

# Memories of Nazrul in London; a Play in Bangla Staged in Britain and Do We Need a Ministry of Culture?

**F**ew birthday anniversaries of our great cultural personalities of the past evoke so much sadness and anguish as that of Kazi Nazrul Islam, which we observed during the past week.

While our homage to the memory of the great poet was utterly sincere, we could not help wondering if such observances have become somewhat ritualistic. My immediate thinking is in favour of more research on the life of the poet, the kind of research that would focus on the sources of inspiration for his writing in all different fields and, indeed, for his music.

We have a number of good books on the poet. But do we have a complete authoritative biography of him, one that covers all aspects of his chequered and controversial life, without excluding his illness on which, I am told, no serious work has been published?

Soon after our liberation, we, in Bangladesh, started paying the poet the attention he deserved, treating him as our national figure. But we took his illness as a *fait accompli* and his recovery as an impossible proposition.

However, this was not the case in the early fifties when the poet was brought to Europe, to Vienna and then to London, for treatment. Then, just 50 years old, Kazi Nazrul Islam was relatively at an early stage of his illness which, experts in Calcutta said, had not been accurately diagnosed. So, as some of these doctors argued, there was still a chance, perhaps a slim one, of his recovery. Hence, there came the trip to Vienna which had the best facilities for neurological treatment available in Europe and then to London. It was probably in 1954 or 1955. But I am not sure.

What we do remember vividly is the sadness we, then either studying or working in London, felt when visiting the Poet, at a modest flat in north London. By then, we knew that doctors in Vienna had found little hope for any prospect of his recovery.

In London, there were enough Bengalees from erstwhile East Pakistan and West Bengal to take good care of the visiting poet, the leading among them being the late Sayeedul Hassan, then the Trade Counsellor for Pakistan and Dr Tarapada Basu, also dead, who had been the most dominant figure of the Bangla-speaking community in the British capital for four decades, as the London bureau chief of the *Hindustan Standard*.

As I found out for myself, a visit to the poet was a heart-breaking experience. Nazrul was usually sitting on a mattress on the floor of what served as the living room. But it was always almost completely bare. People who looked after the poet rightly discouraged visitors from crowding into the room, because, it seemed, too many people around him irritated Nazrul. He would become restless and jittery. When left alone, what he liked to do was to take pieces of paper and tear them up, slowly in rhythmic movements, taking little interest in his surroundings. It is said that he reacted, often by raising his head with interest and sometimes with a vague smile, when someone sang one of his songs, accompanied by a harmonium. His reaction tended to be different when it happened to be a song composed by someone else. The fact that he recognised his own compositions and was usually pleased to hear them revived the lingering hope that all was not lost with Kazi Nazrul Islam.

One of my many journalistic lapses was that I did precious little to find out more about the visit of Kazi Nazrul Islam to London, on doc-

tors' opinion about his illness, about people who accompanied him, about his daily routine and even about the duration of his stay in the British capital. I just did not realise how important would be my recollections of the visit a few decades later when we might start looking into different aspects of the poet's life, including about his abortive treatment in London and Vienna.



Khan Ataur Rahman who, already a superb singer, was yet to find his way into the film world? Or was it someone else, please allow me to be immodest, say, this humble self?

We staged a Bengali play in London, running for three nights, to a packed audience. The play, not anything particularly modern like *Kalindi* by Tarashankar Banerjee, but a simple heart-warming one, *Sirajoddolla*, one that could move our target audience, somewhat simple-minded, not particularly well-educated Sylheti owners of and waiters from Bengali restaurants.

Instead of trying to book a theatre in the West End — that would have been too audacious even for Lohani — we got the Unity theatre at Camden Town, which, owned by a leftist group, was offered to us, a group of Bangla-speaking artists from West Bengal and the then East Pakistan, virtually free of charge. It was for three nights, with all the facilities for rehearsals, the use of the make-up room, the lights, the screens and whatever else one needed to stage a play in the land of Shakespeare.

Lohani had no problem in getting the lead role, while Khan Ata, Nurul Islam who has just retired from the Bangla service of BBC and Sunil Roy from Calcutta were put in other important roles. We had problems in finding the right girl to play the female lead role, the wife of the Nawab Sirajoddolla. Eventually, we found a particularly good-looking one — so good-looking that any make-up would have done her gross injustice — but she could not say a word in Bangla, the language of the play. Again, it was Lohani who came up with yet another audacious idea. "She will speak in simple Urdu," he declared, "the language of the

Bangla-speaking people in London has developed new dimensions. There are weekly journals and other publications, occasional art exhibitions and even book fairs. But are there Bengali plays staged in London? I wonder. However, we — people like Khan Ata and myself — remain proud of a modest beginning we had made in the early fifties.

**H**AVING once suggested at an informal get-together here that the Ministry of Information should start reducing its functions and gradually liquidate itself, I should have no problem in agreeing with our guest columnist Zillur Rahman Siddiqui that we should do the same with the Ministry of Culture. He raised the question in his regular piece published on Wednesday.

However, I have some difficulties in going along all the way with the position taken by Prof Siddiqui.

True, most developed countries have no such ministries, partly because they do not believe in influencing trends in cultural activities and partly because there are large well-funded foundations and trusts providing assistance to activities which fall in the realm of creative activities, from offering grants to struggling writers to underwriting the expenses of a theatre.

Most developing countries are in a different — indeed, in a difficult — position. Few of them have the kind of private sector which sets up foundations and trusts, backed by endowment funds, to provide assistance to cultural activities. In the end, few developing countries, including Bangladesh, have viable theatre movements outside the capital, national public library networks, art institutes at the district level and thriving publishing trades. The result, many of the developing countries I have worked in during past decades do have ministries of culture. Unfortunately, they do not function in the way they should.

The answer does not lie in creating a vacuum. Instead, we should look for a solution what contains a package of answers, a few innovative ones combined with some borrowed from other countries.

In Canada, a substantial grant for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) which operates a highly effective programme for the Third World is voted by the parliament, based on an all-party agreement. Then, the programme is handled by an independent body, untouched by "the coarse fingers of the government", to quote an expression used by our columnist.

Should we then try to set up an autonomous corporation which is funded in the way the parliament in Canada supports IDRC, supplemented by assistance from the private sector? Cynics would say that no autonomous body can work in this country. My answer is, we ought to try, like we are trying with parliamentary democracy, instead of throwing up our hands in despair.

The fact is, there is much to be done in the field of cultural activities, especially outside Dhaka and Chittagong. We need theatres, good public libraries, viable community newspapers and even art shows. If we can carry out these jobs without setting up a state-backed mechanism, we should be perfectly happy to do so. Meanwhile, we should not let our built-in cynicism take us in the wrong direction.

## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Besides Sayeedul Hassan and Tarapada Basu, one man who probably had all the facts to fill in the gaps about the poet's visit to Europe was Ataur Rahman — hope I have got the name right — who served as the constant companion of the Kazi. Unfortunately, while the poet returned to Calcutta, Rahman stopped in Rome and disappeared in search of a career in the film world, very much like that young Dhaka writer-journalist, Abul Kalam Mohammad Shamsuddin, better known as Akamusha.

**I**T probably had nothing much to do with the visit of Kazi Nazrul Islam to London as such. But the early fifties also saw the Bengali community in the British capital try to give Bangla a modest place in the cultural life in London, and that too, believe it or not, in the theatre world. After all, the "Ekushe February" — the historic Language Movement — in Dhaka had to produce its echo, rather a delayed one, in the United Kingdom.

