

NAZRUL ISLAM: EMERGENCE OF A SECULAR CULTURE IN BENGAL

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Abstract

The rebel poet Nazrul Islam appeared in the twentieth century Bengali literary- cultural arena as a harbinger of secular aesthetics. As a strong upholder of mixed cultural poetics Nazrul always raised his voice against the parochial and exclusivist worldview that contemporary literary- cultural space of Bengal was submerged in. His idea of secularism was based on the principle of mutual respect and peaceful cohabitation of people belonging to different religious and cultural beliefs. He strived to liberate the socio-literary space of Bengal of the religious dogmatism, communalism through writing numerous poems, songs and essays reflecting his secular and inclusivist philosophy and poetics.

Keywords: Secularism, Transculturalism, Humanism, Universalism, Inclusivism.

When Nazrul Islam appears in the literary scene of Bengal, Bengal, though geographically undivided, was strictly compartmentalized socio-religiously, thereby culturally too, i.e., in the space of language and literature and other cultural production. The inter-communal conflict dormant so long, was awakened and intensified by the colonial instigation despite the ardent effort of harmonization on the part of the secular figures like Gandhi, Tagore etc. Under such prevailing circumstances when even Bengali language was divided into Islamised Bangla (laden with Arabic Persian words) and Hinduised Bangla (laden with Sanskritized words) Nazrul had a utopic vision of secularizing the whole cultural arena of Bengal. In this paper I will try to see how Nazrul Islam transcends the barrier of religion and community through his writings as an intercultural icon and also as a literary activist in the true sense of the terms, who not only dared to threaten the colonial policy by providing an alternative mode of resistance by way of producing one after another anti- colonial anti -imperial literary works but also shook up the strong pillar of traditional orthodoxy regarding the religious and communal sentiments, by voicing against all kinds of oppression that curtails freedom of mind and soul and defames humanity.

Nazrul came of a Bengali Muslim family in 1899. In his early life he received religious education from a local mosque and at the age of ten he started teaching there as a muezzin (a person appointed to perform the daily prayer along with other activities in a mosque) in order to support his family financially. Around this time he came in contact with the 'Ieto' (a travelling theatrical group) group and started working with them. For Nazrul, these two events played a very significant role to build the foundation of a secular consciousness that would flourish in future. While studying and working in the mosque he came to be familiar with the Islamic cultural tradition along with the knowledge of Arabic-Persian-Urdu vocabulary and later being with the "Ieto" group he came in contact with the Sanskrit literature and Hindu scriptures like Puranas and here he composed folk plays like 'Data karna' (the Philanthropic Karna), 'Meghnad badh' (the killing of Meghnad), 'Shakuni badh' (the killing of Shakuni), 'Kobi Kalidash' (the poet Kalidasha), 'Akbar Badsha' (Akbar the emperor) and many more.

When Nazrul started his poetic career during the 1920s he discovered a lack of mutuality in the two communities, Hindu and Muslim, both of which formed the majority of the populace in Bengal. The antipathy working on the socio-political level gets reflected in the cultural space, i.e., in the linguistic and literary divisions as well. Nurul Kabir has rightly pointed out,

... along with the political economic and religious reasons the Language, Bangla language, its different varieties spoken and written in the east and west Bengals..., the different contents of literary works produced by the Hindu authors and Muslim litterateurs of Bengal substantially contributed to the political partition of the Bangla speaking region on communal lines. (Kabir, "Colonialism")

There was a kind of cultural hegemony and linguistic communalism that the Kolkata based elites used to hold over the whole of Bengal ignoring the linguistic and cultural diversity and difference prevailing there. In this situation when division in the socio-cultural sphere easily anticipated the political bifurcation Nazrul spoke of unity. He strongly criticized both the Hindus and Muslim communalists who utilized this sectarian politics to fulfill their own narrow ends. Pointing out to the communal clashes he wrote:

The two groups have the same leader- Satan. Wearing a cap on the head and false beard on the cheek he sometimes provokes Muslims and sometimes tying a false tiki with hairs on head, provokes Hindus. (Nazrul, "Mandir o Masjid" 432)

Nazrul was against all kinds of dogma and believes in the emancipation of mind. He believed that Hindu-Muslim-Christian have a single source, i.e. God. God does not belong to

any particular community but to all, 'like the light that belongs to all and everybody'. Getting into the root of these communal problems he discovered:

Krishna's admirers claim that Krishna belongs to Hindus, Muhammad's admirers claim that Muhammad belongs to Muslims and Christ's admirers claim that Jesus belongs to Christians. Thus Krishna, Muhammad, and Christ got nationalized, which created all sorts of Problems. (Nazrul, Hindu-Mussalman 437)

The solution that Nazrul found out to this problem of cultural and religious exclusivity and separatism was a strong belief in humanism. He said "Let a Hindu remain a Hindu, a Muslim Muslim, but say for once, standing in the midst of the unlimited freedom under the open sky that 'I am a Human being, Humanity is my Religion'" ("Chuntmarga" 393). Nazrul was a humanist. His idea of secularism was based on his deep respect for humanity.

