

book review

# Rediscovering Rabindranath Tagore — After All These Years!

by Jon Spayde

**G**IVEN the torrent of books and tapes and classes that draw on Asian wisdom, real or spurious, to help us meditate or levitate or find our lost Western selves, it's easy to forget that the coming together of East and West goes a lot deeper, and is a lot older, than the contemporary New Age.

Ever since greedy and energetic Europeans began to colonize, convert, and trade their way into Asia in the late Renaissance, Western values (from the sublime to the unspeakable) have been thrust into the faces of Asian peoples. Their responses have varied from angry rejection to ecstatic embrace to wary sifting. At the same time, the colonizers have interpreted Asia for the home market, in ways that have ranged from the starkest racism to the most conscientious scholarship.

While every Asian culture had its inspired leaders who faced the Western challenge in their own way, two figures were able to absorb the Western impact, find a living relationship to their own traditions, and then become world famous for bringing this mix to the West in the form of wisdom. They were the Indians M K Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

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As Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson point out in the introduction to their splendid book, **Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology** (St. Martin's, \$30), Gandhi is very much alive in the West today and Tagore is all but forgotten. That's a major shift of taste. Between winning the Nobel Prize for his poetry in 1913 and his death in 1941, Tagore was simply one of the most famous men on the planet. His poetry and prose, deeply coloured by his reformist, highly philosophical Hinduism, had a serene weightiness that appealed to Westerners who were being hurtled from one World War toward another. Both cosmopolitan and deeply Indian, he seemed like the perfect bearer of Eastern wisdom into the modern world. He was received by kings and presidents, discoursed publicly with Albert Einstein on the nature of the world, and mixed with the West's literary elite: William Butler Yeats was a friend, and Ezra Pound not known for low self-esteem confessed that he felt inferior to Tagore.

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Yet, by one of the ironic rules of our shrinking planet, the longevity of an Asian writer on the world scene depends on the quality of translations into English. Once the photogenic, prophet-bearded poet/philosopher was gone

from the scene, his poetry in stiff English renderings from the Bengali made mostly by Tagore himself just couldn't stand the test of time. Dutta and Robinson are helping revive interest in Tagore by downplaying the poetry (which as they point out, still awaits a great translator) and making fresh translations from the many other literary genres that Tagore mastered: the short story, the polemical essay, memoir travel writing, and especially the familiar letter, which he handles as powerfully as Keats.

In the process, the editors also reveal

the power of a personality that transcends his specifically literary achievements. Tagore, scion of one of the richest and best connected families of 19th-century Calcutta, never suffered feelings of inferiority before the "sahibs" the English masters of India. He was a leader of the pre-Gandhi *Swadeshi* (self-rule) movement in Bengal at the turn of the century, but turned away from nationalist politics in disgust at the violence and bitterness that came with it. His wary friendship with Gandhi never prevented him from expressing grave doubts about the wisdom

of Gandhi's advocacy of "nonparticipation" with British rule while the British, still, in Tagore's view, had modern lessons to teach India.

