

Nazrul Jayanti Special

Coming as he did from a dark, obscure village called Churulia where he was born in on May 24, 1899 (Jaishta 11, 1306), Kazi Nazrul Islam, proverbially known as a *vidrohi kobi*, brings to us a world of poetry and music which endlessly celebrates man, while declaring a total war against everything that depresses, dwarfs and diminishes him.

Always a source of inspiration to our struggle for freedom, democracy and equality, Nazrul never tires of inviting us to live, love, hope and rebel even in the face of a future seeming to be closed off.

To celebrate the ninety-sixth *jayanti* of Nazrul, The Daily Star Weekend Magazine presents a few write-ups that seek to revisit the world of Nazrul at a time when our path to progress continues to bristle with difficulties.

Our Debt to Nazrul

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

"We have more than one reason to be grateful to Kazi Nazrul Islam", concludes in this article a leading literary critic and Nazrul-scholar who recently authored an important book called Nazrul: Poet and More. While underscoring the need for acknowledging our debt to this major Bengali poet, the author readily identifies those qualities which not only make Nazrul unique, but also turn him our contemporary.

EVERY year, when we, in Bangladesh, celebrate the birth anniversary of Nazrul Islam, we not only remember a poet of unusual abilities but also pay our homage to a hero who has put us under a great debt of gratitude. In fact, we are in need of heroes, because we are, and have been, living in distress and misery. And in our creation of, and turning to, heroes, political and literary, there is, more than anything else, an expression of our helplessness.

Calyle had noted that a hero in a society embodies the values cherished by its members. That we have accepted Nazrul Islam as a hero testifies to several things. First, it shows that we expect from literature both instruction and delight. To us a great poet is not a mere creator of beauty, he is also a figure of our pride, an architect of national identity and unity. It would not be untrue to say that our great poets and writers have satisfied this double test, aesthetic and national. Bankimchandra's novels worked as a source of inspiration for the young Congress workers; two of Rabindranath's songs have been accepted as the national anthems of India and Bang-

ladesh. Secondly, literature constitutes the most dominant element and form of expression of our culture. It is the culture of the town-dwelling middle class that matters, and the middle class is educated. Entrance into the folds of the middle class depends on the acquiring of education. The fuss that the father in Nazrul Islam's play *Jhilmil* makes over the question of a BA degree is farcical and yet understandable, for a degree is an essential part of the equipment of a person who hopes to make a reasonable living. Most of those whom we see passing to the middle class are richer in education than in

property. Hence, again, the importance of literature. A third significance relates to the eradication of the diseases of communalism; and it augurs us well.

Communalism has been an old and deep-seated disease in Bengal. The partition of Bengal in 1947 was a tragedy, and, like tragedies in literature, it had proved to be inevitable. The Muslim middle class of the time of Nazrul Islam feared the Hindu bourgeoisie. The well-to-do Hindus had also lost meaningful contact with the Muslims. It is not without significance that the rich literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries failed to reflect the life of the Muslims. Nazrul Islam was above communalism, but even he had to put up with ugly manifestations of the malady. Two incidents are worth recalling. One involved his stay in a boarding house in Calcutta and the other the impulsive action of a Hindu girl in making him a present of a necklace. After his return from the army, Nazrul Islam stayed for some time in a Calcutta boarding house with his boyhood novelist-friend Sallotananda. Everything went on well, he was liked by all the inmates of the house. Then one day things changed when it was discovered that he was a Muslim. On another occasion, a Hindu girl, who heard Nazrul Islam recite one of his poems, wanted to offer him her necklace as a tribute to him. She did. And she suffered for what she did. The social resentment that followed was so bitter and loud that the poor girl was obliged to end her life taking nitric acid.

Nazrul Islam's birth anniversary provides this communally divided society with an opportunity of coming together. Most of our festivals are religious; the two communities stand apart in life, and more so when they go to their festivals. The celebration of a day connected with a poet is one of those secular and non-communal occasions of which we do not have many in our country.

