

Special Lecture

Of Equality I Sing

Dr. Ipshita Chanda



‘গাহি আশ্রয় গান’

**Nazrul Centre for Social and
Cultural Studies**

**Kazi Nazrul University
Asansol, Paschim Bardhaman**

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Plurality of Religion and Culture in the
context of Kazi Nazrul Islam

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Of Equality I Sing

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*None is greater than man, nor more glorious
Separation by nation, faith, time and place is spurious
In every place, time, in every home, He dwells as man's kin.¹*

We mark here the malevolent aspects of difference, which exist to separate; the poet advocates rising above these divisive differences towards the equality of all humankind. Can this be the principle of nation-formation? We raise this question in the delicate time of militant nationalism, which is militant not against the coloniser who comes from outside, but against our neighbour who is “different” from us and therefore, must be separate(d). What then is the future of the idea that we must rise above differences to become one human race? As contemporary history seems to indicate, this conviction can become an instrument in the hands of those who wish to impose a uniformity in the name of unity, to erase difference. The ideal of humanity may be reduced to a rhetorical one, but to erase difference as a condition of our lives is to deny the existence of both reality and humanity. Thus, whether we speak as Indians or whether we think of ourselves as human beings unmarked by the contamination of militant nationalism, we must address the question of difference which is part of our conscious lived world. The physical erasure of difference is a fantasy to be achieved only by extreme violence. We ask not for exclusivity or separation engineered by difference, but taking cognisance of its ordinary, undeniable place in our lives : how to live with difference and yet be one nation, one people : how to achieve the great union among varied differences without violently erasing any?

We attempt to address this question by embarking upon an exploration of the implications of plurality which characterises the very essence of India – an essence whose unwritten history should now claim its space as the only viable alternative for the survival of what has been called an idea : the idea of India.

The milieu in which Nazrul lived and wrote, in the gathering struggle for freedom from colonial rule, was pregnant with possibilities. The harshness of the colonial rule and its inherent racism brought home the idea of freedom as a future time when these discriminations would give way to the equality of human beings who inhabited the nation, a space wherein this freedom would be protected by law. In an evocatively titled essay, ‘Firing (at) the Black man’², Nazrul writes.

When you fire at a dog, there is still some semblance of fear, what if the dog suddenly turns around and sinks his teeth into us? But when it comes to firing at us black men, our white lords have no such hesitation. Because they know that we are lower than animals. Once, a whiteman’s bullet killed one of our kind. The Saheb asked who was killed; someone informed him, A rural poor man, hujoor. The Saheb set his legs wide apart and said without a hint of discomposure, Oh I had thought it was a human being. Which means that this poor rural man was not even a human being in the Saheb’s cat-eyes. I do not know if any greater hatred for human beings can be shown anywhere else.

The title of this essay must be remarked upon, even if it is a digression at this point, for it is an indicator of both Nazrul’s thinking and his expressive resources, his language and idiom, rooted in more than one tradition and language-culture, which lays the natural basis for plurality in a society that is striving to unite by orchestrating its differences. The phrase “guli maaro”, which has been here translated as “firing (at)”, is a sign of crass rejection in colloquial Bangla. It’s flippant irreverence of course does not conceal the violence towards difference – the blackman is not only not worthy of the respect due to a human being, he is as good as an object or worse still, a dangerous or pesky animal – to be shot. This reveals the attitude which the lowest rungs of a stratified society must endure, indicating that stratification is based not upon any essential difference but upon

physical dissimilarities arranged in imaginary hierarchies, essentialised and enforced as divine decree.

During the struggle against the colonisers, charged with the responsibility of thinking of a future for a nation that stood against such discriminations, contemporary intellectuals and patriots realised all too painfully, that the aspiring ‘national’ society of India was indeed built on the unsung ideal of pluralism. Thus began the struggle that is required for democratic humanitarian values to remain functional and viable in a society stratified along the lines of caste, class, religion and gender. Not all societies are required to maintain the plurality of their ethos and simultaneously strive to forge an unity that can be called “nation” : they may partition themselves according to any one aspect of difference that divided them from their neighbours – whether religion, language or ethnicity. But in the spirit of the times, and in Nazrul’s thinking, the nation was a goal to be aspired for, driven by an idea that must be actively realised in daily living, against the pre-given ideal of a traditional and ancient community that was founded on a hierarchy of difference. Since this was a common idea shared by people from vastly different religions, languages and cultures, a relational unity within a heterogenous whole best describes what they were aspiring for, the idea of India as it has existed until now. This idea is based on the confluence of many traditional communities distinctly different from one another, which were in contact with one another for the purpose of survival. Each also attempts to preserves its own uniqueness in relation to an other, conforming to a social hierarchy which powerful groups proclaim to be backed by divine sanction. This is the “traditional” society within and against which nationalists struggled to achieve what Gandhi would call a swaraj³ in ideas. The Indian constitution was one way of addressing the inexorable existence of difference. As Uday Mehta⁴ says, the Indian constitution tried to do what appeared contradictory –

Here was a document which granted universal adult franchise in a country that was overwhelmingly illiterate; where, moreover, the conditionality of acquiring citizenship made no reference to race, caste, religion, or creed...which committed the state to being

secular in a land that was by any reckoning deeply religious; which evacuated as a matter of law every form of prescribed social hierarchy under extant conditions marked by a dense plethora of entrenched hierarchies; that granted a raft of fundamental individual rights in the face of a virtually total absence of such rights... [and] most importantly, the Constitution created a federal democracy with all the juridical and political instruments of individual, federal, local, and provisional self-governance, where the nearest experience had been of imperial and princely authority.

These contradictions of traditional society, exacerbated by the hierarchies of colonial capital and intensified by the centrist colonial state, were answered by the ideal of humanism, backed by the history of cultural movements that questioned the hierarchies set up by religion, which prevented the devotee from reaching God. This residual idea was the source which legitimised equality and made it an idea to strive for in a stratified society where stratification was claimed to be divinely ordained. In Nazrul's romantic revolutionary vision, plurality and equality were necessarily complementary, seen in the context of the universal religion of humanity. Man is kin to man because in all men, despite their differences, dwells God – he is the bond that binds humanity. God is the creator of all men and the arbiter of their destiny – this ties the human being in a bond of brotherhood(sic) with other humans despite the difference between them. These views are common to many religious philosophers, especially those of the Sant and Sufi movements which, in the period before industrial and colonial modernity, brought to caste divided Indian society the breath of freedom through equality in the eyes of God, the precious equality of worship. Saints and poets, whether they were Sufis or belonged to the tradition of Sants who were famous for their loksangraha, or work of social upliftment, preached the oneness of God whatever name the devotee calls him by. The echo of this belief is heard in Nazrul's encounter with a group of Hindus in a train; seeing his headgear and his attire, they immediately tried to physically distance themselves from him as his appearance was identifiably Muslim. The poet and his companions knew clearly that they were unwanted in this milieu; but

There was a panditji sitting in one corner of that very same bench, who had been reading aloud to the others from the Veda or some such scripture. Seeing us and our embarrassment, he smiled and rose, and taking our hands, seated us beside him. The others (who had shown distaste for allowing the poet and his companions to sit with them) by then were wide-eyed at this occurrence. And we too were now comfortable enough to ask how he, being a Brahman who adorned the highest caste and a devout ritualist, could embrace us so easily, while these gentlemen leapt a hundred feet away as soon as they saw us. He said with a smile, look my son, it is because I know the Hindu religion to be true and because I love it, I have learnt to love all the religions of the world. Because I have faith in my own religion, so I can trust all people and believe in the greatness of all religions and have the strength to embrace all with all my heart. Those who think of other people, other religions as lowly, those who hate them, are themselves mean and lowly within, they do not truly follow any religion.⁵

