

# Kazi Nazrul Islam

Bengal's prophet of tolerance

In November 1922, British colonial authorities issued an arrest warrant for the poet Nazrul Islam, a rising star of Bengali literature, charging him with sedition for his poem *'The Coming of Anandamoyee'*.<sup>1</sup> Published two months earlier in the newspaper *Dhumketu*, of which Nazrul himself was editor, the poem vividly depicts the subjugation of India's population. He called the British colony a 'butchery' where 'God's children' were whipped and hanged. The authorities reacted with vindictiveness and in January 1923 he was sentenced to one year of rigorous imprisonment.

Peter Custers

TODAY, WHEN THE RIGHT to free speech has obtained a super-status in the Western world, Nazrul's story appears rather perplexing. Yet, the story of the court case over Nazrul's poem, and of his year in detention, contains further surprises. Not least, that the poet chose to conduct his own defence, in a statement that has come to be known as the 'Deposition of a Political Prisoner'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than repent for writing inflammatory poems and essays, Nazrul presented himself as the representative of 'Truth', holding the 'sceptre of Justice'. The colonial government used the charge of sedition to try and silence Nazrul, to prevent him from articulating that the Indian people were 'enslaved'. Nazrul, apparently without embarrassment or shyness, proclaimed that his was a message from God. He could not be blamed. God was speaking through the voice of the poet.

Nazrul Islam hailed from a Muslim family. Growing up, his father had been head of a village mosque. Yet, in his court statement, the poet freely used imagery derived from Hinduism in order to highlight his own views. In the poem targeted by the colonial state he specifically called on the Goddess Durga, to play her role in countering tyranny. In his widely published and acclaimed deposition, Nazrul enthusiastically raised the spectre of Shiva, Hinduism's ascetic God of destruction. Clearly from the very beginning of his career, Nazrul was willing to explain and illustrate his views using the religious imagery familiar to the people of Bengal. He consciously and unreservedly drew on the religious traditions of both Muslim and Hindu sections of the population to make himself heard.

The arrest and imprisonment of Nazrul in 1922-1923 reveal some of the most characteristic features of his personality. The speech he made in court illustrates how he uncompromisingly defended a poet's right to free speech. It also shows that his opposition to the injustices perpetrated by the coloniser was religiously inspired. Nazrul's relationship with religion was, to say the least, unconventional. For whereas he had grown up in a Muslim environment and had obtained his initial formal education in a Muslim primary school, he did not by any means restrict himself to using imagery of the religion of his youth in his journalistic and literary creations. Instead, he freely transgressed the borders between Bengal's two main faiths, Hinduism and Islam. In this essay, I will explore the legacy of Bangladesh's national poet and, in particular, his significance for the cause of religious tolerance today.

### National awakening

Nazrul lacked any formal training as a journalist or artist, and appears to have built his artistic experience through his participation in folk musical troupes in his youth. After two years of high school, Nazrul joined the army of the British colonial government. Stationed in Karachi during World War One, as part of the Bengal regiment, he rose to the position of a sergeant, a *havildar*. It is striking that his career as a rebellious writer-poet began as a serving British soldier. From Karachi, Nazrul started submitting poems and short stories to literary and other magazines, published in Bengal. In doing so, he attracted the attention of the editor Muzaffar Ahmed, a key architect of the Leftist movement in Bengal. Ahmed and others published Nazrul's essays because of their moving patriotic and internationalist content.

When Nazrul Islam returned to Kolkata in 1920, he was largely unknown in the city's literary circles. This changed dramatically within the space of a year. Indeed, Nazrul's rise to literary prominence was extraordinarily rapid in comparison with other poets who have gathered fame in the history of Bengal. Undoubtedly his talent explains a large part of his success. In 1920, Nazrul became a performer of Tagore songs, and surprised many people with his capacity to memorise the master's lyrics. He also became a journalist, writing essays on contemporary world events affecting India's fate. Most significantly, he wrote poetry that stood out for its aesthetic, and unmistakably high, quality. So much so, that Tagore was moved to welcome him as a new star in Bengali literature. In the benediction written for the bi-weekly publication launched by Nazrul Islam, Tagore hailed Nazrul with the words: 'Come, O Comet, build a bridge of fire across darkness'.<sup>3</sup>

