

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

The Mute Rebel

by Asoke K Bagchi



AT Bombay the great Bengali thespian, Tulsi Lahiri met me. He was an actor, a director, a lyricist and a dramatist. His lyrics were very much like those of the rebel poet of Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Next morning I was scheduled to leave for Liverpool on board the "MV Jal Azad." Poet Nazrul Islam, his paraplegic wife, son Aniruddha, a nurse and his secretary Rabiuddin Ahmed were also to travel by the same boat.

Poet Nazrul Islam was the second most popular poet of Bengal after Rabindranath Tagore. In sharp contrast to Tagore's affluence, he was born in an almost unknown family at a small village named Churulia, near Asansol.

He was a man of indomitable spirits and wrote many poems for our freedom movement. The themes of most of those were rebellious. On the other hand his lyrics and ghazals were idyllic and suave.

His songs composed during the freedom movement of India irked the British Government and he had to serve a term in the gaol. Several of his books were proscribed.

He was a total extrovert like the European poets, artists, musical composers and intellectuals of the Renaissance and later periods, which might have been the prime cause of his ultimate sufferings.

During the early forties he became the editor of the Bengali Daily "Nabajug".

On the 9th of August, 1942, Gandhiji raised the slogan of "Quit India". Strangely, on the 10th of August, 1942, the rebel poet Nazrul Islam became totally mute! Probably our Creator realised that there was no further need for his blood boiling songs and poems!

The poet was being taken to England and a few other places in Europe to seek medical relief for his mutism.

In the afternoon of the day prior to our departure the poet was given a big send off at the Sea Green Hotel on the Marine Drive. There was a huge gathering attended by Hemant Kumar, Bipin Gupta, Anil Biswas, Pradip Kumar, K M Yusuf, Kamal Amrohi, K A Abbas, Mukesh and Naushad Ali.

"Fulero Jalashay Nirab keno Kavit?" (Why the poet is silent today in this brilliant array of flowers?)

It transpired that a famous princely singer from Tripura and his family lived in a suite of the same hotel. But he was conspicuously absent! During the formative years of his singing career he was benefitted by songs of Nazrul. But due to some reasons unknown he suddenly left Bombay for a neighbouring hill station in the morning of the reception.

In fact, a kitty was opened by Mukesh and the collection tallied over fifty thousand rupees with a few hours!

The poet was dressed in dhoti and kurta and was wearing thick garlands of jasmine and mogra. He was sitting mutely all the while and was very busy in tearing apart an old issue of a pictorial magazine! When the tofa of donation was handed over to him he made some unintelligible sounds and dropped it on the farash.

The poet was given a rousing farewell at the Ballard Pier next morning, a loud-speaker was blaring out Hemant Kumar's popular song "Zindagi pyar ki do-char gharti hoti hai..." (Life is just a few moments in the realm of love...)

The ship progressed in its leisurely motion towards Aden. On board there were quite a few singing Bengali youngsters, their leader was Prodyut, who had his tanpura with him. Often he used to sit in front of the poet and sing:

"Age zarli tor bhanga nauka chortam na..." (If I knew beforehand, I would never have boarded your broken boat...)

One day a strange light came to face of the poet, it looked brightened! As soon as Prodyut stopped singing, the poet became agitated and muttered something as if asking for an op-cure!

Prodyut sang again and the "rebel" looked pacified like a person in a trance.

The poet's wife said, "Oh Lord! he was trying to talk after eleven long years of silence, but it was nipped in the bud!"

We entered the waters of the Mediterranean sea through Port Said on the 12th of May, only three days later on our way to Algiers, was the 54th birthday of the poet.

The whole ship got ready to celebrate it. The poet's guitarist son, Aniruddha was the music director, Prodyut was the prime vocalist, Mrs Pearson of the Thomas Cook & Co was the piano accompanist and a few youngsters and women formed a choir.

I hurriedly translated a few well-known poems of the poet with the assistance of Maria, a Goan freelance journalist. The musicians set those to the usual tunes of the poet.