It seems that the poet identifies religion as the primary marker of difference, and the divisive effects it has on Indian society only exacerbate the divisive forces created by both caste and class. That paradox is not lost on the poet, who juxtaposes the fragmentary social manifestation of religion against the spiritual unifying force that some religious discourses, especially that of the Bhakt, Sant and Sufi poets, presented it as. The symbols of religion, the material manifestation in ritualism, draw his scorn:

We can tolerate both Hindu-ness and Muslim-ness, but not their beard-ness or their tuft-ness, for those are the sources of conflict. A tuft of hair is not Hinduism, perhaps it is Brahmanism of the Pandit. Similarly, the beard is not Islam, it is Mullahism. Both these isms marked with the hair on the head or the face are leading to hair-splitting conflict. The battle that is raging today is the battle between the Pandit and the Mullah, not between Hinduism and Islam. The mace of Narayan and the sword of Allah will never clash, for they are both one, the weapon held in one divine hand will not join battle with the weapon held in the other. He is

the name of all, all names meld in Him. In the midst of this conflict the only ray of hope is that Allah also known as Narayan is neither Hindu nor Muslim, he sports neither a beard nor a tuft.⁶

Nazrul was a dedicated iconoclast in the time he lived and worked for the short span of lucidity and intense activity he contributed to the life of the Indian nation, to Indian language literature and the ethos of Indianness, the values of humanity and the equality of humans in the eyes of law and god himself. The division and stratification of humans is not endorsed by anyone who thinks of India as a unity, achieved through establishing a living relation between differences, through a negotiation of difference in actual concrete circumstances.

Swami Vivekananda says that the downfall of India started not on the day that the Muslims arrived, but the day the word *mlechcha* came into our vocabulary. The religion that teaches us to look down upon and demean another human being is not a religion, whatever else it may be – I challenge anyone to prove the contrary. This is the same religion that teaches that *nar* (man) is *Narayan* (god). What a lovely, generous view of man ! How easily is man made worthy of worship through it ! But in this same society which follows this religion, a human is treated worse than a dog by the disgusting system of untouchability.⁷

Religion creates such concrete circumstances, as it is identified as the source of and justification for caste oppression, whose most inhuman aspect is the treatment of humans as polluting and therefore untouchable, a custom practised with overtly or subtly cruel refinements across the country. The essay from which these words are taken is entitled *Chutmarga*, a word untranslatable in languages which do not suffer from the blind rigid belief in discrimination by touch. In the essay which deals with the phenomenon of pollution by touch, he amalgamates the division by religion and caste, saying that the majority community, i.e. the Hindus, find the touch of a Muslim as well as that of a lower caste person, equally offensive, thereby dismissing both from the respect due to fellow human beings –

It is our deepest conviction that the biggest obstruction in the path of unity between Hindus and Muslims is the disgusting custom

of touch pollution. Even if we do not have any great knowledge about religion itself, we can say emphatically that this cannot be a part of any religion. For no religion can be so narrow, parochial and limited. Religion is based upon truth and the truth remains always, for all the world, the same.

The beliefs and rituals which claim religious sanction are unmasked as hypocrisy and a hankering for power. Hence in a plural society aspiring to be democratic, where Hindu and Muslim live together and each have, notionally, one vote, both the “unity” and the “uniqueness” of these different communities become political issues. Nazrul’s commitment to diversity as well as the active forging of a unity between differences that are not hierarchised, thereby stratifying society, speak of the plurality of his ethos. He sees the differences as each equal with the other, which is a characteristic of a plural society.

Let the Hindu remain Hindu, let the Muslim remain Muslim – just for once stand under the boundless freedom of the infinite expanse of the heavens, O human being, let the primal sound of creation resound in your voice, let us hear you say, My dharma is the Human Being. You will see all around you, the ten directions quake with the spontaneous appeal of the responding sovereign echo of those words.⁸

Politics however, uses diversity as a means of division, to increase the power of the powerful. Referring to the concern about Hindu-Muslim unity Nazrul says :

Once I saw in a comic strip, a doctor held his stethoscope at the base of the patient’s tiki (the tuft of hair that a shaven headed high caste Brahman has) trying with great gravity to diagnose the ailment. Our political masters and leaders and the decision makers who decide our fates also have a similar kind of mistaken, misguided treatment for what they see as the disease that keeps Hindus and Muslims alienated from each other. The true pulse, where you can hear the actual heartbeat of a human being, should be where that stethoscope is placed, instead of at the base of a caste-marker which will yield as little direction for Hindu-Muslim unity as it will help to find out what the real nature of the disease is:

that is both comic and unsuccessful. There is the difference of heaven and hell between true unity and selfish union.⁹

Thus dismissing the politics of division and all cosmetic attempts to heal the breach, Nazrul proposes the relational, experiential path towards true union, acknowledging the plurality of the society in which he lives and the equal participation of all that forges a unity preserving that plurality

In this context, religion takes an important role in conceptualising difference : in the eyes of God, there are no differences, and it is no different in the state of democracy, where every individual is equally important because he carries the power of a voting citizen who elects his own government. The argument of God's equalising gaze is however severely compromised by the state as a dispenser of power – it distributes the goods of equality in an unequal fashion, prompted by the powerful who wish to maintain their position without losing the support of whom they oppress. On the other hand, the difference of faith does not lead to secularisation from the spurning of faith itself – rather, keep your faith, but take the pledge of the higher faith which is based on essential similarity, not man-made difference. However, uniqueness and singularity form an integral part of the similarity of human beings and of their universal human essence : difference is a testimony to the artistry of creation which we attribute to the creator, the very attribute that calls forth our worship. So Nazrul does not round off his reflection with this call to unity in the service of an abstract ideal : he advocates this unity as an active, concrete solidarity against exploitation, whether social or economic, that must benefit those who are deprived. And like the universality of humanity as a religious ideal that unifies, pain and deprivation afflict human beings despite difference – both joy and suffering exist despite difference. It is from the common human experience of suffering, both material and spiritual, that he identifies poverty as outflanking the divisiveness of religious difference

In one place I saw, forty nine civilised and uncivilised Hindus were gathered together to beat a single thin, povert-stricken Muslim, in another place I saw Muslims of a similar number beating a weak

helpless Hindu with bestial force. In both cases, weak, helpless humans were being brutally beaten by animals. They are beating human beings like wild dangerous boars are attacked and prodded to death. Looking at the faces of these attackers, I saw that their faces were more grotesque than the devil's, more terrible than that of wild boars. Despicable cruelty has made their bodies reek with the rank odour of hell.¹⁰

The duplicity of religious fundamentalism goes against religion itself. In the milieu in which Nazrul was writing, one of the aims of the movement towards a nation was to balance these differences, as the hatred between religious communities was already taking a heavy toll on a society in which differences were many and intertwined. He and his contemporaries realised that the exacerbation of religious differences would lead to a mutual bloodbath, a threatening possibility always which sometimes turned into a devastating reality. Here too the humanist poet's gaze found the true source of the division :

Both these parties had a single leader, and his name was Sahitaan, the devil. Sometimes he changed his appearance and donned a skullcap, and incited the Muslims, sometimes he ties his hair in a tuft and incites the Hindus.

