

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) as a Muslim Poet-Writer: An Apology

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Abstract

After a conscientious perusal of Kazi Nazrul's writings, most of the readers come to the point that Kazi Nazrul Islam, even belonging to a Muslim family, treated the people of all religions equally. But it is a matter of great regret that some critics including William Radice have pointed out that Kazi Nazrul was unknown in the West for two reasons: partly because he was a Muslim; and partly for the fact that he identified himself with the rural poor rather than the elite of the pre-partitioned India. It is factual that philosophy, happiness and sorrows of a writer are actually reflected in his writings. In every piece of writing, we the readers study the reflection of what the writer thinks, how he thinks, how he looks at nature, how he looks at human beings etc. Nazrul came of an underprivileged but respectable family and suffered and struggled to be what he was, and this he delineated in his literary works. How could a poet-writer who used his pen only for humanism and whose aim was to create an atmosphere so that people of all religions can swig water from one quay be barred of being famous because of his religious philosophy and poverty? This paper aims at seeking an apology for the poet-writer for his becoming a Muslim and poor, shows him as a writer of humanity, classlessness, syncretism, tolerance, equality, etc., and questions the reader: is it prohibited for 'poverty' and 'Islamism' to be reflected in literature?

Keywords: Kazi Nazrul Islam, humanity, egalitarianism, syncretism, equality

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Introduction:

At the time of studying at Mathrun High English School, Nazrul had to leave the school as he failed to pay his school fees. So it can easily be said that Nazrul didn't identify himself with the rural poor, rather he himself was actually a member of underprivileged people and it was predestined by God with which he had nothing to do. But this fact of being disadvantaged barred him to be famous in the West. It won't be an overstatement to opine that he failed to become renowned in the West because 'he composed a large number of poems and songs during the period of imprisonment and many of his works were banned in the 1920s by the British authorities.' (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 4-5)

Dr. Fazlul Haque Shaikat, a renowned Nazrul researcher of the East Bengal, writes, "Nazrul's ideology was to see a society where nobody will come across any discrimination between Hindus and Muslims, rather everybody will be recognized as 'human beings' beyond divisions into classes or castes. He wrote for the young, 'Our religion is Islam, but the religion of our soul is youth and juvenility. We are for all countries, for all castes and creeds, for all religions, and for all ages.' When the wind of communalism started spreading all over the subcontinent, Nazrul came forward with the light and wrote: 'Are they Hindus or Muslims? Who ask this question, I say. Tell him, my Captain, the children of the motherland are drowning today'. In a national warm reception arranged for the poet in 1929, he uttered, 'Somebody say my writings are for non-Hindus, some say for the disbelievers, but I'm trying to bring both the Hindus and non-Hindus together and make them shake hands with each other'." (Shaikat, 2008, pp. 9-10)

But despite all of these heroic expressions in favour of humanity, William Radice has pointed out, "Kazi Nazrul was unknown in the West for two reasons: partly because he was a Muslim; and partly due to the fact that he identified himself with the rural poor rather than the elite of the pre-partitioned India". (Khan, 2010, pp. 1-2)

Thus, is it a felony for him to become a poor as well as a Muslim? Is it prohibited for 'poverty' and 'Islamism' to be reflected in literature? If not, why are his poverty and Islamism a reason behind his not being well-known in the West?

Kazi Nazrul: A Poet of Egalitarianism and Classlessness

"Nazrul Islam took a determined and principled stance against religious-communal hatred. He truly militated against the growing danger of communal conflagration, and he used all his skills as a journalist and a poet to convince both Hindus and Muslims of the folly of the religion-based hatred, passionately arguing that he 'entirely believed in the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity'". (Islam, 1999, pp. 1920-1950)

William Shakespeare, the brightest star in the sky of English literature, has very technically and explicitly shown the victory of the Christians in his famous play 'The Merchant of Venice'. Shylock, the Jew, is cruelly defeated in this play. His only offence is that he is a Jew, and not a Christian like Shakespeare. Antonio is really a philanthropist who lends money to the needy people without interest which is undoubtedly a good practice and supported by all religions and creeds. He is accused of bringing about a big problem to the business of Shylock who lends money to the poor and disadvantaged people with a rate of interest.

