

My Son Munier

On December 14, 1971, barely two weeks after his 46th birthday, Prof Munier Choudhury was picked by Al-Badr men from his Central Road residence and killed. His body was never found. A brilliant career as a teacher, scholar, critic, dramatist and translator was cruelly cut short at its prime. On the occasion of his 70th birth anniversary on November 27, Shaheed Munier Choudhury's mother Afia Begum, now 89 remembers her son.

I feel very much like writing about my Munier's childhood and giving it to Ferdousi. Perhaps she could use it in some way or may be just type it out for me in good paper. I have an image of Munier in my heart but I still want to write about him and keep it for myself. As a boy, he was very naughty and not serious about his studies at all. He never studied during the day; he would study at night but only if I scolded him. He would say that it was too noisy to study during the day. He would not even take a nap. One afternoon I forced him to lie down with me. I woke up to find that it was pouring and Munier was not beside me. The entire house was still. Munier was probably about three years old then. I went downstairs and found him pacing the verandah and crying. I asked him what happened and he said he had done something awful. In the backyard against the wall there was a cement water-tank and he had unplugged the stopper and let out all the water. He was scared when he saw the water gushing out. I said it was all

right — Geda would put the stopper back and fill up the tank again.

Another event. He was so naughty, he would cut and bruise himself all the time, but never tell anyone about it. One afternoon I was praying in the verandah, and I thought I saw someone running away in front of me. There was a clump of banana trees in the backyard and Munier was standing there and bleeding profusely. He wouldn't tell anyone. I quickly bandaged his cuts.

3. He had a passion for angling even as a boy. I went to my father's house in the village and took Munier with me. Munier went to the pond with his fishing rod and somehow the fishing hook pierced his big toe and got stuck under his toe-nail. He managed to pull it out himself and didn't tell anyone about it. Two days later in Dhaka, he had an infection; he was made unconscious with chloroform and the hook was pulled out.

Let me tell you one more incident. Like his father, he would often walk into the kitchen and lift the covers of pots to see what was cooking.

That day, a big fish was brought from the market, and I was cooking it with a lot of spices. What fish is it, Amna? he said. *Boal*, I said. *Boal*? I don't eat *Boal*. Would you like some eggs? Okay, he said, and I made him an omelette with two eggs and lots of onions and green chillies. He finished his omelette and asked for some fish. So, it's a trick, isn't it? You want both? He started crying, went to his room upstairs, shut the door and cried some more. I had forgotten that he was not a child anymore. I was dumbfounded. Manik (Prof Kabir Chowdhury) came down for lunch, saw the plate with rice and fish and wondered about it.

Manik said that he never bothered me about food, but Munier liked a good meal. How could I say that to him? I said that I didn't realise that it would hurt him so much. Manik went up, knocked on Munier's door and asked him to eat with him. Munier said he had already eaten. Come down and let's eat together, said Manik, and Munier joined Manik to eat the fish and rice. I never scolded Munier ever again.

But is that why he left never to eat with me anymore? There is no end to the stories I can write about my son.

One day Manik had locked the door of his room from inside. Munier knocked on the door and asked Manik to open up. I won't, won't, said Manik, laughing from inside the room. Munier pushed the door angrily, smashed a glass pane with his fist and cut an artery. A doctor was quickly called in, and later he had to go to the hospital. The doctor said it was a main artery, people die when the main artery is cut. Five minutes more and he would have died. He didn't die then, but some years later he did.

You won't die unless your time is up. This is something we learnt as children.

Munier is a student of class VIII. He asks for the car to go to school and his father says, you don't need the car to go to school. I walked to my school, you can too. Do you know what he said?

He said, you were a peasant's son, and I am the son of a District Magistrate.