In this human conflict, God is conspicuous by his absence.

I saw that Allah did not appear to protect his masjid, nor did the Goddess Kali come to save her temple. The temple tower crumbled, the dome of the mosque was broken. As people are possessed by evil spirits, so these men are possessed by temples and mosques. Much plight is in their fate.¹¹

This dangerous false consciousness distracts and obfuscates the truth of the human condition.

The ten lakh people who die in Bengal every year are neither Hindu nor Muslim, they are human, God's beloved creations. These places of worship are created for human welfare, men are not created for the enrichment of these places. If today due to our religious addiction they become the sources of human misery and suffering, that which should have been the bridge between earth and heaven

should be destroyed at once. Let all men come and stand beneath the shelter of a single sky, in the courtyard of the temple of the world brilliant with the light of a single sun-moon and stars.

The primacy of the human being lies in the fact that he is the one source of all unities and all dissensions – he must direct himself to the truth not with the help of man made divisions, but respect the uniqueness of every soul as well as the relation between these differences which manifest our common humanity despite and because of them :

Man himself has made these temples and mosques softening the earth with the pressure of his feet. So just because two bricks from these temples or mosques have been displaced, does it mean that two hundred human heads have to be displaced as well ?... If the debt of two bricks have to be repaid by the deaths of two hundred men, then what about the ten lakh people who are removed from this massive body-temple of the Bengali people by the machinations of the exploitation-demon – how many heads will be required to repay that huge debt ?¹²

This is his answer to the politicisation of religion, which he sees as rampant in his milieu, whether through the communal fury fuelled by the Hindu right or the do-or-die enthusiasm of a section of Muslims for the two nation theory. Religion has relinquished its role of a means of rising above differences to reach the divine – rather the divine seems to have literally descended to the realms of the sub-human in the hatred it fosters between humans. So the poet turns to the chant of socialism, and sings the Song of Equality¹³ :

Our times are those of human pain, of equality unbound
None shall be in chains, proclaims the trumpet's sound
Should men enslave women and bind them to the home
The same shackles will bind them in the days to come
The law of the time is thus
Inflicted pain will return, your own life to curse.
Take heed oh men on earth
The more you torture other beings the lower is your worth

But how is this “samya”, equality to be achieved in a society so diverse where the slightest incitement to hatred can arouse the flames of death ? According to Nazrul, by rising above the divisions towards a common objective – not a divine but an earthly goal, the goal of survival in a milieu bedevilled by stratification in society, supported by religion and ably assisted by capital for its own ends. It is against the neglected masses who have been left out of the bourgeois ideal of freedom that he places those who have benefitted from colonisation. In an essay entitled ‘The Inauguration of Neglected Power’¹⁴, he speaks of those who have been denied the right to humanity by the inhuman customs that have perverted diversity and killed the spirit :

Despite their pure hearts and simple, liberated minds the lowly folk are unable to do anything with their lives because of the oppression of the bhadralok, the gentlefolk. From the time he is born, he feels himself diminished and nothing more than the object of disgust, neglect, which is all that he has got from society, causing a natural hesitation to claim his humanity by becoming a very part of his demeanour – he forgets that he is also a human like us, a creation of Allah. If anyone dares to stand up against this torture, the bourgeois society immediately fells him with a blow and renders him unconscious.

Here Nazrul issues a call to the youth, the breakers of tradition, who will project their powers onto the future, enunciating for them the mantra of nationalism in the name of service to humanity, rather than to a single religion or culture.

Open your heart to this neglected mass of humanity and you will see, the pleasure of the slightest touch of affection will open up in them the most intense desire for sacrifice. If we are able to win over these poor people whose greatest pride is their humanity, only then can we think of creating an overarching nationalism in India – or else not. In this great age of humanism, break the bounds and come out, say, I am not a Brahman, or Shudra or Hindu or Musalman, you are human, you are the truth.

Thus he advocates the acknowledgement of difference, but not with the view to separation between people on that basis, as appears

to be the goal of identity politics. Neither is he in sympathy with the erasure of difference in the quest for a higher ideal, that of unity. He advocates the religion of humanity, which he ties to each religion that is practised in the society he inhabits, for no religion will truly reject the human :

When two hearts meet, pushing aside all the fear generated by spurious bonds and mix with the spontaneous care and concern, then that meeting is true; and this true meeting is eternally lasting. When the ever-existing division between hearts and minds is suppressed for the facade of an external hearty friendship, there no true friendship can flower, rather the purpose of this pretence may not be fulfilled because nothing can be accomplished on the crutches of untruth.

Rather, to live with difference is the exercise in which the religion of humanity will come to our aid. It is an ideal of action that advocates a direct address to plurality : taking all the differences into consideration, Nazrul enlists the help of those who rise to the ideal of humanity to erase the divisive, separatist nature of difference in a plural society. We may note that it is to nation that he appeals, the most alluring idea in the time in which this essay is written. The objective is to forge an overarching nationalism.

Come if you can, keeping complete sincerity in your own religion within your heart, and bringing a heart as boundlessly generous as the sky, stamping underfoot all society's obstructions with hed held high like a human, and bringing with you only the naked humanity. If you sound this clarion call, you will see we shall forget Hindu-Muslim¹⁵

It is this sense of plurality, not only in intellectual and political terms but in the very process of living itself, in his views about the humane and human face of nation and nationalism, that we see in his engagement with the literary and revolutionary nationalist culture of Bengal. It does not seem wrong to state that because we have ignored his views, his life and most of the values enshrined in his work, we are today left with a situation that appears not to have changed in the time since his voice fell silent. Nazrul as a thinker and a poet became a mute spectator of the coming into being of new budding Nations at the very

young age of 48, when he was beset by physical and mental illness resulting from his punishing struggle to craft an India that would provide a panacea to all the deprived in whose name he revolted against all power, all hierarchies. So his thoughts on social and cultural plurality which he sought to preserve from becoming divisive identity politics by placing common humanity above the difference, need to be revisited and considered afresh today.

‘SECULAR’ MODERNITY AND MODERNISM IN LITERATURE

Refusing me your garland, my love you may deride
You I shall create with my art, that will be my pride¹⁶

Modernism in Bengal was heralded by poets grouped around the poetry periodical *Kobita* edited by Buddhadeva Bose and his associates. As the editor of this journal from 1936 to 1961,¹⁷ Bose is recorded to have encouraged both younger poets like Samar Sen and older poets like Jibanananda Das, while creating a following and poetic friendships with all those who were associated with modernist poetry in Bengal, the common point of reference being the blinding radiance of Rabindranath Tagore from which to craft their own.

