate the arrival of Durga. Nazrul had also later that year visited Comilla where he renewed his brief acquaintance with Ashalata Sengupta – better known by the name given her on marriage, Pramila. Ashalata was barely fourteen but Nazrul fell in love – an emotion perhaps compounded by the circumstances of the fiasco of his marriage to Nargis a few months earlier.

In late December that year, inspired by a complex of personal and political feelings, Nazrul combined his Muslim heritage with his knowledge of Hindu mythology to write what would be his most iconoclastic poem: "Bidrohi." Muzaffar Ahmed, with whom Nazrul was boarding at the time, narrates how the poem was written during one night. He notes that neither Nazrul nor he had a fountain pen. "His thoughts were flowing too fast for him to keep dipping his pen into the inkpot and write and so he wrote this poem in pencil" (quoted in Rafiqul Islam, *Biography of Kazi Nazrul Islam*). Early next morning, Nazrul read the poem out to Muzaffar Ahmed, who refers

to it as "the finest piece of work in his [Nazrul's] life." Others too who heard the poem recognized its exceptional quality. Early next year "Bidrohi" appeared in *Bijli*, on 22 Poush 1328 [January 5, 1922]. The poem would be reprinted many times, including in the poet's own journal, *Dhumketu*, when it started publication.

While the main theme of Nazrul's poem is about shattering all forms of oppression and discrimination, the poem is also celebratory. It celebrates humanity, creativity, beauty, love, nature. As in Nazrul's poem "Proloyullash," "Bidrohi" too combines images of destruction with images of creation.

I am the rainstorm, the hurricane,  
Smashing all in its path.  
I am dance-crazy rhythm,  
Dancing to my own beats.  
I am the joy of a life of total freedom!

A musical metaphor contrasts the two contradictory aspects of the poet – and the poem: "Momo ek hate banka bansher banshori, aar hate rono turjo" [In one hand I hold the tender bamboo flute, the trumpet of war in the other]. In Indian literature and culture, the flute has always been the symbol of Krishna as the lover of Radha. Nazrul was both the iconoclast and the lover.

Kinetic images of frenzy and destruction juxtapose tender images of young love and the first flushes of passion.

I am the fancy-free maiden's flowing hair, the glow in her eyes,  
The fiery passion in the lotus-heart of a sixteen-year-old girl.

The poem describes stolen kisses, secret glances, and the sound of glass bangles even as it calls for the destruction of oppressive forces.

I am the tremulous excitement of a girl's first stolen kiss;  
I am the quick sidelong glance of a secret lover;

I am a young girl's romance, the tinkle of her glass bangles.

These images of young love seem out of place in the poem until one realizes that the poet who was rebelling against all forms of discrimination was also rebelling against a conventional society which would keep lovers from different religious communities apart. However, love and romance are only a small aspect of this poem which is about rebelling against all that destroys the human soul.

Nazrul was against all forms of religious bigotry and suppression. In

"Samyabadi" and "Ishwar," he spoke of the futility of searching for God in the different holy books of religions. God resides within the human heart, not in temples or the Ka'aba: "Ei hridayer cheye boro kono mandir-kaba nai" ("Samyabadi"). In "Bidrohi," however, he uses violent images to destroy what he sees as the oppressive nature of conventional religion. At the beginning of the poem he speaks of piercing the throne of the Almighty – "khodar ashon arsh chhediya" – and at the end of splitting asunder the Almighty's indifferent breast like the rebel sage Bhrgu: "Ami bidrohi bhrgu, bhagwan buke enke debo pada-chinho!/Ami kheyali bidhir bokkho koribo bhinnno." (Early translators omitted these lines of the poem.)

Towards the end of the poem, the rebel notes his weariness, expresses his desire to rest. But he can only do so when all oppression ends:

I am the great rebel, weary of battle,  
But I will rest only when the anguished cries of the oppressed  
Cease to resonate in air and sky,  
And the oppressors' swords  
cease to ring on the battlefield.  
Only then shall I, a rebel,  
weary of battle,  
Rest in peace.

As long as there is injustice and oppression, the rebel cannot rest. Thus the poem ends with the eternal rebel, holding his head high.

I am the eternal rebel hero –  
Alone, my head ever high,  
Rising far above Earth.

Though the soldier poet seems to have been replaced by the rebel poet, the poem stresses that the soldier and the rebel have become one: "Ami chiro bidrohi bir" [literally, "I am the eternal rebel warrior"].

Today, a hundred years after the poem was written, injustice remains, discrimination remains, religious fundamentalism and bigotry remain, the weak and defenceless continue to be exploited, to be bombed and killed. It is not yet time for the rebel to rest.