One day he went to some important meeting and

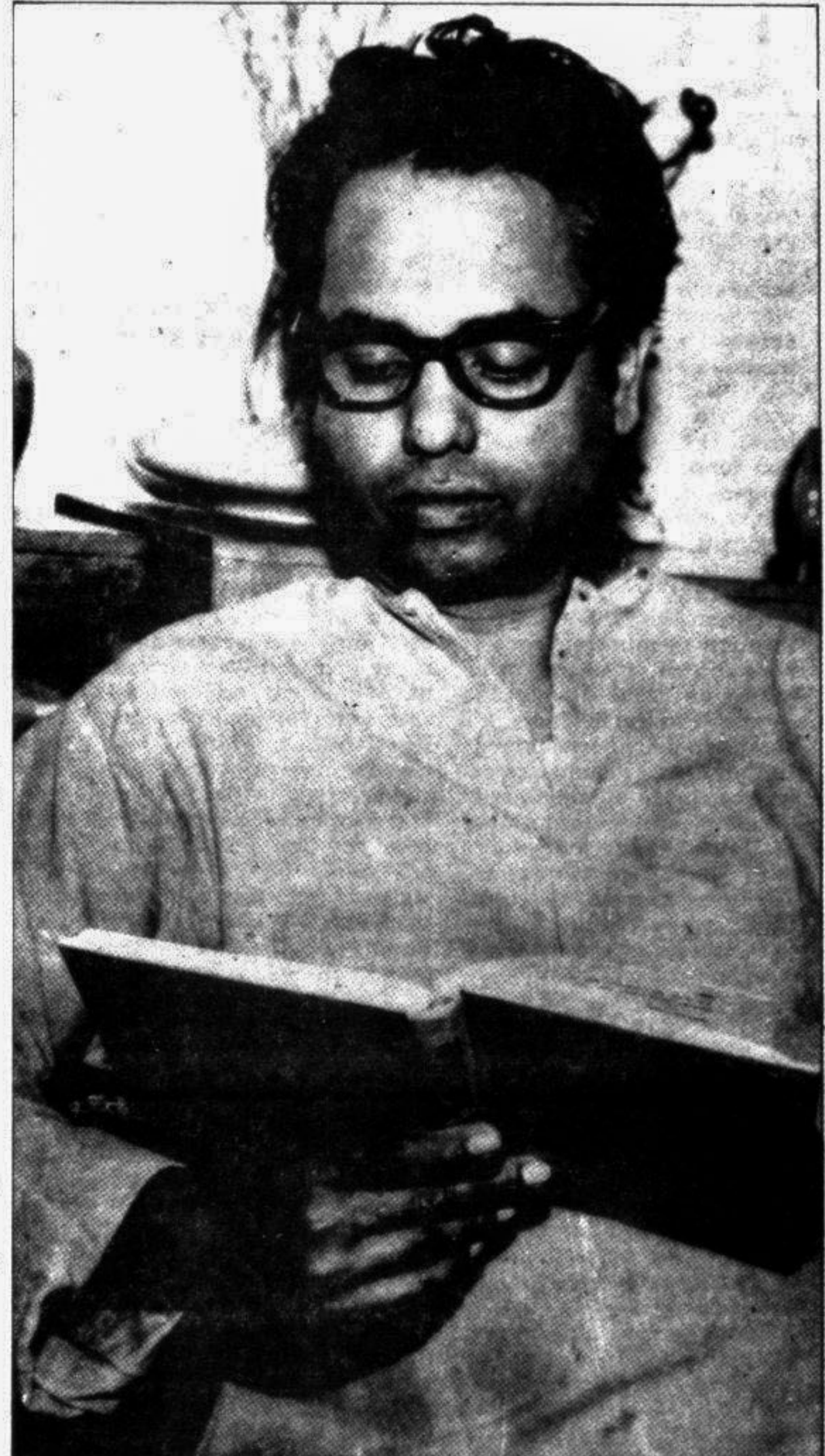
somebody asked why he was not wearing shoes. He said that his father did not give him money to buy a pair of shoes. He was fearless even as a child. I have so much to write about him. As I write about his childhood, images of Munier's youth come crowding into my mind. If you think it is irrelevant you can drop it.

But I am his mother. So I can't stop writing. During Eid in 1971, I invited his mother-in-law, my grandchildren and son-in-law for lunch. Munier said, let Lili (his wife) eat with her mother, and I will eat with mine. He was a Professor the Dhaka University and ate his lunch at 1:30. He would often see me on the prayer-mat around 1 PM, go away and come back again later so that I could serve him his lunch.

He didn't snack much. He liked fried fish, one green chilli, one raw onion, some *bharta*, and leftover vegetables. I would put aside his favourite dishes in a cupboard. Sometimes when he was hungry he would take the food out himself and eat it, and then tell me about it. He

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Munier Choudhury, the playwright, was born in Manikganj on November 27, 1925 and educated at Collegiate School, Dhaka, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh and at the University of Dhaka. He taught at the Brajajal College, Khulna, Jagannath College, Dhaka and at the University of Dhaka. In 1949 he was married to Lili Mirza. He spent two years from 1956 to '58 at Harvard on a Rockefeller Fellowship, studying linguistics. He received the Bangla Academy Natya Purasker for his play *Raktakta Prantar* in 1962 and Daud Purasker for *Mir-Manas*. During the political turmoil of the fifties he was incarcerated and spent more than two years in prison. It was there in prison his *chef-d'oeuvre Kabir* was written. Also a prolific writer on a wide range of genres and subjects including literary criticism, linguistics, comparative literature, he translated from Shakespeare, Shaw and Galsworthy.