This fear was not unnatural given Tagore’s own incessant activity, and his indomitable power to change himself. As Bose, the editor of a still popular anthology of ‘modern’ Bengali poetry,¹⁸ points out in the preface of this collection, which begins with Rabindranath and contains a dozen poems by him :

But some readers may think, the first modern poet after Rabindranath is Rabindranath himself. This is also true – so this collection begins with compositions from *Lipika*,¹⁹ the book in which, having completed one lifetime from *Manasi* to *Balaka*,²⁰ Rabindranath was born again. The poetry of his last phase has borne fruit in many ways in our contemporary poetry, and perhaps this relation will become clearly visible when the contemporary poets are placed alongside him. (*ibid.* introduction)

Rabindranath himself participated with great vigour in these exchanges. In the essay “Adhunikabya”,²¹ he says that if asked for a definition of pure modernism, he will reply, “to see the world not from an involved subjective viewpoint but with a calm steady gaze, immersing oneself in it. This dispassionate view is radiant and pure, this is what gives unalloyed pleasure. Modern science analyses reality with this uninvolved spirit; modern art will see the world in its totality with the same ascetic spirit.” But to call this modern is “simply stupid. This simple, direct unprejudiced gaze does not belong to any one time. It belongs to anyone who is able to dwell in this disclosed, unveiled world” : time and space give material to the creator, but “these elements do not make him. By using these elements he expresses himself as a creator”²². So poetry wrests the original from the given and is by nature ‘counter’ to what prevails as culture – even if this culture itself makes poetry possible. Accordingly, Tagore points to all that is ‘modern’, the result of the time, that he feels is limiting poetry. One is the endless curiosity exhibited by science. This foreign craze for scientific readings invades India in the name of modernity and acts as a shameless imitation. He accuses this scientific spirit of disrobing ‘sahityalakshmi’, the beautiful and auspicious ‘literature-Goddess’²³. About the realism identified with modernity he says “Through the magic of the pen, through the transforming touch of imagination, a drunken party becomes real. But it must be made thus....Realism does not come from the selection of theme, realism will manifest itself through the magic of composition”²⁴. He criticizes what he calls a forwardness imported from abroad, which finds realist art in this “loincloth wrapped, muscle flexing, dusty modernity”²⁵. Tagore criticized the poets espousing socialism for “the arrogance of poverty (that) has pretensions of idealism which it flaunts as the basis of moral precepts.... In individual life, things change, but this does not change the universal gift of humanity given to mankind – in this we are fortunate. If we want to cobble together a party that opposes this gift, then we should say that those who are deprived should be given a colony in the desert, or else their hearts will never know satisfaction. Should we now set up literature as an oasis to satisfy the deprived sections among readers ?”²⁶

Tagore carried the criticism to the very stuff of experience from which modern progressive poetry was crafted :

Some people use the poverty of the country to spice up the novelty of their new literature. The curry-powder of sentimentalism is giving birth to a cheap literature. This is a ploy through which people without talent and with little effort earn plaudits.²⁷

The modernists belonging to formally English educated bhadrakalok class may have been the focus of Tagore's criticism, but poverty, discrimination and oppression were not sentimental poetic ploys for Nazrul, who took exception, saying that poverty was the only form of human suffering that the older poet had not endured, and it was arrogance to describe as sentimental those who had to fight it daily. Biographical details are an insult to poetry – but in Nazrul's case they explain the great breadth of his aural world, his ability to hear the language, which he developed, I would like to imagine, consciously. Modernist poetry in Bengali is to be read rather than being sung or spoken. This may have been an attempt to distance themselves from the tradition of musicality established by Tagore. I suggest that this task consumed their energies to the extent that they ceased to hear anything but their own voices, speaking to themselves. Poetry was reduced to a fixed part in the conversation of the many registers in which the language was spoken : its voice was the voice of the 'modern poet' a stylized persona who rebelled against the conventions of the time by retreating into himself.

Though Nazrul was contemporary to the first phase of Bengali modernism, his voice found no echo in this dominant poetic idiom or language. The culture and languages he counted as his inheritance opened up a different literary world and a repertoire of signification that he made available to Bengali poetry and to the language as a whole.²⁸ This poetic idiom already existed in the oratures in Bengal, whether in the ballad or Sufi premakhyan tradition or in the songs of the wandering Sufi teachers and their Hindu and Muslim followers. The songs drew upon the Perso-Arabic roots of the scriptures that had been translated into Bengali to facilitate and anchor the spread of Islam in this area. What was termed Islami Bangla remains in use in

speech and orature, but gradually disappeared from the literary register that formed the basis of standard Bengali speech in ‘modern’ times. The class and caste register of the language of Bengali modernism is in stark contrast to Nazrul’s language, idiom and worldview. He tried to include these in the language of Bengali literature in the same way as other modernist poets did – by translation. He himself translated the ghazals of Hafez and emphasized clearly the need for translations to make available to both Muslim and Hindu Bengali readers the rich literary heritage of Persian and Arabic.

In turning away from the ‘trivial’ colloquial registers and rhythms audible across the language community, modern Bangla poetry limits itself by limiting the scope of its language and through this, its accessible semiotic and aural world. The ‘accessible aural world’ of Nazrul’s poetry ranges across several genres popular in religious and secular music, though music was frowned upon by Faraizi and Wahabi sects, which were popular in then East Bengal. As a poet, Nazrul’s partiality to music can well be read as a protest against parochialism and religious fundamentalism. In embracing what was frowned upon by the establishment, Nazrul left no doubt about his persona as a modern poet; in repudiating the hierarchies created by capital and institutionalized social and religious orders and upholding the equality of all he was free of the criticism that Tagore leveled at the false propagators of the ideology of poverty. But the complications arose in his vigorous addition of what was seen as Muslim culture to the national culture of undivided Bengal – in his case the cultural nationality he claimed as his own was deeply entwined with the language, Bengali. That the Muslim speakers of Bangla wrested a nation on the strength of their espousal of a language is ironical when we realize that the existence of the ‘Islamic’ register in Bangla is seen not as a normal outcome of speaking and writing in the language by Muslim users, but rather as a characteristic of a particular period in the history of the language, or as a geographical divide – the Bangla spoken in Bangladesh is Islamic while the Bangla spoken in India is Hindu. Bangla as an Indian language refused its plural heritage by preserving Nazrul as more popular than literary, not taking cognisance of his experiments with poetic craft and his mastery

of music, while confining him to a rebel poet obsessed with the theme of liberation. This fame masked the more serious battle that he lost : the plurality of a language was throttled by those who sought to make it speak like themselves. This ossifies him as a one-man wonder, a ‘Muslim’ writer. It obfuscates his command over the vast heritage of orature and literature and a musicality that none of his contemporaries could muster. He is limited to his religion and his rebellious spirit rather than given credit as the initiator of a tradition of a plural semiotic universe.

Emeneau²⁹ calls India a linguistic area.

“This term ‘linguistic area’ may be defined as meaning an area which includes languages belonging to more than one family but showing traits in common which are found to belong to the other members of (at least) one of the families.”

