

essay

Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis—IV

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

Love has been over-emphasized in the culture of Bengal. It is not the Vaisnabs only, every Bengali seems to believe in the supremacy and efficacy of love. What is equally true is that the Bengalis are not incapable of indifference and cruelty. They have killed each other in the past, and are doing so even now. Idols are as quickly thrown away as the are made. The Mughal observation that Bengalis do not believe in persons, they believe in posts does not seem to be untrue. It has been noticed that between 1204 and 1757 in a period of five hundred years there had been as many as 117 rulers occupying and leaving the throne. On an average a monarch did not rule for more than 5 years,⁴¹ and whoever could manage to occupy the throne was confident of gaining acceptance, at least temporarily. Those who matter in Bengal obey those they fear. The usurpations we have gone through in Bangladesh since 1971 are of a piece with our past history.

BENGAL had always been a poor, marginalised country. Its dependence on agriculture did not decrease with the advance of time. Capitalist growth has been denied, not only because of the blockade set up by British trading interests, but also for the internal social system. The only opening for those who wanted to move beyond agriculture was government employment. A chancellor of Dhaka University, one of the lieutenant governors, had remarked in his convocation speech somewhat wittily that the young graduates in Bengal had made it their mission to do 'service,' but to them 'service' means only jobs and not work for the country. He, of course, did not see that they only service a young man could give to his country in any real sense would be to drive away the foreign occupiers from the motherland. This desire the governors always called politics, and unfailingly discouraged under threats of punishment. The job-seeking middle class of Bengal was the very Janus of Greek mythology; it helped as well as betrayed the Profullah Chakris.

The title of Surendranath's political autobiography, *A Nation in Making*, is suggestive of the very work he thought himself to be engaged in. But the idea of a nation changed for him during the course of his own political life. Surendranath entered politics without his wanting to do so. Like others of his class, he had wanted to be a government employee, in his particular case an ICS. It was because of the refusal of the government to allow him to become a bureaucrat that he became a political activist. His first political mission was to unite the Indians into a nation on the twin questions of the raising of the civil service examination-eligibility age and the holding of the examination in both England and India.

The movement that he launched was nationalist in appearance, but it was unlikely to go very far, for instead of uniting the Indian middle classes it divided them on both communal and regional lines. Gradually Surendranath withdrew himself from the all-India movement; he who was responsible for the founding of Indian Association became the founder of a daily which he called *The Bengalee*.

But Surendranath was not a radical. On the contrary, he head in him something of his own mother; he was a conservative who abhorred the very semblance of a revolution,²⁵ and was opposed to CR. Das because of the latter's extremist propensities. Surendranath was a Bengali; but he also saw himself as a Hindu; that is the reason why despite his whole-hearted turning to Bengal politics he was not able to promote Bengali nationalism in the way CR. Das did.

Saratchandra, the novelist, did not dislike radical politics. His Sabyasachi believed in revolution; but the revolution preached by the adventurous

physician was to be brought about by the middle class, for its own self. Sabyasachi thought in terms of class, and not of nation. He was against the 'father' in being violently anti-imperialist, but he almost cherished the weaknesses of the mother. Sabyasachi is very much Saratchandra himself. After the communal riots of 1926 and the announcement of the Communal Award of 1932, the novelist lost his liberalism and spoke in a language the communists would find reasons to admire. In an essay on the problem of Hindu-Muslim relationship,²⁶ he calls India Hindustan and says that the Muslims can never be sincere in their offer of amity with the Hindus, because they had come to India as plunderers. He argues that it is pointless to count number, and be disturbed by the Muslim majority in Bengal, because what really matters is not quantity but quality. Qualitatively, he suggests, the Hindus and the Muslims can never be equal, and therefore the hope for amity must be given up, without further delay.

Rabindranath was for all Bengalis; he had sought to free literature from its communal linkage. But he too had signed a memorandum in 1936 against the Communal Award along with Saratchandra, Brajendranath Seal and Profullah Chandra Roy,²⁷ arguing that the Hindus of Bengal should be valued not in terms of number but in accordance with their overwhelming superiority in the matter of culture.²⁸ 64 percent of the literate population of Bengal, the memorandum tells the government, were Hindus.

