

# Modern Bengali Poetry and Kazi Nazrul Islam

**B**ENGALI poetry of the first two decades of the century, in the period before World War I, has been described as the reflection of Tagore.

To separate poets like Karuna Nidhan Bandopadhyay (1878), Kumud Ranjan Mallik (1878), Kallidas Roy (1889) and others like them from the pervasive Tagore tradition is difficult. Consciously or unconsciously they imitated and emulated Tagore. They were impertinent about it, claiming it was easier for them to walk roads they were familiar with than to strike out on their own. Yet, even at a time when Tagore's influence was at its height there were at least three poets whose individual distinction set them apart: Jatindranath Sen Gupta (1888-1954), Mohitlal Majumdar (1882-1952) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-76). In the work of Satyendranath Datta (1888-1922) the Tagore-tradition is fused with the older pre-Tagore ways. He acted as a bridge between Tagore's emulators and those who wished to free themselves from his influence.

Satyendranath Datta is placed among those ranking close to Tagore by some critics, giving Nazrul Islam second place as a new but lesser poet. This is only partly correct for, even within the ambience of the Tagore-tradition Satyendranath Datta has a separate place of his own. His individuality and distinction are obvious. Satyendranath Datta admired Tagore. Of that there is no doubt but he was as much himself as Pramatha Chaudhuri or, Abanindranath Chatterjee, as original and as different. The poets of Satyendranath Datta's time were influenced by him as much as those in Tagore's circle were by Tagore. His difference derives from his natural delight in the practice of various poetic techniques and his choice of subject-matter. In these he was largely free from Tagore's influence. He contributes not a little to the liber-

ation of Bengali poetry from the conscious effort to shake off the influence of Tagore is also manifest in the works of Dwijendral Roy. He was the first to show it openly. His hostility to Tagore created a sensation in Bengal at one time. Tagore's poetry seemed vague and mysterious to him. Of The Golden Boat (Sonar Tor) he wrote:

The most difficult poem by the most difficult poet in a language foreign to me, a language spoken in an alien country (Wordsworth's Ode to the Immortality of the Soul) is easier to comprehend than the poetry my Bengali brother, writes in my own tongue. The effort to decipher its meaning brings out the perspiration. If this is because the feelings expressed are lofty, their loftiness is extreme. The poem is not really difficult to understand nor devoid of feeling. It has no meaning and it is also self-contradictory.

Dwijendral's rebellion was loud, his criticism derogatory but it was shallow and superficial. He did succeed in affecting some of the younger poets but he added nothing to Bengali poetry, either in technique or subject matter. He changed nothing. What had acquired a distinction of its own during the Tagore era and become established subsequently as a tradition was left untouched. Dwijendral Roy's only contribution was in the use he made of language. He handled the language of poetry like prose. As a dramatist and song writer he achieved more than as a poet.

A profound sense of his time and a deep social awareness inform the work of Satyendranath Datta although

Rafiqul Islam



Kezi Nazrul Islam, The soldier.

he kept aloof from the intellectual restlessness and skepticism of the postwar period in which he lived. In the political and social poems he wrote like Samyasa, Sudra, Methor, Jattri Pati, Satyendranath Datta made remarkable advances. A sudden and untimely death put an early end to his life.

Pramatha Chaudhuri's name is also memorable. In connection with his Sonnet Panchasat he wrote to Amiya Chakravarty: There was a Chakravarty: I found shallow imitations of Tagore irritating. The evidence is in one of my published poems.

The poet was referring to a sonnet entitled Advice (Upadesh). His attitude is clearly shown in the lines quoted here:

If you would be a poet well beloved write love to melt your reader's heart Two things are needed at the start borrowed words and forced feeling for your sweet heart.

Nazrul was emotional also but he kept his feet firmly on the ground. His rebellion went beyond literature, reaching into society in general and penetrating as far as the state. It was Nazrul Islam who related modern Bengali poetry to the life of the times. He did not deny or decri the influence of Tagore for he had the strength to go beyond it and open out new creative possibilities. There is a questioning of established values in Nazrul's poetry. In his attitude to love he accepts physical love and the emotional experience it brings unequivocally. And although he does not disbelieve in God there is a marked absence of faith in ethical codes based on ritual and established practice. Nazrul also consciously examined different traditions and cultures and made use of them deliberately. He voices strongly the need to create a new society on more egalitarian lines even though he does not look Marx for endorsement. Proverbs, rural idioms, words of phrase in daily use and words borrowed from foreign languages all find a place in his work. He is not choosy out of regard for a fancied purity of language, and takes whatever is of use to him in creating of a new imagery and the diversification of his range of subjects. Even the foremost of the modern poets who followed him, Jivanananda Das, was influenced by his work.