In the evening a huge flower shaped cake was prepared by the chef of the boat. The poet was dressed in his best and non-chalantly tore pages after pages of old magazines. He saw the cake and tried to grasp it like a child!

When the music started the poet stopped all his activities and stared longingly at Prodyut, may be he was recognising his own tunes!

When the chorus sang: "Chal! Chal! Chal! Urdha Gagan bajje Madal Nimne utala dharani tal..." Meaning: March! March! March! The drums are beating high in the sky The earth below is in turmoil...

NEW publications — good, bad and indifferent — keep landing on my desk. There are several feelings uppermost in my mind as I look at the pile of books at the corner of my writing table with a sense of guilt, the same unease as one has of falling behind in responding to letters from old friends in distant places.

The feelings are hardly all negative. One impression is, a lot of literary activities have been going on behind the scene, with authors themselves bringing out their own books, presumably at their personal cost — novels, poetry or drama which an established publisher may not get too excited to offer to bookshops. As an author once confided to me, "A publisher has his balance sheet to look at, but I only count my meagre saving."

Again, judging by a documentary we saw at the Bangladesh Television (BTV) a few weeks ago, which came very close to being a case of good reporting, for publishers and book-sellers, the business has been fairly good in recent months or perhaps right through the year 1992. Perhaps a survey by the Bangla Academy would show if people are, in effect, reading more books or just buying them and leaving them to fill their bookshelves.

Most of the books in my growing collection are well-produced, in terms of printing, the layout and design of the jacket. My complaint is — it is an old grievance — that books in English on our social issues, some written by our internationally-known experts are either badly edited or not edited at all. May be a publisher is too over-awed by the standing of the expert to change anything in his (or her) manuscript.

I wonder if book editing is taught in the Department of Mass Communication of Dhaka University or if it has ever figured in the activities of the Press Institute of Bangladesh.

Books which reach our office are generally meant for reviews, but this does not apply to all the publications. Some come to us with ready-made reviews, written by established literary personalities, for favour of publication. I have not seen this practice anywhere else in the regions I have worked in. So, first time I got one such review, I read it carefully, debating if it should be used at all. I found it a little long and certainly complimentary to the book. Then, when I eventually went through the book, I found the review hardly euphoric and, I would say, fairly comprehensive and balanced. After all, the reviewer had as such interest in promoting the book as in protecting his (or her) professional reputation. Well, that's good enough for me — and The Daily Star.

THERE are several books lying before me, just as I write this column, which I plan to read during the next few weeks — or months.

The latest arrival is a biography of the noted artist, S M Sultan. If the painter requires no introduction — this paper published a definitive feature on him last year — there is also no need to introduce the author or the book either. He is Hasnat Abdul Hye, a civil servant-turned-writer who, in 1977, won the prestigious Bangla Academy Award for Literature, a well-deserved recognition for one who has written plays, short stories and novels. Interestingly enough, Hye's 363-page book, simply titled "Sultan", was originally written in Bangla and then translated into English by noted professor and symposium speaker, Kabir Chowdhury.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Before I start on the book on Sultan and find someone to review it, I must of course finish an interesting one I am half-way through: "Spring, 1971" by Faruq Aziz Khan, a personal account of what the writer, a well-known expert in several fields and a former civil servant, and his family went through during the liberation war in 1971. I am impressed by what I have read so far. It is a straightforward account of the ordeal of one of many Bangladeshi families, told in a simple precise language, without a display of undue emotion. After one quick glance, see a strong possibility that part of the book may be controversial. That's what will make me read it with more than usual interest.

There are also books which offer collection of pieces — in prose and verse — which deserve our attention, even if we do not get time to read them all.

My congratulations to the United Nations Information Centre, Dhaka for bringing out "A Choice of Verse of Human Rights", edited by Prof. M Harunur Rashid. Published in June, the collection contains poems by 24 nationally-known writers, all in Bangla, but translated into English with skill. I, for one, would like this publication to be included as a recommended reading in our colleges. (UNESCO once made a sizable grant to Sri Lanka for publication of

materials on human rights for use in schools. May be Bangladesh should try for a similar grant for this project).

The publication on human rights by the UN Information Centre has what we may call, a companion book, "Aar Juddhah No", (No More Wars), which, edited by Saïda Khanam, is published in the memory of the late Poet Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua who passed away in 1977, at the end of a productive career in writing. "No More Wars" contains generally short pieces by a cross section of noted personalities from the creative field, dealing with horrors of armed conflict and calling for peace and harmony among nations and people.

There is indeed a lot going on behind the scene in our creative world. We just have to take a little time off to look at it. It is certainly worth it.

ONE book has caused me considerable disappointment, even some embarrassment perhaps because it relates to a member of our clan, the late Dr Syed Mujtaba Ali who needs no introduction.

Edited by Bishamadev Choudhury of the Department of Bangla, Dhaka University and

just published by the Bangla Academy, the 113-page slim volume contains personal letters of the noted author of "Deshe Bideshe", addressed to his life-long friend, Saif-ul-Alam Khan of Sylhet. The publication is titled, "Syed Mujtaba Ali's Patraguchcha" (letters of Syed Mujtaba Ali).

Most of the letters of Uncle Mujtaba Ali, included in this publication, were written soon after he had arrived at Santiniketan in July, 1921 as, I am told, the first Muslim student of Viswabarati. During the five years he spent at this unique institution of Poet Rabindranath Tagore, Mujtaba Ali had probably written hundreds of letters to Khan. The correspondence between the two went on right until 1973. As Khan tells Choudhury in a letter about his friend, he must have received over a thousand letters from Ali, from Santiniketan, from different places in the world and finally from Dhaka after the liberation of Bangladesh.

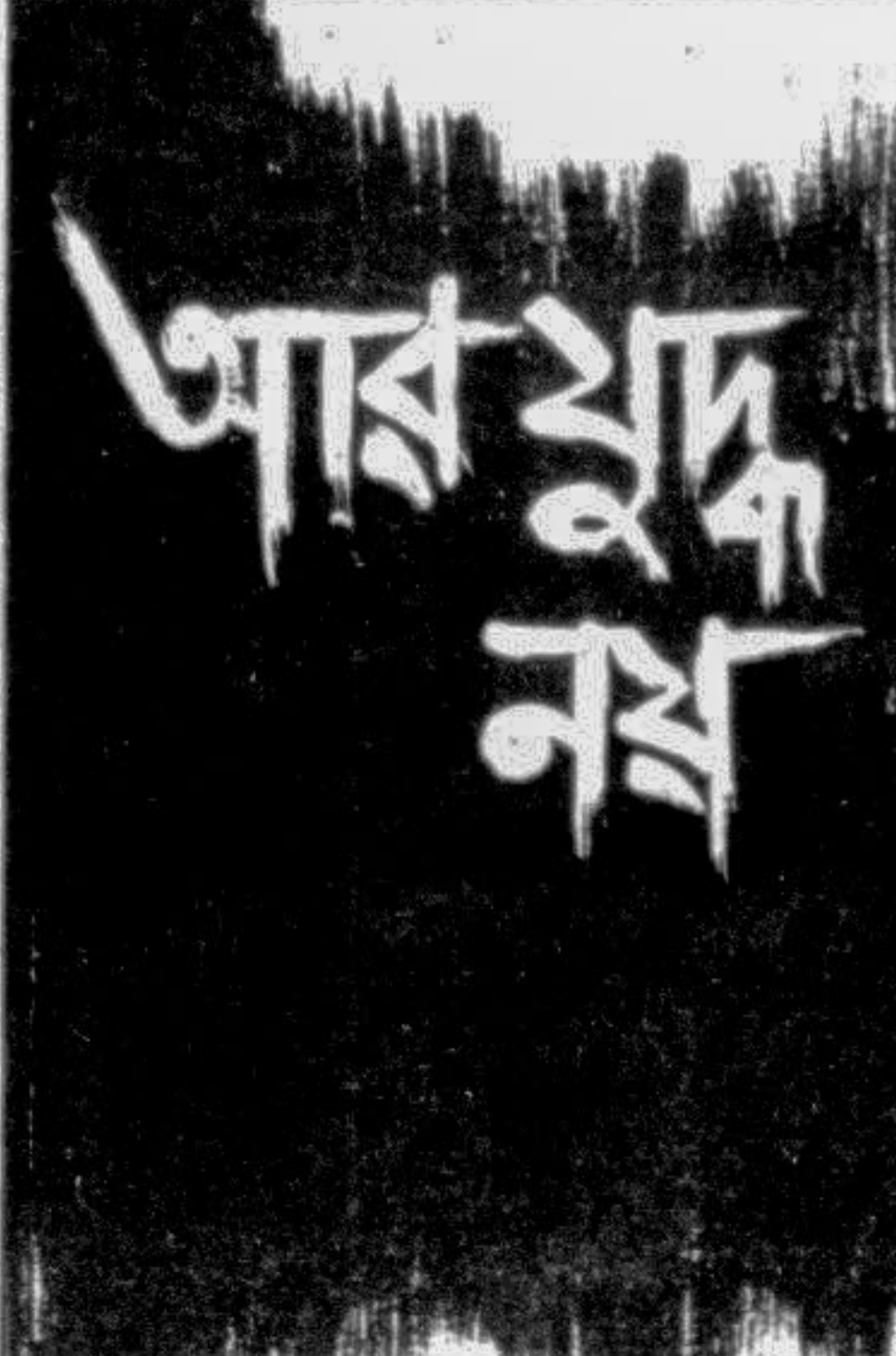
There is a lot readers must have expected from this correspondence of Mujtaba Ali. What was the university like in its formative years, when so much international attention was focused on it, with Tagore having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1917? What was the teaching system, wholly designed by the poet himself, that won international acclamation, except from the colonial British administration that refused to recognise degrees from Viswabarati? In short, were Mujtaba Ali's impressions of Santiniketan?