But Rabindranath stood apart the very next year when he refused to accept the Hindu nationalist view that Bande Mataram should be accepted as the national anthem for all Indians, irrespective of their religious affiliation.²⁹ He had set to music the first stanza of the song, and sung it in his youth in the Congress Conference in 1896, but when around 1937 the Muslims began to find the central idea of the song unacceptable to them because of its celebration of the motherland as a goddess, Rabindranath saw their point. Others did not; and they were angry with him for not toeing their line. That Rabindranath's own song — Jonaganomano Adhinayaka — had a more universal appeal was proved when it came to be accepted as the national anthem of independent India.

The difference between the two songs — Bandemataoram and Jonaganomano — is significant in yet another respect. Bandemataoram speaks of the mother, Janaganomano of the father. And it is certainly both sad and ironical that in trying to persuade everyone to sign in honour of the mother-idol the country was pushed further along the dangerous path it was already treading, namely, division along the communal line; and that neither the father figure of Rabindranath's Janaganomano Adhinayaka nor the lord of the state in Nihar Roy's historical imagination could be of any avail.

The mother, however, has come back

in Rabindranath's other song, *আমাৰ শোনাৰ বালা আমি তোমার ভালোবাৰি* (My, dear golden Bengal, how I love you) which has been accepted as the national anthem of Bangladesh. Here the image of the mother is altogether different from that in Bande Mataram. She is secular; she seeks to unite rather than divide, and is democratic inasmuch as she is not partial to any of the communities. But this triumph of the mother over the powers of the state has not been easy; it had to be paid for by blood and tears of the children.

It was on the question of the mother tongue that Bengalis in Pakistan had first reacted. The electoral rejection of Muslim League in 1954 was really saying no to the very concept of Pakistani nationalism, which had no sound basis underneath. But it is surely of some historical importance that the preamble to the 21-point election programme of the United Front had to promise that nothing repugnant to the Holy Quran and Sunnah would be enacted. The 1970 election manifesto of the Awami League was even more decisive: for in voting for the Awami League in that election the people had given the clear verdict that they would not accept anything short of independence. Although, this manifesto does not mention the Quran and the Sunnah in the preamble, it brings them in as one of the state objectives, saying, once again, that no law repugnant to the holy books would be enacted. In fact the pledge occupies the second place, coming next only to the promise to frame a constitution on the basis of the 6-point programme. Secularism, which is the first decisive step towards democratic nationalism, is not easy to achieve. The four state principles of the original constitution of Bangladesh were a landmark; for they indicated the way nationalism of the entire people as distinguished from that of a particular class or community should have been developed. It is of course meaningful that the state-principles have been violently altered. Secularism has been the first victim, and socialism has been emptied of its substance. Nationalism has become Bangladeshi, replacing Bangali. The feudal and anti-democratic forces had lost the battle, but are hoping to win the war. And it is certainly indicative of their power that religion continues to be used by our two major political parties — both of them bourgeois, and both non-believers in socialism. The restoration of the state principles is essential for the preservation of what has been achieved through a long struggle as also for the promotion of democratic nationalism. The task is not easy, as the history we have been looking at tells us; but the work has to be continued. That again is what history tells us.

The ultimate objective in nation-building ought to be improvement in culture. Culture is organic, and represents man's victory over his environment and circumstances. Bengalis are proud of their culture, and have spoken of its cohesive character. But cohesion itself has also been called into question. Bankimchandra, we have noted, has

seen four clear divisions. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar thinks that, living side by side, the Hindus and the Muslims resembled two strong-walled forts, each of which had only one gate.²⁹ Of course, the separation existed; but it operated mainly at the upper level. The peasants must have also quarrelled, but there not in the sustained manner of the well-to-do.

Cohesion could also look very much like an imposition from above. For example, Rabindranath asks the question whether one can still remain a Hindu after conversion into Islam. Christianity and answers:

ইহা মধ্যে পৰামৰ্শি কৰ মা নাই। ... ইহা সত্ত্বাৰ বালামেৰে হাজাৰ মুসলমান আৰে ... কিন্তু তাৰাৰাৰ আৰ্দ্ধিলাল পৰিবার। ... দিলু কৰোৰে হাত্যাকালৰ বৰ্ণনাৰ ভাবত্বৰেৰে কেন্দ্ৰে পৰম্পৰাৰ লড়াই কৰিবো পৰিবে না— এইখনে তাৰাৰাৰ সামৰণী পৰিয়া পাৰিব। সেই সামৰণী আৰিশু হইবে না, তাৰা দিলেৰাবে দিলু।³⁰

[It brooks no question....It is true there are thousands of Muslims in Bengal but they are Hindu Muslims. The Hindu is the national outcome of Indian history. In India the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Muslims, the Christians will not fight each other to kill themselves — they will find themselves in a harmony, and that harmony cannot be non-Hindu ... it has to be particularly Hindu.]