Bengali as a Vehicle of Abstract Thought

Munier Choudhury

BUDDHADEVA Bose in one of his essays expresses the opinion that Bengali prose, "in less than a couple of centuries, has achieved remarkable maturity." He, however, alleges that it has "yet notable deficiencies. Deficiencies, I mean, not in performance, but in potency itself!" Reflecting on these supposed fundamental limitations of the Bengali language, he further says: "Bengali prose, therefore, is now all right for description, narration and dialogue, the accessory of fiction and *belles-lettres*, but seems just to fall short of speculative, critical and philosophical writing."

Had this been the opinion of an ignorant foreigner or that of an infatuated worshipper of foreign idols, we need not have taken it seriously. But this is the view of a writer among whose many achievements must be counted his astonishing ability to discuss difficult aesthetic questions in charming prose, and, therefore, calls for comment at length.

As the question is about the limits of Bengali as a language and its inherent tendencies, the present discussion must keep in view the entire range of our prose literature. To my mind, that would be the best way of dispelling the misgiving of people who needlessly despair of the future of Bengali.

Ram Mohan Roy created a new epoch as a prose writer at a time when Bengali had

not developed punctuation marks or the notion of agreement between clauses, according to the genius of the language. His *Vedanta*, published in 1915, was the first step towards a fully blown and modern prose. This pioneering effort, naturally hesitant and unsure of itself, is significantly a work with a spiritual theme. Bengali prose thus made its beginning in the abstract realm of philosophy.

After twenty-five years appeared Akshoy Datta on an intellectual scene profoundly disturbed by the conflict between native culture and foreign culture. There was no hypocrisy or self-deception in the response of the times to new ideals and ideas of life. The impact of it all affected the very heart of society and the individual, and the resultant awakening was so deep and real that Bengali avidly set about assimilating western and Indian knowledge. In their attempt to know, not merely through English translation but at first hand, the best that has been thought in every language, they learnt Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit on the one hand, and Latin, Greek, French and German on the other. It was this serious sense of purpose and scholarly pain that made possible the revolution in thought and language in the nineteenth century. Akshoy Datta was important not only as a reformer of language but as an exponent of new ideas. His work entitled *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti* (Nature and Human Nature) does not

merely contain a freight of information. His discussion of the laws of nature, the constitution of human nature, the question of human happiness, shows that Bengali had already acquired the power of logical analysis and of representing the complex structure of abstract thought. The book, *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti*, is not a wholly original work. When, however, a great idea leavens, or a great change occurs in communal life, and the individual is roused by his insight into it to make its significance clearer to himself and to others by studious effort, language, under the stress, discovers its possibilities. Datta was aware that he had used words which were not easy for an ordinary English-educated reader to understand. He, therefore, sought to remove the difficulty of such readers by adding to his work a glossary of the unfamiliar words with their English equivalents. In doing so his aim was to facilitate the study of western science and philosophy through the medium of Bengali. His assumption was that his English-educated audience understood the English equivalents he supplied, and for this reason, he gave his alphabetical glossary the caption: 'English Rendering of Words Compiled'. That he did not tentatively call it 'Proposed Bengali Equivalents of English Words' is also a proof of his great faith in the possibilities of the Bengali language.

Vidyasagar was a contemporary of Akshoy Datta. The

emancipated mind and love of knowledge that gave distinction to Datta's prose also inspired the prose of Vidyasagar, whose mature skill as a writer was commended by Tagore in these words: "He insisted that you must say what you want to say simply, beautifully and in an orderly manner... In fact, Vidyasagar introduced order into the disorderly crowd of Bengali prose, gave it the sense of period and structure, taught it restraint and neatness, and thus increased its flexibility and functional effectiveness." Vidyasagar's prose is valuable because the mind that it mirrors has extraordinary qualities. One result of his constant study of Sanskrit philosophy was that to him even abstract thought became as clear and definite in outline as sensible images. His consciousness of the modern *Zeitgeist* and a deep faith in western philosophy made the secular content of this prose of irresistible appeal. It was the work of a vastly erudite logician and naturally had a solid logical structure. The spirited but lucid, didactic yet argumentative prose of *Bidhaha Bibaha* (Widow Marriage, 1855), radiates, in its flair for sarcasm and ridicule, the steady heat of the midday sun.

