

## **Kazi Nazrul Islam**

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### **Abstract**

*Bengali poetry of the first two decades of the century, in the period before World War I, has been described as the reflection of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). To separate poets like Karuna Nidhan Bandyopadhyay, Kumud Ranjan Mallik, Kalidas Ray and others like them from the pervasive Tagore tradition is difficult. Consciously or unconsciously they imitated and emulated Tagore. They were impenitent about it, claiming it was easier for them to walk roads they were familiar with than to strike out on their own. Yet even at a time Tagore's influence was at its height there were at least three poets whose individual distinction set them apart : Jatindranath Sengupta (1888-1954); Mohitlal Majumdar (1888-1952) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976). In the work of Satyendranath Datta (1882-1922) the Tagore tradition is fused with the older pre-Tagore ways. He acted as a bridge between Tagore's emulators and those who wished to free themselves from his influence.*

Satyendranath Datta is rated by some critics as one ranking close to Tagore, placing Nazrul Islam next to him as a new but lesser poet. This is only partly true, for even within the ambience of the Tagore tradition Satyendranath Datta has a distinct place of his own. His individuality and distinction are obvious. No doubt, Satyendranath Datta admired Tagore but he was as much himself as Pramatha Chaudhuri or Abanindranath Tagore, as original and as different. The poets living under Tagore's all-pervasive spell, were also influenced, though in part, by Satyendranath Datta. His difference is pronounced by his natural delight in the practice of various poetic techniques and his choice of a varied subject-matter. In these he was largely free from Tagore's influence. He contributed much to the liberation of Bengali poetry from Tagore's overwhelming : personality. Satyendranath Datta's influence was not confined to his contemporaries. The foremost of the poets who came later, the first of the moderns, Jibananda Das owes much to it.

The conscious efforts to shake off the influence of Tagore had also its manifestation in the works of Dwijendralal Roy. He was the first to show it openly. His hostility to Tagore created a sensation in Bengal at that time. Tagore's poetry seemed vague and mysterious to him. Of *The Golden Freight (Sonar Tori)* he wrote:

The most difficult poem by the most difficult poet in a language foreign to me, a language spoken in an alien country (*Wordsworth's Ode to the Immortality of the Soul*) is easier to comprehend than the poetry of my Bengali brother writes in my own tongue. The effort to decipher its meaning brings out the perspiration. If this is because the feelings expressed are lofty their loftiness is extreme. The poem is neither really difficult to understand nor devoid of feeling. It has no meaning and it is also selfcontradictory.

*Dwijendralal's* rebellion was loud, his criticism derogatory but it was shallow and superficial. He did succeed in affecting some of the younger poets, but he added nothing significant to Bengali poetry, either in technique or subject matter. What the Bengali poetry achieved as a distinct genre under Tagore, and subsequently grew into a tradition was left untouched by a poet like D. L. Roy. His only contribution was in the use he made of language. As a dramatist and song writer he achieved more than what he earned as a poet.

A profound sense of contemporaneity and a deep social awareness enrich the work of Satyendranath Datta, although he kept aloof from the intellectual restlessness and scepticism of the post-war period he lived in. In his political and social poems *Samyasama*, *Sudra*, *Methor*, *Jatir Pati*, Satyendranath Datta made remarkable advances. A sudden and untimely death put an early end to his life.

Pramatha Chaudhuri also deserves to be mentioned in this context. In connection with his *Sonnet Panchasat* he wrote to Amiya Chakravarty :

There was reason for my writing these sonnets. I found shallow imitations of Tagore irritating. The evidence is in one of my published poems.

The poet was referring to a sonnet entitled *Advice (Upadesh)*. His attitude is clearly shown in the lines quoted here :

If you would be poet well beloved  
Write love to melt your readers heart  
Two things are needed at the start  
Borrowed words and .  
forced feeling for your sweet heart.

In the work of Jatindranath Sengupta the effort to shake off *Tagore's* influence is strongly marked. He was an engineer by profession. As a poet he belongs to the pessimists, those who celebrate sorrow. The titles of his works are appropriate : *Mirage (Marichika)*, *Desert Flame (Moru Sikha)*, *Desert Magic (Moru Maya)*, etc. The poet says about these three volumes in his preface to later volume of his poems (*Anupurba*) as follows :

I have endeavoured to attract the attention of the reader by introducing one desert after another into the eternal green of Bengali poetry in the titles for my books.