Certainly, he speaks hopefully, and attractively, but only for those belonging to a particular community, and not for those who constituted the majority of the Bengali population. The Muslim middle class would see, and did indeed see, in this the prospects of a historical extinction. Speaking less poetically, Nihar Ranjan Roy suggests that during the rule of the Pals an integrated Bengali culture was emerging, but the integration took place in the mould of the Aryan-Brahmin scriptures and culture.³¹ He is also of the view that any improvement that Bengali culture can claim as its own is really due to all-Indian influences operating on it.³² This is in fact an idealisation of a surrender. And it has continued. The object changed, but the adulation of the foreigners did not. The Sens, the Pathans, the Mughals, the English have all been set up by one group or another as cultural emancipators. The periodisation of history into the Hindu, the Muslim and the British times does not speak of any importance given to the natives; it indicates the hegemony of the foreigners.

Cultural surrender is usually imperceptible. It works like music, without being seen. Thus Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, writing a decade after the partition of Bengal, at a time when the threats held out by Hindi to the non-Hindi languages were very real, finds occasion to praise Bhudeb Chandra Mukherjee's 'extraordinarily perceptive' realization even before 1892 that the Hindi language was of great value for keeping India together.³³ In a somewhat similar manner, Mohammad Shahidullah argues in the very conference address we have quoted from that since in the past we had learnt and used English as the

state language we are unlikely to have any objection to learning Urdu in the future.³⁴ This was spoken nine months after Jinnah's notorious announcement concerning the state language of Pakistan, and may have been influenced by the extraordinary conviction 'the father of the nation' had displayed.

Muslim writers spoke against what they thought was Hindu hegemonic intentions. Not to speak of the more conservative ones, even liberal writers like Yakub Ali Choudhury, Mohammad Wajed Ali and Motahar Hossain Chowdhury have ventilated sentiments which were typically Muslim. Yakub Ali Chowdhury wrote an article in 1927 to suggest that it was because the Hindus thought that they were a nation that the Hindus developed what the Hindus call Muslim communalism.³⁵ In a more emphatic vein, Mohammad Wajed Ali, in an article on communal harmony written the same year, blamed communalism almost entirely on Hindu 'narrowness'.³⁶ And in an unpublished essay written in the 1950's Motahar Hossain Chowdhury sees Jinnah as a rescuer and holds the 'dream of Hindu nationalism' responsible for communal discord in India.³⁷

Bakhtiar Khilji's conquest of Bengal is a fact of history, but its assessment by writers on the two sides of the communal divide has been contradictory. Suniti Chatterjee's view is predictable: he thinks that in destructiveness the Turkish conquest (which he calls Muslim) was comparable only with what the Spanish conquistadores perpetrated in Mexico, Peru and elsewhere in America.³⁸ Even a Marxist critic like Gopal Halder sees in the conquest an attempt to burn and bury all evidences of culture and finds reasons to be thankful to the caste system, which, despite its well-known weaknesses, has saved Hindu religion and society from being inundated by the flood of Islam.³⁹ Gopal Halder was Suniti Chatterjee's student, so was Enamul Haque, who wrote his Muslim Bangla Shahitya (Muslim Bengali literature) in 1957. Enamul Haque's picture of the conquest is entirely different. He did not see devastation or inundation; on the contrary he saw in the conquest the making of a Renaissance that rejuvenated the Bengali mind.

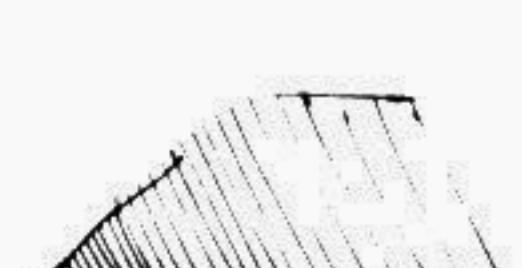
There was the other Renaissance too, of which Jadunath Sarker spoke in History of Bengal Volume II with great excitement, and which he found to be more momentous than the one that had occurred in Europe. Behind his overvaluation of the British conquest of Bengal which is what this unparalleled renaissance really is, lay a sense of release from the midnight darkness of the so-called Muslim rule. We see Jadunath Sarker's reaction one against in 1947 when, fearful of the prospect that the whole of province might go to the Muslims, he urges that Bengal be divided.⁴⁰ Ramesh Chandra Majumder was also in favour of partition. And when the Boundary Commission's Recommendations were known, both historians went to the press, seeking the inclusion of their own native districts — Rajshahi

