

## People

## Face to Face

## Hasnat Abdul Hye: A Master Story-teller

Hasnat Abdul Hye weaves his narratives like a multi-layered patch-work. He approaches each story in a new way redefining traditional boundaries of novel. With the three biographical novels — *Novera*, *SM Sultan*, *Ekjan Araj Ali* — Hasnat has injected fresh blood into this impoverished genre. *Ekjan Araj Ali* is perhaps the best of his artistic endeavours to recreate and relive the recent past. Travelogue writing in Bengali literature found its creative expression in Rabindranath Tagore and flourished through Shankar and Anyada Shankar Roy. With a personal style and eyes to observe and analyse events with intricate intimacy, Hasnat has carved a niche in the rich tradition of travelogue writing. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Q: Travelogue writing in Bengali literature is not as popular as novel or poetry. Of course, with few exceptions like Rabindranath Tagore and Anyada Shankar Roy. What really interested you to take up this not-so-popular genre to express yourself?

A: Well, to begin with I was, and still am, fascinated with places and people. I have tremendous curiosity about unknown places and about people of whom we know very little. When I go to a new place to satisfy my curiosity I try to collect as much information possible about the place, and also the people I come across.

Our forefathers were all nomads. I believe that in every human being there is a kind of nomadism even though we are leading a sedentary life. In our blood we have atavistic feeling of roaming around. This nomadism in me was helped and encouraged by my father who was a government servant. It was because of his job we had to move from one district to another. We never stayed in one place for more than two or three years.

Right from my childhood, I have become familiar with the kaleidoscopic changes in the sights and sounds and people that I came across. That was the background. When I started reading books, the one that attracted me most was *Dristupath* by Jafar. I have read other travel writings including the ones of the great Tagore and Anyada Shankar Roy. But to me the model of a travel writing is *Dristupath*. There is humour, there is wit and there is aphorism in the book. A very sophisticated Bengali has written it. All the contemporary ingredients like politics, culture are there in it. In all, the book is very contemporary yet it transcends the present.

My background, reading habit and wander-fest put together contributed to my interest in travel writing.

Q: What is exactly the challenge of travel writing?

A: The challenge is to make an appropriate blend between information and sustenance of readers' interest. The readers, one should bare in mind, are interested in information up to a point, but they also like to be entertained. Entertainment not in a cheap or casual manner, but with an aroma of wit. So there must be a combination of information with these other qualities that makes a good travel story. To make a travel story interesting it is not enough to describe a place however important it may be like Taj Mahal. One has to write about people one comes across. These are the ingredients of a successful travel story.

Q: What is the chemistry of the travel story called *Xanadu* which has just been published?

A: The genesis of my visit is the reading of the famous poem *Kubla Khan* by Coleridge. I'm not a student of literature. I'm a student of economics, but whoever has read that poem has been fascinated by the poetic description of the place *Xanadu*. When I read the poem I was literally transported to a land of mystery. I was moved by the description of a fantasy-like land as if it does not belong to this world. The description has been juxtaposed with brilliant images like ice-filled caves and then there appears a flowing river in a landscape that is very much tropical. This juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory objective realities is the first feature that attracts readers' attention. And then the musical rhythm of the poem creates a kind of not only delight, I would say, a kind of discovering the unknown. So that was the beginning. The description of the fantasy land in Coleridge's poem and then of course the history of the Mongols associated with the place particularly *Kubla Khan*.

Q: Which you have touched upon in your book.

A: Yes, in a separate chapter I have dealt with the history of Mongols and

*Kubla Khan* particularly. In another chapter I have tried to analyse the poetics of *Kubla Khan* (the poem). And, of course, these two chapters are preceded by the account of my travel to *Xanadu*.

Q: So, basically your travel account is a melange of emotion and intellect.

A: Yes. Ultimately it borders more on emotion than intellect.

Q: Let us move to novel and particularly your biographical novels for which you have received critical acclaim. The characters you have chosen as the protagonists of your novel are contemporary and one of them is still alive. What spurred you to deal with contemporary personalities?

A: Firstly, I don't want to be pigeon-holed as a writer of biographical fiction, writer of historical fiction, writer of romance or anything. I believe in change and that is why I don't repeat myself. Yes, I have written three novels based on biography of some well-known personalities of Bangladesh. But that's it. I'm not going to repeat myself even though some people have said why don't you write a novel on Mr. Z or Mr. X. I said no. So far so good.