Nazrul Islam's poetry and other writings reflected the spirit of his time; the spirit of nationalist awakening in colonial India. A time of mass resistance to British colonial dominance. Nazrul Islam expressed this spirit of awakening in his writings in a way that earned him the admiration of a wide readership in Bengal. One particular example illustrates his spirit of anti-colonial nationalism. It is an essay about the events in Jalianwalabad. Jalianwalabad, in Amritsar, is the place where a British officer, General Dyer, ordered indiscriminate firing on an unarmed crowd of civilians in an enclosed space. News of the event enraged many Indians, and it also infuriated Nazrul Islam who expressed indignation at the cruelty perpetrated in the name of British rule. He went further though, and assessed the psychological significance of the massacre for the awakening of the Indian's people sense of self-respect. In his essay entitled *'Memorial to Dyer'*, Nazrul argued that any monument to the Jalianwalabad massacre should not just be dedicated to the people who lost their lives, but such a statue should also recall the role of Dyer. For the murders which Dyer ordered, so Nazrul explained, served to generate consciousness among the Indian people about their own dejected state.<sup>4</sup>

Nazrul Islam was not just aware of the fact that Indian men and women needed to be pushed into standing up for their rights. He was also farsighted and gained credit, in particular amongst Bengalis, for advocating that the struggle against the British should result not just in concessions, but in revolutionary change.

### The 'Muslim Renaissance'

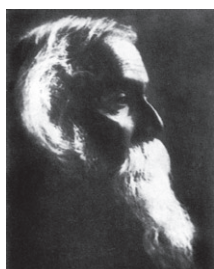
A brief comment needs to be made on the poet's relation to the Muslim cultural *renaissance*. In the period subsequent to India's first war of independence – the soldiers' mutiny and guerrilla war of 1857 – British rulers consistently stigmatised members of the colony's Muslim community. Consequently, Muslims had great difficulties in accessing education and jobs in the colonial administration, exacerbating their sense of inferiority and frustration. Well before Nazrul Islam appeared on the literary scene in Bengal, a movement of 'Muslim renaissance' was born, drawing on the intellectual history of the Muslim world and on the European renaissance, in order to strengthen confidence among the Muslim minority population of British colonial India. Nazrul became a fervent proponent of this struggle for a Muslim 'rebirth'.

Nazrul repeatedly addressed Bengal's Muslim literary society, the *Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Samaj*.<sup>5</sup> He wrote numerous poems on themes derived from the history of the Muslim world, or in styles derived from Persian and other Middle Eastern traditions, as exemplified by his *ghazzals*. Yet the poet's position was far from orthodox. Thus, Nazrul warned against any blind reliance on scriptures, including the Quran, and expressed a scepticism towards all priesthood, including Islam's priesthood of *mullahs*. In his poem *'Manush'* ('Human Being'), he chastises *mullahs* and priests who put loyalty to holy scriptures above human solidarity. Nazrul revolts against the idea that the Quran, or any other holy scriptures, can be put above the lives and rights of humans. He openly condemns those ready to kill humans in the name of any scriptures, recalling the fact that all holy scriptures were brought into existence by human beings themselves.<sup>6</sup>

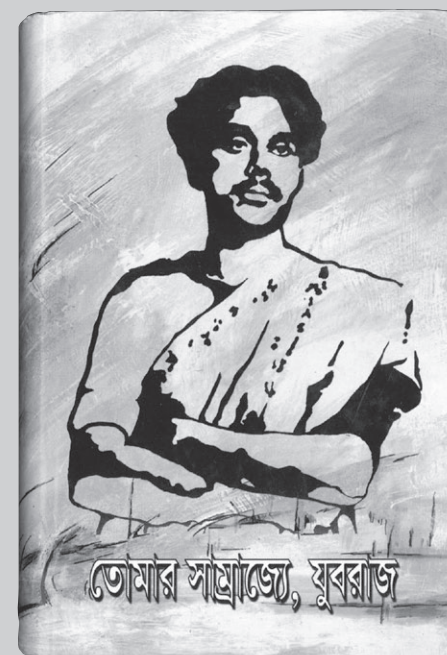
At a time when sections of the Western media and public opinion-builders are depicting Islam as a religion which is inherently intolerant, it is particularly important to stress that Nazrul Islam propagated the very opposite. Against the background of rising intolerance between religious communities in colonial India Nazrul insisted that the prophet Muhammad was a messenger of tolerance.

### Firm opposition to communalism

Nazrul Islam took a determined and principled stance against religious-communal hatred. He truly militated against the growing danger of communal conflagration, and he used all his skills as a journalist and poet to convince both Hindus and Muslims of the folly of religious-based hatred, passionately arguing that he 'entirely believed in the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity'.<sup>7</sup>



Rabindranath Tagore who hailed Nazrul Islam with the words: 'Come, O Comet, build a bridge of fire across darkness'.