and Faridpur, respectively in West Bengal. Jinnah did not feel for the Muslims he had abandoned in India, nor did the middle-class Hindus or Muslims in Bengal feel for those of their co-religionists they were leaving behind, on the other side of the border.

Love has been over-emphasized in the culture of Bengal. It is not the Vaisnabs only, every Bengali seems to believe in the supremacy and efficacy of love. What is equally true is that the Bengalis are not incapable of indifference and cruelty. They have killed each other in the past, and are doing so even now. Idols are as quickly thrown away as the are made. The Mughal observation that Bengalis do not believe in persons, they believe in posts does not seem to be untrue. It has been noticed that between 1204 and 1757 in a period of five hundred years there had been as many as 117 rulers occupying and leaving the throne. On an average a monarch did not rule for more than 5 years;⁴¹ and whoever could manage to occupy the throne was confident of gaining acceptance, at least temporarily. Those who matter in Bengal obey those they fear. The usurpations we have gone through in Bangladesh since 1971 are of a piece with our past history.

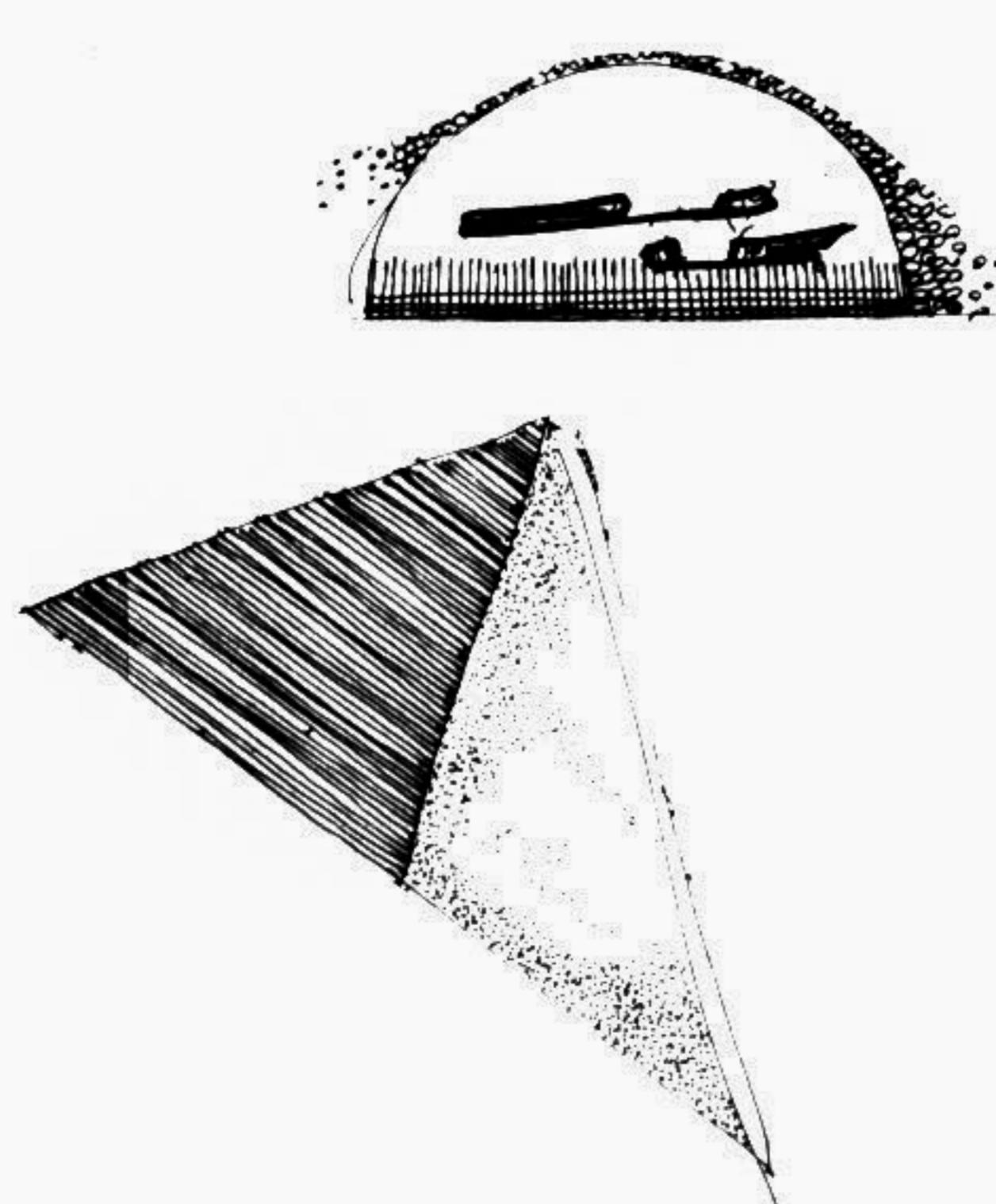
When a city falls, all its vestiges including bricks, are removed, as if to challenge the historical imagination. And those who have power laugh at those who have lost it. When the Aryans came and conquered they found their rhetorical repertoire