Secondly, I was attracted by the lives of the people who have featured in my novels as protagonists. When I came to know about the life of artist S M Sultan, met him I thought these are the ingredients which fictions are made of. So fascinating, out of the ordinary, this man is, leading a vagabond not staying in a place and indulging in all kinds of indiscipline and yet he has not lost track of his main preoccupation that is painting. The colourful lives led by people like him which appeared to me to be very different from the ordinary types of lives led by others. And then the creativity in spite of the bohemianism in their lives were such that they not only made mark in their own areas, but they also left legacies for the future generation. And as individuals

also there are so many things in their character which immediately set them apart from other people. It's very tempting to write about these people. But I have tried also to capture the time in which they lived. I have also tried to bring in other characters who are not as colourful as they are but who are very important to bring out the contrast — the contrast between my protagonists and the lives of the ordinary people. The style I have adopted writing these biographies also bears this out. I have not gone into a narrative like let's say *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone. I have built up my characters through my discussion with different people who know the character. I interviewed the character also. For example, I have interviewed Sultan and a host of painters who know him personally. It's basically through my discussion with people that my subject character is being developed. My discussion with the people who were friends of the character, the time in which they lived also featured in the narrative.

Q: It is not only narrating a character but discovering a personality as well.

A: Yes. Through the eyes and minds of others. I did not rely at all on written material. It was primarily based on whatever other people had to say.

Q: Sort of searching for oral history.

A: Yes. And then there is another thing. Even though they were biographical novels they differ in style. Like in *Sultan* I have adopted interview method followed up by some narrative which is again punctuated with interviews. In *Novera* I have used another technique. In each chapter there is a different style. One chapter, let us say, is like a film script, another chapter is written in diary form as if my main character used to keep a diary. The diary-keeping method helped also to squeeze many years into one chapter. I could skip one year to another simply by making three or four entries

for a year. So it was helpful as a device. Then another chapter was written in the form of stream of consciousness. That was the difference between *Sultan* and *Novera*.

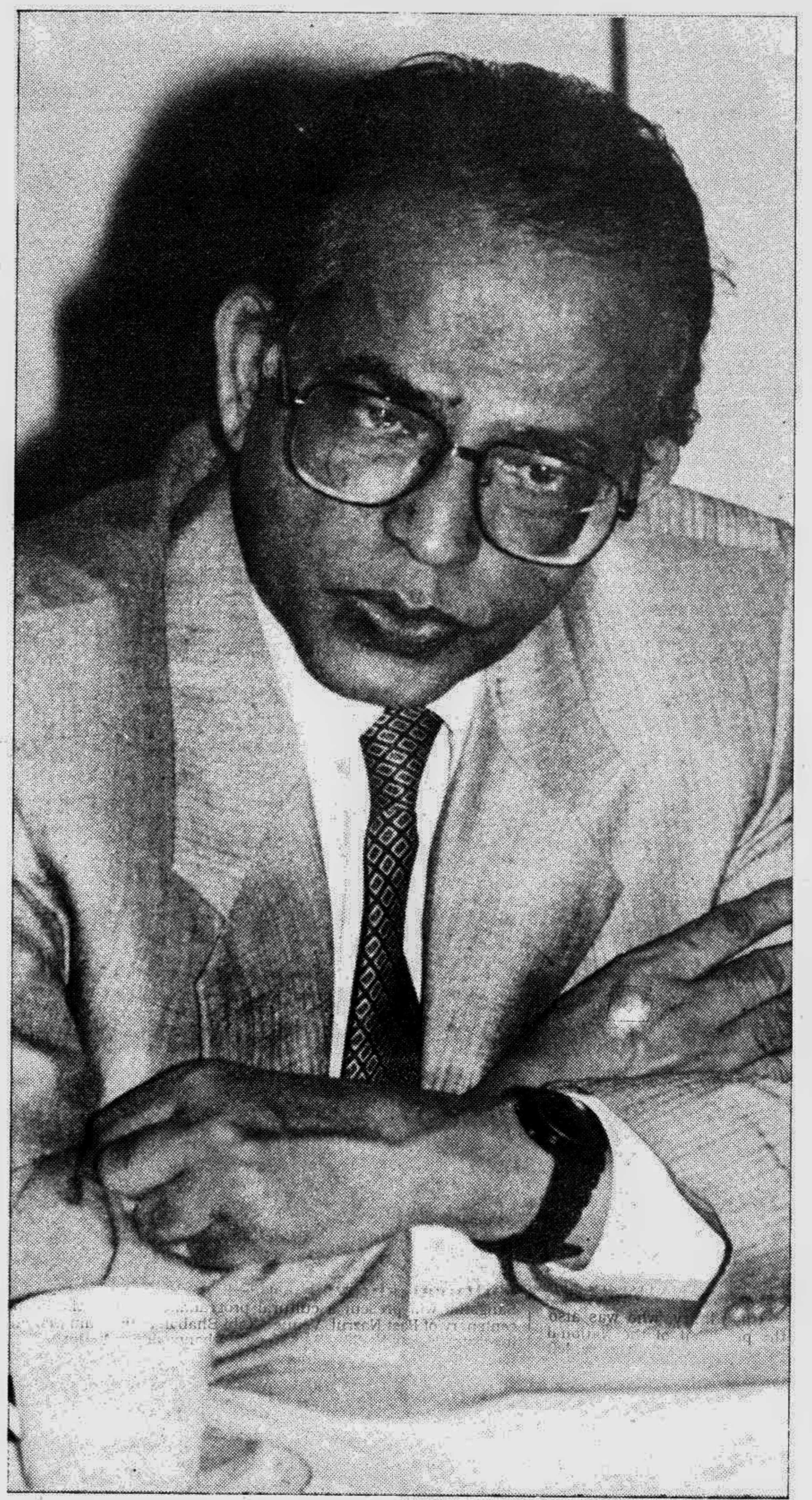
Q: How do you develop a style, does it evolve as you work on a theme or you set your style before approaching your theme?