# Looking Back on The Soviet Union, With Love And Nostalgia

**U**NIL recently, visitors to the Soviet Union usually talked about their experiences in Moscow and other cities in uncharitable terms. They talked about the chaos and confusion at airports, the unfriendly custom and immigration officials, the long wait for a transport to the city. Some criticised the quality of food in the hotel, the absence of room service and the indifference, almost bordering on downright rudeness, of waiters in restaurants where, as one friend once put it, getting an empty table was almost like winning in a lottery.

Jokes about life in Moscow filled books, but it was hard to find a dependable guide for buses and the metro. Many of these criticisms were — and still remain so — well-founded. Some of them were echoed by Moscovites themselves, without much embarrassment as if they were talking about someone else's country, not their own.

Now, suddenly, as people refer to the "former Soviet Union" and to Moscow as the capital of the Republic of Russia, rather than of the non-existent USSR, images change and the experiences are recalled in a different light and perspective. Uncharitable criticisms give way to positive comments, while some fond memories are exchanged among one time visitors to — yes, we must now get used to the term — the former Soviet capital.

This is precisely what happened at an informal get-together here the other evening. There were quite a few friends and acquaintances who had either lived or studied in Moscow. Some had served in our diplomatic mission there, while others had

paid short visits to the country. There seemed quite a lot to talk about, in nostalgia. There were those unforgettable visits to the Bolshoi Theatre, if one could afford the price of the ticket, watching the Swan Lake. Once in a while, one dined out at Baku, the noisy, crowded and smoke-filled restaurant on the Gorky Street that served Azarbaijani speciality, *Sabjapilau*, a biryani dish served with spinach. There were the long walks through the Red

by the western standard would be a lack of free discussion on academic issues, including on tenets of Marxism, was another matter. We all knew that this problem, the absence of intellectual freedom, touched lives of millions, denying them the right of political dissent and association, a problem whose solution eventually came in the collapse of the whole system and disintegration of what we knew, until recently, as the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics. As we were

Soviet influence, then synonymous with both Socialism and Marxism, probably represented the single most important force among our generation of university students and teachers. Here, the research would take us to the relationship between the so-called progressive leftist school and the rising Bengali nationalism, to the reaction of the rightist faction in Awami League to the phenomenon and finally to the impact of emerging political equations on our national scene. What happened when the Chinese influence came in? How did our intellectuals react to the anti-Soviet uprising in Prague in the fifties? Did the this event cause a decline in the Soviet influence, but still leaving the so-called Marxist school relatively secure in its own cocoon? Above all, where was the Soviet influence most pronounced? Among the students, intellectuals, peasants, labour or journalists? Where was it more visible than strong? And where was it the other way round?

## MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

Square when, even in the middle of the Russian winter, the chilly wind felt fresh and crisp.

All very conventional memories? Perhaps.

Then, one young friend who had studied in the University of Moscow in the early seventies recalled one of his impressions which this writer thought was different, almost original and somewhat unexpected.

"What I liked as an undergraduate student in Moscow was of being free from tension and anxieties, free from being caught in a hectic rat race," he said. Then, he added that he missed this "nice comfortable feeling" when he moved to the United States for his graduation.

It was presumably a minority, but genuine view. How this young friend reacted to what

all filled with nostalgia about Moscow of another time, no one seemed particularly interested in discussing all the various causes for the end of the Soviet Union.

**A** subject that is waiting to be researched and written about relates to the influence of the Soviet Union on Bangladesh, starting with our independence from the British rule in 1947 to the present day, perhaps right until last week when the Russian flag started flying over the embassy of the former Soviet Union.