almost inexhaustible in calling the natives names. The indigenous were শিলাই, পাপী, সুসু, দস্তুর, পৰী জোৱা, গুজাৰ (the cannibal, the worst sinner, the robber, the carnivore, the slave, the dog, the bird, the unclean, the fallen) and the like. They have also been called শব্দ (the unclean foreigner). Later the term stuck to the Muslims. তামুতি was the name of Sanskrit book of medicine, in Bengali তামুতিৰ লেখা is the job of an impostor. The Buddhist retreat from Bengal has been appropriately recorded in the inversion of তিক্ষ্ণ (Vikshu) into তিক্ষ্ণক (Beggar), সম্ব (Samgha) into সম্ব (clown) and আপুন (the accomplice) and Buddha himself into বুদ্ধ (the foolish one). Burbali Shah was once a ruler of Bengal; but বুৰাবক is a fool. Fazlil is a title of academic distinction, but in ordinary conversation it is the designation of a fellow who pretends to be smart without being one, কেৰি in Persian is virtue, but in Bengali it has taken the form of আৰু, the pretentious; কামুকি is conspiracy, being far away from the original Persian which means a skilled maker. Intermediaries like the Mandal and the Pradhan, connected with the land tenure system, have lost their glory. The Hindu failure to pronounce Muslim names properly have hurt feelings in the past. Even in 1990 Amalendu Tripathi in his book on the Indian National Congress mispronounces familiar name like Suhrawardy, Fazlul Huq and Abdur Rahim. What these violences and desecrations suggest is anything but love and tolerance.