By the mid-1920s, the political climate in Bengal had changed dramatically. Outbursts of communal violence were reported not only in Kolkata and other urban centres, but also in remote rural areas. Moreover, it is recorded that religious leaders actively instigated communal hatred amongst members of their own community, which explains Nazrul Islam's strong criticism of the role of priests and other religious functionaries in his poems.

Nazrul's writings reveal how deeply aware he was of the dangers posed by the heightened tensions, and also show the ways in which he tried to fight the trend. In his essay 'Mandir O Masjid', ('Temples and Mosques'), published in the magazine *Gana Bani*, of which Nazrul was chief editor, he directly addressed the theme of communal frenzy:

"...Once again the murky Hindu-Muslim issue has raised its head. First, there are brawls, then they hit each others' head. Yet once those who have got drunk over the 'prestige' of Allah or Ma Kali get bashed, then, as I can see, they do not cry for Allah or Ma Kali. No, Hindus and Muslims together cry and lament in the same language: 'Baba Go, Ma Go' – just as children who have been abandoned by their mother, cry for their mother in one choir. Hearing the weeping of the wounded, the mosque does not waver, nor does the Goddess-in-stone of the temple respond".<sup>8</sup>

Nazrul described the outcome of the riots in earthy terms, using the tragedy of incidents which had already occurred as a mirror, in an effort to pre-empt further violence. He used key opportunities to speak or present his views, to warn political leaders of India's nationalist movement against the dangers if they failed to stem the tide of violence. One of these occasions was the annual session of the Indian National Congress, the common platform of anti-colonial struggle, held in Krishnanagar. Here, Nazrul sang one of the most famous songs he ever composed, 'Kandari Hushiar' ('Helmsman Beware'). He sounded the alarm with the words: 'In this dark night, O sentries of Motherland be alert'; 'this helpless nation is drowning – it does not know how to swim'; 'helmsman, tell those who are drowning that they are no Hindus or Muslims, for they are drowning as human beings'.<sup>9</sup>

These words illustrate Nazrul's deeply felt recognition of the fact that the Indian nation would 'drown', if the Congress – as the political force leading the struggle for independence from colonialism – failed to stem the tide of communalism. When Nazrul wrote these sentences in 1926, the incidents of communal violence were merely local sparks. But these sparks would turn into a communal conflagration. At the time of Partition in 1947 millions of Muslims and Hindus perished. As Nazrul Islam was writing 'Helmsman Beware', those days were still more than 20 years away, yet he seems to have sensed the immensity of the dangers ahead. His poem is a passionate appeal to the Congress, to work more determinedly for the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity, so urgently required in the struggle against British dominance.

**Tolerance and equality**

This poet-writer fervently supported ideals of social and economic justice, ideas just starting to be propagated by socialist activists in Bengal at the time when he rose to prominence. Nazrul consciously combined his advocacy of religious equality, with an advocacy of economic equality. In fact, it is evident from Nazrul's writings and practice, that he strongly believed in the need to oppose the escalation in communal violence by simultaneously advocating two imperatives – communal harmony and united class struggle – waged jointly by labouring Hindus and Muslims. In this respect there is a significant difference between Nazrul Islam's position and that of Mahatma Gandhi, the Congress leader with whom he shared a deep commitment to Hindu-Muslim amity. Contrary to Gandhi, Nazrul did not hesitate to champion class struggle, fighting landlordism or factory exploitation. In fact, the poet is known to have pioneered efforts towards the politicisation of Bengal's peasants and workers, in particular from 1925-1926 onwards.

In his essay 'Dharmaghat' ('Strike'), Nazrul states his commitment to the toiling peasants in words which continue to be voiced by social activists in Bangladesh today:

