

MOLLA NASREDDIN

(Hasan Javadi)

ii. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL WEEKLY

Molla Nasreddin (Mollā Naṣr-al-Din) was a political and social weekly in Azeri Turkish, which was published from 7 April 1906 until 1917 in Tbilisi (340 issues), in 1921 in Tabriz (8 issues), and from 1922 to 1931 in Baku (400 issues). This eight-page weekly had a tremendous impact on the course of journalism and development of ideas not only in Southern Caucasus but also in Persia, Turkey, and Central Asia. Its founder and chief editor, the celebrated writer Jalil Moḥammadqolizāda as well as his friend and colleague ‘Omar Fā’eq No‘mānzāda along with a philanthropist merchant Mašdi ‘Ali-Aṣḡar managed to finance its publications right from the beginning. The celebrated satirist Azeri poet, ‘Ali-Akbar Ṣāber Ṭāherzāda, for the first five years of the journal contributed considerably to its fame. His biting satirical poems in praise of Sattār Khan were recited by the Constitutionalists fighting the Royalists in the bunkers of Tabriz. The paper was banned from Persia on account of its focusing on the inequalities and injustices in society (poverty, women’s lack of social rights, plight of the working classes, oppression, tyranny). It was, however, often smuggled in inside the bales of cloth. The reactionary clerics of Tabriz, who were afraid of its anti-clerical stand, ruled that it was a deceptive paper (*awrāq-e moẓella*) and “worse than the sword of Šemr [the villain of the Karbalā tragedy]”. The outstanding feature of *Molla Nasreddin* was its

beautifully drawn color cartoons, which were the works of two eminent German artists in Tbilisi, Oscar Schimmerling and Joseph Rotter, and later on those of Azim Azimzāda. These cartoons were sharp satires illustrating the works of the writers of the weekly and were full of verve and caustic humor.

Moḥammadqolizāda was instrumental in every aspect of the journal right from the outset. He had written both in Russian and Azeri Turkish in liberal newspapers of Tbilisi before he published *Molla Nasreddin*. The time was very opportune. After the defeat of Russian army in Manchuria in 1905 and the disturbances of the same year, a certain degree of freedom was given to the press, and a degree of liberty among the Muslim peoples of Tsarist Russia coincided with the movement of the Young Turks in Turkey and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 in Persia. It was a time of great historical change in the region, especially in Tbilisi where the exiled and mostly liberal Russian aristocracy met with the Muslim intelligentsia and with socialists of various stripes. According to Moḥammadqolizāda's statement in the first issue (7 April 1906), the paper came into being as a result of a socio-political necessity. He further said: "*Mollā Naṣr-al-Din* was the creation of its own nature and time". The plan of a revolutionary future of the paper in its literary, social, and political venues was laid down in the first issue. *Molla Nasreddin* did not limit itself to the enlightenment and education of Azerbaijani society but rather took the whole colonized or so-called independent societies of the East as its domain. It aimed at showing the pitfalls of Tsarist policies toward

the nations under its control, criticizing absolutism and imperialism in the Middle East, fighting against superstitious beliefs and fanaticism, and spreading learning and culture, as well as friendship, amongst various nationalities. It was also stated that the writers of the journal would use every literary and satirical form in order to achieve those ends. Moḥammadqolizāda was aware of the difficulties that he faced in this ambitious plan. He wrote in his memoirs: “The despotism that had faced us like a mountain was the despotism of the king and the Sultan as well as the power and oppressiveness of those who had distorted the religion”.

The exceptional success of *Molla Nasreddin* was primarily due to the talents of its writers. Apart from Moḥammadqolizāda and Šāber, other contributors included the poets ‘Ali Naẓmī and ‘Ali-oğlu Ğamgosār, the dramatist ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Ḥaqqverdiev, the famous composer and writer Uzeyr Ḥājibeyov, and the novelist Moḥammed-Sa‘id Ordubādi. There were also many other artists, poets, and writers who joined in during the paper’s long history. For instance, Mo‘jez of Šabestar, an Azerbaijani poet of some fame contributed poems when the journal was being published in Tabriz.

Moḥammadqolizāda wrote under different satirical names such as Hardam/Herdem-kiāl (whimsical), Dala (gluttonous), Serteq (stubborn), Qārinqoli (ever-hungry). He, however, was mostly known as Molla Nasreddin and was popularly identified with a character of the same name in a series of popular stories, whose acts and sayings as a wise fool were proverbial all over

Middle East and Central Asia. According to Moḥammadqolizāda's wife, illiterate women in Tiblisi would come to their house to meet the real Molla Nasreddin.

