Kazi Nazrul Islam
Bengal's prophet of tolerance

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

Peter Custers

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

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

The arrest and imprisonment of Nazrul in 1923-1924 reveal some of the most characteristic features of his personality. The speech he made in court illustrates how he uncompromisingly defended a poet’s right to free speech. It also shows that his opposition to the injustices perpetrated by the coloniser was religiously inspired.

Nazrul’s relationship with religion was, to say the least, unconventional. For whereas he had grown up in a Muslim environment and had obtained his initial formal education in a Muslim primary school, he did not by any means restrict himself to using imagery of the religion of his youth in his journalistic and literary creations. Instead, he freely transgressed the borders between Bengal’s two main faiths, Hinduism and Islam. In this essay, I will explore the legacy of Bangladesh’s national poet and, in particular, his significance for the cause of religious tolerance today.

National awakening

Nazrul lacked any formal training as a journalist or artist, and appears to have built his artistic experience through his participation in folk musical troupes in his youth. After two years of high school, Nazrul was called up by the British colonial government. Stationed in Karachi during World War One, as part of the Bengal regiment, he rose to the position of a sergeant, a rank he held until the end of the war.

When Nazrul Islam returned to Kolkota in 1920, he was largely unknown in the city’s literary circles. This changed dramatically within the space of a year. Indeed, Nazrul’s rise to literary prominence was extraordinarily rapid in comparison with other poets who have gained fame in the history of Bengal. Undoubtedly his talent and the role of Dyer. For the murders which Dyer ordered, so Nazrul explained, served to generate consciousness among the Indian people about their own dejected state. Nazrul Islam was not just aware of the fact that Indian men and women needed to be pushed into standing up for their rights. He was also foresighted and gained credit, in particular amongst Bengalis, for advocating that the struggle against the British should result not just in concessions, but in revolutionary change.

The ‘Muslim Renaissance’

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

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

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

Firm opposition to communalism

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

Nazrul’s poetry and other writings reflect the spirit of his time: the spirit of nationalist awakening in colonial India. At a time of mass resistance to British colonial dominance, Nazrul Islam expressed this spirit of awakening in his writings in a way that earned him the admiration of a wide readership in Bengal. One particular example illustrates his spirit of anti-colonial nationalism. It is an essay about the events in Jamalabad. Jamalabad, in Amritsar, is the place where a British officer, General Dyer, ordered indiscriminate firing on an unarmed crowd of civilians in an enclosed space. News of the event enraged many Indians, and it also infuriated Nazrul Islam who expressed indignation at the cruelty perpetrated in the name of British rule. He went further, however, and assessed the psychological significance of the massacre for the awakening of the Indian people’s sense of self-respect. In his essay entitled ‘Memorial to Dyer’, Nazrul argued that any monument to the Jamalabad massacre should not just be dedicated to the people who lost their lives, but such a statue should also recall the role of Dyer. For the murders which Dyer ordered, so Nazrul explained, served to generate consciousness among the Indian people about their own defeated status.
Nazrul described the outcome of the riots in earthy terms, using the tragedy of incidents which had already occurred as a mirror, in an effort to pre-empt further violence. He used key opportunities to speak or present his views, to warn political leaders of India’s nationalist movement against the dangers if they failed to stem the tide of violence. One of these occasions was the annual session of the Indian National Congress, the common platform of anti-colonial struggle, held in Krishnagar. Here, Nazrul sang one of the most famous songs he ever composed, “Rander Husil ("Helmsman Beware"). He sounded the alarm with the words: ‘In this dark night, O sentries of Motherland be alert’; ‘this helpless nation is crying for the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity, so urgently required in this time… But the lord who takes his paddy meals of boiled rice. Accept for a rag reaching down to his head. First, there are brawls, then they hit each others’ head. Yet once those who have got drunk over the presence of Allah or Mo Kali get bashed, then, as I can see, they do not cry for Allah or Mo Kali. Nei, Hindus and Muslims together cry and lament in the same language. Bibi Go, Mo Go – just as chil- dren who have been abandoned by their mother, cry for their mother and run to the side of the struggle – wajpi the babur, the mosque does not waver, nor does the Goddess-in-stone of the temple respond’.8

These words illustrate Nazruls’ deeply felt recognition of the fact that the Indian nation would ‘drown’, if the Congress – as the political force leading the struggle for independence from colonialism – failed to stem the tide of communalism. When Nazrul wrote these sentences in 1926, the incidents of communal violence were merely local spurs. But these spurs would turn into a communal conflagration. At the time of Partition in 1947 millions of Muslims and Hindus perished. As previously stated, Nazrul Islam was simultaneously vocal on the spread of violence between Bengal’s two religious communities, and advocating the need for both Muslim and Hindu peasants and workers to stand up and defend their rights against landlords and industrial bosses. In this respect, Nazrul has been vindicated, for in the course of the 1950s and 60s, and as part and parcel of the struggle for a secular nationalism, powerful movements representing the interests of the rural and urban poor were built in East Bengal. After independence in 1972, the newly-installed government of Mujibur Rahman made Nazrul Bangladesh’s first national poet. And while it is true that more recently, severe pressures towards abrogation of the principles of tolerance and secularism have built up in Bangladesh, the principles of religious tolerance and of social equality have never been what the country officially ende- pendence. There are compelling reasons to take Nazrul Islam’s example seriously in contemporary international debates on religious tolerance.

