

## Nationalism within the Ummah: A Discussion of Atatürk in the Works of Kazi Nazrul Islam

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# Nationalism within the Ummah A Discussion of Atatürk in the Works of Kazi Nazrul Islam



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## ABSTRACT

The Muslim rule in the Bengal Delta began with Turkish Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Muhammad Bakhtiyār Khaljī of the Ghūrid army of Afghanistan. The Ottoman Caliphate was established in today's Türkiye during the same century. The foundation-stone of warm relations between the Bengali Muslims and the Turks was laid then, and it remains intact after many ups and downs. When the Bengali Muslims agitated against the Colonialist British during the early 1920s, the independent and sovereign Ottoman Empire was considered the Guardian of Islam and became their source of inspiration. Consequently, when the Ottoman Empire was disbanded after the First World War, massive mobilizations intended to protect the Institution Of Khilafat spread over the Islamic world. This unique episode is recorded as the Khilafat Movement in history. However, after the Turkish hero Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (19 May 1881-10 November 1938) had disbanded the caliphate, the Khilafat Movement in the Former Mughal Empire ended. Like other Muslims worldwide, many Bengali Muslims failed to endorse Mustafa Kemal's reforms, which had been an issue of discussion and debate around the Muslim world due to disbanding of the 600 years-old Ottoman Empire. However, the situation changed when many Bengali Muslim intellectuals supported the Turkish hero. Kazi Nazrul Islam, the National Poet of Bangladesh, was the pioneer among those who supported Kemal Atatürk in Bengal. He, who declared a do-or-die revolt against the British colonial rule in the Former Mughal Empire, was mesmerized by Atatürk's heroism. This paper intends to study the factors behind Kazi Nazrul Islam's fascination with Atatürk.

**Keywords:** Mughal Empire, Bengal Muslims, Enver Pasha, Caliphate Movement, Mustafa Kemal.

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KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM WAS JUST EIGHTEEN when he joined the British-Indian army. It was 1917, and the conflict between the two superpowers of the European continent, the British Empire and the German Empire, was near an end. The Ottoman Empire joined this war for their ally, the Germans. They fought against the British, French and Russian empires. Under this circumstance, a Muslim student in 10th grade from a remote country area of Bengal province of the former Mughal Empire

ignored the fear of death and signed his name. The British Empire put the Bengali Muslims fought against the Ottoman Empire, which was the Hope for All Muslims worldwide. The Ottoman side was successful in this war. They foiled the joint attack by the navies of Britain, New Zealand and Australia in the Dardanelles Strait, the entrance to the capital Istanbul. Mustafa Kemal, the future hero of the Turkish people, was the successful leader of this war. His reputation spread during that time.

# Kriegsbilder

Beilage der Linzer „Tages-Post“.

Verantwortlicher Schriftleiter für Oesterreich Dr. Richard Schubert in Linz.



The Victory of Kut Al-Amara, the arrival of Turkish Army reinforcements led by the sacred flag. 1916, war illustrations, design by Bruno Richert, Austrian State Library (Inaltekin, 2016).

On another battlefield, the Ottoman army captured the 8,000-strong British Army garrison in Kut, 160 km (100 mi) south of Baghdad, including the British commander Major General Charles Townshend. This battle is known as the Siege of Kut al-Amara (7 December 1915 – 29 April 1916), also

known as the First Battle of Kut. Following the surrender of the garrison on 29 April 1916, the survivors of the siege were marched to imprisonment at Aleppo. Historian Christopher Catherwood has called the siege “the worst defeat of the Allies in World War I” (Catherwood, 2014:51).

Ten months later, the British-Indian Army, consisting almost entirely of newly recruited troops from Western India, conquered Kut, Baghdad and other regions in between in the Fall of Baghdad.

**During the fall of Kut al-Amara, the British-Indian army was under strain due to a lack of manpower.**

During the fall of Kut al-Amara, the British-Indian army was under strain due to a lack of manpower. The British government used to recruit soldiers from Indian provinces. They had no plan to recruit soldiers from Bengal. Their excuses were, “Bengalis are not good warriors”, “They are not a martial or warlike race”, etc. After the First War of Independence of 1857-1858, this British suspicion of Bengali Muslims is thought to have grown. But after the defeats of the Brits in several battles, India’s pro-British leadership wanted Bengalis included in the forces of the British Empire. Finally, by 1916, the British government agreed to form a double company with Bengali troops.