Moḥammadqolizāda was an able playwright and short story writer. His plays like "The dead," "My mother's book" and "The gathering of the mad" are interesting literary works in their own rights, but he is mostly remembered for his short stories such as "Pocht qütüsi" (The post box), "Üsta Zeynal" (Ostād Zeynāl), "Iranda hurriyat (Democracy in Iran), and "Saqli üşaq" (The bearded child), some of which predate *Molla Nasreddin*. He reportedly preferred his journalistic experience to his creative writings.

The main factor in the great popularity of *Molla Nasreddin* and the impact that it had upon the satirical press of the time was the poetry of Şāber, whose satirical poems were regularly published in the paper until his death in 1911. Alesio Bombaci described Şāber as an author who combined the wrath of Decimus Juvenal with the sarcasm of Béranger and the humanism of Nekrasov. He has been considered "incomparable in depicting political and social problems" (Dehḳodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.v. Ṭāherzāda Şāber). Şāber's originality of thought and form marked him as a truly great poet. The vivid realism of his poetry reflects the hardships of his own life as well as the corruption, superstition, repression, and ignorance prevalent in his society. He faced the opposition of the officials and various clerics and suffered greatly as a consequence. The same was true of Moḥammadqolizāda, who, after publishing an article on the

freedom for women, had to take lodging in the Christian quarter of Tbilisi, away from Muslim fanatics.

The satirical works of Şāber embraces a wide variety of subjects, ranging from the defeat of the vainglorious czarist armies by Japan to scenes of social and domestic life at home. The butts of his satire range from Emperor Wilhelm of Prussia to Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah of Persia, from Sultan ‘Abd-al-Ḥamid of Turkey to very minor officials and clerics. His most fruitful years were those from 1905 to 1911, which coincided with the Constitutional Revolution in Persia. The struggle between the reactionaries and the Constitutionalists, the social corruption in Persia, the nature of the totalitarian government of Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah, and many other aspects of the revolution are all depicted in the bitingly satirical poems of Şāber. Şāber depicted the monarch as a ruthless, hypocritical, and miserly tyrant. In one of his famous poems, Şāber depicts him as a man who has put Persia up for auction, including the royal treasures, the provinces, and the country’s heritage. All these poems on Moḥammed-‘Ali Shah and on Persia were freely translated in verse by Sayyed Ašraf Gilāni and published in his journal *Nasim-e Šemāl* without the mention of Şāber’s name. Although the original terseness, beauty, and some flair of Şāber’s tone are lost in the process, they were good rendition in Persian and created a sensation in Tehran upon publication.

The immense popularity of Şāber, Moḥammadqolizāda, and other contributors of *Molla Nasreddin*’s led to much imitation. For instance the humorous and sometimes cynical

character Mollā Dā'i or Mollā 'Amu, which appeared everywhere in the paper as poet, or/and as the person who answered letters, advised the youth, parodied the viewpoints of the establishment and was ever present in the cartoons, was adopted by the weekly *Āḍarbāyyān*, which began its publication in 1907 in Tabriz. *Āḍarbāyyān* presented the figure of Ġaffār Wakil in *Molla Nasreddin's* or Mollā Dā'i's role. On the cover of the first issue of *Āḍarbāyyān*, Ġaffār Wakil is standing before the Mollā, listening to him like a faithful disciple.

Similar characters appear in other Persian satirical weeklies, among them Ḥašarāt-al-Arż (Tabriz, 1908), Šeydā (Istanbul, 1911), Bohlul (Tehran, 1908), and Sheikh Čoğondar (Tehran, 1911). The device was taken up also by Dehḵodā in his column in *Sur-e Esrāfil*, entitled "Čarand parand," which contained some of the most telling examples of Dehḵodā's satire. Two of the pseudo-names used by Dehḵodā were reminiscent of those used by Moḥammadqolizāda: "Damdamki" (Whimsical) and "Ḳarmagas" (Gadfly). Some of the satirical techniques used by the former in stories such as "Democracy in Iran" are similar to those used by Dehḵodā in "Čarand parand." Karbalāy Moḥammed-'Ali in the former story and Āzād Khan Karandi in the latter are very similar in their innocent ignorance and naiveté. Sometimes the questions raised by Šāber or Moḥammadqolizāda were answered in prose or poetry in *Sur-e Esrāfil* and other contemporaneous Persian periodicals.