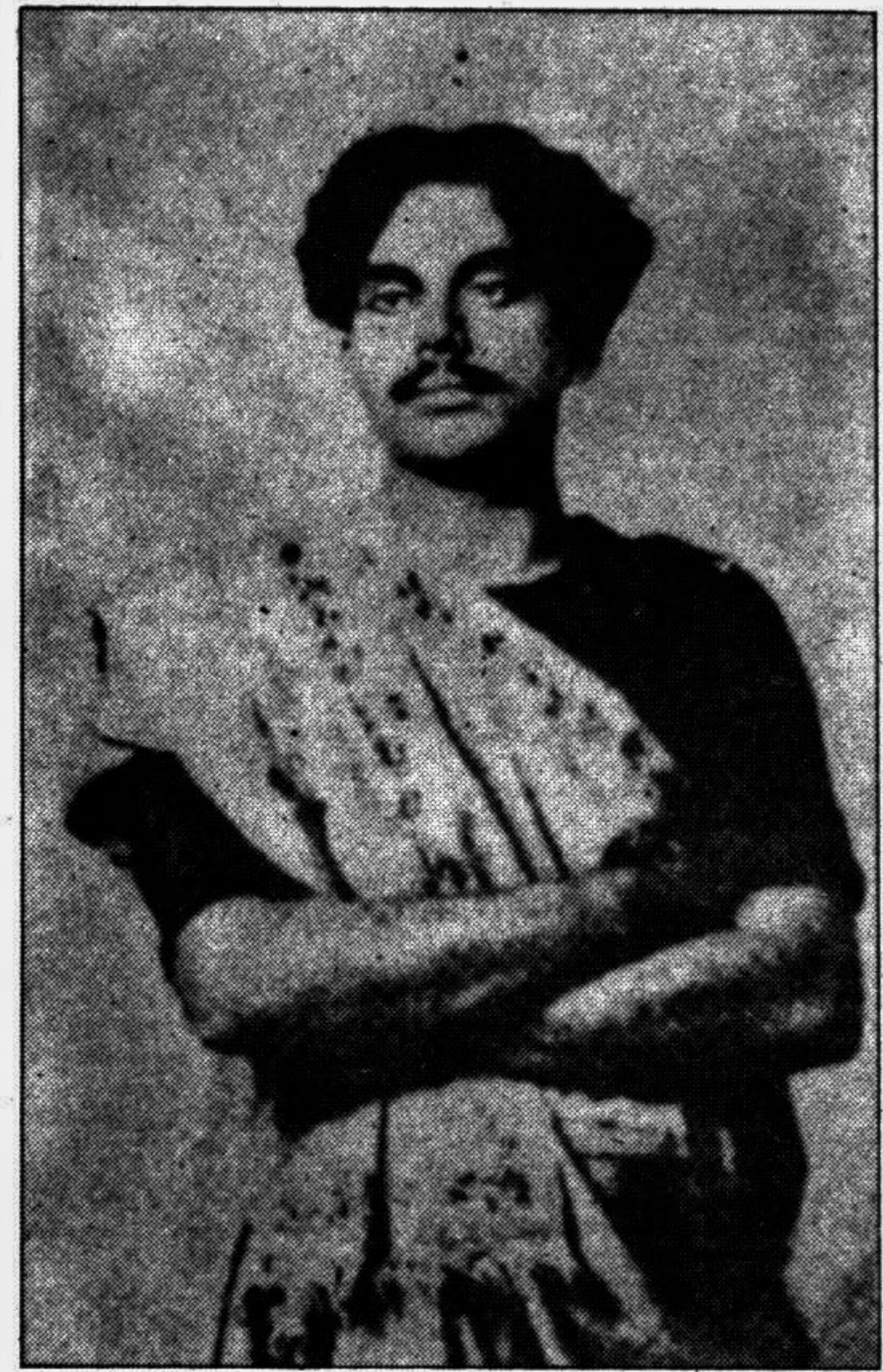
The impact Nazrul Islam made on the community he was born to was unique. Muslims were poor, and they were exceedingly self-conscious. Doubts were expressed by some of them as to whether Bengali was their mother tongue. Today this sounds rather absurd, but this is a fact of history. Those among Bengali Muslims who considered themselves part of an All-Indian aristocracy thought it beneath their dignity to speak in Bengali. Sir Syed Ahmed's founding of a society for translating English texts into Urdu was a progressive move, but Nawab Abdul Latif's insistence on the Bengali Muslim's cultivation of Urdu was totally reactionary. For this Nawab, whose title bears testimony to the service he rendered to the British masters, was asking his co-religionists in Bengal to uproot themselves from the land from which they drew their sustenance. Abdul Latif was a contemporary of Bankimchandra; they were both graduates and civil servants. Bankimchandra began his literary career with a novel written in the English language, but the novelist had the instinctive wisdom of a great writer and has turned to Bengali immediately afterwar-

ds. Later he wrote a memorable expose of the Bengali Babu, the English-educated Bengali gentleman. But Nawab Abdul Latif always wrote in English and considered Urdu to be his vernacular. The difference in attitude and

outlook between the two persons is symptomatic of the difference between the Hindu and Muslim middle classes. The Muslim of Bengal owe not an insignificant part of their literary backwardness to the leadership of the Nawab Abdul Latifs.

