

Project Title: A National Poet for the Nation of Bangladesh: Exploring the Legacy of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976)

Abstract:

I seek eight months (January-August, 2014) of AIBS funding to undertake the first of two fieldwork components of a comparative project focusing on one of the most important and yet understudied figures of colonial and post-colonial South Asia -- the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976). This will be the first study in any language -- Bengali, English, or any other -- to assess the impact and relevance of Nazrul, as he is remembered and interpreted in two states: Bangladesh and West Bengal. Although Nazrul is significant to both sides of the border, comparatively little scholarship exists on him. Less than five percent of his literary oeuvre has been translated from Bengali into any language, and few studies of Nazrul exist outside the Bengali-reading world. I have three research strategies for my time in Bangladesh: (1) reading, translating, and consulting with Nazrul experts concerning the dominant themes of Nazrul's literary and social vision; (2) meeting with a range of people (performers, scholars, activists, educators, and kin) to ascertain Nazrul's significance for Bangladeshi citizens; and (3) thinking through what it means for a poet to be claimed and elevated as a "National" Poet. For me, what makes Nazrul, or "the rebel poet," so fascinating as a subject of study is his total commitment to Hindu-Muslim amity. He expressed this in his life by marrying a Hindu and championing communal peace; he reflected it in his poetic oeuvre by mixing Hindu and Muslim images and referents in the same compositions. It is this "mixed" legacy that is both galvanizing and controversial in Bangladesh today.