May be I am being a little uncharitable to both Mujtaba Ali and Saif-ul Alam Khan. While Khan tells Choudhury in a letter when he gave his permission to publish the correspondence that he himself was not a literary person, one is far from sure if his friend had developed any literary ambitions at that early stage of his student career.

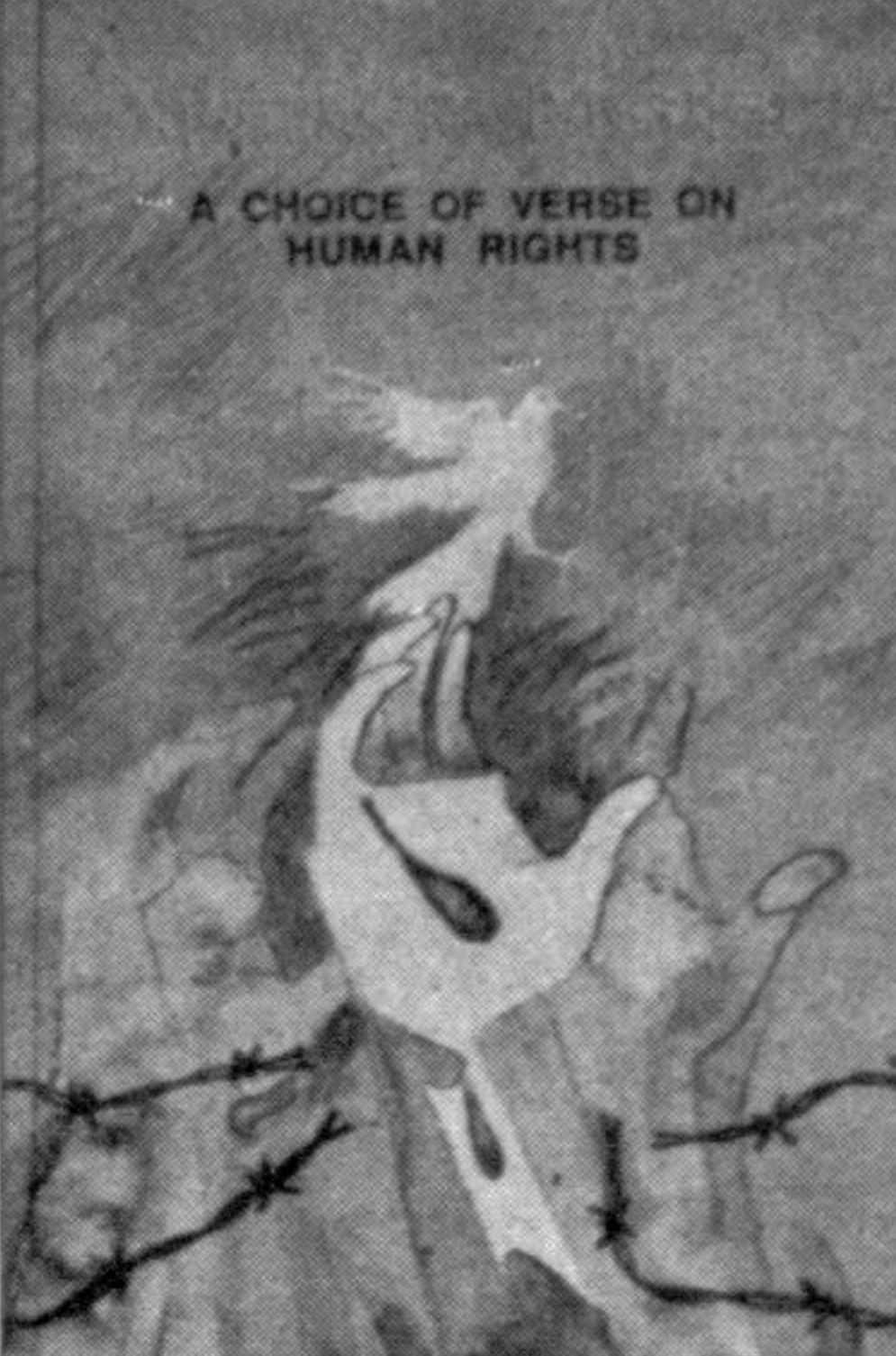
The result is, most of letters of Mujtaba Ali from Viswabarati contain a lot of colourless, almost banal, tidbits which, after more than seven decades, would evoke no interest among readers. One wonders if Uncle Mujtaba Ali would have agreed to the publication of his highly personal letters to his friend. The pity of it all is, he did write some superb letters during the war of liberation, from Calcutta to a few of his nephews who were then living outside Bangladesh.

While, I believe, I have made my case that these letters of Mujtaba Ali serve little literary or biographical purpose — and as such should never have been published — I must compliment Bishamadev Choudhury for his excellent introduction, especially the biography of Ali, not to mention of his painstaking research into annotations added at the end of the book. However, could I here offer a small correction? It was indeed "Deshe Bideshe" which marked Uncle Mujtaba Ali's literary debut, winning him the prestigious Indian presidential award! But it was his twice-weekly column, the post-edit, in Ananda Bazar Patrika, written under his pen-name "Satyapir", during 1945-47, that earned for him a place in journalism. That was before Desh had started serialising Deshe Bideshe, thanks to the initiative taken by two of his best friends, Sagarmoy Ghosh and Kanai Lal.