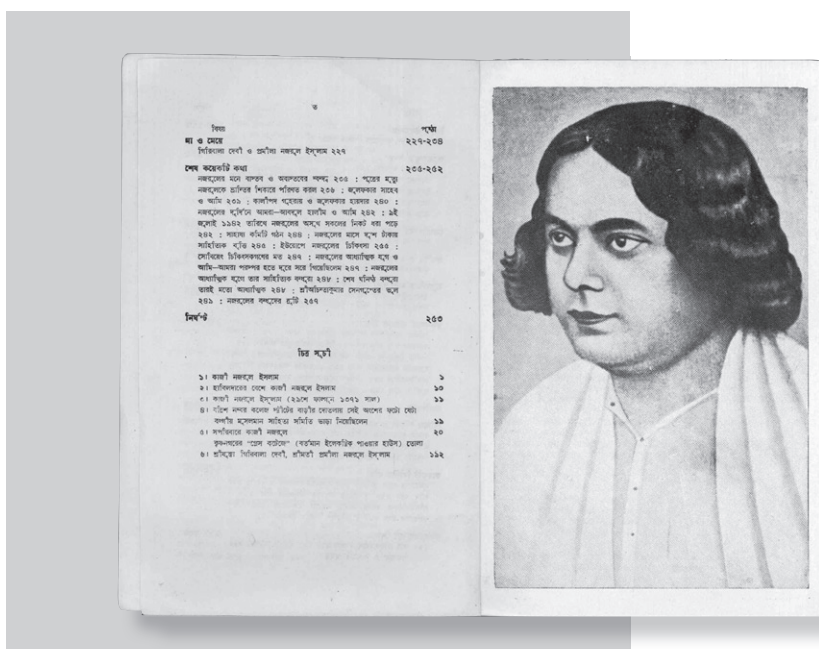
"The peasants who during the whole year undertake back-breaking physical labour, while removing the sweat from their forehead with their arms, cannot even eat two full meals of boiled rice. Accept for a rag reaching down to his knees, he does not even avail of one proper dress (piran) through all his life... But the lord who takes his paddy rice spends twelve months under a royal (nawabi) roof, enjoying one after the other festival".<sup>10</sup>

Alongside his support for peasants' struggles, Nazrul enthusiastically supported the struggles of waged labourers for emancipation. A characteristic poem is 'Kuli-Mazur'. (Coolies and Labourers), in which he combines imagery that is familiar from other poetry on class exploitation with imagery derived from the subcontinent's religio-cultural traditions. He calls the labourers who build steam engines 'dadhichis', a reference to the sage who sacrificed his own bone to allow the God Indra kill a demon. Later on in the same poem, he re-employs the same metaphor, describing the labourers who, with their hammers, crowbars and shovels, crush mountains to make way for roads; yet their 'bones now lie scattered on both sides of the road'.<sup>11</sup> Nazrul expresses his hope and expectation that workers will stage a rising which will make God smile in heaven, and leave 'Satan in fear'.<sup>12</sup> Once again Nazrul does not hesitate to utilise religious imagery as a tool to strengthen workers' confidence and consciousness.

Nazrul's writings effectively reveal his combined commitment to equality between members of different religions, with an equally strong commitment to the struggles of Bengal's labouring population for social and economic equality.

**Mysticism and Syncretism**

It is time to return to the thematic posed in the introduction to this essay. When describing the episode of Nazrul's arrest and imprisonment, I referred to the poet's religious inspiration. Here I will try to establish what his own religious position was, beyond his artistic and political interests. An analysis of the extraordinary speech which Nazrul gave to the Muslim Literary Association (*Muslim Sahitya Shamiti*) in April of 1941 is helpful in this context. The speech, entitled 'If the Flute Does not Play Any More', was to be the very last of Nazrul's life.<sup>13</sup>



In July 1942, while participating in a children's programme on All India Radio, Nazrul suddenly lost the power of speech. His mental capacities reportedly were affected too. Although several attempts were made to arrange for medical treatment, in the hope of him making a full recovery, Nazrul Islam spent the rest of his life, until his death on August 29, 1976, incapacitated. The cause of his collapse, although probably attributable to utter despair over the unstoppable wave of communal politics, officially remains a 'medical mystery'.

Nazrul's speech is a testament to his personal beliefs. In the opening paragraph he elaborately expresses his *mystical* search, his desire for union with a loving absolute reality, or Supreme Being. God is depicted as both beautiful and loving. Nazrul's speech also expresses the poet's *syncretic* orientation. To convey his message, he singles out two deities from the Hindu pantheon, and uses imagery relating to their roles, in order to highlight his own quest and admonish his Muslim audience. Strikingly, they are a God and a Goddess - Krishna, the earthly-loving God of the current of *vaishnavism*, and the Goddess *Anandamoyee* or Durga, whom we encountered in the introduction to this article as an exemplary fighter of demons. Krishna and *Anandamoyee* are juxtaposed repeatedly throughout his testamentary speech.

