



MOLLA NASREDDIN II. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL WEEKLY

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Molla Nasreddin (Mollā Naşr-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 (Memed Qulizadeh; 1866-32) as well as his friend and colleague ‘Omar Fā’eq No‘mānzāda (1872-1940) along with a philanthropist merchant Maşdi ‘Ali-Aşğar managed to finance its publications right from the beginning (*Molla Nasreddin*, published 7 April 1906, referencing a verse from the poet Şāber, “Don’t wake them, let them sleep.” Courtesy of the author.” /uploads/files/mollanasreddin_ii_fig_1.jpg>FIGURE 1). The celebrated satirist Azeri poet, ‘Ali-Akbar Şāber Ṭāherzāda (1862-1911), 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 Constitutionals fighting



the Royalists in the bunkers of Tabriz (Āryanpur, II, pp. 46, 57). 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; [FIGURE 2](#)). 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 moʔella*) and “worse than the sword of Šemr [the villain of the Karbalā tragedy]” (Āryanpur, II, p. 45). 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 (1863- 1938) and Joseph Rotter, and later on those of Ażim Ażimzāda (1880-1943). 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 Naşr-al-Din* was the creation of its own nature and time” (Moḥammadqolizāda, apud Āryanpur, II, p. 40). 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 Azarbaijani 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 (Mollā Naşr-al-Din, published 13 January 1913. “We thought it had died, but it’s back again.” Courtesy of the author.” [/uploads/files/mollanasreddin_ii_fig_3.jpg](#)”>[FIGURE 3](#)). It was also stated that the writers of the journal would use every literary and satirical



form in order to achieve those ends (Akhundov, p. 28). 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” (apud Ārynpur, II, p. 42).

The exceptional success of *Molla Nasreddin* was primarily due to the talents of its writers. Apart from Moḥammadqolizāda and Şāber, other contributors included the poets ‘Ali Naẓmi (1882-1946) and ‘Ali-oḡlu Ğamgosār (1880-1919), the dramatist ‘Abd-al-Raḥim Ḥaqqqverdiev (1870-1933), the famous composer and writer Uzeyr Ḥājibeyov (1885-1948), and the novelist Moḥammed-Sa‘id Ordubādi (1872-1950). There were also many other artists, poets, and writers who joined in during the paper’s long history. For instance, Mo‘jez of Şabestar (1874-1934), an Azarbaijani poet of some fame contributed poems when the journal was being published in Tabriz (FIGURE 4).

Moḥammadqolizāda wrote under different satirical names such as Hardam/Herdem-kiāl (whimiscal), 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 Tibilisi would come to their house to meet the real Molla Nasreddin (Memedqulizade, p. 114).

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 “Saḡali üşaq” (The bearded child), some of which predate *Molla Nasreddin*. He reportedly preferred his journalistic experience to his creative writings. (Sardāri-niā, p. 144).

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 (Bombaci, tr., p. 217). He has been considered him “incomparable in depicting political and social problems” (Dehḡodā, *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-ʿAli Shah of Persia, from Sultan ʿAbd-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-ʿAli Shah, and many other aspects of the revolution are all depicted in the biting 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-ʿAli Shah and on Persia were freely translated in verse by [Sayyed Aşraf Gilāni](#) and published in his journal *Nasim-e Şemāl* 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 (Āryanpur, II, p. 64 ff.).

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 ʿAmu, 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 *Ādarbāyjān*, which began its publication in 1907 in Tabriz. *Ādarbāyjān* presented the figure of Ğaffār Wakil in *Molla Nasreddin's* or Mollā Dā'i's role. On the cover of the first issue of *Ādarbāyjān*, Ğaffār Wakil is standing before the Mollā, listening to him like a faithful disciple.

Similar characters appear in other Persian satirical weeklies, among them *Ḥaşarāt-al-Arz* (Tabriz, 1908), *Şeydā* (Istanbul, 1911), *Bohlul* (Tehran, 1908),



and Sheikh Čoğondar (Tehran, 1911). The device was taken up also by Dehḳodā in his column in *Sur-e Esrāfil*, entitled “Čarand parand,” which contained some of the most telling examples of Dehḳodā’s satire. Two of the pseudo-names used by Dehḳodā 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 Dehḳodā 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 Azarbaijan.

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