

Narrative Report **Rachel Fell McDermott**

My time in Bangladesh, although drastically shorter than I had originally envisioned and hoped, was very productive. My original plan, for which I won the grant, was to spend end-December 2013 through mid-August 2014 in Bangladesh, centered in Dhaka. At the last moment, political instability and warnings against coming, from the Dhaka AIBS Office, from the school where we had enrolled our son James, and from the State Department, caused us to change our plans and go, on our own funds, to Kolkata. There we got James enrolled in a different school, rented a flat, and looked for occasions to move to Dhaka. Although the political situation calmed down by January/February, we felt that pulling James out of school in one city and moving him to another in different country in the middle of the term was too much of a disruption, so although I went to Dhaka twice for weekend trips (in February and May), we did not move to Dhaka until James' schooling was complete, in June. We stayed in Dhaka for 6 weeks.

The delayed arrival, although very disappointing, did have its advantages. During my five and a half months in Kolkata, I had read and made rough translations of 90 Nazrul poems; these I brought with me to Dhaka, where I met with three scholars of Nazrul – Dr. Karunamay Goswami (of Cambria University), Dr. Mohammad Nurul Huda (of European University), and Dr. Sisir Kumar Ray (of Kustia Women's College) – who helped me answer last questions that my teachers and I had been unable to address in Kolkata. For these 90 poems, therefore, the “spade work,” one might say, had already been accomplished by the time I got to Dhaka, allowing me to have more fruitful conversations with the scholars whom I met.

I also managed to meet a number of very helpful people from several walks of life, who talked with me about Nazrul's “meaning” in Bangladesh: These included: Prof. Rafiqul Islam, my principle mentor; Mr. Mustapha Zaman Abbasi, Dr. Mohit-ul Alam, Dr. Anisuzzaman, Dr. Karunamay Goswami, Dr. Muhammad Nurul Huda, Justice Mustafa Kamal, Dr. Nashid Kamal, Dr. Sisir Kumar Roy, and Dr. Niaz Zaman. I also visited several institutions: the Nazrul Institute, the Bangla Academy, the Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, and the International Center for Nazrul at Chittagong University. From each of these people and institutions I learned different things about Nazrul's past and present legacy, and I now have a much clearer idea of what I need to do when I return.

In sum, what I can say so far is that Nazrul in West Bengal is a symbol of secular culture embraced by Hindus and Muslims who see him as having contributed in eloquent language to the struggle for independence from the British. Along with famed personages such as Rammohan Roy, Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, and even mother Teresa, Nazrul is included in a constellation of Bengali cultural and literary stars. Nazrul's Syama-Sangit, or songs to Kali, and his Krishna-Kirtan, are beloved by the Hindu population; he is viewed almost bi-religiously, or as being above religion, by his Indian champions.

In Bangladesh, by contrast, where he has been made the national poet, Nazrul has a greater burden to bear. In the Pakistan era (1947-1971) of East Pakistan, attempts were made to “cleanse” Nazrul of his Hindu “accretions” and “leanings”; his poems were often bowdlerized and mistranslated, and his life interpreted to buttress claims for his representation of a Muslim nation. Although in the period leading up to the liberation of East from West Pakistan in 1972, Nazrul was claimed as a symbol of Bengali secular nationalism, in the hands of some contemporary right-leaning Bangladeshi interpreters, he is a difficult icon to uphold, due to his unorthodox life and poetic style. I was able to interview a spectrum of people in Bangladesh, some of whom assured me that Nazrul stood for an inclusive nation, some of whom claimed that Nazrul's chief contribution to Bangladesh was as a pioneer of Muslim regeneration, and still others of whom said that Nazrul was a kafir (heretic), whose status as national poet was problematic.

Obviously this project, with both its translation and its interpretive dimensions, needs more time to mature and develop on the ground. I am grateful to AIBS for giving me a start and for enabling me to see where future work needs to be done.

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October 2, 2014