On the one hand, Nazrul counter-poses the rhythmic dance to the tune of Krishna's flute, to the reality of communal violence around him.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, *Anandamoyee* is projected as a source for his own search. Thus, Nazrul speaks of her 'Power of Love', of her power to take him to a state of meditation, suggesting his own dissolution into her Being: 'If the power of *Anandamoyee* in me does not dissolve me by carrying me into the supreme Void, then I will once again sing the songs of love, of equality...'<sup>15</sup> While leaving open the possibility of a return to worldly matters, Nazrul impresses on his audience his refusal to service Islam, or any other established

religion. '...If I come, I will come only as a servant of the one and only indivisible God, who is above Hindus and Muslims, above all nations and creeds'.<sup>16</sup> In line with a long tradition – to which the 14th century saintly composer of hymns, Kabeer, as well as the 19th century Bengali composer/singer Lalan Shah belong – Nazrul Islam sought to overcome the historic divide between the subcontinent's religions, by taking a *supra-denominational* position.<sup>17</sup>

**The legacy of religious tolerance**

Nazrul Islam's views, reflected in his literary and political writings drafted during his creative period (1919-1942), were well ahead of his times. This counts, in particular, for his vision regarding religious tolerance. It is important to note that Nazrul's championing of religious tolerance in the 1940s did not initially receive a favourable response from politicians in Bengal. The decision to Partition the region in 1947, on the basis of the Hindu-Muslim divide, followed a tragic escalation in tensions instigated by communal politicians. However, it remains significant that the majority of the region's politicians, including those who were to steer East Bengal's subsequent struggles for self-determination, eventually embraced the politics of secularism, defending a strict separation between state and religion, so as to counter communalism. In the 1950s and 60s, Nazrul's poetry and songs enjoyed a lasting popularity, in West Bengal, India, and in East Bengal (East Pakistan).

Furthermore, Nazrul Islam's way of propagating religious tolerance – through the combined emphasis on respect for human equality in the religious and economic spheres - in the period when East Bengal formed a part of Pakistan, was shared by broad sections of the province's politicians and activists. As previously stated, Nazrul Islam was simultaneously vocal against the spread of violence between Bengal's two religious communities, and advocating the need for both Muslim and Hindu peasants and workers to stand up and defend their rights against landlords and industrial bosses. In this respect, Nazrul has been vindicated, for in the course of the 1950s and 60s, and as part and parcel of the struggle for a secular nationalism, powerful movements representing the interests of the rural and urban poor were built in East Bengal. After independence in 1972, the newly-installed government of Mujibur Rahman made Nazrul Bangladesh's first national poet. And while it is true that more recently, severe pressures towards abrogation of the principles of tolerance and secularism have built up in Bangladesh, the principles of religious tolerance and of social equality have been vibrant in the country's society since independence. There are compelling reasons to take Nazrul Islam's example seriously in contemporary international debates on religious tolerance.

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This is an abridged version of the essay 'Kazi Nazrul Islam. Bengal's Prophet of Tolerance'. The full essay can be read online at [www.iias.nl](http://www.iias.nl).

**Notes**

- 1. For the full text of the poem see Ahmed, Muzaffar. 1981. *Kazi Nazrul Islam. Smritikotha* Kolkata: National Book Agency. For a short excerpt in English: Kamal, Sajed. (transl.) 1999. *Kazi Nazrul Islam. Selected Works*. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute.
- 2. For further details on the court case and on Nazrul Islam's conviction: Ahmed, Muzaffar. (1981). For an English translation of the 'Deposition of a Political Prisoner', see Sajed Kamal (1999)
- 3. For an English translation of Tagore's tribute to Nazrul, see Sajed Kamal (1999)
- 4. From Hossain, Monowara. 'Nazruler Rajnoitk, Artha-Shamajik O Sanskritik Prabandha'in: Rafiqul Islam, Shampadana Parishad. 2000. *Nazrul Janmashotoborsho Smarakgrantha*. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute.
- 5. For an overview of Nazrul's participation in Muslim organisations' events, see the life-chronology appendix in Sajed Kamal (1999)
- 6. For English translations of *Manush*: see Sajed Kamal (1999) and Rafiqul Islam (1990).
- 7. Mustafa Nurul Islam, 1999. *Samakale Nazrul Islam*. 1920-1950. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute
- 8. See Hossain, Monowara (2000); also Mahmood, Majid. 1997. *Nazrul. Tertiary Biswer Mukhopatra*. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute
- 9. For an English version of the poem see Sajed Kamal (1999)
- 10. Monowara Hossain (2000)
- 11-16. *ibid*
- 17. on Kabeer's supra-denominational mystical position, see e.g. Hedayetullah, Muhammed. 1977. *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers; on the legacy of Lalan Shah, see Chakraborti, Sudhir. 1998. *Bratya. Lokayat. Lalan*. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani.