

interview

A Poet Apart

"Art in its purest form never reveals all", writes Sudeep Sen, one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Indian and international poetry circles, as evident in the unfathomable depth and beauty of a 'Bharatanatyam Dancer' in a poem by that name. This inspired line by the poet also serves as a fascinating commentary on his poems.

Sen essentially loves to express himself in a clear, crisp, logical fashion, while building his ideas line by line, and stanza by stanza. The belief that ambiguity is at the core of poetic beauty is not true for Sudeep Sen. His poetic beauty works at a very different level.

However he may conceive a poem, the final result is always a well-knit fabric. If you try unravelling the threads of the fabric itself, it will gently reveal subtle layers which otherwise go unnoticed to an everyday eye. It is worth comparing his poems to a treasure-chest -- one that appears simple, concrete, and well-constructed -- but upon opening it, it starts to "slow-release" its many secrets, splendours, and gifts. The voice in his poems is soft, gentle, though persuasive -- one which murmurs and hums its mantra into our ear, a mantra that is, to quote the end of the same poem, "poetic, passionate, and ice-pure." Sudeep Sen tells Ziaul Karim about his inspiration, his influences and his style. Excerpts:

Ziaul Karim (ZK): If I were to try and locate the central theme of your poetry (or by extension your weltanschauung), I think I would cite the line -- "I love the luxury of secrets" -- by an anonymous writer you quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of your recent book of poems, *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* published by HarperCollins.

Sudeep Sen (SS): I suspect part of the reason why I was attracted to that particular epigraph was due to the fact that imaginative spaces occupy a zone of secrecy that is limitless, expansive and full of mystery. It is a space that allows for creative unfurling of ideas and energies because so much of that area is unknown, untapped, uncharted, waiting to be realized, experienced and learnt. I'm not sure whether the epigraph entirely sums up everything I write about in my poems, or even the essence of the book itself, but certainly it is true for a certain aspect of my writing.

ZK: You have a penchant for digging deep into life's experiences, or at least the Sudeep Sen as he appears to me as a poet, loves to discover the intricate mysteries of living. You are basically a poet whose voice is understated. Even though you are politically conscious and aware, you are not overtly political. Are you a cerebral poet?

SS: I try very hard not to sound too political or overly cerebral. In fact when I write poetry and revise them, this is an aspect that becomes very important to me as I don't want to sound either overly politicized leaning one way or the other, or consciously cerebral. I think that the whole point of a poem is lost if you cannot appeal to a wide cross-section of readers.

Different readers with different backgrounds bring with them a unique personal sensibility by which they understand and appreciate a piece of art -- and all of them have a perfectly valid point of view. I imagine my audience as anybody who is literate and culturally-inclined in the most widest sense of the word -- s/he could be a banker, teacher, sports person, model, ice-cream seller, or working in the garment industry. I definitely do not write specifically for the English departments of universities, or students of English literature.

I write because I enjoy writing, because I enjoy language, because I enjoy how words sound when they are strung together in an interesting manner. If one consciously tries to insert sexy politically-correct terminology or jargon, references which largely an English literature student (or an academic/critic) understands, then I think I would be terribly limiting myself. I would feel claustrophobic if I just dwell in the inward world of aca-

demic discourse. My interests are serious, and at same time much wider -- sports, popular culture, alternative music and drama, underground literature, erotic poetry, and so on.

There is a lot of politics, comment, perhaps even a pinch of intellectualization in my poems -- how can one avoid what is around you in a daily sense. However, what I try to do is not make them obvious. And that can be quite hard because having written the poem/s, subverting the obvious is a serious challenge. Being understated and quiet is much more interesting to me than the other way around.

Often one reads poetry which sound like statements, as if the only aim of poetry is to give expression to a set of ideas or agendas. That in its own myopic terms does not interest me enough, as that can be done by a commercial political speechwriter or ad-agency copywriter. To me, if you have

ture and film.

To me, a poem should not only be linguistically challenging, but how it appears visually is a fairly important factor to me. There are two kinds of structures -- one of course is the use of rhyme and various rhyme-schemes, and the other is visual rhymes. And then, depending on how important structure is to that particular poem, it can have a considerably significant impact.