The poetry of Jatindranath was the first in history of modern Bengali poetry to show a clearly enunciated aversion to self-centred content-satisfaction. It was an open-eyed assault made on current ideas of beauty. He used powerful irony and a laconic approach. There was also, for the first time, a conscious attempt to establish contact with the common reader. The keenness of *Jatindranath's* scrutiny of current poetical practices is illustrated by following passage :

You are weary, fancy, your breathing is quick  
The same old demands of poets in thousands  
Have worn you out. Bees in flowers must be thick,  
Breezes gentle, flutes must wail of love,  
Tears and laughter mingle, separation makes us sick.

Jatindranath disliked intensely the petal-smooth diction and artificiality of the poetry of the period. His first book of poems, *Mirage (Murichika)* appeared in the same year as the famous journal, *Kallol*, 1923. This is significant. The poets associated with *Kallol* were particularly impressed by a poem of him *Sleep-walking (Ghumer Ghore)* which appeared in it:

Why do you bother us so much, dear brother Rabi ?  
Why do poke us in the eye with a gold wand  
Made of broom rage ? You're a good boy, Rabi.  
Your watch keeps tickling steadily without oil.  
You have brought light to the people, Rabi,  
And they celebrate your triumph everywhere.  
To those who have been blind from birth, Rabi,  
How much light have you brought ? I ask you.  
Can you borrow a cloud from Cherapunje, Rabi,  
And lend it to the waterless desert of Gobi ?

In the witty sardonic intellectuality of *Jatindranath's* poetry there is a touch of modern disillusionment. He was the first to turn away from flowers full of bees, zephyrs, and the pastoral idyll of Tagore. The *Kallol*-group of writers and poets took up the scepticism of Jatindranath and developed it further and gave it a clear focus. Carnal love was introduced to current poetry by Mohitlal Majumdar. He declares:

The soul has been forgotten.  
Only the body's bonds hold me.

The outlook of the *Kallol*-poets differed from *Mohitlal's* poetic ideal fundamentally, but they were nonetheless attracted to him. The difference affected both quality and quantity. The younger poets were the most influenced naturally, just as they were the most influenced by the work of Jatindranath Sengupta. In the following extract Buddhadeva Bose acknowledges this:

The two poets from whom we took our direction for the time being when we were young and climbing the obligatory staircase of revolt were Jatindranath Sengupta and Mohitlal's book, *The Forgotten (Bismarani)*. When *The Forgotten* appeared Jatindranath's first two books were, as far as I remember, already published. They were *Mirage, ( Marichika)* and *Desert Flame (Morusikha)*. When we, the newcomers of *Kollol*, were listening with astonishment to the long rolling rhythms of *The Forgotten (Bismarani)*, rhythms sweeping up and breaking like surf, Jatindranath claimed our attention with music of an almost totally different kind, fresh, homespun, simple, it was the music of an ox-cart driving over the rough bare fields of late March in a dry wind.

Mohitlal's powers were limited in another way. His extreme self-awareness of his poetry confined the appreciation of poetry to a small circle of an artificial elite. He was not touched by the discontent to which the works of Jatindrath and Nazrul Islam gave rise, a discontent that affected the later work of Tagore himself. The political and social problems of the times influenced the writing of every Bengali poet from Satyendranath Datta to Tagore in a greater or lesser extent, but Mohitlal's poetry shows no trace of them. And the common reader was prevented from savouring his work by the complicated technique he employed in sculpturing his poems. Common or topical truths were excluded. The range of the poet's experience, from *The Peddler of Dreams (Swapan Pasari)* to *Autumn Twilight (Hemanta Godhuli)* was confined to the radiant satisfaction of the knowledge of carnal love. Mohitlal's plight is well described in the poem *Disillusion (Mohamukta)* from *The Forgotten (Bismarani)* :

With softly lifted face the jesmines of the maiden night  
contemplate the constellations  
With bloodless lips they suckle sweetness  
in an arbour of grapes.  
Streams of milk gaily fill the earth  
Weaving a web of magic for hungry human mouths.  
How many inhabitants of the earth can you console  
With bewitching wine, forever yourself denying,  
O poet of the day in  
night's bridal chamber?