Peter Custers, Affiliated Fellow, International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) antim@IIAS.nl www.petercusters.nl

This is an abridged version of the essay ‘Kazi Nazrul Islam. Bengali’s Prophet of Tolerance’. The full essay can be read online at www.iiias.nl.

Notes
5. For an overview of Nazrul’s participation in Muslim organisations’ events, see the life-chronology appendix in Sajad Kamal (1999)
9. For an English version of this poem see Sajad Kamal (1999)

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

Alongside his support for peasants’ struggles, Nazrul enthu- siastically supported the struggles of waged labourers for emancipation. A characteristic poem in Gol-Maiz (Adolescents and Labourers), in which he combines imagery that is familiar from other poetry on class exploitation with imagery derived from the subcontinent’s religious-cultural traditions. He calls the labourers who build steam engines ‘dothris’, a reference to the sage who sacrificed his own bone to allow the God India kill a demon. Later on in the same poem, he re-employs the same metaphor, describing the labourers who, with their hammers, crowbars and shovels, crush mountains to make way for roads; yet ‘their bones now be scattered on both sides of the road’.11 Nazrul expresses his hope and expectation that workers will once more be able to express their identity as a tool to strengthen workers’ confidence and consciousness.

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

Mysticism and Syncretism
It is important to maintain the apocalyptic position in the essay when describing the episode of Nazrul’s arrest and imprisonment. I referred to the poet’s religious inspiration. Here I wish to establish what his own religious position was, beyond his artistic and political interests. An analysis of the extraneous speech which Nazrul gave to the Muslim Literary Association (Muslim Sultah Shomit) in April of 1941 is helpful in this context. The speech, entitled ‘If the Milk Does not Play Any More’, was to be the very last of Nazrul’s life.12

In July 1942, while participating in a children’s programme on All India Radio, Nazrul suddenly lost the power of speech. His mental faculties reportedly were affected too. Although several attempts were made to arrange for medical treatment, in the hope of him making a full recovery, Nazrul Islam spent the rest of his life, until his death on August 29, 1976, incapacitated. The cause of his collapse, although probably attributable to utter despair over the unstoppable wave of communal politics, officially remains a ‘medical mystery’. Nazrul’s speech is a testament to his personal beliefs. In the opening paragraph he elaborately expresses his mystic search, his desire for union with a loving absolute reality, or Supreme Being. God is depicted as both beautiful and loving. Nazrul’s speech also expresses the poet’s syncretic orientation. To convey his message, he singles out two deities from the Hindu pantheon, and uses imagery relating to their roles, in order to highlight his own quest and admonish his Muslim audience. Strikingly, they are a source of Krishna and Goddess Krishna: the earthly-loving God of the current of Hindu pantheon, and uses imagery relating to their roles, as the political force leading the struggle for independence from colonialism – failed to stem the tide of communalism. When Nazrul wrote these sentences in 1926, the incidents of communal violence were merely local spurs. But these spurs would turn into a communal conflagration. At the time of Partition in 1947 millions of Muslims and Hindus perished. As previously stated, Nazrul Islam was simultaneously vocal on the spread of violence between Bengal’s two religious communities, and advocating the need for both Muslim and Hindu peasants and workers to stand up and defend their rights against landlords and industrial bosses. In this respect, Nazrul has been vindicated, for in the course of the 1950s and 60s, and as part and parcel of the struggle for a secular nationalism, powerful movements representing the interests of the rural and urban poor were built in East Bengal. After independence in 1972, the newly-installed government of Mujibur Rahman made Nazrul Bangladesh’s first national poet. And while it is true that more recently, severe pressures towards abrogation of the principles of tolerance and secularism have built up in Bangladesh, the principles of religious tolerance and of social equality have never been what the country officially ende- pendence. There are compelling reasons to take Nazrul Islam’s example seriously in contemporary international debates on religious tolerance.

Peter Custers, Affiliated Fellow, International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) antim@IIAS.nl www.petercusters.nl

This is an abridged version of the essay ‘Kazi Nazrul Islam. Bengali’s Prophet of Tolerance’. The full essay can be read online at www.iiias.nl.

Notes
3. For an English translation of Tagore’s tribute to Nazrul, see Sajad Kamal (1999)
5. For an overview of Nazrul’s participation in Muslim organisations’ events, see the life-chronology appendix in Sajad Kamal (1999)
9. For an English version of this poem see Sajad Kamal (1999)