It was however Bankim who realised fully that the Bengali language, if properly tapped, could express the whole gamut of human thought and feelings. The novelist has left the mark of this conviction in his own wonderful and various cre-

ation. He imprinted on the face of our prose his realisation, simple as it is, that language is complex or simple, strong or mild, ornate or plain, strictly according to subject matter. Bankim discussed abstruse ideas of western philosophy in his 'Miscellaneous Essays' with such ease and naturalness that it ought to evoke the admiration of our usually unperceptive readers.

Bankim achieved, while attempting abstract definitions of literature, a subtle and suggestive prose, extraordinarily free from verbiage and capable of rendering complex thought with effortless ease. Even when one does not agree with him, one feels the charm of his manner and his power of lucid persuasion.

Eighteen seventy-two saw the publication of *Banga Darshan* and 1891 that of *Sadhana Bharati* (Spirits' Endeavour), presented Tagore to us. In *Sabuj Patra* (1914) Pramatha Choudhury made his appearance, officially as it were, in the field of Bengali prose. After him came, to mention a few names at random, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, Buddhadeva Bose and Annadasankar Roy. Two Muslim writers also produced significant works in Bengali: Humayun Kabir wrote his *Emmanuel Kant* and Qazi Abdul Wadud his *Goethe*. Ramendrasundar wrote his aesthetic criticism in a language characterised by a tendency to overanalysis. He, however, displays an unexceptionable wealth of facts and thinks in words

aply chosen and tautly woven in the fabric of his prose. Pramatha Choudhury treated Trivedi's subject in a racy conversational idiom, and opened up the limitless horizon of a prose able to explore the infinite resources of our spoken language. In his hands dry abstraction seems to glitter by contact with the artist's refined sense of beauty.

Rabindranath served the profession of letters for sixty-five years. There is hardly an important branch of knowledge on which he did not shed light, in his superb prose, during the period. His mind ranged at ease over aesthetics, philosophy, science, politics, sociology, painting and sculpture. Years after his death, he still remains without a peer in skill, facility of language and the richness of ideas as an interpreter of abstract thought. That no region of thought, however, difficult and far lying, is today inaccessible to the Bengali language could be illustrated from his writings alone. It is needless, of course, to add that the writer's medium must possess what Annadasankar calls 'virtue and fire'. I am convinced that as a vehicle of abstract thought Bengali today is well past its adolescence and youth. Owning to the interest of our thinkers in metaphysics and religious discussion, their anxiety to apprehend the fundamental reality of life, poetry, the State and the universe, this aspect of our language has developed most. It seems as if the ceaseless experiment, of more than a

century, with the resources of our language, was designed to cause its fullest unfolding in this direction rather than in any other. In respect of conveying objective, scientific, and technical information our language is indisputably deficient. But this must be understood in the light of the fact that science has not entered our practical life yet in more than a rudimentary form. Hence Bengali is yet to absorb the great scientific and mechanical revolution of our times.

It must, however, be admitted that the prose found in abstract writing in Bengali is in quality and structure far from satisfactory. The reader here is unaware of the resources of the language, while the writers blame its inherent incapacity. The reasons for this unhappy state of affairs must be many and I am unable to go into them all. I should, therefore, content myself by analysing a few works published in recent years and attempting an estimate of their merits in general terms.

When Syed Sajjad Husain writes on national heritage I do not reproach his style, nor do I commend it. The writer does not perhaps pay much attention to style in discussing the abstract questions of cultural tradition. But his aim has been realised. A valuable idea which is neither novel nor complex, but deserves wide currency, has been put across in clear language. It does not matter very much that Sajjad Husain uses English phrases like 'sense of values' where he could easily

find an appropriate Bengali phrase for it. His ideal is not the kind of prose whose quality is determined in every word, clause and sentence used, but the logic and compelling pressure of an idea imperiously demanding expression. It is when a writer faces such a crisis of self-expression that the native capacity of the language is on test. Something of the excellence, in abstract writing, that results from a close penetration of the subject by an alert sense of beauty, is occasionally in evidence in the literary criticism of Syed Ali Ahsan. He is a conscious craftsman and is anxious to inform his style with what is distinctive in his thought. By a turn here and a twist there he unexpectedly changes the effect of a word or syntax worn with familiarity. Sometimes it does lead to the exhibition of needless virtuosity; but it as often sharpens the awareness of a lazy reader or gives pleasure to an attentive one. This has been made possible by Ali Ahsan's close familiarity with the whole exciting course of evaluation of Bengali prose. The same knowledge of the past heritage of the Bengali language enables Abdul Hai to lend to his translation of M N Roy's *The Historical Role of Islam* the charm and readability of an original work. The mass of material in Hasan Zaman's *Dharma Niropeksho Rashtra O Islam* (The Secular State and Islam) demonstrates his painstaking scholarship but the truth which emerges from them does not any-