Such a study would certainly cover a wide field, beginning with the late forties and early fifties, when the

**N**O matter what we fine out about the rise and fall of the Soviet influence in this region, the help from Moscow to our liberation war remains the most important — one should say a glorious — chapter in our bilateral relations. True, in the power game that was played with our destiny, the position of Moscow was hardly an unselfish one. But whatever its motives, it made the right move, at the right time and thus helped us to win the war. Notwithstanding the future course of events in Moscow, our shared history can never be written off.

# Cataract of the Mind

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

**P**OETS all over the world have spent hours romanticizing over the beauty of a pair of eyes — the way they sparkle with joy or grow into limpid pools of sorrow. For most people it is the eyes in the face of either a man or a woman that attracts. "Her eyes talk," a paramour speaks of his beloved. "His eyes are dark and intense," drools a teenage girl speaking of her latest heartthrob. There is no doubt that the eye is one of the most fascinating part of any living body and its real beauty lies in the expression it reflects and holds rather than structure or shape. But the expression is beautiful when it is of love, of admiration, when it shines with honesty or twinkles with hidden amusement. So what happens when this expression is one of vulgar distortion and shameless lust? Does it not make one cringe with disgust and mortification?

What am I talking about you may be asking. I refer to those bipedal creatures who call themselves 'men' and have nothing better to do than stare in the most distasteful manner at anything that resembles a female form. There is nothing reverential or admiring in those scolding stares. They are from heads filled with perverted thinking and a depraved kind of obsession. The victims of such hateful attention, women, are totally helpless and have no option but to endure and pretend to ignore it.

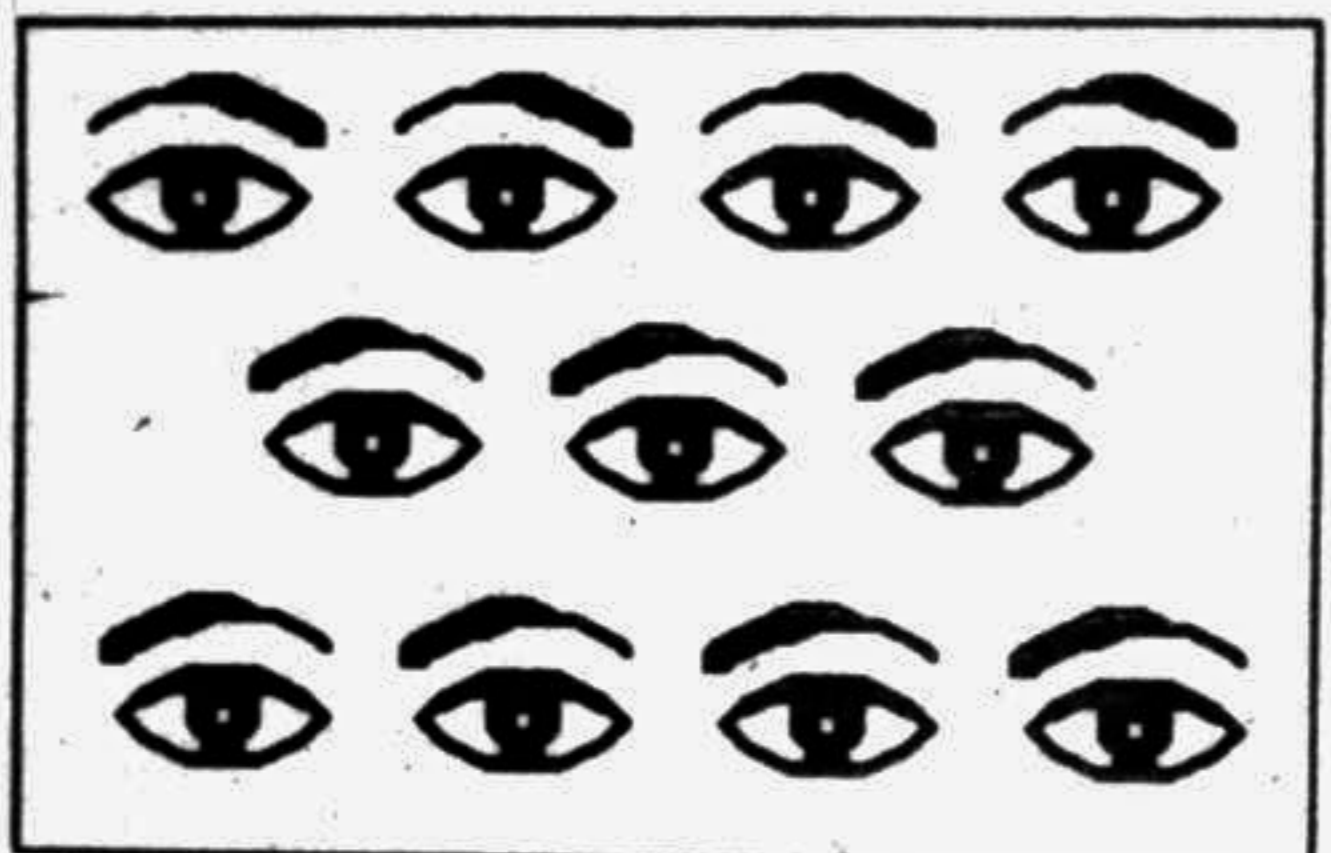
Those leering eyes are everywhere whether you are walking down the street, sitting in a rickshaw or a scooter, at your desk at the office or standing in a lift. Some of my male readers may think I am over reacting or being downright paranoid. So let me give my sceptic readers a few examples and may be they will be convinced.