Antonio may let the people scrounge billions of money from him without interest as he had that much money to lend. With this Shylock had nothing to do. Shylock's business may not be supported by Christianity but it's an earning source for him. But notwithstanding, Antonio is rewarded with victory. By this great tragi-comedy, Shakespeare also tried to show the Jews as indescribably merciless.

Here, a world-famous poet and dramatist like William Shakespeare could help the Jew be triumphant as, I think, he deserves to win since he also helps the needy persons, and Antonio put a signature on the bond according to which he (Antonio) failed to pay the money within the stipulated time. But Shylock had to be defeated and was sinned more than against his sinning as he was Jew. William Shakespeare has, certainly and undoubtedly, showed his partiality and leanness towards Christianity. But this sleekness has been considered by the readers and critics as he is William Shakespeare.

But in the case of Nazrul, such an injustice practice or partiality can never be seen and observed. Throughout the whole of his life, Kazi Nazrul has sung for the egalitarianism and classlessness but failed to be eminent in the society of the people for whom he wrote. In one of his poems titled 'Human Being', the poet writes:

"I sing the song of equality
There is nothing greater than a human being,
Nothing nobler!
Caste, creed, religion- there is no difference.
Throughout all ages, all places,
We're all a manifestation
Of our common humanity." (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 466)

Moreover, to break away the idea of class discrimination, the poet also writes:

"In the name of caste, they play gamble,
Caste will be vilified if touched? It (classism) is not
A thing very easily obtainable.
The water of hookah, and boiler of rice
Are main for classism to you,
For this, o foolish, you break
One class into one hundred." (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 101)

How can the writer of these lines be prevented from being eminent in the world? And how could the people for whom he used his pen forget to remember him in their society?

A Muslim's Vilification against the Muslim

That Kazi Nazrul Islam was a Muslim and practiced Islamism needs no telling. But he is more a humanist than a Muslim. Unlike William Shakespeare and Rabindranath Tagore, this 'Muslim' poet is found to disparage what he finds as faults with religious representatives of his own religion.

The poet writes in his poem titled 'Human Being':

“At the mosque, the mullah is overjoyed,
By the huge amount of leftovers of meat and bread,
From yesterday's offerings.
Just then a sickly traveler arrives at the door,
Saying: “Father, I have been hungry
For the last seven days!”
The mullah reacts: ‘What a botheration!
You're starving? Just go and drop dead
In some cattle graveyard!
Besides-do you say your prayers?’
‘No, Father,’ replied the hungry man.
‘That does it-out!’ shouts the mullah
Shutting the door on his face,
Holding on to the meat and bread.
The hungry man continues on his journey,
Saying: I have lived for eighty years
Without saying a prayer, yet You've never
Deprived me of my food.” (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 141)

Being a true Muslim, Nazrul has attacked and denounced here the malpractices and mismanagements of the Imam of the mosques. Here, he would like to mean even God Himself doesn't deprive a man of his food whether he says his prayer or not. So, who are the Imams and priests of mosques and temples to drive away a hungry man when he begs for food to them?

Kazi Nazrul was and is a Poet of Man

Throughout his life, Nazrul tried to bring the people of all religions together and create an atmosphere so that people of different creeds come under one umbrella and live together with happiness and tranquility. In his famous essay 'The Temple and the Mosque', Nazrul writes: “Those eating-houses are created for the well-being of the human beings, human beings aren't created for the well-being of the eating-houses. If those (eating-houses) become the cause for the woe of humanity for our madness, then break away those dinning-halls. Let all human beings come under one sky and be saved. Let them rest under the courtyard of the same Moon-Sun-Stars”. (Shaikat, 2008, pp. 11-12)

Joseph T. O'Connell, a famous Nazrul researcher, said in his introduction to a translation of Nazrul's essay 'The Temple and the Mosque', "Nazrul wrote and sang tirelessly for the liberation of all humanity, not just the Muslims; he challenged vested interests whatever their type political or religious, foreign or domestic, Hindu, Muslim, Christian or whatever the mask behind which Satan might instigate fanatic violence." (T.O'Connell, 1974, pp. 106-114)

Nazrul also writes that Hindus and Muslims aren't recognized by the outward appearance. We cannot regard a man with beard as Muslim, or a man without it as a Hindu. This is picturesquely described in the essay 'The Temple and the Mosque': "In the midst of the uproar several Hindu lads thought that Khayru Mia, killed in the battle, was a Hindu, because his moustache and beard were shaven off.