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## উন্নত মম শির

Ninety-eight lines of the 139-line poem begin with "ami" – which is also repeated several times within the lines. However, despite the recurrence of the word "ami," the poem doesn't begin with the self. It is addressed to the "bir," the hero, the courageous one, the warrior. However, the speaker is soon forgotten – or rather merges with the "bir" so that the poem becomes the poet's celebration of the self. (Perhaps Abdul Hakim is the only translator to see that the poet is addressing another. Almost all other translators conflate the poet and the "bir.") Like Walt Whitman – with whom Nazrul has been compared by scholars such as Syed Ali Ahsan – the poet celebrates himself but also celebrates every person

Nazrul, who had read much of Rabindranath – and often quoted him in his writings – could not have been unaware of this poem. However, the two poems where Nazrul asks for the head to be held high are both significantly different from each other and from Rabindranath's. Rabindranath's poem is a prayer, Nazrul's a call to arms and action. (Here one might compare Rabindranath's "Esho, esho, esho he baishakh" and Nazrul's "Proloyullash." In the former Rabindranath prays for the Baishakhi storm to wash away all the accumulated rubbish of the past year; in the latter Nazrul welcomes the violence of destruction which is also the turbulence of creation: "The beautiful one comes in the guise of the terrible.")

A translation of Kazi Nazrul Islam's "Duronto Pothik"

## Restless Wanderer

BY JACKIE KABIR

He walked on an inaccessible path filled with thorns. Looking back he saw that a million of unblinking eyes were watching him. Boundless optimism reflected from those eyes and filled the traveler's heart with an intoxicating pride. He asked with a gratified smile, "So tell me, what is the source of the unbound encouragement of your look?"

The thousands of bright onlookers replied, "O fearless wanderer! We got our strength from you, your journey!" Only one voice among the thousand said with brimming compassion, "The young wanderer is likely to lose his life on this inaccessible path!" A million voices roared in response: "Quiet, you coward! This is the true and eternal journey that the human soul must take!"

The wanderer immersed himself in the blessings of the onlookers. The hidden truth inside him resonated like the melody of the veena, as if someone struck its cord with a finger and said, "move forward!"

The greenwood bestowed its youth upon him and said, "Here I put the sacred mark of the coronation of youth on you; you will be forever young and immortal!"

The faraway sky bowed down and kissed his forehead. The horizon where the earth and sky meet guided him towards unrestrained freedom. The leaves on the branches of trees waved and welcomed him. A fiery tune of awakening of souls came from the entrance of the land of freedom, and he ran like a deer following the tune to reach emancipation.

"Oh! Where is your principal gate? Please open up, show me the way, give me light!"

The incantation of the wellbeing of the universe surrounded him and said,

"It's not yet time! You must travel further!"

The wanderer was startled and he said,

"It is you that I want!" the unfamiliar companion replied, "If you want me, you



have to cross that door standing on that elevated piece of land."

The restless wanderer sped up and said, "Yes, that is my target!"

The blue sky peeped through the woods and was astonished to see the wanderer, and the voice of millions of youths resonated with him, "That is our target too. Move, let's move forward. We follow your footsteps."

"You may face death on this path," said the wanderer with the pride of being the torch bearer.

The fiery voices of the youth rang out, "We don't care! This is not the end; this is the beginning!"

The elderly people with broken thoraces walking at the rear were shaking all over

in fear of death. Someone riding over their shoulders mimicked them saying, "Here is death!" A bonfire was lit in order to camouflage their sights. Another was leading these old men towards the bonfire as he tried to refrain from laughing. He pointed his finger, "See! There is your fire to extinguish selfhood and get immersed with divinity. Why would you lose your lives trying to travel on the bumpy path? It is for the restless wanderers, not elderly people. And those youthful ones will perish soon." The elderly people lifted their hands upward and answered, "Yes! Of course!"

Some voices warned them, "you idiots! It's just as well! They will burn you in fire bit by bit."

The herdsman laughed saying, "Don't listen to them! They have a long way to go, the road is dangerous and full of many impediments, pain and sorrow. Your goal lies ahead, right there!"

The restless wanderer followed the tune of flute that came from the liberated land. Now he was faced with the tumultuous tortures of the path. He saw that some footprints were still visible. The path also presented him with some skulls as if telling him, "See! This is what happens to those who tread this path!"

The young traveler said, "Ah! But these are the people who have summoned me! I would welcome this death. My death wouldn't be my end; rather I would be alive

among the young people who are following me along this journey.

Terror inquired, "Who are you?" The wanderer smiled and answered, "I am eternal emancipation, see these skulls! They are not dead but they are alive in me and the many of us. I have come with a new light, new life and this new youth is immortal."

Terror shook with rage and roared, "Don't you know who I am? I am bondage. Whatever you say, my mission is to kill you. I will bind all those who want freedom. You have to die."

The restless wanderer stood his ground and declared, "You can bind me, you can beat me but you can't stop me. I'm deathless. I'll reincarnate."

Terror barred his way and said, "For as long as I'm able I will kill you every time you come. I dare you to kill me or be ready to be killed by me."

The ever-young travelers with luminous bodies who had reached the land of freedom stood at the veranda and welcomed him to join them. The wanderer asked, "Is it worth giving up this life?"

The free souls from the free windows replied in a moist voice, "Yes, it is! People have welcomed this death through ages. You will lead thousands of lives to freedom and there lies your success. Your death will make us ever awake, immortal."

The young traveler then bared his chest and uttered, "Strike me with your sword then!"

All the young travelers picked up the lifeless body of the restless wanderer on their shoulders and cried, "Please return to us!" Somewhere from the distant horizon came voices in concord:

Lands abuzzed with the resonance of the trumpets.

Heroes are welcomed to take seats.

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