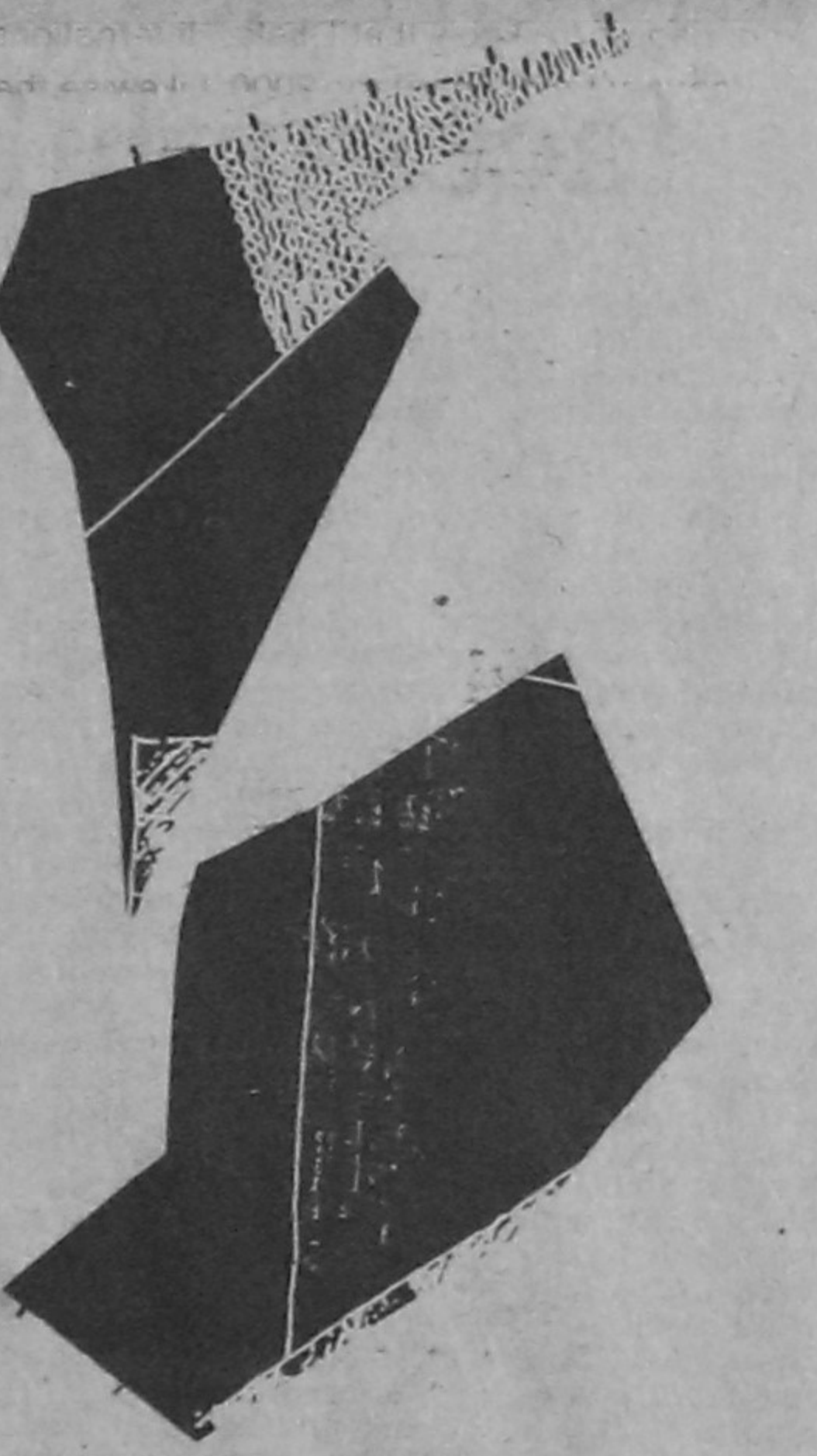
But Tagore was no political fence sitter. His 1919 letter to Lord Chelmsford, viceroy of India, protesting a British massacre in the Punjab region and handing back his knighthood, is a masterpiece of icily correct invective.

Tagore comes closest to us, though when he calls on his Western friends to imagine a world in which East and West give each other spiritual gifts free of imperialistic coercion, a world in which science is honoured but spirit and humane values rule. "When our universe is in harmony with man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it a beauty," Tagore told Einstein in 1930. Coming from a man with illusion, about either East or West, this noble sentiment sounds less like pure idealism than a hard-won way of living decently in a violent century. Tagore's gift for us today, splendidly presented in this anthology, is his insistence on speaking for the highest human values and loftiest human aims. At a time when our public discourses have descended into the mud of *Marketspeak* and *Realpolitik*, we need Tagore's courageous and undecieved conviction that we were born for something wildly and brilliantly better.

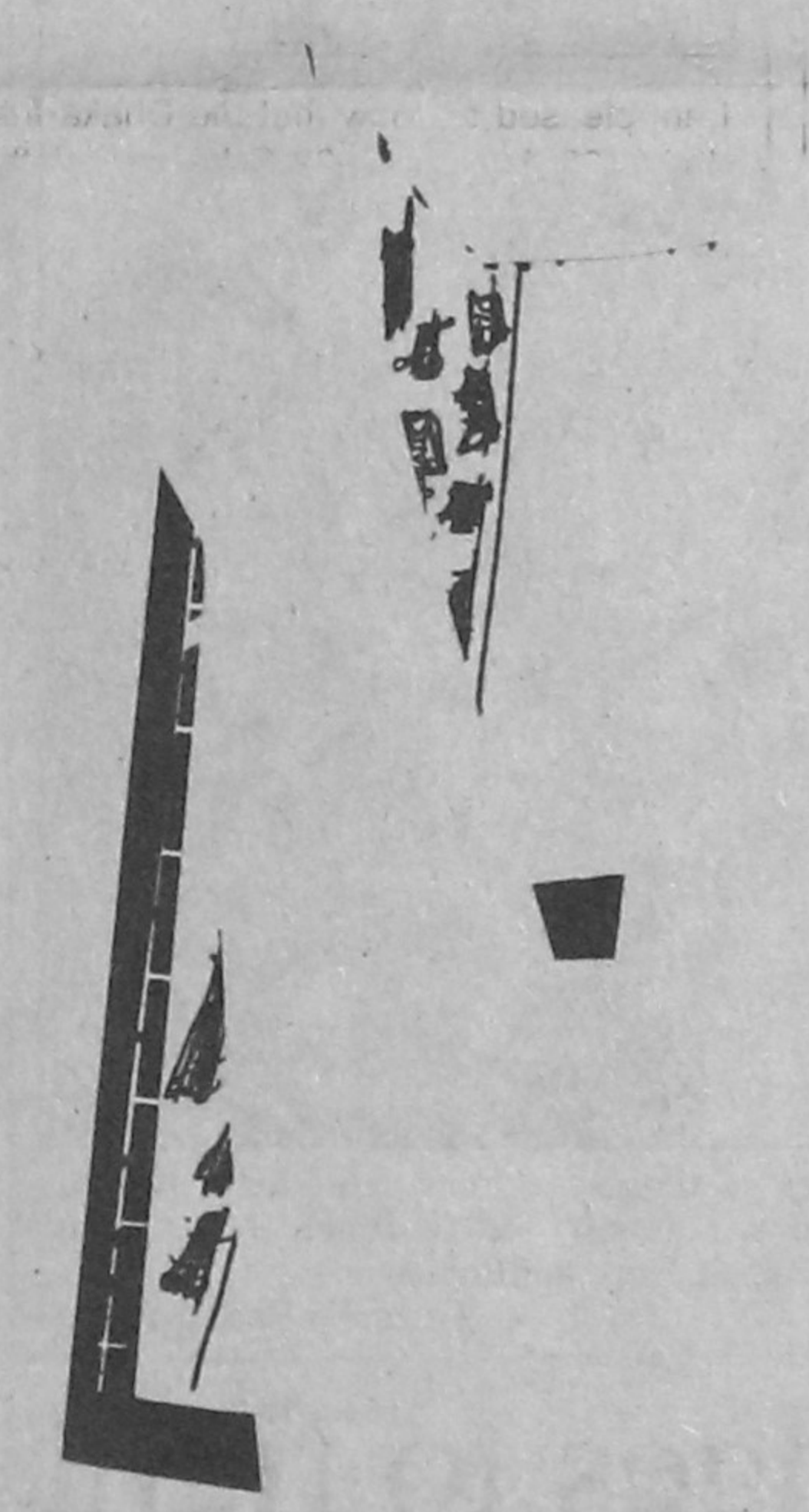
## reflections Ectetra

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

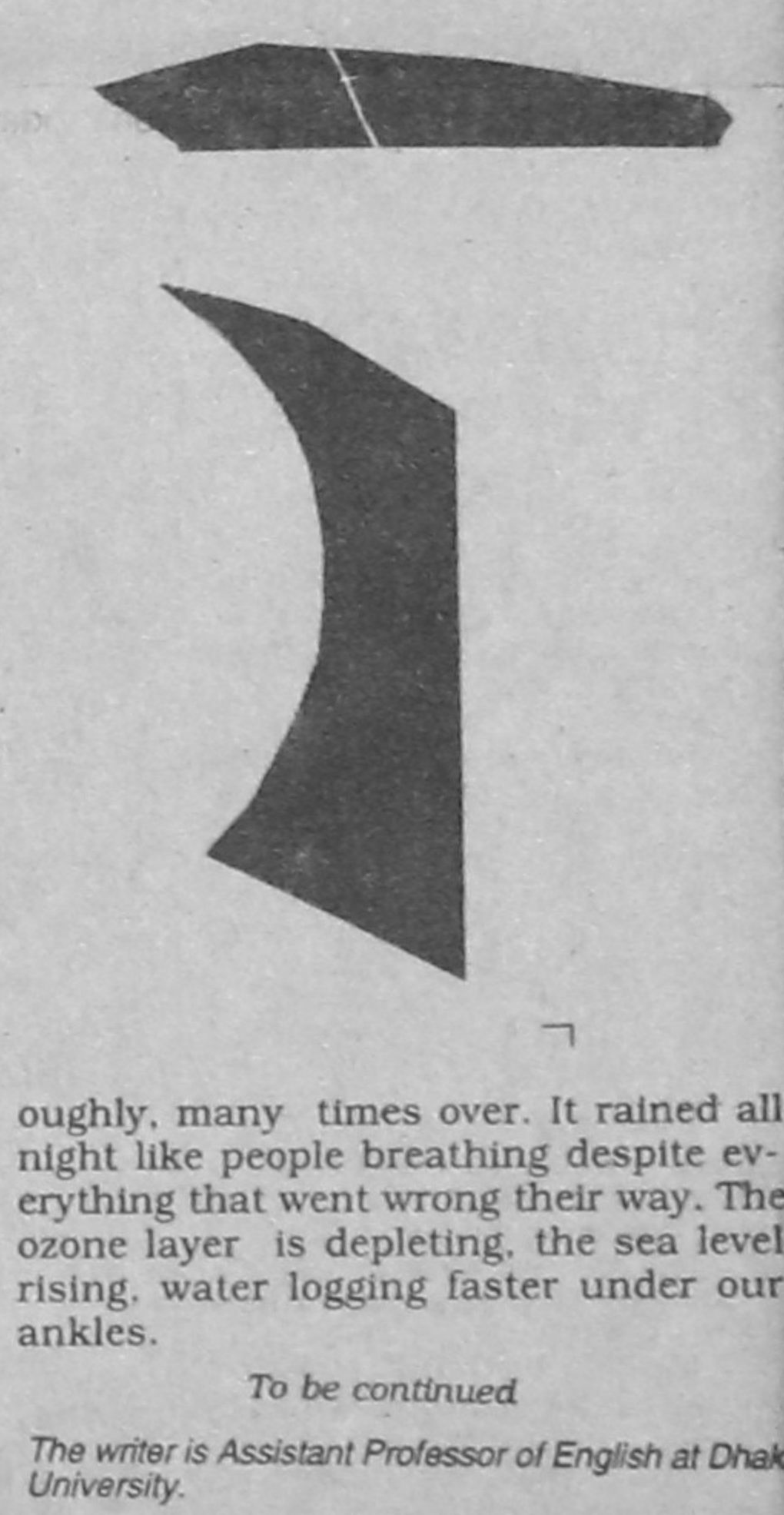
**P**EOPLE need dough for coaching centres, cable operators, for groceries, pearls of Basra, intimate items one cannot name, mushroom sauce, Chinese and Szechuan restaurants, computers, internet, the chicest software, all have claims on your money — universities in the USA and Australia, air fares to Disneyland. Besides, everyone is happy to get a little gift called *bakshish* or trifle, a tip from time to time. It rained all night yesterday, splashes and splashes of rain fell on people's heads but — your maid came over right on time to wash all your bedsheets like she does every single day. The sweetmeat shop washed their floors, the parathadalpoori shops didn't, nor the kabab and Mughlai 'restoras'. Boys and girls sit hand in hand, sipping corn soup from tiny bowls. Eventually, they will fall in love. We love to eat, it is eating that makes us amorous. We love fish, meat too these days. Specially tiger's. The female bodymeat as well. And syrupy sweetmeat. A prostitute with badly applied make-up walks into a department store, jadedly pronouncing her hips, gurgling like a fountain with easy squeeze giggles — she tries her grotesque art of seduction and presto — she wins — she walks away with a be-



witched client. The traffic jam gets stuck again, an ambulance weeps its piteous bleeps and nothing happens. Blood is required, AB+ immediately; money is required, lots of it immediately, a doctor is needed, immediately, if that can be arranged. People watch the accident victims never making it, even if they get borne to the hospital bed. Sometimes life is not just a disaster but something painfully innocent — 2 chocolates for 4 taka, or a bunch of flowers for 5 takas clutched in small baby fingers. The traffic falls asleep again, not forgetting to inhale the thick vapour of grey, hate fills out people's lungs — invading people's AB+, their hepatitis intruded blood, sleeping quietly with their love of poetry that entice tiny mosquitoes as well. It rained hopelessly all night — like inane, cruel, hard hitting, modern poetry — hurting like the servant girl who gets smacked with a red hot iron kitchen spoon, branding her for all times as a 'no-one'. The whistle sounds, the barriers lower, the train chugs away. There is nothing left to be seen now, but more jobless entries, people arriving in the city that does not disoblige anyone — eat if you find something to eat — defecate where you need. There you go, Paltani speeches digging up the long, colourless list of hurt all over again — harping on



desolation, harping on privation, croakingly, repetitively crowing like the red plumed, early rising cock every morning. It's totally useless — education, newspapers, governance, pamphlets, protests, speeches, decorum, law, responsibility, morals, common sense, decency, respect, a personal code, ethics — they are all useless, like an old tin suitcase without a lid or a workable lock, like a rusted screw lying before an empty stomach, or a dead sparrow bones chewed clean by a delicate but unsentimental feline. Life is short, nasty, brutal, compassionless, inert, painless — Hobbesian. So? So what if the new millennium is here? So what if we have independence? The concerts blast and fans get hurt, panic spreads, hartals snort, any rave catches on like any rave must — cars get arsoned, masses get teargas-shelled, the circus goes on — so that our politics, our factions, our hospitals, our police can let us down once again. The ambulance doesn't make it into the tapeworm thin alley, the CT Scan machines are not working, the nurses are on a scowling spree — the heart stops like a pearl inside an oyster shell. The grave is not new to people in this city. Graves feel all too familiar, brown wet, decaying, muddy, insects gnawing — we have all been there before. Been there, seen that, done it thor-



oughly, many times over. It rained all night like people breathing despite everything that went wrong their way. The ozone layer is depleting, the sea level rising, water logging faster under our ankles.

To be continued

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## essay Nazrul in World-Languages

by Khondakar Ashraf Hossain

**S**OME Russian cultural associations sent Nazrul photographs, and life-sketches of Soviet workers while he was the editor of the *Langol*. Achintya Kumar Sengupta has opined somewhere that Nazrul wrote Proloy Ullash mainly to hail the October Revolution. Therefore, it is not surprising that Nazrul would be favourite among the Russians. His translations into Russian and other Soviet languages prove his popularity in that part of the world.