Singing "Bol Hari, Hari bol" - Hindu prayer at funeral, 'say Hari (God)', they carried him to the cremation grounds for burning. Several Mussulman lads think that Sadanand Babu, who wore a beard, was a Mussulman killed by bullets. Reciting, "La ilaha illa Allah" ('There is no God but Allah' - a Muslim prayer), they took him for burial. Temple and mosque began to crack. I suspect because glancing at one another they were laughing." (T.O'Connell, 1974, pp. 106-114)

On the annual session of the Indian National Congress held in Krishnanagar, Nazrul sang one of the most famous songs he ever composed, '*Kandari Hushiar*' ('Helmsman Beware'). He sounded the alarm with the words: 'In this dark night, o sentries of Motherland, be alert;' 'this helpless nation is drowning- it doesn't know how to swim'; 'helmsman, tell those who are drowning that they are no Hindus or Muslims, for they are drowning as human beings'. (Kamal, 1999, p. 485)

These words unquestionably illustrate Nazrul's 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.

Characters from the Muslim and Other Religions

Kazi Nazrul Islam has chosen the characters for his writings from his own religion as well as from other religions which we hardly observe with Rabindranath Tagore, a world-famous and Nobel-prize winning poet in the Indian sub-continent. Let's peruse the following lines from 'Human Beings' -

“Listen, you ignorant: Human beings
Have brought the books,
The books never brought human beings!
Adam, David, Isa, Moses, Abraha, Mohammed,
Krishna, Buddha, Nanak, Kabir-the treasures
Of the world-they are our ancestors.
It's their blood that runs through our veins,
We're their children, kin-we're of the same body.
Who can tell? Someone among us
May turn out to be like one of them.

Whom do you hate brother, whom do you kick?
Perhaps within his heart
Resides the ever-awakened God!

Who's he? An untouchable?
Why do you startle? He's not to be despised!
He may turn out to be Harishchandra or Lord Shiva.
Today an untouchable -tomorrow he may become
A supremely revered yogi-emperor.
You'll come to him with offerings, sing his eulogy.
Why do you look down upon a shepherd?
Perhaps he's Krishna in shepherd's disguise!
Don't hate him for being a peasant
He may be Lord Balaram!
They're all bearers of eternal message,
Everyday begging men and women
Are turned away from the door.
How would I recognize
If Lord Bholanath and Girijaya were among them?” (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 142-143)

In the lines stated above, Kazi Nazrul Islam has very beautifully mentioned many of the honorable religious representatives from various religions of the world. He has urged the people not to despise even any common man like shepherds or peasants because he may become a figure with name and fame in the near future. This kind of unbiased and dispassionate delineation is possible only for the poets like Kazi Nazrul Islam who used his pen only for what is called equality or egalitarianism.

It is here mentionable that the Nobel-prize- winning poet Rabindranath Tagore is regarded as non-communal or non-sectarian while Kazi Nazrul is regarded (by some critics in the Indian sub-continent not by all) as communal or sectarian writer. But who will verify whether it is true or not? Should we look upon one as non-communal as he is non-Muslim, or should we view one as communal as he is Muslim?

Does only practicing Islam or being away of this credo differentiate between sectarianism and non-sectarianism? Rabindranath Tagore belonged to Hinduism. He had written 13 novels, around 120 short stories, more than 22 dramas, a lot of poetries etc. But it is a crucial question that in how many of his writings he has used the names from other credos to which he doesn't belong as the protagonist? It is already stated that he had written more than 120 short stories, but only in few of them he has taken some characters from the Muslim society.