Individual poems of Šāber were also frequently translated or imitated by writers of the Persian press. His famous poem that

begins with “However the nation is plundered, what do I care?” was imitated in Persian by Mirza Mahdi Khan, the editor of the newspaper *Hekmat*, and the rendition appeared in the weekly *Ādarbāyjān* (issue 10). Šāber’s influence can be also seen in the poems of Moḥammad-Taqi Bahār and Abu’l-Qāsem Lāhuti. *Molla Nasreddin* created a new style and approach in journalism in Persia, particularly during the period of the Constitutional Revolution, and had a profound effect on shaping the intellectual thought and ideas of the early 20th century Azerbaijan.

MO‘JEZ ŠABESTARI

(Hasan Javadi)

MO‘JEZ ŠABESTARI (Šabostari), Mirzā ‘Ali (b. Šabestar, 26 February 1874 d. Šāhrud, 3 September 1934), a satirical poet in Azerbaijani whose works were not published for a long time; he remained fairly unknown during his lifetime. His father, Hāji Āqā, was a merchant of declining fortune, but Mirzā ‘Ali managed to receive a good traditional education. He learned Arabic and became well acquainted with Persian classics. Soon after his father’s death in 1889, Mo‘jez traveled through Tbilisi, Batumi and the Black Sea to join his two brothers, Ḥasan and Ḥosayn, in Istanbul, who owned a bookstore there. Of his activities and life in Istanbul we know next to nothing, but it is quite clear that he started writing poetry in this period, and his stay in this cosmopolitan city changed and shaped his world views. In the summer of 1906, after sixteen years in Istanbul, Mo‘jez returned to his native Šabestar, a town near the

northeastern shore of Lake Urmia, where he resided most of his life. This was the most productive period of his life when he “proclaimed war” against injustice, lawlessness, superstitions and ignorant clerics, illiteracy of masses, and victimization of women (*Kolliyāt*, ed. Qāsemzāda, p. 5).

Mo‘jez was greatly influenced by the famous Azerbaijani poet Mirzā ‘Al-Akbar Ṭāherzāda Šāber, and like him he felt an obligation “to express good and bad of his society”. In a poem Mo‘jez alleges that he had been accused of “being an unbeliever and faithless” for telling the truth. His poetry resemble that of Šāber both in terms of the subject matter and the form. In the poem called “Qalam” (Pen), he pays tribute to the memory of Šāber and ranks him equal to great poets of Iran. In some cases Mo‘jez answers or rather writes *naẓiras* to the poems of Šāber. Though in a limited scale, like Šāber, Mo‘jez contributed to the satirical journal *Mollā Naṣr-al-Din*. In 1921, during the uprising of Shaikh Moḥammad Kīābāni, when its editor Jalil Mehmed Qolizāda (Moḥammadqolizāda) was in Tabriz and eight issues of the journal were published there, Mo‘jez contributed two poems, which are probably the only poems that he published during his life time. “Our public baths” (Ḥammām kazinesi *Mollā Naṣr-al-Din*, no. 5, Nov. 1921) humorously depicts the pollution and filth in public bathhouses in those days. Apparently there were other contributions by Mo‘jez to the journal, but their attribution has not been ascertained definitely.

A social problem is addressed in every one of Mo‘jez’s poems. The sham piety of the clerics, ignorance of masses,

corruption of the ruling classes, living condition of the poor, illiteracy, and status of women are among many social issues that he makes the butts of his biting satire. Demagogical clerics and what they do under the pretext of Islam are bitterly criticized. The plight of women in being abused and deprived of their rights is the recurring point in much of his poetry. In spite of living in a small and far off town, Mo‘jez was aware of world politics and international events. In his poem “Wilhelm,” he criticizes the Prussian king for many problems at home, and in a number of other poems he expresses his bewilderment at the senselessness of World War I and the destruction of nature and human lives. Thematically Mo‘jez’s poetry is very much similar to the poets of the Constitutional and post-Constitutional periods in Iran, poets like Abu’l-Qāsem Lāhuti and Iraj Mirzā. Ideologically he was bitterly against monarchy and believed it to be one of the reasons for the slow pace of progress in Iran. The impact of the 1917 Revolution and the establishment of the Communist regime in Russia and Azerbaijan is very much in evidence in his poems, although he does not seem to have been a Communist.