After all these years, I would not remember who thought of it first. Was it the late Fateh Lohani who, like the late Nazir Ahmed, could come up with any number of audacious but perfectly practical propositions? Or was it

Nowab's household? One potential actor — that's myself — stood on the threshold of a new career with tremendous possibilities. But he found his way blocked simply because, as it had happened a few years earlier in a play staged by Dhaka University, that my Bengali had too strong Sylheti accent. Eventually, as a compromise, I was given not one but two roles, albeit rather minor ones. In one, I acted as the Munshi of the Nowab who purposely spoke Bangla with Sylheti accent — after all, the ruler of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa could indeed recruit his clerk from Sylhet — much to the delight of our predominantly Sylheti audience. In the other role, I acted as a sentry who walked from one end of the stage to the other, in measured footsteps. It was better than lying on the stage to the other, in measured footsteps. It was better than lying on the stage as a dead soldier after the Battle of Plassey!

It was truly a fantastic show. We did not get any review in the *Times*. What was important, the two worlds we lived in, one of restaurant-wallas and the other of educated students and journalists, had merged into one in a shared understanding of our cultural heritage.

By now, the cultural life promoted by

**W**E go back a long way. Akhlaqur Rahman and I, way back nearly half a century. In the nature of things few of our contemporaries survive. Some like Munier Chowdhury and Shaheedullah Kaiser were done to death by the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army on the eve of its abject surrender in December, 1971. Horrid word — "collaborator" — which has a surprisingly contemporaneous ring in Bangladesh, which has the virtue of forgetting nothing perhaps because of its congenital inability to solve current problems currently. The confusing rhetoric of the day makes yesterday's enemies of independence undergo a sea-change to become today's guarantors of independence and state sovereignty. Akhlaq would have none of this passing off of wolves in sheep's clothing till the last day of his life. He said as such during our first meeting in ten years about two months ago, unhappily also our last, when he walked in unannounced into my office in the company of a common friend of our stormy student days, Syed Anwarul Karim (Sack for short), former foreign secretary and our one-time PR to the UN.

Akhlaq took his Master's in Economics from Dhaka and Manchester Universities and his Ph.D from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) under the celebrated Professor WW Rostow, the innovative proponent of "take-off economics", before Milton Friedman perhaps the last unabashed academic to uphold the magic panacea of refurbished and updated capitalism. But Akhlaq survived Walt Rostow's authoritative, almost authoritarian assaults to remain an unreconstructed Marxist. This last terminology has come to mean all manner of things to all manner of men and in later days one did not really know who among those calling themselves Left, Radical etc were the fish and which the fowl!

In my life Akhlaq had the remarkable jack-in-the-box quality of popping up as and when he wished, at the most unexpected moment and occasion. The farthest I can remember of him is in late 1947, when as a student activist from Calcutta I met this stormy petrel who had already made a name for himself in East