But those characters aren't given any chance to be the protagonist. Especially mentionable, we find some Muslim characters in his famous short story 'Musolmanir Golpo' i.e. 'the Story of Muslim'. In this story, one character Modhu Mullah has been taken from the creed Kazi Nazrul belonged to. But he has been shown as the leader of a group of dacoits. Another character named Habir Khan is also a Muslim character who is shown as one of the major characters in the short story. But Dr. Mohammad Omar Farook, a translator of this short story, opines by asking, "Is it a notable contribution to become a non-communal writer?"

His Works are the Reflection of What Happened in all Families

When we go to go through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, we see that he has written what he observed to happen in Hindu families. For instance, the incidents of the short stories like *Mini*, *Thakur da*, *Dena Paona*, *Hoimonti*, *Postmaster*, *Balai*, *Didi*, *Professor* etc are the manifestations of Hindu families. But what we notice in the case of Kazi Nazrul Islam is unambiguous to us. He has delineated what he saw to come about in families of all religious peoples.

It is here especially remarkable that Kazi Nazrul had composed a number of notable *Shamasangeet*, *Bhajan* and *Kirtans* for the people who belonged to Hinduism. He wrote these types of sangeet disregarding what the conservative or fanatic Muslims may say something negative about him. That this poet, even belonging to Muslim society, married Pramila Devi, a girl from Hindu family is known and clear to all.

Kazi Nazrul Wasn't a Fanatic Muslim

It's known to all that Nazrul became a critic of the Khilafat struggle, condemning it as hollow, religious fundamentalism. His rebellious expression extended to rigid orthodoxy in the name of religion and politics. He also censored the Indian National Congress for not embracing outright political independence from the British Empire. During his visit to Comilla, Nazrul met a young Hindu woman, Pramila Devi, with whom he fell in love and they got married in 1924.

This proves that he wasn't a fanatic Muslim, rather he was a very compromising Muslim which is the basic of all religions. Pramila belonged to Brahma Samaj which criticized her marriage to a Muslim. Nazrul in turn was also condemned by Muslim religious leaders and continued to face criticism. He stunned society with his poem "Barangana" (Prostitute) in which he addresses a prostitute as 'mother'. The poet accepts the prostitute as a human being, reasoning that this person was breast-fed by a noble woman and belonging to the race of 'mothers and sisters':

"Who calls you a prostitute, mother? Who spits at you?
Perhaps you were suckled by someone as chaste as Seeta.

And if the son of an unchaste mother is 'illegitimate',
So is the son of an unchaste father." (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 473)

Nazrul also composed large number of songs on invocation to Lord Shiva, Goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati, and on the theme of love of Radha and Krishna. He was an exponent of humanism. Although a Muslim, he named his sons with both "Hindu and Muslim names: Krishna Muhammad ('Krishna' from Hindu while Muhammad from Islam), Arindam Khaled, Kazi Sabyasachi and Aniruddha." (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 7)

That fanaticism isn't religion is discerned from the following verses of the poem named 'Fanaticism is not Religion':

"Bullying, hypocrisy or fanaticism: that is not what religion is all about
According to all scriptures, fanatics are disciples of the devil: no doubt,
The one and only Creator of all: He is the loving Master ever;
That there is more than one Creator, no true religion can claim so; never.
Even then, partnership to God is attributed by Satan the smitten
Yet his judge is only God, no one else: in the Qur'an it is written.
Man can't be Satan's judge or try him; indeed, either to the Hell
or to Heaven, what human power can push him or propel?

Why are some ever-destitute, and some are ever-so-rich?
Why some always live in peace, while others are destined to trouble's ditch?
Which preacher or Mullah knows its mystery, please tell me?

(Anonymous, 2012, pp. 112-113)

By composing these lines, the poet seems to declare a war against fanaticism. Actually Nazrul wrote against the injustice and unfairness disregarding the identity of the oppressors i.e. they may be Hindus or Muslims or Christians.