### **Bangali Paltan**

At the beginning of the First World War (1914-1918), the Bengalis began to be recruited for the Indian Army. In the process, many non-combatant soldiers and skilled and unskilled laborers were also recruited from Bengal. Towards the middle

of 1916, the British Government decided to create a regiment of Bengali soldiers and its first unit was called the *Bengali Double Company or Bangali Paltan*. These Double Companies, each consisting of 228 soldiers, were made part of the Indian Army. On 7 August 1916, Governor of Bengal Lord Carmichael announced the formation of these companies at the concluding session of the Legislative Council in Dhaka (Huq, 2021).

### **Why Kazi Nazrul Islam Joined the Anti-Ottoman War**

The question is, why did the fiercest anti-British Kazi Nazrul Islam fight against Germany, i.e. Türkiye, for the Brits? One answer could be the high-profile propaganda campaign of the British government. Kazi Nazrul Islam’s friend Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay also went to be enlisted in the war. We can look at some words in his testimony. He wrote, “The effort to motivate the Bengali youth is going on continuously.” In his words, “...there are new posters in the town. Big posters of various colors are being pasted in the town’s alleys. How strange are the pictures, how strange are the postures, and how strange were their language! And how many strange words are being written!” Sailajananda also said: “Who says Bengalis are not warriors? Who says Bengalis are afraid? It is the duty of the nation to remove this disgrace, and only the youth of Bengal can do it. Jump for the lion’s share. Join Bangali Paltan! Damn it” (Mukhopadhyay, 1968:138).



Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay's statements reveal that Kazi Nazrul Islam and he had signed up together in the newly formed 49th Bengali platoon. But, according to Sailajananda's words, he became 'unfit' due to the 'plot' of his 'wealthy next of kin' meaning maternal grandfather, and 'Nazrul went at first to Nowshera, then to Karachi.' (Mukhopadhyay, 1968a:17).

And a little later, Sailajananda wrote, "I know the story of Nazrul's deepest pain in life. Mixed with that pain was the irrepressible love of adventure of youth. So, abandoning everything with a smile, he too jumped into this death sacrifice" (Mukhopadhyay, 1968b:153).

However, Sailajananda himself points out that the real reason for Nazrul Islam's going to war lies elsewhere. Sailajananda wrote:

"The English are at war with Germany. This is all we know at the time. None of us are happy with the English nor have the necessary devotion to the king. However, I asked Nazrul why we were going to fight for the English against its enemy Germany.

Nazrul said, 'Do you know that war is a science?

I said, 'I know!'

- 'We will learn that science.'

I said, 'They will push you towards death after enlistment.'

- 'Doesn't matter.'

- 'Then a shot from Germany, then finished'

- 'Will die? That's enough! Fighting and dying – great fun. I will die after killing.'

What a joy Nazrul had!" (Mukhopadhyay, 1968c:138).

Later, Sailajananda informed us, "Nazrul will learn warfare and form a large army in India, then drive the English out of the country - he told me about his secret intention one day"

(Mukhopadhyay, 1968d:139).

At that time, it should be noted that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was also touring Gujarat villages and towns, inviting the Indian public to join the British war. Gandhi became quite famous in India during this period. His Satyagraha<sup>1</sup> at Bihar's *Champaran* and Gujarat's *Khera* spread his fame abroad. However, he was still not awarded the title of *Mahatma*.

Gandhiji accepted it as part of his duty to recruit soldiers for the war on behalf of the British government. At first, he tried in Gujarat, then went to his workplace in Khera. Gandhiji wrote, "If I want soldiers, where else can I go without going to Khera? If I do not invite my own companions to be the first sepoys, then who will I invite?" (Gandhi, 1966:327-328).

### **Russian Revolution vs. Ataturk's Revolution**

Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad, one of the founding members of the Communist Party of India and a close friend of Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote, "The truth is that the October Revolution and the Red Army's struggle in this Russia had resonated in Nazrul Islam's mind. So he deliberately made Baluchistan the scene of his stories because the borders of the Soviet land can be reached very easily from Baluchistan" (Ahmad, 1973:164).

But a retrospective review of Nazrul's literature indicates that he was more influenced by Kemal Atatürk's post-World War I Republican Revolution than he had been by the Russian Revolution. If the extent of this influence is explored, Muzaffar Ahmad also will be found to have been mistaken. Muzaffar



Khudiram Bose is one of the Bengali revolutionary leaders who fought against the British rule in India (Indian Culture, 2023).

did not deny that Kazi Nazrul Islam to *some extent* had adopted the ideals of Mustafa Kemal alias Kamal Pasha, the hero of the Turkish Republican Revolution. But he clearly objected to why Nazrul Islam went to drag Anwar Pasha in the poem 'Kamal Pasha' for no reason! For he knows that Anwar Pasha had little connection with the struggle for the restoration of Kemal Pasha's Turkish state, not the empire (Ahmad, 1973:314).