Altaf Hussain Hali in *Ab e Hayat*, quotes Azad on the composite of Hindustani forming gradually across central and western and Northern India :

Look at the nature of Bhasha – what a friendly temperament it has, for mixing with every single language! Cast your eye attentively over its poetry and prose. It not only cleared out a space for its guest among the words, but also adopted many words and thoughts that were specific to the native lands of Arabic and Persian. Thus it gave the realm of heroism to [the Persian *Shāhnāmāh* heroes] Rustam and Sām, although here it belonged to [the *Mahābhārat* heroes] Bhīm and Arjun.³⁰

Since we have been talking about the plurality of Indian languages, let us look at a technical definition of the same. *According to Lachman Khubchandani* : “The edifice of linguistic plurality in the Indian subcontinent is traditionally based on the complementary use of more than one language and more than one writing system in a single ‘space’”³¹. Khubchandani³² designates India as an area of organic language plurality, rather than what he terms structural language plurality that obtains in Europe. He identifies organic plurality through the fuzziness and fluidity in language boundaries, fluidity in language identity

and an opposition between identity claims and language communication. And as I have been trying to demonstrate with examples from Nazrul's work this is the characteristic of his poetry and it is also a problem that the translator must confront. These characterize the language of his poetry as a system consisting of a repertoire of signification that comes embedded in a way of living. Nazrul drew upon the Perso Arabic tradition in language and culture, bringing it to the language and landscape of Bengal both of which were quite distinct from the deserts sands of Arabia. The nature of an "Indian" language, following the characteristics of plurality that Khubchandani designated, makes available multiple repertoires of signification and genres available. In Nazrul's case, we will restrict ourselves to two repertoires available for synthesis – the local and the Perso Arabic that had melded into the local since the coming of the Ghazis and the Sufis to the frontier lands of Bengal (Eaton).³³ The practice of Islam in these areas also grew in dialogue with the belief systems underlying local worship of many Gods. The distinct feature of the culture of many parts of Bengal which was inhabited by a majority of Muslims was the confluence of religious beliefs and practices. Nazrul's condemnation of rigidity and fundamentalism in institutionalised religion and ritualistic practices stemmed from his vision of religious difference as divisive – it is not against Hindu or Muslim he rails, but at the discriminatory practice of touch pollution which prevents one man from treating the other as an equal. His religious practice enjoins upon him the belief that every human is created equal in the eyes of God, but he is placed in a society in which discrimination encompasses the entirety of social relations. Struggling to establish the basis of a secular nation in the midst of religious fervour, Nazrul's refers to – the religion of man, humanity versus nation, religion, caste or creed – the equality of all in the eyes of Allah, echoed by the Sant poets and earlier by the Advaita Vedanta of Sankaraacarya.

As a writer in Bengali following the towering presence of Tagore, he was not prey to the confusion of his contemporaries, nor did he remain in the splendid isolation that became the mark of a poetic sensibility. This poetic isolation was made possible only by keeping in

place the narrow domestic walls of caste, class and religion that Tagore bewailed. Nazrul was as much bound by the bhadrakok credo as his contemporary bhadrakok poets – the standard by which he was kept at a safe distance was the very standard that he despised. His thunderous attack on mechanization and alienation of the human spirit brought the idiom of rebellion into Bengali poetry, even while his lyrical work, in words and music gave voice to and echoed the popular lifeworld. I do not epitomize Nazrul as a poet of what Heidegger³⁴ calls “a destitute time”. Rather, I propose him as a poet, only, for the same reason as I understand poetry as the opening up of possibilities that do not and cannot exist in the world given to us as it is. Here we find a way of dealing with caste hierarchies in the traditional Brahminical society : the freedom and equality of worship

এইখানেই বোঝা যায় যে, কোনো ধর্ম শুধু কোনো এক বিশিষ্ট সম্প্রদায়ের।

This is how we understand that a religion does not belong to any one community, it belongs to the world. And when this rigidity of belief becomes an indispensable part of a religion, then truly it is an imposition upon God.³⁵ Human organisation of society and the bonds of human rules, mores and customs are time-bound, not eternally true. This is where the divine proclamation “I return in every era”³⁶ becomes relevant. So also in our Hadis, in every era there is a mujaddid or reformer who returns. To reform the received convention created by political expedience is the task of these reformers.³⁷

Nazrul could not intellectualise commitment; neither was he possessed of a divided self which both wanted to dwell in the world of men and turn away from it in despair of being understood. Religion, social position and education marked him out from the other poets trapped in the bhadrakok idiom and concerns of Bangla modernism.

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE OF PLURALISM

As a Bengali-speaking Muslim, Nazrul underlines both his identities that are inherent in his idiom, in the language that he uses – and though we call Nazrul a revolutionary poet only because of the fervour of his rhetoric and the clarity of his call to arms for the poor and

oppressed, he is no less a revolutionary when it comes to a vision of the language – that he is possessed of the full resources of an Indian language, exhibiting the plurality of the existence of its speakers who live their diverse identities simultaneously. One of Nazrul’s great strengths as a poet is that he is fully able to exploit the plurality of Bangla, while others are busy trying to separate words according to religions and tying them into preordained systems related to social and religious hierarchies. At this present moment when complementary identities and the plurality of language are still intensely political questions, Nazrul’s commitment to etching out a way to negotiate the condition of living with difference seems remarkable. Nazrul lived for this plurality and took upon himself the pain of separate nations, propagated by the two nation theory enunciated by another poet, Iqbal. Situated in the same city in which the call to dividing the nation according to the two nation idea, Nazrul broached the idea of a plural rather than a dual nation, where the difference of class caste had to be overcome, and that of religion assimilated into the unity of daily living in a plural society.

In this context, we read his essay “The Muslim in Bengali Literature.”³⁸

The writer speaks with his own words and his own pain, the language of the world, and touches the pain of the world. However subtle be the theories he discusses, anyone should be able to say that these are his own innermost thoughts; these were suffocating to death within him, they could not find the way to expression. That is how world literature is created, and that is what we mean by the universality of literature. (Bangla Shaitye Musalman, Jugbani)

Thus both humanism and literature, rising above the divisive separateness of difference, will unite us. The poet, according to Nazrul, is above difference because he is the voice of God, the voice of truth.

I am a poet, I have been sent by God to reveal the hidden truth, to give form to what is yet uncreated. God responds in the voice of the poet. My words reveal the truth, they are the words of God. They may be seditious in the eyes of the rulers, but in the scales of justice, they are not unjust, they are not untrue.

সে বাণী রাজদ্বারে দণ্ডিত হতে পারে, কিন্তু ধর্মের আলোকে, ন্যায়ের দ্বারা তাহা নিরপরাধ, নিষ্কলুষ, অল্লান, অনির্বাণ, সত্য-স্বরূপ।

This universal responsibility is held by the poet, and Nazrul calls upon the Muslim poet to take it up :

We too will have to create universality in literature. Certainly that cannot be at the cost of ignoring or losing our national and local uniqueness. No matter which country a person comes from, in the heart of each are some truths, some most subtle feelings, which are shared by people of all lands; when we create literature, these are the universalities that we must be mindful of (Bangla shitye musalman)

As a poet and as a thinker of the Indian nation state then coming into being through the great upheaval of the movement of anti-colonial nationalism, Nazrul sees the common enemy both from the political and the social point of view : it is identified as the divisive separating force of difference, which must be combated by the ideal of universal humanity in which difference is the marker of unique singularity that reaches out to all other singularities with the hand of human understanding. He is eloquently theorising such a nation and creating for it an imaginal universe, a world of signification and an idiom in which plurality is an undeniable fact, while unity is to be achieved by the human endeavour of establishing relations across difference. In so doing, he comes up against a fundamentalist opposition from both sides of the religious divide : the controversy about the use of the word “khooṅ”, in which the literary establishment, symbolised by Rabindranath Tagore, joined forces against the poet for his use of a “foreign” word.

Tagore was not opposed to the expansion of vocabulary and the repertoire of signification. As he says³⁹

Even after accepting Bangla as a separate language, we cannot but acknowledge that it has a close relation with Sanskrit. The aristocracy of the spirit that is inherent in the Indian mind, the asceticism that Sanskrit brings, if we do not take into the literature of Bangla, then it will be weakhearted and without splendor.

In fact Tagore did not find anything objectionable about the contact of Bangla literature with West European literature in general and English literature in particular.