A Poet of Brotherhood: Hindus and Muslims are Brothers

Nazrul also doesn't find any discrimination between Hindus and Muslims. He says that the Hindus and the Muslims are brothers. They are the two eyes of the greater India. They are two trees in one garden, he adds. Both of them are two rivers coming out of the Himalayas and going to the same sea. They are like two brothers quarrelling for the lap of one mother. This impartial and objective portrayal we see in his famous poem 'Hindu Muslim Duti Vai' (Hindus and Muslims two Brothers):

"Hindus and Muslims are two brothers
Two eyes of India, they are-
Two trees in a garden-deodar and kodom.
As if the Ganga and Shindhu river,
Always blowing together.
Coming out of the Himalayas and going to the same sea.
Nightingale and cuckoo
Singing together in the one garden,

Two brothers make a quarrel,
For the lap of one mother,

They are mad who
Make difference between Allah and God." (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 137)

His creativity diversified as he explored Hindu devotional music by composing Shama Sangeet, Bhajans, and Kirtans, often merging Islamic and Hindu values. His poetry and songs explored the philosophy of Islam and Hinduism, as he says: 'Let people of all countries and all times come together, at one great union of humanity. Let them listen to the flute music of one great unity. Should a single person be hurt, hearts should feel it equally. If one person is insulted, it is a shame to all mankind, an insult to all. Today is the grand uprising of the agony of universal man.' (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 5)

In 1920, Nazrul put across his vision of religious harmony in an editorial in Joog Bani:

"Come brother Hindu! Come Mussalman! Come Buddhist! Come Christian! Let us transcend all barriers, let us forsake forever all smallness, all lies, all selfishness and let us call brothers as brothers, we shall quarrel no more." (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 6)
In another article entitled 'Hindu Mussalman' published in Ganabani on September 2, 1920, he wrote:

No prophet has said, "I have come for Hindus, I have come for Muslims, I have come for Christians." They have said, "I have come for the humanity, for everyone, like light." But the devotees of Krishna say, "Krishna is for Hindus." The followers of Muhammad (PBUH) say, "Muhammad (PBUH) is for the Muslims."

The disciples of Christ say, "Christ is for the Christians." Krishna-Muhammad-Christ have become national property. This property is the root of all trouble. Men do not quarrel for light but they quarrel over cattle." (Anonymous, 2012, pp. 7)

How sardonic it is that a writer of these lines of harmony and brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims is regarded as a communal writer and prevented from being re-born and remembered among people in the West.

A Poet Who Finds no Difference between Men and Women

Nazrul was an advocate of the emancipation of women; both traditional and non-traditional women were portrayed by him with utmost sincerity. Through the following verses, Nazrul has very boldly declared that there is really no discrimination between men and women of this world:

"I sing the song
Of equality;
In my view gender difference
Is essentially a triviality.
Everything that is great in the world,
All the works, beneficial and good,
Half must be credited to woman,
And to man half only we should.

All the flowers blossomed in the world,
And all the fruits grown,
Isn't in beauty, nectar and fragrance of those
Woman's contribution?

All the great victory of the world
And all the grand voyages,
Gained grandeur and nobility from sacrifice of
Mothers, sisters, and wives, throughout the ages.

While king rules the kingdom,
And queen rules the king,
The misery and sadness go away,
Joy and happiness her grace does bring.

Gone
Is that age,
When man was the master
To enslave woman in his wish's cage.
Not very far
Is that cherished day,
When with homage of man,
To woman also homage, the world will pay." (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 374-376)

The verses stated above very obviously show that the poet was dead against discrimination between men and women.

Nazrul Was and Is a Poet-Writer of Tolerance and Equality

In his essay '*Dharmaghat*' ('Strike'), the poet-writer states his commitment to the toiling peasants in words which continue to be voiced by social activists in Bangladesh today:

"The peasants who during the whole year undertake back-breaking physical labor, while removing the sweat from their forehead with their arms, cannot even eat two full meals of boiled rice. Except a rag reaching down to his knees, he doesn't even avail of one proper dress through all his life..... But the one who takes his paddy rice spends twelve months under a royal (nawabi) roof, enjoying one after the other festival". (Hossain, 2000, pp. 45-95)

'Nazrul expresses his hope and expectation that workers will stage a rising which will make God smile in heaven, and leave 'Satan in fear'. (Hossain, 2000, pp. 45-95)
Nazrul's writings thus effectively reveal his combined commitment to equality between members of different religions, with an equally strong commitment to the struggles of Bengal's laboring population for social and economic egalitarianism.