three sonnets by Arifa Ghani



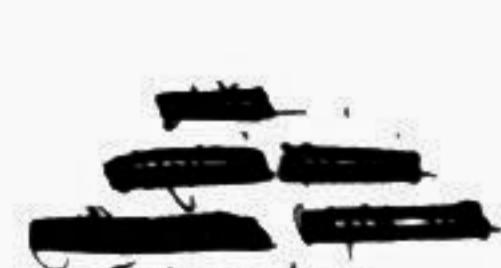
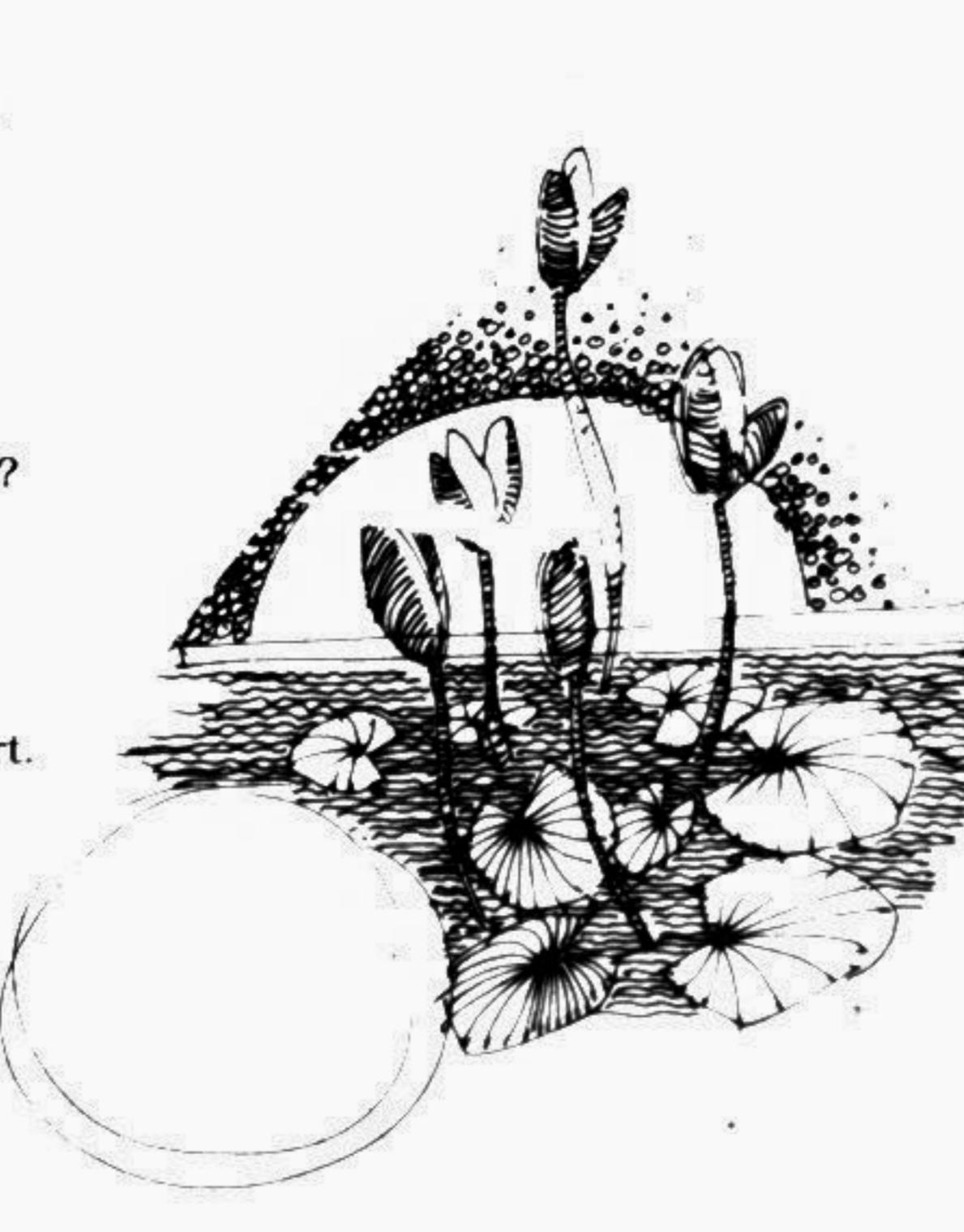
I

My friend, to thee these verses do I cast
To celebrate my joy at thy return.
The pleasure and the pain of years gone past
Doth now with a tremendous passion burn.
Thy dear face never did I think to see,
But Providence hath brought thee to my side -
Across the seas hast thou come hence to me
To bridge the distance that had grown so wide.
Through my cloudy black sky the sun doth peep,
Flowers doth blossom on my barren heart;
Thou art returned, and happy tears I weep;
It is long, my dear friend, since we did part.
Words cannot express the motions I feel,
Thus, with a full heart, doth I rest my quill.



II

I have loved thee long; for how long know thee?
I cannot count the days or months or years.
But know this: I have suffered long for thee
And, like the rain in October, shed tears.
I have burned in the fire of my passion
And have loved thee true with all my pure heart.
Like gold made purer in goldsmith's fashion,
So my love is made purer through thy hurt.
None have loved more truly than I have thee.
Neither will any love so true and long.
So long as flowers bloom and sun doth see
So long live my love and to thee belong.
All my love, joy and care to thee I give
To cherish or spurn as long as thee live.



III

Life did separate us, but so dare not death.
Parted we remained, throughout life, by fate.
And lonely we lived while we still had breath.
But even yet, my love, 'tis not too late
For Death is eternal sleep wherein we lie
Far apart and yet closer than in life.
Thus closer we two will be when we die:
Free from all life's tediousness and strife.
Closed in life, in death will open our eyes.
Free our dammed overflowing hearts will flow.
Arms shall reach overflowing hearts will flow.
And thus worldly barriers to us will bow.
Together we will build our world afresh
In the spirit — that we could not in the flesh.