Nazrul's secularism is inclusive, based on a firm conviction in the religious pluralism and mutual tolerance which is very much rooted into the secular tradition of India or to be more precise, of Bengal. If we look into the cultural history of Bengal we observe that secularism forms an important/ integral part of Bengal's cultural heritage. In the earliest extant specimen of Bengali literature, Charyapada (a collection of songs composed by Buddhist monks), one can observe an overpowering spirit of humanism along with the denial of religious rituals ; and also in the preaching of the Sufi Saints who shook off the rigidity of Islam and practiced liberal humanism. In the fifteenth –sixteenth century- Bengal, the Vaishnavas with Chaitanya dev as the founder figure, preached human compassion ignoring the barrier of caste-creed-religion which got reflected in the writings of many Vaishnava poets. Chandidas, a medieval Vaishnava poet of Bengal wrote:

Listen O brother man,
Man is above everything.
There is no greatest truth than Him

(trans. Shahriar Kabir)

Almost hundred and fifty years ago a folk singer Lalan Fakir sang;
Oh, when will such a human society be created
Where no racial distinction will exist between
Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians.(trans. S. Kabir)

Nazrul's idea of secularism was not only grounded in this tradition but in a way was a successful extension of it, although he attributed his own uniqueness to enrich it.

Before Nazrul, Bengali literature was dominated by the figures like Madhusudan Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore in poetry, and Bankim Ch. Chattopadhyay, Sharat Ch. Chattopadhyay in prose , all of whom were responsible for ushering in Bengal's literary and cultural

Modernity. This mainstream modernity was more or less imitative in nature since all the writers except Tagore would imitate the form of Western writers though the subject matter remained intimately related to Bengali culture and tradition. But Nazrul was not happy with it. As Haider A. Khan says, “[Nazrul] could hardly fit into the stereotype of literary and cultural modernity created by the so-called Bengali renaissance”(Khan, Nazrul’s Poetics). Nazrul did not want to work within a ‘received form’; thus, he innovated that his own. Nazrul’s poetics saw a natural use of both the Sanskritized words, (native)Bengali words, Arabic, Persian, Urdu words and sometimes English words too. Here I quote some lines from his poem “Kamal Pasha”, which he wrote at the victory of Mostafa Kamal in establishing a secular state in Turkistan and in reproach to the Khilafat movement that he derided as an expression of religious fundamentalism:

Well done, brother, well done!
 The coward foes are completely done!
 Well done, brother, well done!
 Hurrah Ho!
 Hurrah Ho!

To sail over the invading aggressor |
 We need, indeed, a dashing Kemal; a terror.
 Kemal, what a wonder you've worked!
 Ho Ho Kemal, what a wonder you've worked!

[Havilder-Major says Bravo to soldiers. Left! Right! Left!]

[Translation: Mohammad Nurul Huda]

In the original Bengali poemⁱ, we can note his juxtaposition of Bengali words like Damal, shamal; Sanskritized words- ashurpure, Ran(war), kshinojibi; Urdu words like kamal, shor, bujdil, duniya; Persian words like sabbas, dushman, khun; English words like Brother, quick march etc. In many of his poems like Bidrohi(the Rebel), Fariad (An Appeal), he used the same mixed cultural poetics, since he never believed in the myth of purity be it racial, linguistic or cultural. Attacked by the contemporaries for not keeping with the linguistic code of the time he said in self defense in “Boror Piriti Balir Baadh”(Love of the Great is like Sand-bank), “I am not the first to use Arabic or Persian words in poetry. Long before me Bharatchandra, Rabindranath, Shatyandranath have done the same.” Moreover he felt that the use of the Arabic, Persian words enrich Bengali literary tradition by adding more grace and beauty to it.