A: Both. Since I don't want to repeat myself I try to introduce a new style in each of my book. This is not as a matter of, let's say, fad that well I have to be new. No. The subject also demands a new style. I start with a determination that well I will have to use a new style it must not be a repetition of the old style. It always works at the back of my mind. But even before I finish the first chapter the subject-matter take control. If you take the case of my latest novel *Maitree-O-Rabindranath* where a writer is having a friendly relation with a reader who is furnishing him (the writer) about many information about her life. The novel develops around the conversation between the two. Each is being benefited by the other's comment, analysis and input and the story grows from within to form a kind of meta-fiction. The fiction is itself being questioned both by the reader in the form of the admirer and the writer.

Q: So it happens bothway. I start with a desire to write in a new style and then as I start writing, the subject itself then determines.

Q: How do you look at the rise of new English? To quote Vikram Seth, "English literature has been overtaken by the non-English."

A: This was bound to happen you see. At one level it is like the Empire striking back in a post-colonial development. For long our part of the history has been discussed by the westerners through their own perspective so it was high time we came up with our version of history. We did that through more serious writing but not so much through fiction. So the fiction writers are late



in this game of writing back our part of history in fiction. So it was bound to happen sooner or later. Secondly, this part of the world is traditionally a story-tellers' world. We love to tell stories and we gossip. We spend more time in gossiping than any other nations in the world. We are born story-tellers. And thirdly, the writers particularly in

India are writing profusely. I think for a time they were in a dilemma about the language to be used. Should it be pure English or should be a mixture of English and their own cultural elements. It took lot of courage to introduce and use freely the Hindi or the Urdu or the Bengali words into English and that has succeeded.

Q: Do you approved of all

this chutnified English? A: Yes. Why not. Since English is the lingua franca of the world it must borrow from all the languages with which it is having interaction. Q: Now that you have retired from government service, what are your future plans? A: To devote myself in writing only.

## When I was a Teenager

"I come from a real happy family. Very few people of this generation can claim such happiness. My parents especially my father was one of those people who did not like to confine happiness inside him rather spread it through out the surrounding. Therefore his happiness was radiated to all of us and made my childhood especially my teens, a real special one," recalls Ferdousi Rahman, one of the country's noted music personality as she took a trip down the memory lane.