We have to agree that in contact with European knowledge, Bengali literature and to some extent, Bengali language, have developed; it has acquired, through this contact the ability to express the new feelings characteristic of the new thoughts and ideas, similarly, the continued link with Sanskrit literature is also a support for us. Just as, if we are separated from European literature, we will be impoverished to a regrettable extent, similarly, if the line of contact with the ancient Indian culture, through Sanskrit, is weakened or severed, then too Bengali will lose the flowing purity and depth.⁴⁰

Despite extolling the virtues of a living language that holds diversity within itself, the word he objected to in Nazrul's poetry was 'khoon'. He is reported to have said that those Bengali poets who used 'the word "khoon" instead of the Sanskritised 'rakta', in finding the former redder in colour than the latter, are trying to cover up their own weak vocabulary with stunts. In May 1926 Nazrul had written "Kandari hushiyar"⁴¹ for the Bengal Provincial Congress at Krishnanagar. The following lines appeared in this poem :

Helmsman before you lies the Palashi battlefield
Bengali khoon smeared upon Clive's naked sword and shield
In Ganges waters, alas, has drowned India's sun
it will rise once more reddened with our sacrificial khoon.

In the same poem appeared these lines

Are they Hindu or Muslim? Who is it that asks?
Helmsman, say humans are drowning, all my mother's sons.

It is not ironic that this literary debate was going on while while communal violence was on the verge of breaking out in Bengal. At the Congress which started with this poem, the former revolutionaries rejected the Bengal Pact and refusing to be ruled by a Muslim, decided that partition was the option for 'Hindu' Bengal. While the literary establishment reduced Nazrul's attempts to expand the linguistic

resources of Bengali to the thematic of rebellion, his pluralist position was also largely ignored in political circles. In the literary field, this resulted in a poetic idiom which prevails till date and erases a demographic fact from 'standard' Bangla – that 28% of the population follow a different religion which is one of the sources of the plurality of Indian life and society. This is reflected in spoken Bangla but absent from the class-caste-gender register that has been made definitive as the language of literature. The language and image-corpus of 'literary' Bangla, as distinct from colloquial Bangla in urban and rural areas, echoes the failure of Nazrul's efforts at broadening the base of the language. Bangla used to be divided into the sadhu and the chalit, the former being the language of literature and the latter, the language of speech. Tagore's view of the language of poetry, which is the spoken and not the written language, has become the Bangla spoken in Calcutta. As he says in "Chalti bhashar roop"⁴² : the language of Calcutta which is spoken there is the language as it is spoken, different from the lekhyia or written language, which – is "artificial, lacks the substance of life, it moves stiffly, it is pond water, not flowing stream."⁴³

Nazrul's vision was embedded in pluralism, natural to the nesting culture of the language he used. He construed Tagore's criticism of his vocabulary rightly, as it turns out in hindsight, as a turning away from pluralism in the interests of some abstract purity :

It seems that this Rabindranath is not the person we know. The Sanskrit grammarians hiding behind him are speaking through him. I use the word 'khoon' in my poetry not to give a Musalmani or Bolsheviki colour to it. Perhaps the poet does not like any of those colours these days. Not only 'khoon', I have used many other colloquial Arabi-Farsi words in my writing. From my side I have an explanation for this. I think that the world-literature Goddess has a Musalmani style. And I am not aware that this style of hers has decreased her beauty and appeal in any way. Today's Goddess of art has half her jewel box full of Musalmani ornaments. Pandit Malviya may not agree with this, but I do not expect Rabindranath and Abanindranath to disagree.⁴⁴

Though the chalit/sadhu distinction is no longer formally applicable, the register in which Bangla fiction, poetry, drama are written, the standard Bangla, is marked by Sanskritised usage and a semiotic universe of atheism and rationalism that marked modernity or Upanishadic humanism that Tagore espoused and what appeared as a deep longing for the civilisation of the interior. Nazrul's faith, however, did not conflict with his use of a repertoire of signification that encompassed Vaishnavism, the mahakavyas, Smarta, Shaiva and Shakti worship. The Kobita group extended the register of poetry in a different direction. They ignored the registers of common speech in a diverse society and introduced classical European and modern west European literatures through translation. This was part of the attempt to free themselves from Tagore's commanding mastery of rhythm and his gift for musicality which none of them possessed. Nazrul did possess a versatile musical gift like Tagore's, but shared nothing of the world that the modernists claimed as their intellectual space.

Modern poetry in Indian languages is a concerted effort to evolve a way of making the vitality of the living language and its various registers of use the very form of poetry itself. But this is not registered in Bangla because Bengali literature has not had a writer of the stature of Nazrul, Hindu or Muslim, who could claim the extended resources and rhythms of Bangla as a spoken language. Neither did the forms introduced by Nazrul find any lasting impact upon modern Bangla poetry. Goethe's translation of Hafez introduced the ghazal as a poetic form into German, but Nazrul, living in a land where the ghazal exists in a number of languages, did not succeed in setting up a tradition in Bengali. Rather, forms like the sonnet and the more obscure Vilanelle, forms borrowed from the non-western tradition like Tagore's experiments with the haiku (the name used was *khsanika* or ephemeral) marked modernism's departure from the local oral resources as much as from the non-Sanskritised colloquial idiom. The language of Bengali poetry does not register the difference and diversity of colloquial popular speech. His vision of the society he inhabited and the literature and thought which grew out of it and addressed it, were plural in nature, though the program for the future was a unity against

all inequalities made by man, it was through the active engagement with difference that this unity could be achieved, not by homogenising difference.

**PLURALISM, CULTURE AND SOCIETY :
“INDIA” AND TOMORROW**

In an approach paper to his *A History of Indian Literature*, Sisir Kumar Das⁴⁵ argues that Indian literature is single because of its shared history and common conventions, which run through a number of language cultures, bringing them into relation with one another. Though he does not say that it is a dialogue between different language-cultures, he suggests that its history must be an integrative one. We may understand this in the context of the inner singularity of literature as a phenomenon, despite its external plurality, as well as its non-iterability, which sets it apart from other domains in which language is used. As I have already indicated, these literatures in different languages share a common culture but diverse social and religious locations across time showing confluences in literary genres, themes and poetics. We are looking at cultures as modes of co-existence and negotiation rather than as isolated individual systems : this is an inevitable outcome of the comparative approach which I have used to read the poet's thought as it appears in his literary work and his reflections upon the present and the future of his society. I approach Nazrul's thinking, as it shaped his literary output in form, content and medium, from the vantage point of India as a plural society, because I would like to propose that the idea of nation, especially in the postcolonial world, need not be homogenous. In the current state of things, it may not be difficult to fully appreciate the primacy of preserving cultural heterogeneity, such that the feeling of nationalism is not one of uniformity but the active maintenance of conversation, of dialogic relations between different groups. This is impossible in a society riven by boundaries and hierarchies.

In the context of the nation state, plurality describes a situation in which individuals of several socio linguistic and religious groups share a core of experience, each difference important in one context but

none so important that they will distinguish individuals of one group in every way from the others (Parekh 2000). Parekh distinguishes multiculturalism from pluralism by pointing out that the former conceptualises society as an additive whole made of the sum total of carefully preserved discrete and separate ‘different’ parts, while the latter emphasises the preservation of difference by setting up and maintaining the relations between the different parts. This implies that in pluralistic conception of the universe, the “whole” is an integration achieved by the individual singularities which are themselves produced through the transcendental relation of individual being to the shared world in which it exists.