Kazi Nazrul Islam referenced *Anwar* in the poem *Kamal Pasha* because of his political philosophy. He considered Kemal Pasha the successor of the Young Turk Revolution of 1907. That is why he wanted Kemal Pasha and Anwar Pasha to work together for the sake of the Ummah. In this case, he is found to

be favoring the assimilation of Kemal Pasha's nationalism within the cosmopolitanism of the Ummah. This perception will become clearer in the analysis below.

### **Kazi Nazrul Islam's Political Objective Behind Joining the War**

There are intense disagreements over Kazi Nazrul Islam's political philosophy regarding nationalism and patriotism. Sushil Kumar Gupta's dispute with Muzaffar Ahmed is a special example of this connection. There are more points of contention too. In 1966, Abdul Qadir, the editor of *Nazrul Rachnabali Poet* (Works of Kazi Nazrul Islam) delivered some glimpses of this diversity:

“Different people have tried to ascertain the nature of Nazrul’s patriotism in different ways. He wanted the total liberation of the country and the nation from political subjugation plus economic independence. He also directed his way. Some people thought his way of those days as terrorism - because he called upon the youth to open fire by using the example of Khudiram’s<sup>2</sup> self-sacrifice; some thought it as Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Dash’s<sup>3</sup> regularism - because he penned ‘Chittanama’; Some thought it pan-Islamism - because he sang hymns of praise for Anwar Pasha; Others thought it as Mahatma Gandhi’s Spinning Wheel Theory<sup>4</sup> - because he entertained Gandhiji by singing his Spinning Wheel Song” (Qadir, 1966:5).

**This victory of the New Türkiye was hailed as the only victory in the post-war world against European colonialism.**

None of these varied paths was his way. Abdul Qadir said, “But if you look a little deeper, you will understand that none of these ideas help to reveal the full nature of the truth.”

He added, ‘In fact, Nazrul was a Kemalist during the first period of his literary life. He thought that the path of the Orderly Struggle of Kemal Atatürk was the most appropriate way to regain his country’s independence (Qadir, 1966:5-10).

In this case, the word ‘Kemalist’ may be questioned. Was Mustafa Kemal a trailblazer

of anything? After the end of the First World War in Europe, Mustafa Kemal’s number one achievement was to separate and protect the homeland of the Turkish nation from the rubble of the defeated Ottoman Empire. He defeated the Greek forces invading the Turkish homeland in frontal battles. Behind the Greek forces was the British Empire. Therefore, this victory of the New Türkiye was hailed as the only victory in the post-war world against European colonialism. A prominent writer in Bangladesh put it this way:

“When the pleas, cries, indignation, shouts and exultations of the Muslim world, especially of the Indian Muslims, were engaged in entertaining the assemblies of the world’s powerful with a mocking face, then one day in the thundering hand of Kemal there arose a perfectly sharpened sword in a corner of his native land. The curtain fell on the comforts and amusements of the mighty, and the Muslim world began to float aimlessly in a flood of wonder, admiration, and praise. The lively enthusiasm of our young poet that day was:

“Kamal Tu Ne Kamal Kiya Bhai”

(Kamal, you have achieved unbelievable success, brother!)

That was the innermost thing in all our hearts that day” (Odud, 1988:5-10).

During the August and September of 1921, the National Liberation Army, under the leadership of the New Turkish Government, succeeded in defeating and driving the occupying Greek forces away. As far as it is known, Kazi Nazrul Islam’s *Kamal Pasha* was composed during the same period. At that time, this poem was sung to tune in the





joyous procession taken out in Calcutta to mark the victory of the New Türkiye.

Nationalist historiography in Bangladesh and West Bengal portrayed Kazi Nazrul Islam as a non-conformist. Though he might have shared elements of this tendency on his part, his actions suggest that he placed his faith in Ottomanism, which was inherently Islamic in spirit. Moreover, his other hero Anwar Pasha also believed in Ottomanism.

To properly understand Kazi Nazrul Islam's actual position over two Western ideas like *Nationalism* and *Patriotism*, his views on the Mughal Empire and Panislamism must be comprehended within their proper contexts.

### Kazi Nazrul Islam on The Mughal Empire

A popular hymn of Kazi Nazrul Islam, published in 1933, laments for the Mughal Empire thus:

“O ye bro, the Agra and the Delhi,  
Still are there but no king.  
No Kohinoor<sup>5</sup>, no Peacock Throne,  
No world conqueror army is anymore” (Islam, 1933).