The poet Mohitlal Majumdar wanted to weave a web of magic for straving humanity. Jatindranath Sengupta looked for and advocated realistic solutions of man's problems. In his poem *The Food Problem (Annasamashya)* he writes :

Even those of who write poems  
know the retail price of rice.  
We know stomachs have precedence  
over our human hearts.  
We try, my friend, to solve  
the problems of nourishment  
for the world another way.  
Forgive us for it.

Mohitlal sought the solution of the *world's* material ills in the basic questions of life while Jatindranath confronted social injustice with a straight irony. He did not enter deeply into problems and his inner anxiety did not find turbulent outward expression. The obstacle in the way of Mohitlal approach to the angry turbulence of an age of crisis was his cultivation and learning. For Jatindranath the obstacle was lack of personal involvement.

Nazrul Islam did not have Jatindranath perspective nor did he have *Mohitlal's* cultivated mask. He also differed fundamentally from the poets of the *Kallol*-group. These poets revolted emotionally and their innovations had to do with subject-matter and technique. Nazrul was emotional also but he kept his feet firmly on the ground. His rebellion went beyond literature, reaching into society in general and penetrating as far as the state. It was Nazrul Islam who related modern Bengali poetry to the life of the times. He did not deny or decry the influence of Tagore for he had the strength to go beyond it and open out new creative possibilities. There is a questioning of established values in *Nazrul's* poetry. In his attitude to love he accepts physical love and the emotional experience it brings unequivocally. And although he does not disbelieve in God there is a marked absence of faith in ethical codes based on ritual and established practice. Nazrul also consciously examined different traditions and cultures and made use of them deliberately. He voices strongly the need to create a new society on more egalitarian lines even though he does not look to Marx for endorsement. Proverbs, rural idioms, turns of phrase in daily use and words borrowed from foreign languages all find a place in his work. He is not choosy out of regard for a fancied purity of language, and takes what ever is of use to him in creating of a new imagery and the diversification of his range of subjects. Even the foremost of modern poets who followed him, Jibanananda Das, was influenced by his work. The voice of Nazrul is clearly audible in the following lines from *The Newcomers (Nava naviner lagi)*;

We are riders of horses,  
young men who are nomads. In our breasts we bear  
captive ladies pain.  
The object of our homage is the deity which  
dwells within man.  
Of it we make a graven image and place it in  
in the shrine of our souls.

Buddhadev Bose acknowledges the importance of the role Nazrul played in the introduction of modernism into Bengali poetry in the following:

Tagore's rise in poetry was so overpowering it took Bengal three or four decades to get over the surprise and wonder of it. It's the spell lasted until Nazrul Islam stormed in, waving on high the flag of rebellion. For the first time Tagore's charm failed to work ... Nazrul was the first poet of original genius after Tagore... and Nazrul came at a time when Tagore's influence was at its height, tearing himself free from bondage to it was an almost impossible feat. he escaped from Tagore by the strength of his own personality and infused Bengali poetry with new vigour, new blood. He awakened aspirations and longings which, in their turn, inspired a widespread restless seeking. They demanded fulfilment. The hour of turning had struck for Bengali literature.

Bengali literature took a new direction. It felt the touch of modernism. The poetry was, chronologically, post World War I, post-Tagore in feeling, and creatively, the exponent of a new music. The journals which played a role of importance in this time of crisis and change were *Kallol* (1923) *Kali O Kalam* (1926) and *Pragati* ( 1927). The last was published from Dhaka. *Kallol* was edited by Dinesh Ranjan Das and Gokul Nag. Buddhadev Bose and Ajit Datta edited *Pragati*. Premendra Mitra, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay and Muralidhar Basu edited *Kali O Kalam*. Kazi Nazrul Islam was very much in tune with them. But the fact remains, he was the transending literary figure of the twenties.