Nazrul Islam brought back to our language words and idioms that had withdrawn themselves rather self-consciously from the area of sophisticated letters and were living in the dim and illiterate world of metrical romances. An inferior artist could not have done this; a less courageous artist would not have wanted to do this. He was a major writer, and like all major writers he had to break away from the established conventions. In giving literary

Continued on page 10



Nazrul and Our Cultural Struggle

by Azfar Hussain

ALTHOUGH Nazrul is completely assimilated today into the canon of post-Togorean Bengali poetry, there is still a growing polarity between commendation and condemnation of his works. Most of Nazrul's detractors, as we still find them today, are aesthetic brahmins who keep passing on Nazrul the very critical *fatwa* that he was rough and rowdy, sloppy and slipshod, and that his was more noise than poetry. Understandably, such a characterisation of Nazrul is at once rash and lopsided. For, it does not take into account Nazrul's life and works to the extent that they can exemplify not only loudness but also silence, not only disorder but also order.

One needs to see that the above complaint Nazrul is still hurled up with is inspired by the ethos of Eurocentric modernism that most of our poets of the thirties so faithfully poetic, while having their poetic passports duly signed by a Baudelaire or an Eliot. True, under the influence of their literary gurus, particularly Eliot, who took poetry away from poets but handed it to *pundits*, our 'modernists' — both critics and poets — did

not always feel comfortable with a 'poor', 'unsophisticated' Nazrul. For, Nazrul was to them most un-Eliotesque in that he did not mistake *punditry* for poetry! Even Buddhadeva Bose, while giving us the impression that he was full of praise for Nazrul, spoke of him more as an attractive and picturesque personality than as a major poet. Achintya Kumar Sen Gupta, too, acclaimed Nazrul, but he was interested in looking more at the poet's 'colourful anarchy' than at his poetry. Echoes of such ironical commendations sometimes accompanied by downright condemnations have not at all diminished over time, though it is somewhat customary to celebrate his birth-anniversary in this part of the subcontinent.

True, *punditry* was not unique to Nazrul, but then wisdom certainly was. He did not have Amiya Chakravorty's Oxford-stamped D Litt in English, nor Buddhadeva's razor-sharp M A in literature, nor Sudhin Dutta's formidable scholarship and unusual multilingual background, nor did he have to come up with a close reading of the text of *Das Kapital* in order to be a Marxist like Vishnu Dey. Yet, it was Nazrul who, with virtually no formal education and being a self-taught man like Blake and Laon, had successfully initiated a post-Togorean phase in Bengali poetry. Yes, it was he who forged a kind of poetic language hitherto unknown. And, also, it was he who first translated the *Internationale* into Bengali, wrote poems and songs in favour of the proletariat encountered by Vishnu Dey mostly in the pages of

books. Serajul Islam Choudhury is right to have observed in his book on Nazrul that he was "our first, and so far the only, major writer to come from the rural poor." The village called Churulia that Nazrul was born in was more than an obscure one, the family he belonged to was poorer than one can anticipate, the community he initially lived in was not at all enlightened, and the kind of society he was trying to change was colonial, feudal and communally divided, but the poetry he wrote and the songs he composed all went well ahead of his village, family, community, society, and even his age, though it was he who, more than any of his contemporaries, directly felt the form and pressure of his time, even drawing the fever-chart of an epoch. Yes, this was Nazrul traversing all the way from the remote village of Churulia, and finding his place, a very prominent one at that, in Bengali literature. True, in his life, he was a vagrant, was one of nature's own bohemians; but, then, it was in poetry and music that he has finally earned a permanent place.