His regret over the non-existence of the Mughal Empire is expressed thus:

“We don't know, nobody knows,  
How many waves to count sitting on the shore,  
How much we have witnessed, also to bear witness to

So many Cruel Sports of the Destiny” (Islam, 1933).

This hymn begins with these words:

“Ganges-Indus-Narmada-Kaveri-Yamuna are there,

Still flowing out as before,

Where are the people of previous genre there?” (Islam, 1933)

### “Turan, Iran, Hejaz, Egypt, India, Morocco, Iraq, standing hand in hand at the same row”

The quotes above clearly show that Kazi Nazrul Islam considered the erstwhile Mughal Empire as a single economic, military and cultural power which was culturally Muslim. On the other hand, the India of 1947 was not formed as a successor state of the former Mughal Empire. Rather, it became a successor state of the British-Indian Empire. It’s based on Hindu identity politics, which is why Hindu Nationalism has grown stronger during the past decades.

Pakistan, which was formed after the breakup of the British-Indian Empire, also failed to become the cultural successor of the erstwhile Mughal Empire because of being ruled by the elites of the colonial era. However, there is state recognition and popular support for the Mughal legacies in Pakistan.

### Kazi Nazrul Islam and Pan-Islamism

Roughly by 1931, Türkiye, Iran, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq and Saudi Arabia turned into nation-states. By welcoming the developments

of this era, Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote:

“Look at the huge rally at the Eidgah of Martyrs today.

Islamic Orders would be passed once again around the world.

Turan, Iran, Hejaz, Egypt, Hind [India], Morocco, Iraq,

Standing hand in hand at the same row” (Islam, 1931).

Three points emerge from the quote:

1. The poet accepted the emergence of nation-states, which some may find seemingly at odds with his overt supportive position for the former Mughal Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

2. The poet wished the newly formed Muslim nation-states would maintain a singular position in world politics.

3. The poet expressed hope that those Muslim nation-states would set the promulgation of Islamic Laws worldwide as their national objective.

The third point shows Kazi Nazrul Islam as ideologically nearer to Anwar Pasha. In the second stanza of the same lyric, the poet went on saying:

“There were faint ones with fear and regret,  
You too join this congregation, forget worldliness.

Today, those who were in prison are alive.  
Today, the Brave Heart runs to the field with the sword in hand.

Today, the Fate has changed; the Echo of Takbir has risen” (Islam, 1931).

With these words, the poet penned his dream of avenging the military defeats of the Muslim world in the First World War. That is, Kazi Nazrul Islam ideologically was out-and-out a Pan-Islamist. But at the same time,

he endorsed the republican nationalism of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He expected Atatürk would not compromise Islam's *Ottoman* philosophical and cultural legacies. It is evident in this lyric:

“The Red Torch of the Religion of Islam has been rekindled from side to side. O ye, the unaware one! You also wake up, light your life-lamp too. The Red Crown of Türkiye has waken up with Gazi Mustafa Kemal, Iran, the desolate country, has waken up today with Reza Pahlavi. Forgetting the slavery, the soulfoul Egyptians have waken up with Jaglul” (Islam, 1931a).

Needless to say that Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Iran's Reza Pahlavi and Egypt's Saad Jaglul Pasha were out-and-out nationalists, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, who simultaneously endorsed pan-Islamic ideas, regarded them as his heroes.

Was it a contradiction, or was there any hidden reason in depth? The reason is revealed in the last stanza of this lyric:

“Faisal is waking Up in the Great Iraq, waking up as the New Haroon-al-Rashid, Look at the Bayt al-Muqaddas waking up, waking up out of broken sleep. The 10 crore unwary Muslims of the Hind (India) alone remain unawakened” (Islam, 1931a).

The next stanza more can didly describes the condition of the Muslims in the then Colonised Hind:

“We only sleep like the Ashāb al-Kahf (Sleepers of Ephesus) for thousands of years, Once upon a time someone of us was a

king, we do boast of that.

If we do wake up, the world will tremble once again” (Islam, 1931a).

There are two points worth noting here:

1. Kazi Nazrul Islam wanted to awaken the 10 crore *Muslims of the Hind*. His country was Hind (erstwhile Mughal Empire), and in his view, the Muslims of latter-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh together conformed to a single political community.

2. He used to cite examples of politically successful Muslim leaders to awaken the Muslims of the Colonized Hind, and in doing so, he bypassed controversies over their position on the application of the Shariah.