## My Friend Akhlaq : A Tribute

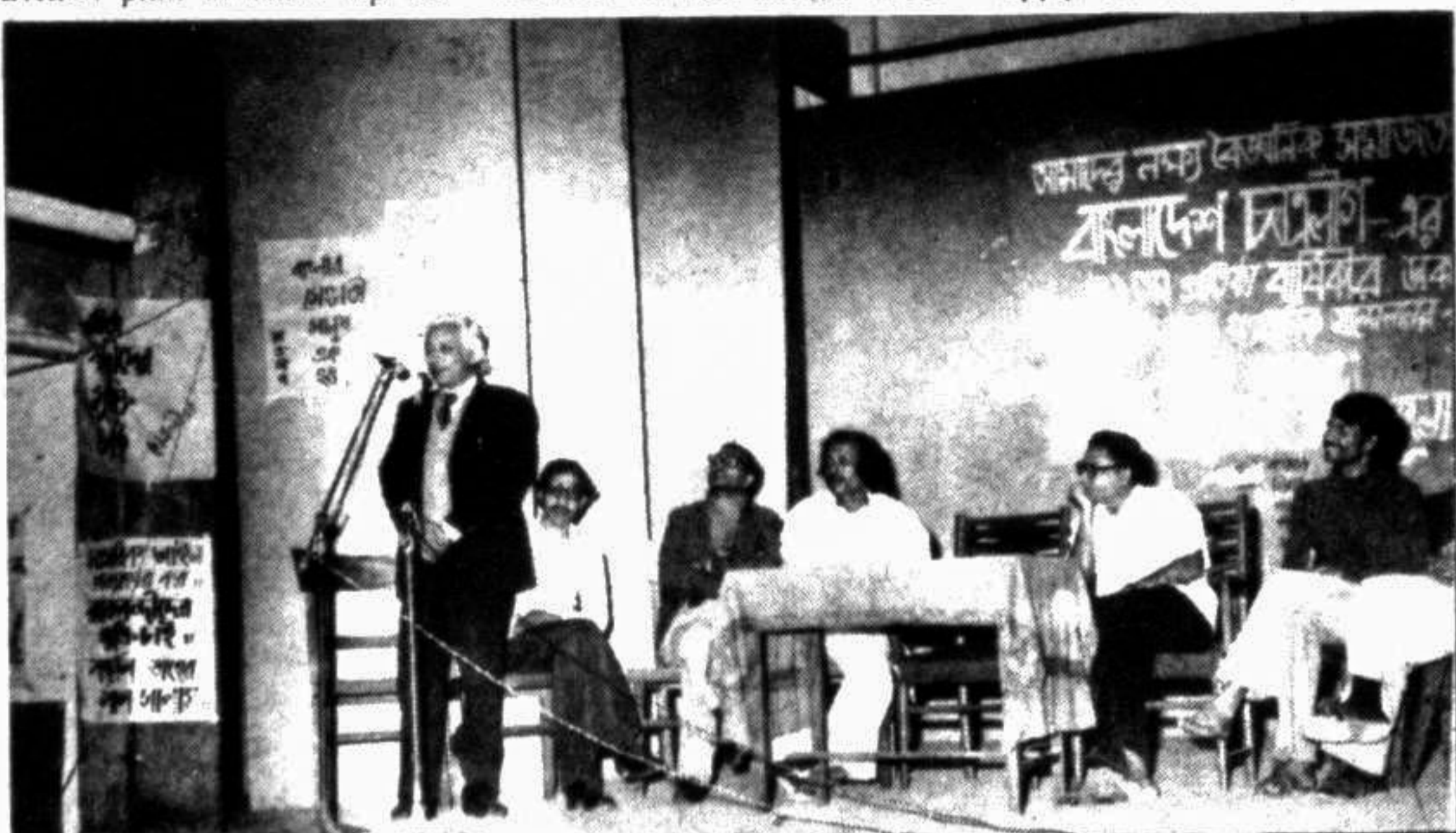
by Syed Najmuddin Hashim

Bengal as a militant of the All-Bengal Students Federation. I recall with some amusement how, soon after partition, I saw Akhlaq, bloodied but unbowed, like a bull in a Spanish ring, parrying off attacks for which actively campaigned in the Sylhet Referendum for the Muslim-majority district's accession to Pakistan under the British plan to carve up the

communist or progressive worth his salt. Akhlaq however survived and soon after 1947 became president of the reorganised East Bengal unit of the Students Federation.

I next met Akhlaq in Karachi when his travel plans to the UK for higher studies were, according to him, thwarted by the then prime minister of East Bengal Nurul

economics faculty. One day, I was witness to an unusual happening. A young man with a First in economics from the local university turned up for an interview for the job of a research assistant. Akhlaq gave him short shrift. He told him without batting an eyelid that only students from Dhaka and Peshawar universities need apply for the simple reason



Dr. Akhlaqur Rahman addressing a seminar organised by the Bangladesh Chhatra League, some time in the seventies. Photo: Courtesy Mrs Akhlaqur Rahman