A Poet-Man of What is Called Syncretism

Furthermore, Nazrul's writings demonstrate that he was and is a poet ahead of any religion. An analysis of the extraordinary speech which he delivered to the Muslim Literary Association (*Muslim Shahitya Shamiti*) in April of 1941 is helpful in this context. The speech entitled '*If the Flute Does not Play Any More*', was to be the very last of Nazrul's life'. (Majid, 1997, pp. 85-140)

Nazrul's speech is a testament of his personal beliefs. In the opening paragraph, he elaborately expresses his mystical search, his desire for union with a loving absolute reality, or Supreme Being. God is depicted as both beautiful and loving. His 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 God and a Goddess—*Krishna*, the earthly-loving God of the current of *vaishnavism* and the Goddess *Anandamoyee* or Durga are juxtaposed repeatedly throughout his testamentary speech. He writes: "If the power of *Anandamoyee* in me does not dissolve me by carrying me into the supreme Void, then I will once again sing the songs of love, of equality'. (Hossain, 2000, pp. 45-95)

In 'The Temple and the Mosque', the poet writes, "..... Once again the murky Hindu-Muslim issue has raised its head. First, there are brawls, then they hit each others' head. Yet once those who have got drunk over the 'prestige' of *Allah* or *Ma Kali* get bashed, then, as I can see, they do not cry for *Allah* or *Ma Kali*. No, Hindus and Muslims together cry and lament in the same language: '*Baba Go, Ma Go*'-just as children who have been abandoned by their mother, cry for their mother in one choir. Hearing the weeping of the wounded, the mosque doesn't waver, nor does the Goddess-in-stone of the temple respond." (Majid, 1997, pp. 85-140)

Despite a Muslim who practiced his religious rituals, Kazi Nazrul is observed to show his respect for the religious representatives and books of other religion. The following lines from his famous poetry “The Egalitarian” show how reverential he was to other religions:

“I sing the song
Of equality,
Where all status and class
Become triviality.
The Rendezvous of Hindu, Buddhist,
Muslim or those of Christianity,
I sing the song
Of equality!

Who are you? Persian? Jain?
Shaotal, Til, Garo? Jew?
Confucian? Charvaka-disciple?
Anything else; something new?

My friend!
Be whatever you are,
Or, whatever book or scroll you carry
in your head or on your shoulder.

Vedas, Tripitak,
Or Quran - Puran,
Avesta or another,
read as much as you like or can.” (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 466-467)

Unlike some other world-famous poets and writers, Nazrul here seems to be very courteous to all religions.

Poverty Made Nazrul Great

It has already been stated that a writer generally depicts what he experiences from the life he leads in this material universe. This is also true for this poet-writer. Kazi Nazrul came of a poor but respectable Muslim family. His father Kazi Faqeer Ahmed was the Imam and caretaker of a local mosque and mausoleum. At the young age of ten after 1908 when his father died, Nazrul had to begin working in his father’s place as a caretaker of the mosque to support his family. But is it a great offence for him to become poor and prop up his family in its distress? If no, why should his ‘poverty’ stand against him and bar him to become what he was supposed to be in the West? With a great pride, the poet sings that his poverty has made him ‘great’:

“O poverty, thou hast made me great.
Thou hast made me honoured like Christ
With his crown of thorns. Thou hast given me
Courage to reveal all. To thee I owe
My insolent, naked eyes and sharp tongue.
Thy curse has turned my violin to a sword.” (Chowdhury, 2001, p. 374-376)

Conclusion

The idea can be concluded by stating that Kazi Nazrul was not really a poet for the Muslims only, and his works are not the personal property for the people of his own religion. He was rather a poet-writer of what we regard as humanity. He wrote and sang for human beings only disregarding what the so-called religious representatives may say anything negative against him. It is obviously proved when we go through his writings. Thus, the researcher here asks, should this poet of humanity be kept aside and barred him of being famous in the world only for the reasons that he came of a Muslim family as well as for the fact that he was predestined to be underprivileged?

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