I am, like hundreds of my female species, travelling in a rickshaw on Gulshan Avenue. The hood of the rickshaw only partly covers me and offers little protection. First, two men whiz by on a motorbike. The rider at the back spots me and nudges his friend. Soon the motorcycle starts to swivel and turn overtaking the rickshaw from both sides, slowing down from time to time to take a closer look. I try to look ahead but all the while I am painfully conscious of those leering eyes, that lewd expression riveted on me, on my being. A car honks impatiently and I give out a sigh of relief since the motorcycle is forced to move on. But peace is short lived. The driver of the car slows and turns his back to get a glimpse while my love for humanity turns into utter contempt. I keep wishing he would would hit the island so that those eyes, those ugly, grotesque eyes would be shut and silenced forever.

I am now sitting in a scooter which has stopped at the lights. This is a 'Z' cinema hall. Before I can take a few carbon monoxide breaths that horrible feeling creeps into me again. I look up and

sure enough, it is those eyes again. The occupants of the neighbouring scooter utilize their time waiting for the light to go green by inspecting me from head to toe and ogling to their hearts content. I console

go around wearing revealing clothes, they are just asking for it." As usual it is the woman who has to be the scapegoat for any evil of society! But I would like to inform these people that more often than



made for them are equally outrageous — they are just not used to seeing women." Or "what do you expect if women

not, it does not matter what the woman wears, or how old she is or even whether she is attractive or not. As long as she

is a woman, she is, to those eyes, an object, a piece of meat to be inspected and stripped of all dignity.

Such behaviour is a consequence of the image of women that is portrayed in society through films, posters, books myself as many of my fellow women do, with visions of those heads being axed off at the guillotine or more realistically, severed by a speeding bus.

Am I becoming psychotic, a sadistic maniac, I think to myself. But I just can't seem to shrug off that feeling of degradation and outrage.

What psychological impairment causes this distorted behaviour and that has gripped most of the male population in this country? The excuses etc.

The concept of respecting women, treating them as human beings rather than sex objects, is alien to these men. The idea that women are just weak, helpless, brainless creatures to be used and

abused is so internalized in these bestial maniacs that it has become a reflex action to stop and ogle at anything looking like a human female. Why else would 'men' in their fifties or sixties stare at young girls with such greed and crude desire?

Why else would 'men' blatantly cast 'dirty looks' and focus their attention on certain parts of a female's body as she walks by?

In Freudian terms this kind of 'deviant behaviour' if you want to call it that could be explained as the result of a repressed society where normal interaction between the sexes is severely frowned upon or regarded as taboo. But this sort of psychoanalysis let us leave the experts to ponder on. For now let us simply concentrate on building an image of woman as an intelligent human being, as man's companion and friend, not his object of prey and abnormal desire. Only then will those eyes be of appreciation and respect. Only then will this cataract of the mind clear.

# In The Eyes of The Law

(Contd. from overleaf)

Now, as in the past, laws and programmes tackling prostitution are based on many prejudices against women. Instead of helping or protecting women in prostitution, these measures, especially the laws, tend rather to 'protect' the men from 'bad' women in prostitution.