For instance, in the poem 'New York Times', I invented a rhyme-scheme -- 'abxbacdxdc exfde' and so on -- the middle line, i.e. the third 'x' line, in fact is the mirror-line which reflects the first & second lines with the fourth & fifth lines of each stanza. The other reason I used the five-line stanza-format in the poem is because the city of New York itself has five boroughs -- Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, etc. The other thing

each section reflect the four seasons, the four side of a frame, the four corner of a visual space. I also use alternating line-indentation for each couplet and stanza with the idea that the entire poem works on a cyclical principle. So, if you join all the stanzas together using the left-justified margin as a reference plane, they in fact fit in a perfect dove-tail joint.

But in the end however, typography and structure of a poem is just as vital as the inner-spirit and content of any poem.

ZK: Right from the beginning of your career, your poems are brilliant examples of great control as regards rhythm and syntax, which is a testimony to your own interest in poetry as a craft. Later you went through creative writing programmes at American universities. Did your interest in the architectural aspect of poetry inspire you to go for a Masters Degree in Creative Writing?

SS: Thank you, those are very kind words The creative writing classes I took in the States were much later. I first started writing during my boyhood in Delhi. In India in those days, creative writing was only deemed as a hobby, albeit a laudable one. Nobody took it seriously, certainly not in a career or an academic sense. So by the time I went to America and took my first creative writing class, I already had a typical South Asian bias against the teaching of creative writing itself. I thought that how can anybody teach you how to write poetry -- you either had it in you or not -- or so I was led to believe until then.

But what I did learn when I was enrolled in these workshops were aspects of craft, prosody, stylistics, and technique. It is very important to know and learn these things, and I can't over-emphasize their importance. We also read sheaves and sheaves of contemporary poetry which is very exciting for me. A lot of bad name to modern poetry has come about because people think that they can just write a sentence, break it up, and then rearrange it in a column-format. It may be poetry for some people, but for most it is not. These amateur poetasters do not necessarily have the skill, technique, or the inclination to actually write in formal stanzaic patterns. When I say formal, I don't necessarily mean that it has to be always rhymed -- there is blank verse, free verse, concrete poetry, other kinds of structures involved. I think creative writing classes are useful both if you are particularly interested in the aspects of prosody, as well as it teaches you to think seriously and critically about contemporary writing itself.

ZK: In the post-colonial literary scene, poets and novelists writing in English from the non-English speaking world, do suffer in most cases, from a sense of displacement -- this is a strong phenomenon in the writings from the South Asian diaspora. You are remarkably free from such feelings of being uprooted. One discovers that in the pages of your various books, you move smoothly between one home to another.

SS: I think the reason why you don't see any sense of displacement in my writing is because I'm actually a very rooted person. My rootedness comes from my family and the way I was brought up. I'm first and foremost a Bengali writer, who just happens to write in another Indian language that is English. So, my cultural and intellectual spaces are very much defined by the fact that I come from a thoroughly Bengali milieu.

I am also fortunate to have grown up in a tri-lingual situation -- I spoke Bengali at home, Hindi on the streets, and English at school -- not by design but by circumstance. So, this wonderfully tripartite situation was such that I could slip in and out of several mother-tongues and languages at the same time -- it certainly made it linguistically richer, and we as South Asians are very lucky because of that.

I also come from a typically liberal educated middle-class Bengali family who have always been an immense source of strength for me. So, that kind jargon-ridden "post-colonial" displacement you are talking about is very alien as a concept to me, and even more difficult for a person with my background to rationally understand.

The other aspect of this is that I grew up in the capital city of Delhi which is a very cosmopolitan place -- it has a curious mix of the First and Third World atmosphere depending on where or what you are engaged in at any given moment. So wherever I traveled subsequently, be it a cosmopolitan place or a rural one, I was in some manner or the other, somewhat familiar with that new place from before -- at least I was never in a

state of cultural shock, however remote.

We, in India, have been exposed to the western culture, along with our very own, from our early childhood -- so neither of them are unfamiliar to us. So, when one is actually inhabiting these so-called Western (and Eastern spaces), they are places one feels equally at home. In fact I quite enjoy being in both worlds. I love the taste of *singara, sandesh, kabab and phuchka* ... at the same time I love blue cheese, meat roasts, wine and single malt. I don't personally see any conflict in these two worlds, rather I feel lucky and infinitely richer in experience, since my taste-buds as well as my intellectual and emotional terrain, can accommodate all of that happily and simultaneously.