But, in order to appropriate his place as such, Nazrul did not have to hitch a lift with a Baudelaire or an Eliot, as was the case with the star-crazed 'modernists' who were more or less Nazrul's contemporaries. At this point, one needs to look at the difference between Nazrul's opposition to Tagore and that of the modernists. In fact, Nazrul was not deliberately opposed to Tagore, but Nazrul became simply inevitably different from him stylistically and temperamentally. On the other hand, the modernists of the thirties were programmatically resistant to Tagore, trying to espouse an aesthetic modelled on Anglo-American and European poets. The consequences were nothing but artificiality in the name of anti-Tagoreanism or post-Tagoreanism including a sense of alienation and a false sense of aesthetic urbanisation.

While Tagore was forging ahead with a cultural struggle against colonialism, and therefore, was always looking for a larger unity of man and society, the poets of the thirties were replacing this sense of unity by a sense of so-called alienation which only resulted in another form of colonisation — 'aesthetic neo-colonisation'. But, Nazrul was never ideologically distant from Tagore, for Nazrul only added a new force to Tagore's anti-colonial cultural struggle exemplified not only in Nazrul's poetry, but also in his active politics.

Yet, a difference needs to be underlined. Tagore's was mostly a middle-class cultural struggle, but Nazrul's struggle was essentially one of the subaltern classes — peasants, workers, labourers, coolies, fishermen, blacksmiths, potters, and so on; in other words, Nazrul was deeply rooted in his history, tradition and class, as Tagore certainly was, in his own way. In fact, dialectically enough, Nazrul

moved away from, and went back to, Tagore, as Nazrul, like Tagore himself, looked forward to a greater unity always discouraged by colonialism. In terms of both quality and impact, Nazrul could outstrip the poets of the thirties primarily because of his rootedness which linked him up with the revolutionary tradition of Chandidas-Lalon-Madhusudan-Vidyasagar-Tagore. The poets of the thirties, with the exception of Jibanananda Das, only turned their back on this tradition, groping for light in the dark, labyrinthine worlds of the Anglo-European modernists.

Nazrul was able to mark his difference from Tagore not because Nazrul forced himself to be different like our 'modernists', but because he was sincerely committed to his class, time, and language. That he was loud at times was nothing but a sign of his sincerity; he had to be loud given what went on around him, given the kind of colonial suppression, feudal oppression and communal attack his class had always been subject to. That he looked rough was also a sign of his sincerity; for, he did not have the middle-class pretension of being someone other than what he was; in fact, he did not have to conceal his natural self.

True, he shouted himself hoarse in Calcutta football matches, but also spent silent hours over the chessboard. In his famous poem called 'Vidrohi' (the Rebel), he could say, "I am the mighty primordial shout", but at the same time, he could come up with the pronouncement of "Sometimes I am quiet and serene", or of "I am the soothing breeze of the south." In fact, Nazrul was in a position to strike a fine balance between the binaries in him, between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in him, and between the rebel and the lover, who go together hand-in-hand in him, as he said: "In one hand of mine is the tender flute/while in the other I hold the war-bugle." Thus, Nazrul was not all loudness, all disorder, as is uncritically and unsympathetically assumed today by those brahmins in the critical circle. Indeed, if one looks carefully into his poem 'Vidrohi', one can see that the poem only apparently looks chaotic; that it has its own internal logic and structural coherence resting on a deft balancing of all possible binary oppositions the poem evokes, and on a meaningful progression towards a conclusion sincerely drawn out of, and deeply rooted in, his own history and class, as the poet could unambiguously declare: "I, the great rebel/shall rest in quiet only when I find/the sky and the air free of the piteous groans of the oppressed."

But sincerity was not all that Nazrul represented, and it is not to be taken to compensate any deficiency he could have. His sincerity was amply complemented by his unusual strength and competence, though they also certainly stemmed from his sincerity. One of his obvious strengths

Continued on page 10



Nazrul as the National Poet: How and Why

by Zaheda Ahmad

WHEN the former military dictator declared Kazi Nazrul Islam our national poet, he did so with the ulterior purpose of promoting him as the sole poet of the so-called Muslim renaissance in this part of the sub-continent. Undoubtedly, Nazrul, coming as he did from the very backward Muslim community of the then colonial Bengal, was that community's first great literary figure ever to have arrived on the scene. But he would not have been true to his own creative genius, had he looked upon himself as an exclusively Muslim writer engaged in furthering the cause of his community alone. He was first and foremost an utterly non-communal Bengali who, drinking deep from the well of Bengali national consciousness, had his feet firmly entrenched on the Bengali soil. Indeed, long before Bengali nationalism, imbued with the ideals of democracy and of equality among and tolerance for all members of society, found its political embodiment in the establishment of the sovereign state of Bangladesh, Nazrul through his literary and political activities, had come to epitomise the nascent Bengali national identity. His courageous fight against colonialism/imperialism, social inequality and exploitation, against communalism and religious fanaticism placed him in the forefront of our struggle for independence from alien rule.