It is evident here that Kazi Nazrul Islam gradually began to plant the seeds of nationalism in the meadow of his own Ummah consciousness out of an extreme urge to oust the British colonialists from the Hind (erstwhile Mughal Empire). In this context, if Kazi Nazrul Islam's understanding of 'Islam' isn't considered, his ideas and vision of Pan-Islamism may be misconstrued. We, therefore, have to turn towards a brief elaboration of Islam as understood by Kazi Nazrul Islam.

### Islam and Kazi Nazrul Islam

It's worth noting that in the view of Kazi Nazrul Islam, the True Vitality of Islam was *mass power, democracy, universal brotherhood and egalitarianism*.

He saw Mustafa Kemal Atatürk not only as the national hero of the Pure New Türkiye but also as the 'new founder of the true vitality of Islam' or reformer. When Atatürk

disbanded the caliphate in the name of the Turkish Republic, Kazi Nazrul Islam asked in a letter to Ibrahim Khan, “Is the superstition and false garbage that has been piled up in the name of Islam - is not calling it Islam a campaign against Islam” (Khan, 1967)? In this awakening song, Kazi Nazrul Islam’s detailed understanding of Islam is concretely manifested:

“We are that nation who become the  
martyrs in the path of religion.  
We have let the world know that we brought  
equality and fraternity.  
We’ve become that nation.  
Those who brought out for the thirsty earth  
scorched by the sins,  
Brought out of the hot bosom of the desert  
the cool fountain of peace,  
Broke the difference between the high and  
the low by letting everyone get chest,  
We’ve become that nation.  
We’ve first endowed freedom to the women.  
We have smashed the man-made walls and  
given them the same form.  
We have brought down the veil of dark  
night and brought out the light of hope.  
We’ve become that nation.  
Islam hasn’t come for the Muslims alone.  
The one, who seeks the Truth and obeys  
Allah, is a Muslim by name.  
No difference between the Amir and the  
Faqr, all brothers are the same partners.  
We’ve become that nation” (Islam, 1933b).  
Here the poet candidly elaborated  
his issues, viz, the universal equality of  
humankind, economic classlessness,  
women’s rights and democracy. He had  
found all these factors in Atatürk’s programs  
of revolutionary reform. 

## Editor’s Notes

<sup>1</sup> Satyāgraha (Sanskrit: सत्याग्रह; satya: “truth”, āgraha: “insistence” or “holding firmly to”), or “holding firmly to truth”, or “truth force”, is a particular form of nonviolent resistance or civil resistance. Someone who practises satyagraha is a satyagrahi. (India Times. Love and Satyagraha. (2023, August 12). Access: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/the-speaking-tree/love-and-satyagraha/>)

<sup>2</sup> Khudiram was one of India’s youngest freedom fighters and in the early 1900s, it was the public speeches of Aurobindo Ghose and Sister Nivedita which prompted him to join the freedom struggle. It is said that in 1908, Khudiram joined the Anushilan Samiti, an early 20th-century revolutionary group that resorted to violent means to force the British out of India. (Indian Culture. Kudhiram Bose The Boy Revolutionary. 2023, 8 of August). Access: <https://indianculture.gov.in/node/2796633>)

<sup>3</sup> Chitta Ranjan Das, politician and leader of the Swaraj (Independence) Party in Bengal under British rule. (Britannica. Chitts Ranjan Das Indian Political Leader. (2023, 8 of August). Access: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chitta-Ranjan-Das>)

<sup>4</sup> The Gandhian philosophy of spinning-wheel. As an inward spirit, the spinning-wheel, as Mahatma Gandhi introspects, epitomizes man as a divine being. As an outward spirit, it emphasizes self-help, self-service, self-contentment, and austerity. The dream of the spinning-wheel, as he visualizes, is the dream of a better emancipation of man as an individual and social being. (Narayanswami, S. (2000). The Gandhian philosophy of spinning-wheel. Gandhi Marg Journal, 22(3). Access: <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/Philo%20of%20spng%20wheel.htm>)



<sup>5</sup> The Koh-i-Noor diamond (also Koh-i-Nur or Kūh-e Nūr) is one of the largest and most famous cut diamonds in the world. It was most likely found in southern India between 1100 and 1300. The name of the stone is Persian meaning 'Mountain of Light'. The British East India Company was the owner of the diamond when it took over the Punjab region in 1849. (World History Encyclopedia. Koh-i-Noor. (2023, 8 of August). Access: <https://www.worldhistory.org/Koh-i-Noor/>)

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