Subcontinent along communal lines. He had ammunition aplenty like recalling that the SF, following the lead of the Communist Party of India, had done much to lend theoretical legitimacy and to popularize among the masses the Muslim League's communal demand for Pakistan by equating it with the Leninist-Stalinist thesis of "Self-determination of Nations", confusing the medieval concept of religious community with the twentieth century definition of nation-states. The CPI had changed course suddenly with the change in its leadership even before partition by disowning Dr Gangadhar Adhikari's learned thesis in support of the Pakistan demand and substituting it with the equally flawed theory of 'progressive India versus reactionary Pakistan', to which 'feudal country' no accretion of territory could be supported by any

Amin, on the strength of his unsavoury police dossier. After cooling his heels for weeks on end in the Pakistan capital, he had to return to Dhaka. During our long seasons in Karachi, I recall how we concurred on how Pakistan had already become "a vast prison-house of nations," after having come to know Sindh, Pathan and Baloch firebrand nationalists of every hue and colour.

After losing sight of my friend for a dozen years, I met with him again in the 60s in Karachi, and the meetings became almost a daily affair, when he was joint director of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) housed on Bunder Road within stone's throw and almost opposite to Broadcasting House where I worked as news editor. He had returned to Karachi after a stint at Peshawar University where he had founded and built up the

Pakistan; Khan Mohammad Shamsur Rahman (known as Dr Johnson for his encyclopaedic knowledge and total recall) — intellectual, administrator, diplomat, secretary of East Pakistan's planning think-tank in the 50s and co-accused with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the notorious frame-up of the *Agartala Conspiracy Case*. Rischid considered Akhlaq's economic formulations the last word in clinical precision and clarity and Rehman Sobhan as approximating the classic concept of political economist. Akhlaq had his own rating system for a clan he considered overwhelmingly prone to selling out for a handful of silver and among the honorable exceptions he listed himself, Rehman Sobhan and Anisur Rahman. I remember his fantastic performance in Rawalpindi during a nationwide live broadcast of a seminar on Ayub's five-year plan, whose architect was the super technocrat Shoaib (who owed Pakistan nothing because even his drinking water came from France — the bottled *Eutan* and *Perrier*!). When Rehman Sobhan, in his flawless Englishman's English and low-keyed voice, offered some barbed comments, the economic adviser to the GOP, Professor ML Qureshi jumped into the fray in the government's defence using the blunderbuss rather than reasoned argument. Up jumped the redoubtable Dr Akhlaqur

Rahman and, metaphorically if not literally rolling up his sleeves, barked, "Qureshi, Rehman Sobhan has forgotten more of economics than you can ever hope to learn!" The meeting ended in a fiasco with the authorities precipitately retreating from their venture into the glassnost of live broadcasts. It was during his time in Peshawar that he read a keynote paper at Maulana Bhashani's Kagmiri conference in March-April, 1957. Its elaboration in his 1963 publication, *Partition, Integration, Economic Growth and Inter-regional Trade* became indispensable source material in the exposure of inter-wing economic disparity. He showed how the forced purchase by East Pakistan, at inflated monopoly prices, of manufactures of West Pakistani industries built out of our plundered jute earnings, constituted a classic example of neocolonial extraction of the Eastern Wing's wealth. Akhlaq for one was never fooled by hypocritical appeals to Islamic ideology and state loyalty which yielded value added to the West at the cost of unabated impoverish-



## ONE QUAZI NAZRUL ISLAM TO ETERNITY

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

We are assured for ever that one unrelenting rebel would take a stance at all time. Playing on his fiery veena, he would beat our oppressing time. While in the midst of everything, he would stand out prime. At least, he would not endure silly pantomime!

Here is one Nazrul who talks of love, Without interruption — in an unfaltering tone. Who thinks of engraving rambunctious inscriptions on dead stone. Whose martyrdom on the altar of love is not a mere obsession.

While we are shocked by every single notoriety, While we indulge in pettifoggery, tantum and self-pity, While we cannot look beyond all looming actuality, Here, in overmasterly euphoria he makes his deepest entreaty.