These were exactly the ideals that our war of liberation stood for and which ultimately inspired us to break loose from the political and socio-economic bondage called Pakistan. His vehement hatred of alien rule not only led to a govern-

ment ban against his writings, but it quickly landed him in prison also. But Nazrul went further. With equal determination and clarity of vision, he kept himself aloof from the communal politics of the Indian Muslim League. At the height of the Khelafat Movement — an effort aimed at preserving the obsolete but still existing ruling structure in Turkey — we find Nazrul going all out in his support for the new-age secular Turkish leader Mustafa Kamal Ataturk. Neither could he support, or could he associate himself with, the Muslim League's infamous two-nation theory that in the end culminated in the birth of Pakistan. Religious bigotry, fanaticism and extreme intolerance of other religions — those venomous hallmarks of the sub continental political life in colonial India — were fundamentally in conflict with the ideals, beliefs and values that Nazrul represented. Not for nothing, he was "the rebel poet" who, in keeping with the new spirit of youthful defiance that was abroad in the post-First World War India, unfurled his standard of rebellion against — as he, so dramatically and eloquently expressed in his immortal poem "The Rebel" — oppression, exploitation, intolerance, ignorance, superstition and such other forces of darkness and evil that had kept our people perpetually in chains.

Let us have a look, a little more in detail, at his ideals which he preached in his literature and practised in real life. As was already mentioned, Nazrul hated, and was passionately opposed to, the British rule that he knew to be at the root of the evils — in case of some directly, in case of others for their aggravation —

that afflicted Indian society. By freedom, he meant full and total liberation not only of the whole nation but also of the individual self. He would not, so he declared, lower his head to any authority, to any power however mighty, not even the creator. "I do not salute anyone, except myself" became his life-long conviction. In 1922, his bi-weekly *Dhum Ketu* (The Comet), very characteristically, became the first newspaper in Bengal, publicly to demand full independence, rather than dominion status or self-government under Britain, from the British rule. For him, national liberation was the first milestone on the road towards emancipation of the masses from the centuries-old socio-economic bondage.

For that to be achieved, something more than national freedom would be necessary, he knew. In that sense he was not an ordinary nationalist. Rather he began to write and speak for the sublime ideals of ultimate human equality as propagated by Marx and his supporters. The Socialist Revolution in Russia found him an ardent supporter passionately committed to the goals of freedom from inequality based on class, creed or gender. As a young writer of twenty, he was deeply moved by the message of the Russian Revolution. True, there were other political thinkers in Bengal before him who knew about the Revolution but the glory of first introducing those ideals into Bengali literature belonged to Nazrul. Apart from translating the international into Bengali before anyone else, he wrote in 1925 a whole series of poems entitled 'The Shammovadi'

(One who Believes in Equality) which was later followed by yet another collection of poems and songs called 'Sarbahara' (The Proletariat).

Equally forthright was his condemnation of communalism and its close ally with religious fanaticism, a scourge that has of late acquired an international notoriety as religious fundamentalism. In 'Kandary Hushyar' (Beware, Oh Pilot) he asked, with obvious pain in his voice, "Are they Hindus or Muslims? Who asks that? Tell him, oh Pilot, they are the children of our mother who are going down". Then again, "who are you to touch the Quran, the Veda and the Bible if you hate people? Oh you the idiots, listen. It is man who has brought Books and not the other way round."