Because of his secular worldview reflected both in his public life (in his literary practices) and personal lifeⁱⁱ too, Nazrul was nearly ostracized from the society as people of neither community welcomed him as their own and sometimes completely misunderstood him. In

‘Amar Kaifiyat’(My Explanation) which he wrote in reply to the bitter criticisms run against him in several hindu –run and muslim-run weekly and periodicals such as Muslim Darshan, Shaniberer Chiti etc for his secular outlook, he expressed this conflict of his life:

Sacrificing everything I got married: Hindus say ‘get lost’.
Am I Muslim or a heathen? Where is my pigtail or beard, or the hem of loin-cloth? (My Explanation)

This poem is also an answer to those people who restrict the spontaneity of a poet by trying to categorize him/her. This poem is a celebration of defiance. For Nazrul , a poet is the bearer of universal truth. He defies all religious, communal, political, even gender categorization. A poet can fit into everything and nothing. That is what Nazrul says here:

The revolutionaries say: This one is non-violent,
My songs deal with spinning wheels: they resent.
Top Brahmins find me atheist, lesser ones regard me as one of the Confucians;
Independence lovers don't accept me; their opponents prefer me to be with those Europeans!
(ibid)

In a letter written to Anwar Hossain he said, “The Muslim society has always made mistakes (about me), for they have confused between my poetic works and myself-Nazrul Islam the person that is. I am Muslim but my poetic work is dedicated to all countries, all times and all religions” (179). Nazrul differentiated between the Man Nazrul and the Poet Nazrul. Though the man can never deny the part of his identity, he is born into, but the creative self is beyond this; it is a-historical and universal.

Nazrul was speaking from and for the margins. Naturally he was regarded a threat to the dominant cultural ideology of the time where people were having a parochial view regarding religion and community “...the belief in a basic contradiction between Bengali and Muslim identities appears to have been accepted by all Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, and even the British. The fact that Bengali Muslims were identified as Muslims rather than as Bengalis in the first quarter of the twentieth century, emphasized the religious at the cost of the cultural basis of identity”(Mursid 87). Nazrul was well aware of this contradiction and false prejudices of the society. He also knows that he needs to provide a great blow in its root in order make the society free of its delusions and dogmas. In Bidrohi (the Rebel) he says:

I am the cruel axe of Parsurama,
I shall kill warriors
And bring peace and harmony in the universe!

I am the plough on the shoulders of Balarama,
I shall uproot this miserable earth effortlessly and with ease,
And create a new universe of joy and peace.(trans. Kabir Chowdhury)

Nazrul dreamt of an apocalypse—the destruction of the old dogmatic world and the creation of a new secular peaceful universe without borders, margins, categories. In his poem , “The Songs of Equality” (Samyabadi) he wishes to have a universe where there will be no division between a Hindu, Muslim or Christian; all will be treated equally.

Nazrul’s syncretism is reflected not only in his poetry but in his songs too. Among his more than four thousand songs he composed several hundred Kirtans (devotional songs for lord Krishna), Shyama Sangeet (devotional songs for the goddess Kali), Islami Sangeet (Islamic devotional songs), Bhajans, Ghazals etc where he drew on from both the Hindu and Islamic philosophy, myths and folk culture. He wrote songs on the life of the prophet Mohammad, and also on the theme of the love of Radha-Krishna. He was the first Bengali composer of Ghazals which had been mainly composed in Urdu and Persian. He experimented with both the form and content of his songs as he did with that of his poetry.

For the literary critics like Asit kr. Bandyopadhyay, Nazrul was a poet of time. Being meant and written for the people of a particular time and place his poetry lacks that universal appeal which makes a work sustain for ages ;thus it fails to achieve an a-chronic status. And it is not that Nazrul was not aware of it. He evaluated his poetic self as , “I am a poet of today, not a prophet of the future ,”(“My Explanation”). He realizes the need of the time. And as a visionary he could fully understand that the present problem can jeopardize the future of mankind if it is not fought out. And the only way to uproot this evil of communal conflict is through bringing in a secular culture – an idea which was later found to be concretized in the constitutions of both independent India and Bangladeshⁱⁱⁱ where the secularization of the socio-political sphere is emphasized to the most. In this very aspect his poetry is still so relevant even after the sixty seven years of Independence when our society is still suffering from caste prejudices, religious fundamentalism and communal orthodoxy.

‘খুব কিয়া ভাই খুব কিয়া!
বুজদিল ঐ দুশমন সব বিলকুল সাফ হো গিয়া!
খুব কিয়া ভাই খুব কিয়া,
হররো হো!
হররো হো!
দস্যুগুলায় সামলাতে যে এমনি দামাল কামাল চাই!

কামাল! তু নে কামাল কিয়া ভাই!

হো হো কামাল! তু নে কামাল কিয়া ভাই (হাবিলদার মেজর:- সাবাস্ সিপাই! লেফট! রাইট! লেফট!)

ⁱⁱ He married a Hindu Brahmo woman, Pramila Devi, named their children in both hindu and muslim names like Krishna Mohammad, Arindam Khaled(bulbul), Kazi Sabyasachi and Kazi Aniruddha, maintains a secular atmosphere at home.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nazrul is the National poet of independent Bangladesh.

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