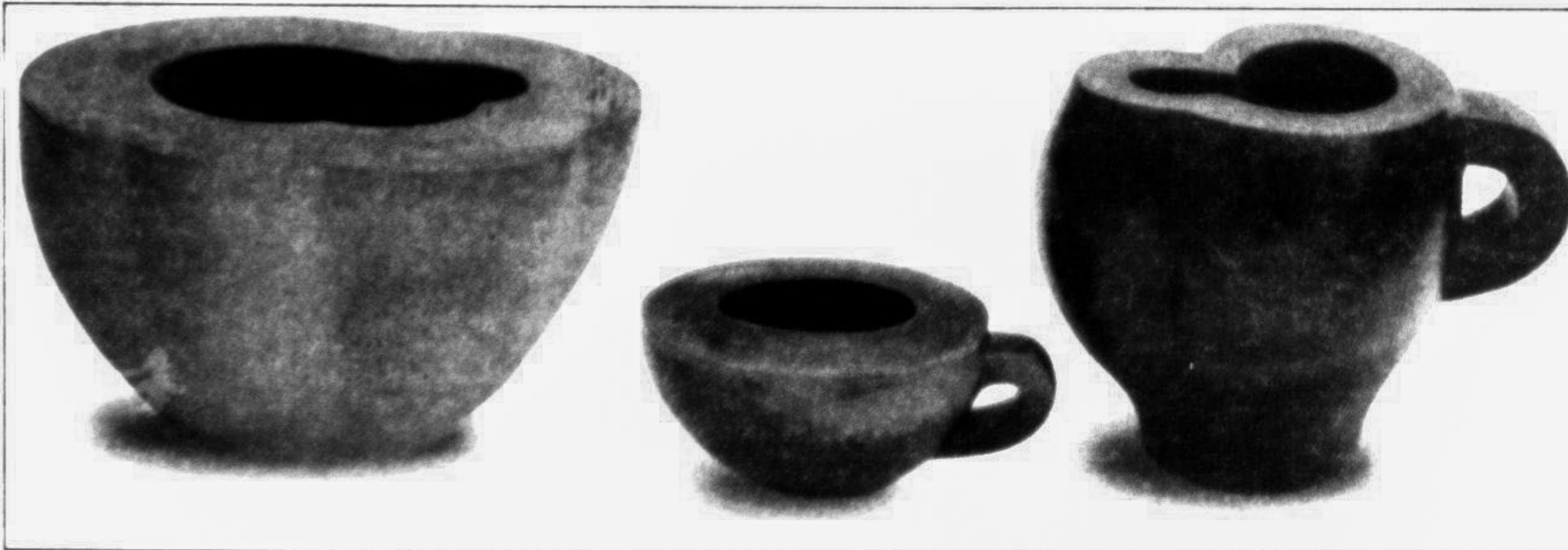
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art

Suku Park : Ceramic Artist Per Excellence

Abul Mansur

SUKU Park's recent visit to Bangladesh went somewhat unnoticed. Even the art circle in Bangladesh was not aware of the visit of an internationally acclaimed ceramic artist to their country. It was partly due to the fact that Suku Park came here not as an artist, but as a member of a Korean trade delegation, partly also due to the Asian Art Biennial which was occupying the centre-stage of the art world here. The fact that ceramic is still looked down upon as a minor art might be another reason. Nevertheless, Park himself was more interested in art



and artists of this country rather than trade possibilities and carved out time to see institutions and artists in his visit to Dhaka and Chittagong.

Though born in Korea and educated at home and Sweden, Suku Park has been living in Finland since 1976. The serene tranquility of the Finnish nature attracts him and his works display a kind of pure beauty inspired by it. He is at present regarded as one of the finest ceramic artists of the world and exhibits his works round the world in major art shows. He has also served as a member of jury in international ceramic competitions. Suku Park is noted for his fresh and modern touches in ceramic design. He transforms

his wit and humour into his works. His idea is to lessen the stereotype in people. Thus his works often provide new insight to things. What makes Park's works unique is his departure from traditional methods in production processes and pictorial patterns on ceramics. He does not use the traditional wheels in producing clay forms. His method is to put together the clay which are moulded in various forms. He transforms the two and three dimensional world into a world of fantasy. His colour and surface treatment is unique and distinguishes his works from other contemporary works by their originality. Park's works resemble organic forms and create an in-

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