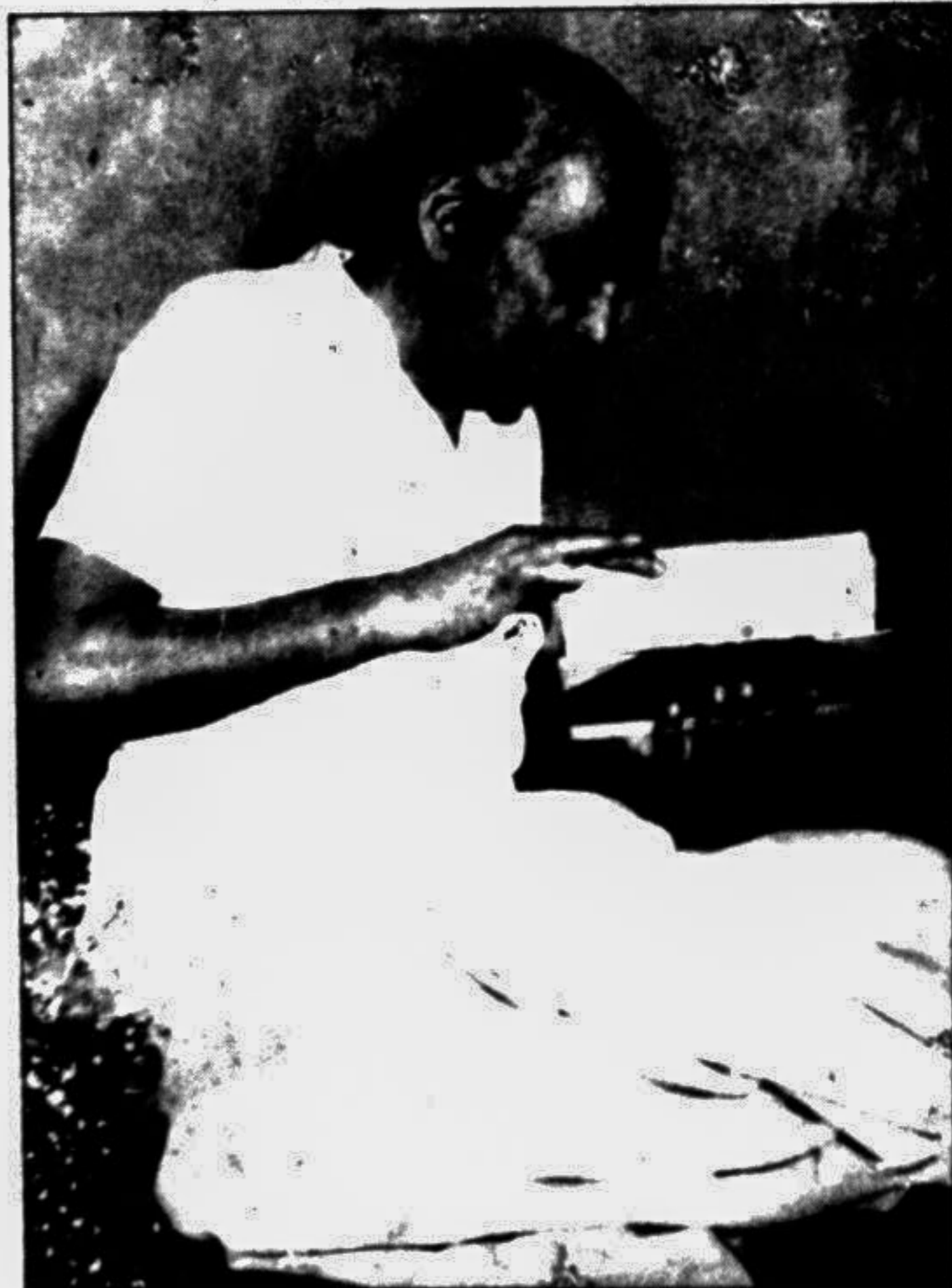
One can go on quoting but that in no way can lessen our sense of outrage in seeing the use, abuse and misuse that the rebel poet had been continuously subjected to by ultra-communal elements during the Pakistani period. The gusto with which our Pakistani rulers and their local collaborators began Pakistanising Nazrul was aimed at making their infamous colonial rule over the Bengalis more effective.

But what is even more shocking is the fact that the process, instead of coming to an end with the demise of Pakistan, has been revived, after a brief interval at the beginning, by the ruling establishment in 'independent' Bangladesh. As in so many other spheres of our national life, the Pakistani state and all that it stood for have made a comeback with a vengeance in our cultivation of Nazrul and his literature. This is nothing but a travesty of all

that Nazrul lived and worked for as long as he had good luck of enjoying a normal life.

So, in present day Bangladesh, foreign domination in the garb of foreign aid, advice and capital has become the accepted practice. Now gone are the dreams of national self-reliance and democratic, dignified, vibrant Bengali nation marching its way up

Continued on page 10



And then there was silence...