In summer of 1933, on his way to Šāhrud, Mo‘jez stayed for a few days with his friend Moḥammad Nakjavāni and told him that he had left the manuscript of his poems with a friend in Šabestar as security for a fifty-toman loan. Nakjavāni traveled to Šabestar, paid off the loan and received the manuscript. Eleven years later, during the so-called Autonomous Government of Azerbaijan under Sayyed Ja‘far Pešavari, two scholars from northern Azerbaijan, Mirzā Ebrāhimof and Ġolām Memmedli,

worked on this manuscript and for the first time published a selection of the poems in Tabriz. After the fall of the Pišavari government, like many other Azerbaijani publications, this 240-page first edition of Mo‘jez’s poetry became an underground book. In 1959 a second selection of his poetry was added to the first and clandestinely published in Tabriz with no publisher or editor’s name. The banning of Azeri publications during the most part of the Pahlavi period explains why Mo‘jez has remained virtually unknown in Iran while several editions of his works have appeared in northern Azerbaijan. In a hand-written autobiographical note, Mo‘jez explains why did he write most of his poetry in Azeri and little in Persian: “Many people in Azerbaijan, being illiterate they would not benefit from my Persian poems. My purpose was to convey my message in a way that all women and men could understand it”. His language is simple and often colloquial. He has some lyrical and old style poems, but even in such poems he invariably brings in social issues and discusses them in simple and straightforward language. Mo‘jez died of tuberculosis in Šāhrud at the age of sixty-one on 3 September 1934.

BEHRANGĪ, ŠAMAD

(Michael C. Hillmann)

BEHRANGĪ, ŠAMAD, teacher, social critic, folklorist, translator, and short story writer. Born in mid-1939 into a lower-class Turkish-speaking family in Tabrīz, Behrangī completed elementary school and three years of secondary school and then

attended the local teacher training school for grade schools, from which he received a certificate in 1957. Later, in the course of eleven years of teaching Persian in village and town schools in Azerbaijan, he obtained a B.A. degree in English from Tabriz University.

Behrangī began writing short stories and translating from Turkish into Persian in the late 1950s. He published his first story, “Talkūn,” in the spring of 1964. In the spring of 1965, he and Behrūz Dehqānī published the first volume of *Afsānahā-ye Ādārbāyjān* (Tales of Azerbaijan). The second volume of these Persian versions of Turkish tales appeared in the spring of 1968.

The appearance in the summer of 1965 of Behrangī’s severe critique of educational methods and textbooks called *Kand o kāv dar masā’el-e tarbiātī-e Īrān* established the author as a social critic and brought his name to the attention of Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad, a leading literary figure of the day among anti-establishment writers. Āl-e Aḥmad subsequently endeavored without success to arrange for the publication by the Ministry of Education of Behrangī’s *Alefba barā-ye kūdakān-e Ādārbāyjān* (Alphabet for the children of Azerbaijan).

In 1966 Behrangī’s “Īldūz wa kalāghā” (Īldūz and the crows), his first published children’s story, was discussed in the popular weekly *Ferdowsī*, which brought the young author’s name to the attention of readers of Persian fiction. During the next two years, numerous stories by Behrangī appeared in pamphlet form, some of them distributed surreptitiously as he developed a reputation as a dissident writer. In the summer of

1968 his best known work appeared, the folktale called *Māhī-e sīāh-e kūčūlū* (The little black fish), which many readers have construed as an anti-establishment allegory.

In early September of 1968, on one of his wonted field trips to gather folklore and stories, this time to the *Ḳodā Āfarīn* area near the Iran-USSR border, Behrangī, who could not swim, reportedly went wading in the Aras river and drowned. This bizarre death in a faraway region combined with his growing reputation as a social critic and the presumed concern on the part of government authorities with his writing convinced some like-minded people that his death was not accidental. The Association of Writers of Iran (*Kānūn-e nevisandagān-e Īrān*) immediately compiled a commemorative issue of *Āraš* magazine in Behrangī's memory. In the spring of 1969 twelve of his children's stories were published in a volume called *Qeṣṣahā-ye Behrang*. That summer all of Behrangī's articles, including several previously unpublished pieces, were compiled by Dehqānī in *Majmū'ahā-ye maqālahā*. Dehqānī (who was later executed during the Pahlavi regime as a terrorist) published another compilation of Behrangī stories and fables in 1970 called *Talkūn wa qeṣṣahā-ye dīgar*. The appearance in 1978 of *Nāmahā-ye Ṣamad Behrangī*, compiled by the author's brother Asad, practically completes the corpus of Behrangī's writings.

During the 1970s, Behrangī became a hero and martyr figure for anti-Pahlavī groups, and during the 1979 Revolution he received considerable attention. A dedicated and indefatigable advocate of radical reforms, Behrangī is said to have been a

model teacher. His antipatriarchal and anticlerical encouragement of the youth of Azerbaijan to educate themselves into equality with Persian-speaking Iranians, his passionate criticism of the wholesale adoption of American educational ideas and values, and his courageous willingness to confront the governmental power structure through his writing and teaching guarantee Behrangī a place in Iranian intellectual and social history, despite the fact that his fiction is not likely to endure for its literary merits.