Pluralism acknowledges difference and the equality of difference – as such, it stems from a refusal of ontological reductionism, a view that can be traced back to the *anekantvaad* propagated by Mahavira. The idea of difference or the *vibhajyavaad* as preached by Buddha, who stood against the difference-as-illusion theory of Advaita Vedanta of Sankaracharya, by asserting that a single question can have more than a single answer. An attempt at *samanvay* or balancing of difference was made by thinkers from Vedic times who agreed that experience was a proof of the way things are in the world. The Jain thinkers insisted that difference was characteristic to human being on earth, and therefore that relation between differences should be maintained in order for humans to live together. They emphasised that practical action manifested thought, and stated that the human being was always open to change in his thinking and ways of living in order to achieve the equilibrium between “manyness”, rather than subsuming all differences into an imagined unity. On the contrary, difference seen as absolute is the dynamic force of identity politics, as has been the case with liberal democracy : in that case, the acknowledgement of difference remains another capitulation to the liberal democratic habitus and the state structure deriving from it. The state in this conception, is the hub of power, doling out the wages of difference to different groups who demand and compete for these doles on the basis of their difference. Historically difference is a source of discrimination because

it has been used to bar people from resources. That is the reality of Indian society – in which we have, since the establishment of the nation state, concentrated upon the absolutisation of difference into identity politics rather than establishing relations between differences. Pluralism is not a liberal form of containing difference within the state structure but calls for a reimagination of the state and of the concepts of nation and nationalism. The program of activity that appears in Nazrul's thinking can be described as the engagement advocated by the pragmatists like William James⁴⁶, against reduction to absolutism, scientism or idealism – empiricism, pragmatism, i.e. focus on human experience and the plurality of world. As well as the *anekantvadi* or pluralistic philosophy of the jains. This may sound utopian in the current reality, but a poet is nothing if not both utopian and revolutionary, because his voice, as Nazrul says, is not of this world. It is the voice of God speaking in his tone, as the seer of truth.

If you snatch the flute from my hands, the tune will not die, because I can acquire or make another one and play the same tune upon it. The tune does not come from the flute, it is my heart which produces the tune, and it is my skill which makes it flow. Hence the fault is not of the flute or of the tune; the fault lies in my heart that is the source of the tune.

Though Nazrul did not extend his own position to explicitly acknowledge the pluralism of his language and his vision, preferring to emphasise the unity to be actively achieved by the effort of diverse groups, his view did show that he espoused the radical democracy of language. As a human capability, language belongs equally to all humans, because by dint of their humanity. The hierarchisation of languages and the exclusion that was practised in the name of cultural purity was the source of political separatism and division. This linguistic democracy was of a piece with the plurality that characterised contemporary Indian society, and Nazrul insisted on difference but changed its focus in his thinking from that which divided people that which would serve to eradicate these inequalities by working against the divisiveness that engendered exploitation:

We hear today that we we have to walk with our religion and through it. What religion? Why should we take shelter in religion? O Shudra, rise today and say, I am not a Brahmin that I have to cling to religion. I will no longer wait for you to save me. I have to live....Living is my religion. I will tame the storm and rain that the gods pour down, I will take up the challenge against the ravages of nature. I will throw off the burden of custom and destroy society. Even if everything is extinguished, I shall live. He who is enslaved by men, has he religion? Do you have the right to speak of religion ?⁴⁷

The call of the heart has immense power. If you must call out, first you must touch directly the strings of such a way that pain rings out. Then alone can new creation awaken in India.⁴⁸

As the source of new creation he identifies those “neglected powers”, those whose efforts are unseen in the national striving towards the future. Will freedom mean freedom for them as well ? Nazrul’s idea of the nation is different from what Frantz Fanon would call bourgeois nationalism. Fanon was writing in the backdrop of a guerilla war fought by socialists to dislodge a colonial enemy quite different from the indirect rule policy of the English, who did not think the colony worth preserving once it ceased to give economic benefits. The nature of the struggle against the English coloniser, an unarmed struggle for human dignity, was different from the armed warfare waged by the Algerians against the French. The ruling structure of feeling in the nationalist movement was decidedly bourgeois; it has been accused of being upper caste and upper class as well. But Nazrul defied these descriptions, as his life as a folk performer, as a soldier, a worker of the communist party opened him to the world oppressed by caste and class hierarchies. Perhaps his birth into a religion that proclaimed the equality of all men at birth, also found an echo in the unity of pain and suffering. Hence his idea of the nation includes them, their labour and above all, gives them the place of humans in a human community. That was the kind of India he imagined :

It is because we have neglected these wretched people, the true representatives of humanity that we are that we face

destruction and downfall; so, neither democracy or popular strength cannot be amassed in our country. How is it possible? The country is made of the people of the country, and the community of people are the jati, the nation. And if the country and its national community are not understood by the people themselves, then to expect its progress is like expecting to build a tower in the sky. Do you imagine that your status – proud, hypocritical, untruthful gentlefolk most of whom have no real love for either the country or the national society, will be able to build the nation and rescue the citizens from dire straits?

For this he imagined a program of national education that worked on being different from what was planned by the colonisers. In the context of the formation of the National Council of Education, his thoughts are relevant to us even today, when a “National” education policy seeks to circumscribe rather than expand the student or youth’s imagination by imposing a single language or culture, rather than teaching the appreciation of plurality :

There is an idiom that says, you flee in fear from sourness and make your home under the tamarind tree. The great hullabaloo nowadays about National education, echoing all around can well be described by this satirical idiom. If we divorce ourselves from the colonial education just because of the regressive curriculum in government schools, then the national schools we plan to set up for the progress and strengthening of our education according to our wishes and desires, cannot be in any way similar to the government schools or a watered down version of them. If that is the case, then we have fled from the established schools for nothing but the fear of sourness, because we have taken shelter under another kind of sourfruit tree. (Jugabani Jatiya Shiksha)⁴⁹

Years later, Ngugi wa thiong’o advocated the abolition of a single colonisers’ language as the medium of education and pleaded for a return to the language and culture of the society of the colonised. For Nazrul too, the “National education” being given was just.

The removal of the trademark of foreign education, replacing it with ‘swadeshi education’ instead. The little originality that we see is

nothing much. That kind of mundane originality can be seen in anything novel. If our national school reveals itself to be just an incarnation of the foreign schools, then we can never accept that as our national school, nor feel any pride in its existence. What is not entirely our own, that which just traces the path charted by others, with what misplaced pride can we call that “ours”?

The gaps in the “National curriculum” also came in for his scrutiny

Except teaching the art of using the spinning wheel, there are no new methods being used here which are conducive to our climate or appeal to the hearts and minds of our youth. It is as if we have taken the rules and customs of the foreigners and dressed them with turbans on their heads and embroidered shoes on their feet, claiming that the result is local. It is like saying that a white woman dressed in a saree or a white sahib dressed in a dhoti is an Indian national.