Regarding what the law in Bangladesh has to say, Rahat Fahmida spoke to a noted lawyer Sigma Huda — looking into the legitimacy of prostitution and that of the 'resistance committee'. The following is an excerpt of the conversation.

**DS:** What article in our constitution deals with prostitution?

**SH:** Article 18(2) contained in the Fundamental Principles of the State Policy of the constitution states that adopt effective measures to prevent Prostitutional Gambling. This part of the constitution being fundamental to the state policy cannot be enforceable though it has been incorporated as a guide to the interpretation of the Constitution and of the other laws of Bangladesh and also is the basis of work of the states and of its citizens. Therefore, the state has committed itself as a part of its policy to eradicate prostitution yet not applied that the article in question will be enforceable in the court of law.

**DS:** What is the legal basis of committee's stand?

**SH:** The Resistance Committee cannot justify its demand and action such as, harassing persons and beating of clients as it can in no way take the law into its own hand. If carrying on the business of prostitution becomes a public nuisance and is not congenial to the enforcement then the Resistance Committee can request the authorities to take action to curtail such business. However, it may be remembered that under Article 41 every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion but in so doing

such right may be restricted if, it affects public order. Therefore, there can be no legal basis in which the Resistance Committee can take the law into its own hand without first taking recourse to the law enforcing agency.

**DS:** What is the legal basis of the prostitutes' stand?

**SH:** The Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act 1933 has never been given effect to. On the contrary the operation of Brothels has been defined to mean a place where 2 or more prostitute jointly work or operate their business of prostitution. Furthermore, soliciting can be an offence. Under the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance 1983 it is stated that whoever lets out, hires, sells, buys or uses any woman of any age shall commit offence under the Ordinance and shall face the consequences as contain in Ordinance itself. Thus we see that even under this Ordinance the prostitute has been inherited from the offence as she is being treated as victim and not as the perpetrator of the offence. In such circumstances, if the prostitute feels that she is being not allowed to carry on her business as permitted under Article 40 of the Constitution then she has the right to go to court for redress. Further, the court will have to incorporate whether her profession is lawful or not. It is also an offence if assault or criminal force is applied to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty. The Penal Code further provides punishment for kidnapping, abducting or inducing a woman to compel her marriage, selling or buying minors for the purpose prostitution etc.

**DS:** Are the affidavits, claim a number of prostitutes claim to have, legal?

**SH:** There is no such intent as to the validity of the docu-

ment on the basis of which prostitute can claim to be lawfully pursuing their profession. Defendants are required before a prescribed authority affirming that the facts contained in such affidavit are true and such may only act as evidence to such acts. However, evidence by prostitute only endorse loop holes of the law which are exploited by such evidence. It is seen that the affirming Magistrate or Notary Public do not even bother to verify the basis of the contents of the evidence and we have seen that in most cases even though the prostitutes are below the legal ages and not at all admissible to practice as prostitute. The affirming authorities have never taken such minors or persons behind such minors who are instrumental in making these evidence to task.

**DS:** What is the Bangladesh Jatiya Mahila Ainijibi Samiti doing? What legislative changes do you suggest?

**SH:** Bangladesh Jatiya Mahila Ainijibi Samiti was first to produce the atrocities being admitted in the name of Un-Islamic Resistance activities Committee. We had said in our press conference that whilst appreciating the effect of prostitution destroying the dignity and status of woman yet without providing them alternative job upon which they can live and survive no person or authority can evict them from their residence. At the same time it is to be remembered that these prostitutes are recognised tax payers and they also contributed greatly to the development of the neighbourhood. We also highlight loop holes in the existing law namely, the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act 1933. We had also placed before the press the draft amendment to this act by which we hope the prostitute could ultimately be saved from being eliminated from getting justice and in the meantime adinterim measures have been suggested.

# The Tanbazaar Cycle

(Contd. from overleaf)

Shilpi is an attractive 23 year old who cannot remember the circumstances under which she came to the brothel 10 years ago. She falls under the 'top class' category of call girls. Her rates range from 500 taka an hour onwards although she never asks for money in advance. She drinks regularly, her favourites being VAT 69 and Red Label. Shilpi has also been to Saudi Arabia where a client of hers introduced her to a brothel there where she says, there are many Indonesian, Indian and Bangladeshi women. Although the perks of her 'job' were very attractive she has come back of Bangladesh because all her earnings used to be taken by the brothel owner.