Nazrul's poems have been translated into Japanese by Kazuo Azuma, a Professor of Ritako University. Among his translations is Nazrul's famous poem 'Kandari Hushiar'. A significant translation work has been done in Persian under the aegis of Islamic Republic of Iran Cultural Centre in Dhaka (in 1995). The name of the book in Persian is *Ghuzidahe Ahwl Wa Asar-e-Kazi Nazrul Islam Shayere Milli Bangladesh* (Life and Selected Poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh) 20 of Nazrul's poems and songs have been included, most of them on Islamic themes. Among the secular pieces are 'Kandari Hushiar' and a few love-songs like "বগিচায় বুলবুলি তুই," "তুমি আমায় ভালবাস তাইতো আমি কবি।"

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Nazrul's poems were translated into Urdu in Pakistan before 1971. Even during the Bangladesh liberation war, in September 1971, Pakistan Academy of Lahore brought out a volume titled 'Nazrul Islam'. The book written by Professor Mohammad Abdullah of Dhaka University contained excerpts of Nazrul poems rendered in Urdu. Before that, a significant Urdu translator, of Nazrul titled *Payam-e-Shabab* came out from Urdu Markaz, Lahore. The author

was Dr. Aktar Hossain Raipuri. The earliest translation of Nazrul into Urdu was, of course, a compilation of his short stores, *Tughlan*, that came out in 1949 from Delhi. An interesting information in this regard is that Bangla Academy Dhaka published a collection of 25 Islami songs of Nazrul in Urdu way back in 1962. The name of the volume was *Jam-e-Kausar*. One interesting study on Nazrul's poetry was done in Urdu by Shantiranjan Bhattacharya in a book titled *Iqbal, Tagore, Nazrul, Teen Shayer Ek Motalya*. Bhattacharya translated some excerpts of Nazrul's

poetry for the benefit of his discussion.

A surprisingly well-written book on Nazrul Islam has recently been published in the German Language. It has come out in 1999 from Frankfurt-am-Main. The name of the volume is *Leben und werk des bengalischen Dichters Kazi Nazrul Islam*. The editor of the volume is Golam Abu Zakaria. The eminent poet Alokaranjan Dasgupta and his wife Barbara Dasgupta, among others have written on different aspects of Nazrul's life and poetry. The book includes German translations of Sarbohaa; by Hans Harder. Harder has

subtitled Sarbohara as "Agitatorische Lieder" or "Song of Agitation." Sarbohara (Die Verloren), 'Kishaner Gan (Lied des Bauern)', 'Sramiker Gan' (Lied der Arbeiter), 'Dhobarer Gan' (Lied der Fischer), 'Chhatradaler Gan' (Lied der Studenten) have been included. Monika Carbe has translated 'Bidrohi' with the subtitle: *Ein Feuerball auf der schwelle zur Dammerung Nazrul Islames Gedicht Bidrohi* ("Der Rebell").

A few lines from the German translation of 'Bidrohi' (for the taste of it):  
Sprich, heros,  
Sprich: Hoch erhoben ist mein

Haupt!  
Vor meiner Große  
Schwinden die gipfel des — Himalaya.  
Sprich, Heros,  
Sprich: Den weiten Himmel Des Universums  
Zerriß ich  
Sonne und Mond, planeten und sterne  
Weit hinter mir lassend.  
Durchatach ich Erde und Himmel und spaltete Gottes Thron.  
In an interesting article, Christian Weiss has compared Nazrul with other poets of protest: Rimbaud, Brecht and Mayakovski.

The above discussion of translations of the poetry of Nazrul Islam is by no means complete and exhaustive. We have reasons to believe that he has been translated into East European languages like Polish and Bulgarian although information regarding such translations is rare and hard to obtain. I would be grateful if anybody from the audience could supplement the above facts with newer information regarding Nazrul in the world languages.

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