His alternative was to connect the education to the emotional development of students, stressing their appreciation for difference and encouraging the effort to negotiate divisiveness with spontaneous empathy – an expansion of the heart and mind that had been constricted by the bonds of traditional separateness and colonial oppression. He addresses the youth as iconoclasts, drawing upon the Hindu mythological character Kalapaahar; they have been inducted into and calls upon them to break the shackles of bondage to both past and present oppression, keeping intact still the values of humanity and the respect for human difference :

If you think we are trying to get rid of religion altogether, you will misunderstand our intent. From the depths of our heart we say, that in the finitude of our earthly lives we must raise the tune of infinity. We must accept and follow our own religion but attain the strength to extend our arms to embrace the world. He who is truly a follower of his own religion will find the love for the world of men well up naturally in his heart. All the barriers to touching others all these mean and parochial practices come naturally only to those who are false practitioners of religion, like the crane who pretends to be an ascetic or the cat who eats a hundred mice and then turns into a cage to put a facade on her

sins. We must unmask these hypocrites and reveal the horrible naked truth that lurks in their hearts to the eyes of society

As plurality constitutes our being in the world, every encounter with an other, whether from the same or different language-culture, is a meeting between two unique individuals, who nevertheless share a commonality – perhaps language, perhaps culture, but beyond all that and certainly, the commonality of human being. Understanding is thus an imperative for the negotiation of plurality on a daily basis : in a society as diverse as the one we live in, the necessity becomes even more urgent and commonplace. But how to understand the other without reducing it to our assumptions, our obsessions and our prejudices? What becomes of these in the encounter with the other? The very being of difference demands that the enigmatic remain so, inciting in us the sense of wonder and perhaps discomfort and adjustment.

As students and readers of literature, we are able to perceive through the effects of language plurality upon poetics and rhetoric, the formation of a plural literary culture. This follows from a tracing of the relations between many coexistent language formations and interlinked poetic discourses as a context for understanding human interaction and expression, showing poetic usage to be the marker of such a culture .

Nazrul's uniqueness in Bangla literature, and that which connects him to "Indian" literature, is his celebration through use of the plurality of the Indian literary cultures, and of Indian culture itself.

Speak, O Brave and bold
Say, how high is my head, behold
Bowling to gaze into my eyes see, the mountain peaks snow cold
Say, the great milkyway the deep void rending
My course far from sun moon and stars tending
Earth, Heaven and universe ripping through
Khoda's seat, the Arash piercing, too
I have risen, an eternal wonder in earth-mother's fold
On my forehead burns Destruction's fire, marking victories bold

Speak O thou brave and bold.
Say always, my head high I hold.

Nazrul's idea of a free unified plural India where the pain of the oppressed calls forth the succour of millions of diverse hands extended to relieve suffering, is still with us, and still to be realised.

FOOTNOTES

1. Kazi Nazrul Islam, "Samyabaadi"/"Socialist" in *Kazi Nazrul Islam Rachana Samagra*, Volume 2 Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, June 2001(b). All references to this volume are henceforth by date, followed by name of individual work and page numbers. Manush;
2. Kala Admi ke GULi Mara/Firing at the Black Man'
3. Gandhi Swaraj in Ideas
4. Uday Mehta constitution
5. Chutmarga/The Difference of Touch
6. Hindu-Muslim, Rudramangal
7. *ibid.*
8. Amar Dharma? (Chutmarga)
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Rudramangal/Mandir o masjid)
12. (Mandir o Masjid/ Rudramangal)
13. Nari Samyer Gaan Gai (nari samyer Gaan, 1926, samyabaadi)
14. Upekkhito Shokti'r Udbodhon
15. (Amar Dharma)
16. Ahonkaar/Pride, Jinjir/Shackles
17. Buddhadeva Bose, *Amader Kavita Bhavan*, 1974, Calcutta
18. *Adhunik Bangla Kobita*, ed Buddhadeva Bose, M.C. Sarkar and Sons, Kolkata.
19. A collection of poems by Rabindranath Tagore published in 1922.
20. Two of Tagore's poetry collections, *Manasi* 1890 and *Balaka* 1916
21. Rabindranath Tagore, "Adhunikabya"/Modern Poetry, <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8464>, in the collection in the collection SahityerPathey/ On the Way of Literature, <http://>

www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/4?subcatid=10&catId=6. References to this online edition are henceforth by the name of the collection, with specific essay and web link following. All translations of all quoted sections in this paper, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine

22. Rabindranath Tagore, “Sahityeroitihāsikotā”/ “The historicity of literature” in *Prabandha Samagra* Volume 3, Bikash Grantha Bhaban, Kolkata, 2003, p. 1143. Further reference to this collection is by date, name of essay and page numbers following
23. Rabindranath Tagore, “Adhunik Kābya” <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8464>
24. Rabindranath Tagore, 2003, “Sahityer Swarup”/ “The essential form of literature”, p. 1121-24.
25. The analogy he gives for modern realism is the rowdy celebrations of Holi indulged in by working class Bhojpurisin Chitpore, the heart of aristocratic urban Calcutta in “Sahitya dharma”/ “The Duty of Literature”, <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8448> in the collection Sahityer Pathey/ On the Way of Literature.
26. Rabindranath Tagore, “Sahitya dharma” <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8448>
27. Rabindranath Tagore “Sahitye Nabatwa” <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8453>
28. Partha Sarathi Gupta has discussed the resistance that grew in Bengal as a result of the Permanent Settlement (Partha Sarathi Gupta 2002 *Power Politics and the People : Studies in British Imperialism and Indian Nationalism*, Anthem, Delhi). Muslim landowners lost their land to Hindu buyers, and the peasant, across Bengal, as well as the rural worker who migrated to the city, was a Muslim : they formed 28% of the population.
29. Emeneau (note 23)
30. Hali
31. Khubchandani
32. Lachman Khubchandani “India as a Sociolinguistic Area” in *Language Sciences*, Vol. 3, issue 2, 1991 p.265-288. Also see Khubchandani “Language Plurality of South Asia : A Search for Alternate Models in Knowledge Production”, *Published Online*: 2012-10-

- 11 **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2012-0015> 983 on susceptibility to contact in plural language cultures.
33. eaton
 34. Heidegger
 35. Khodar upor khodkari imposition of human self upon god
 36. Gita
 37. Upekkhito ?
 38. The Muslim in Bengali literature
 39. Rabindranath Tagore, “Abhibhashan /Address” in *Bangla Shabdatattwa* <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8722>
 40. *ibid.*
 41. Kazinazrul Islam, “Kandarihushiyar/Helmsman Stay Alert” from *Sarbahara* in Nazrul 2001b, p. 128
 42. Rabindranath Tagore, “Chaltibhasharrup/ The Form of Colloquial Language” in *Bangla Shabdatattwa*, <http://www.rabindra-rachanabali.nltr.org/node/8720>
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. Kazi Nazrul Islam, “Bodor Piriti Baalir Baandh”/ “The Affection of a Great Person is Like a sand-barrier” in *Atmashakti*, 14 Paus issue, cited in MARXIST INDIANA July 2013.html
 45. Sisir Kumar Das “Why Comparative Indian Literature” in *Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice*. ed. Amiya Dev and Sisir Kumar Das. IIAS Shimla 1987. See also Amiya Dev “Comparative Literature in India.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.4 (2000)
 46. Pluralistic universe
 47. Kazi Nazrul Islam, “Amar Dharma”/My Religion, *Kazi Nazrul Islam Rachana Samagra* vol 1, Unpublished Essays, p.471-2 aschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2001. Referred to hereafter by date, name of essay and page numbers.
 48. Kazi Nazrul Islam, 2002 “Chutmarga/Untouchability” p. 428 – 31
 49. <https://nazrul-rachanabali.nltr.org/page1.php?pagenov =23&title id=76;> p.23



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