The column by Satyapir created a stir, with many people wondering about the identity of the writer who dealt with theological issues of all different religions, politics, social problems and the literary scene, among others. It was a kind of a model in column-writing that inspired many younger journalists later, including this writer.



Two recent publications, one on peace and the other on human rights, which should be recommended reading in our schools and colleges.



We commemorate the National Poet KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM with all solemnity, and pay our homage on the occasion of his anniversary of death.

I Sing of Equality

I sing of equality in which dissolves all the barriers and estrangements, in which is united Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians. I sing of equality Who are you? — A Parsi? A Jain? A Jew? A Santal, a Bhil or a Garo? A Confucian? A disciple of Charbak? Go on — tell me what else! Whoever you are, my friend, whatever holy books or scriptures you stomach or carry on your shoulder or stuff your brains with — the Quran, the Puranas, the Vedas, the Bible, the Tripitak, the Zendavesta, the Grantha Saheb — why do you waste your labor? Why inject all this into your brain? Why all this — like petty bargaining in a shop when the roads are adorned with blossoming flowers? Open your heart — within you lie all the scriptures, all the wisdom of all ages. Within you lie all the religions, all the prophets — your heart is the universal temple of all the gods and goddesses. Why do you search for God in vain when the skeletons of dead scriptures when he smilingly resides in the privacy of your immortal heart?