The other side of Shilpi's story is that of a young woman afraid of what will happen to her when she loses her looks and youth and a desperate mother trying to bring up her eight year old daughter. When asked what will happen to her child Shilpi says "I will never let her enter this profession. I have kept my child as far away from the brothel as possible. She is being taken care of by my mother and she has no idea about her origins."

It is not their moral and psychological situation that makes the prostitutes' lot hard to bear. It is their material condition that is most often deplorable. Exploited by their pimps and their madams, they live in a state of insecurity, and three-fourths of them are penniless. After five years of the life, about seventy-five per cent have syphilis, according to doctors who have inspected thousands. Inexperienced minors, for example, are fearfully susceptible

to infection; twenty-five per cent should be operated on as a result of complications. One in twenty has tuberculosis; sixty per cent become alcoholics or drug addicts; forty per cent die before the age of forty. It must be added that, in spite of precautions, now and then they become pregnant and that they operate on themselves, generally, under bad conditions. Common prostitution is a miserable occupation in which woman, ex-



Babies born into this world face a limited choice of livelihood when they grow up

ploited sexually and economically, subjected arbitrarily to the policy, to a humiliating medical supervision, to the caprices of the customers, and doomed to infection and disease, to misery, is truly abused to the level of a thing."

Prostitutes in Tanbazaar seem indifferent to the AIDS threat. One woman claimed that if they contract any venereal disease they go to a clinic and do not take clients till

they are well. Such claims are difficult to substantiate.

The demand for female flesh will not miraculously disappear. Clients interviewed by the Daily Star cite an endless variety of reasons for buying sex: boredom with their wives, the need for experimentation, the freedom from emotional responsibility.

As this demand is a real factor, it is perhaps time to take a new look at the very roots of our legal system. Prostitution is illegal not only as a social wrong, but to prevent interested groups from making profit by arranging such intricate gang-systems as in the Tanbazaar area.

Prostitution is a commercial transaction, in which women's sexuality is controlled and utilised for male sexual pleasure.

Prostitution is divided into two categories: forced and free. It is mostly innocent, ignorant, young girls from rural areas who are lured into forced prostitution. The conditions of work are extremely exploitative. For this type of prostitution, legal measures that exist already should be enforced to help those young girls out of their deplorable situation, but penalise only procurers and other agents.

Legal protection is also required for free prostitution. According to interviews with women in this category, none of them wants to stay long in this 'profession'. They see prostitution as a short-term means for their survival. Therefore, solutions like registration of prostitutes would stigmatise them and make it more difficult for them to leave this institution.

On the other hand, outlawing prostitution strengthens the underworld and prevents

# WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

You often receive letters from women who complain about being put down by their husbands. The answers you give never work because the relationship is one sided and the man gets away with anything. If a woman wants to assert her independence she is rebuffed, further humiliated and ultimately made to surrender. I want to hear your comments.

Nasira Chittagong

Dear Mita,

I was going somewhere and the car stopped at a traffic light. There was a girl of 9, naked, except for shorts, shivering in the cold. I was so upset that my evening was spoilt and the image of the shivering child kept on coming back. How much longer this atrocity, and cruelty to children will go on? Will this situation ever change? Is there anything I can do to help?

Dear Rita, Gulshan

Dear Nasira,

What you say is true, but you will have to agree that things have changed for the better since the last few years. The struggle must go on, not always overtly or aggressively but in subtle ways, just enough to show that women, despite of the humiliation still want to protest. I feel optimistic that the man women relationship will go towards more equality if future and women should not give up and surrender.

One is faced with this kind of sight everyday, stopping at red lights have become a torture. We hold our breath when these children approach and breathe a sigh of relief when the light turns green and continue. The state should be responsible for looking after its citizen, whether man, woman or child. This has not apparently happened and the poor and distributes have been abandoned. However there are organizations who are working for the protection and development of children and anyone is free to join and lend a helping hand. The Shishu Adhikar forum in one such organization which you could contact