A vagabond, a bell-boy, a soldier, a poet always Who pays to the *Prometheus* all allegiance Who mourns never for lost days, Who takes delight only in vintage — Our man, our deity, our spoilt fulfillment, Our inflaming furor and fervour thus in a razzmatazz over-spent.

ment of the East. During the 1971 crisis when he was adviser to Agha Hasan Abedi's *United Bank*, Akhlaq was untiring in his efforts to raise funds for the Bengalees stranded in West Pakistan. After another hiatus I came upon Akhlaq in Dhaka in 1975 and the reunion nearly ended in a fight. About his ramoured association with the *Jalijo Samajtantrik Dal*, I commented that I could forgive political tyros of the self-proclaimed Left being totally ignorant of recent history but how could a seasoned socialist like him lend his authority to a party which had named itself literally after Hitler's *National Socialist Party*, the abominable *Nazi*? On that occasion I will recall what he said, "If you had not been who you are and my old buddy I'd have wiped the floor with you!" Only he caustically pronounced it as *baddie* as in Western movies but good humour and the old camaraderie were soon restored. The government of the day can be forgiven for a lot of things but not his long incarceration on dubious charges of 'com-

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## WRITE TO MITA

**Dear Mita,**  
I left my job as a school teacher after my children were born. They are 6 and 4. Recently I got a good offer of a full-time job which is going to be very demanding. I have never left my children on servants and am very hesitant to do so now. On the other hand, this is a good opportunity for me to embark on a career and I am very tempted. What should I do, please advise.

Ruma, New Eskaton, Dhaka

**Dear Mita,**  
Since the last two years I have been going out with a married man with children. I have tried very hard to break off this relationship but have not been able to. We now want to get married but I fear the social condemnation that is sure to come. What can we do? I am willing to do everything so that the family does not suffer too much. Please advise, I feel so guilty.

Anonymous, DOHS, Dhaka.

**Dear Ruma,**  
The anxiety you are having about leaving your children and going back to fulltime work is only natural. Believe me, mothers who have been working for years still go through anxiety and guilt. If you can arrange for proper and safe care for the children, then you should surely go back to work. Children of working mothers are not necessarily neglected. You have to concentrate on giving quality time to them. What about your husband? If he supports you, then surely he will take over half the responsibility of looking after them.

**Dear Mita,**  
I read with interest the letter in your column from the man who wants to prevent his bhabhi from getting married again. I liked your answer but you should have disagreed with him more strongly. Who is he to stop a 45-year-old woman from getting married? Does he know the pain and loneliness she has suffered during the last 5 years? Everyone is shocked because she is marrying a man 10 years younger but nobody minds when a 40-year-old man marries a woman of 20. This kind of hypocrisy should be condemned and the writer of the letter should be asked to mind his own business. What do you think?

Selna Jahan, New Eskaton, Dhaka.

**Dear Anonymous,**  
Whatever you do, your action will hurt and affect the lives of some people, there is no getting away from it. However, if you have taken an adult decision there is nothing else for me to add. The gentleman should have a long and frank talk with his wife, she should be spared any unnecessary humiliation. And should of course see that the family is well provided for. In such situations children are the worst sufferers, giving them financial security is just one way of helping them cope with the trauma. In our culture it is very tough but if possible some ties should be maintained with the children. In a situation as this there is always a victim, most often it is the wife. Use your judgement in dealing with her, remember how you would feel if you were in her position.

**Dear Selna,**  
I agree with most of your comments, our society is very hypocritical and has double standards for men and women. There is nothing wrong in her marrying a younger person but there is a possibility that the man is trying to exploit her. Even then she should be allowed to take that decision and that is what I have advised.

**Dear Siddiqua,**  
I have often not been able to give satisfactory answers due to space constraint but the column cannot be expanded. I will however look into the possibility of dealing with one or two problems at a time. The purpose of this column is not to give solutions to problems but to introduce the writer to some options which he/she can later explore.