I'm not lying to you, my friend. Before this heart all the crowns and royalties surrender. This heart is Nilachal, Kashi, Mathura, Brindaban, Buddh-Goya, Jerusalem, Medina, Ka'aba. This heart is the mosque, the temple, the church. This is where Isiah and Moses found the truth. In this battle field the young flute player sang the divine Geeta. In this pasture the shepherds became prophets. In this meditation chamber Shakyamuni heard the call of the suffering humanity and decried his throne. In this voice the Darling of Arabia heard his call, from here he sang the Quran's message of equality. What I've heard, my friend, is not a lie: there's no temple or Ka'aba greater than this heart!

The poet heard it with due attention, his eyes became shiny with tears! He was visibly agitated when they sang: "Karar oi louha kapat Bhange phle kar re lopat Rakta jamat rakta jamat Sikal pujan pashan bedi..." Meaning: Break open the iron gate of the prison Demolish the blood congealed stone altars Where the chains of bondage are worshipped.... To me it was one of the most memorable experiences in my life. Captain Smith, the Commander of the ship came in his full regalia and presented the poet with a beautiful silver replica of "MV Jal Azad". The poet held it for a while like a toy and placed it on the farash. It was very sad that the poet had to come back empty handed from Europe a few months later only with the embellishment of the diagnosis of "Alzheimer's disease" and nothing else! He died a mute in Dhaka after the independence of Bangladesh. His poems and songs are the cultural links between the politically vivisected Bengal of yester years.

Idle Song

Like a bee my mind today is absorbed by the grass flowers and the field of green peas! On this winter morning with the restless butterflies I dance from bud to bud collecting honey! At night, I hear the farewell cry of the Aman paddy fields. Who walks through the catkin reeds along the banks of the dead river, her anchor getting caught in pigeon-pea flowers? That maiden — wearing a nose-pin of babla flowers and a sari of blue aparajitas — I want to be touched by her! She called me with her eyes! Like a bee my mind today is absorbed by the grass flowers and the field of green peas!

Two poems by KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM Translated by Sajed Kamal



Tamizuddin Khan: A Portrait

by Razia Khan Amin

THE journey of a boy born and reared in a Bangladeshi village repeatedly ravaged and impoverished by the Padma in spite, from his village school to the Bengal Legislative Assem-bly, could not have been smooth. Trudging to school on foot, for several miles, then seeking college education in Cooch Behar because the fees there



On his last visit to the US — Tamizuddin Khan being received at the Washington DC airport.

University. He had stolen into the auditorium unobtrusively and departed just as quietly. His tactfulness and self-effacement were extreme. During his visits to England he had met Earl Attlee and other luminaries; presided over important conferences. But when he returned he sat munching his food at the dining table not breathing a word about his experiences, which I found recorded in a diary which has been unfortunately stolen. He would similarly descend from a sea plane at Faridpur, don his homely 'lungi' and throw the fishing net into the pond bare-bodied to the waist, bare-foot, he could have been any ordinary fisherman, but for his rosy complexion. Mrinal Sen who comes from the same place had once remarked he had never seen a handsome man as he watched my father bathe in the pond, when Mrinal Sen was a mere boy. Naresh Bhadhuri, a renowned Calcutta lawyer also said to me that he had seen my father on the verandah of Tagore's Jorasanko home on the day the poet died, and he was also impressed by his good looks. Bhadhuri, then at school had gone to Tagore's home to pay his last respects. My father was then the education minister of Bengal. He was also active in helping poet Nazrul who was already gravely ill. He chaired a committee for treating and aiding the poet. When he was health minister he had the X-ray unit installed in Faridpur General Hospital. He ran a paper called Medina while he lived in Calcutta. Graduating with Honours in English from Presidency College Calcutta, he had first joined the Scottish Church College. It was possible

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