The youngest and the only daughter of the family, Ferdousi got all the care in the world from her parents. Her father, Abbasuddin Ahmed, the legendary figure in the country's folklore music, never failed to squeeze time out of his busy schedule for his children.

"My mother, Luthfunnessa Abbas was another dedicated soul. Although we always talk about our father, the affection and attention we got from our mother was priceless. I was eighteen when my father died and by that time, I had already become quite a known face in the music arena. During those days, my mother's attention and guidance towards me and my career made her more than my friend, philosopher and mentor."

Ferdousi's music lesson

started at the age of three. Her father Abbasuddin Ahmed was her first guru. But he wanted the best for his children and since he had limited initiation in classical music, he appointed an *ustaad* (music teacher) for them. He also requested famous artists of that time Abdul Ahad, Kalim Sharafi to give his daughter lessons. Put together, Ferdousi had the best possible music lesson one can possibly think of.

Her first performance on stage came at the age of five. Three years later, she was a junior artist of national radio. At 15, she was made a senior artist on special consideration. The age-limit was 17.

"I really liked *Khelaghar* (radio programme for children). Sometimes the programme was held in the garden. We, the participants, played together and had great fun. It was like a picnic. And the payment I received — ten taka per programme — made me quite rich. But father always taught us to be content. He opened a saving account for me."

Contentment is something that Abbasuddin always wanted to teach his children. And for this, he didn't even mind experimenting with them. Once he gave Ferdousi and her elder brother (Mustafa Zaman Abbas) ten taka each and

## IN CONVERSATION WITH FERDOUSI RAHMAN

By Sonia Kristy



Ferdousi Rahman in the early 60s.

Source: Family Album

asked them to buy whatever they liked. They were obviously excited and made all sorts of plan throughout the day. But when it came to shopping they couldn't figure out what to buy, because they had everything they could think of. At the end of the day, Ferdousi and her brother returned the money to their father.

"This made my father real happy as he found out that he had been able to teach us the value of contentment."

School life was great as well. She was a student of Saint Xavier's. The teaching system was excellent with teachers teaching them to become creative and composed. Up to class six the students learnt all their lessons and had to do their entire homework at school.

"As I didn't have to study at home, I could concentrate with music lessons and other things. My father always wanted us to learn everything. He wanted us to become punctual and religious, and, above all, self-reliant. Every Sunday I had to wash my school uniform. If any of our maid servants fell sick, I had to take care of her. I don't know whether we have learnt the best or not but my father always

tried his best to give his children the best possible education."

During her teens Ferdousi had always been a docile and modest girl. Although sometimes she and her elder brother used to fight but never did she create any sort of problem for her parents. Even as a student she was a real bright one and always among the top of the class. When she was fifteen and getting prepared for the Junior Cambridge, her father got her admitted in Banglabazar School to sit for the Matriculation Exams.

"I only had six months to prepare myself for the exams and even missed out fifteen marks in the history paper, but when the result came out I found that with two letters in history and music I had stood first among girls and seventh in the combined list. My father was so happy that on my birthday, which incidentally was two days after the result had been published, held a grand surprise party for me. Still, many of my friends recall that superb party."

Although she had her schooling mainly at English medium institutions, she had nevertheless a strong base in both Bengali language and literature, thanks to her father's insistence on learning Bengali. "It was almost compul-

sory for me to read Bengali books at home and practise hand writing. While reading Sharatchandra, Bibhutibhusan, Banaphool along with Agatha Christie and Hans Christian Anderson, reading became an addiction."

Going to movies was another favourite pastime not only for her but also for the family. Whenever there was a good movie on, Ferdousi and her family would go to the theatre and watch it. There were restrictions, though. Parents made sure that movies were suitable for the young by watching them first. If they were, permission was granted. Be it *Sagarika* or *Roman Holiday*, Ferdousi and her brothers, they had to get parental guidance first.

While recalling her earlier days, Ferdousi lost track because it looked as if she wasn't sure what to leave out. Vacation in Darjeeling, swimming lessons in the Burjanga, badminton with the family, singing with father and brothers, family get-togethers and *jalsha* on Pahela Baisakh — everything was so special.

"It is the love of the parents and strong family bond that made my teenage life so special. And I really consider the present generation unfortunate as most of them are deprived of such parental love."