ZK: Is it then, your trans-national self, that writes -- "I / am going home once again from another / home, escaping the weave of reality into another / one, one that gently reminds and stalls / to confirm: my body is the step-son of my soul"?

SS: The poem 'Flying Home' partly reflects the trans-national quality I have been talking about. Many writers and artists nowadays are in this sort of situation. When I'm going from one home to another in a plane, which in itself is such a peculiar kind of controlled space, it is a sort of perennially-transitional home, a home that is elastic -- it all depends on how you visualize space and how you demarcate geography. To me, that in itself is an interesting concept, one that allows for an expansive canvas. So, I suspect there is something inherent in me that makes it very difficult for me to feel displaced.

ZK: Poetry and dance are constant sources for your poetic inspiration. Through your poetry you constantly refer to other forms of art and its architectural beauty, e.g. in the poem 'Bharatanatyam Dancer'.

SS: Absolutely. It accurately reflects my penchant for various sorts of art-forms, in this particular case, the South Indian classical dance. But I'm equally interested in music, film, theatre, live and performance art, and more. If a particular dance or a particular painting, or even a particular piece of dramatic writing moves me, I may write about it -- directly or obliquely. And this poem 'Bharatanatyam Dancer' is a clear case in point.

An aspect of the poem that may interest you is the architectural and topographical mapping of its poetic structure. I invented another rhyme-scheme for this poem that reflects the actual dance-step pattern on stage that is in consonance with the bols and tals, in this case -- ta dhin ta tha tai ta -- abacca dedfdd ... the actual rhyme-scheme of the poem itself. That of course is only one thing. The more important thing is that I was completely moved and entranced by the performance, skill and beauty of the dancer herself, Leela Samsom -- so I had to write the poem. It was almost written for me by her. I didn't have a choice -- the whole process was quite magical really.

As is perhaps evident, I do enjoy writing about other art-forms which have inspired or moved me in some way or the other. In fact, my new collection of poems I am currently working is called *Blue Nude*. The title poem is a sequence that have been inspired by Henri Matisse's cobalt-blue cut-out figures by the same name. Then there are other poems in the book that were inspired by photographs, drama, film and other media. So one can say that the central unifying theme of this book-in-progress, comes from my pleasure and response to the genre of creative arts itself.

ZK: By the time *Postmarked India* was published, you had already polished and crafted your own poetic voice. You were awarded the prestigious Hawthornden Fellowship in the UK and nominated for the Pushcart Prize in the USA bears testimony to that fact. But somehow I detect that Louis MacNeice's influence still seemed to linger on.

SS: I am not entirely sure whether I agree with that last comment. In fact I don't -- various critics have said various things -- I believe you in this case you are referring to Angus Calder who compared me with Louis MacNeice in *The Scotsman*. It was an interesting comparison, but Calder perhaps was referring to the "variousness" in my writing, its range and latitude. I never thought that I was ever inspired by him or wrote like him.

Similarly, other people have written that they have found influences/similarities of T.S.Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Hugh MacDiarmid and W.H.Auden in my poems. This

could all be temporarily very flattering, but at the end it is completely up to the reader or the critic as to how and what they feel about a particular piece of my writing. I don't think I have at all been influenced by any one of them, even though I admire their writing enormously.

No one poet has directly influenced me, and this is evident in the kinds of poetry I like which tends to be rather varied and eclectic -- I adore the poetry of Jibanananda Das, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, the French symbolists like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, Verlaine, Rilke, Neruda, Paz, Walcott, Heaney ... It is too varied to list them all. Also the ticker-tape is so dissimilar and expansive that I can't think of any one or two who, could have possibly influenced me.

Again, if have to find one source or fountainhead of influence -- it would actually be Bengali culture that has affected me ultimately, directly and indirectly. For instance, my interest and sense of rhythm and rhyme comes from my very early childhood through my mother and grandmother. They used to recite stories or sing lullabies to me, and I regularly heard them chant their prayers with a typical Bengali rounded lilt. All these were very inherent rhythms which quietly slipped into my psychological system by a curious process of osmosis. So, these perhaps are my influences -- very localized and genetic, completely spontaneous. However, the received and learned knowledge as well as the exposure they subsequently lent -- what I was talking about earlier -- is a very different sort of thing altogether.

ZK: Your voice as a poet is very subdued. And your poems are soliloquies?

SS: I would just replace the word "subdued" by the word "understated" which is perhaps more apt. I find that there is a lot of power in understated writing. If you write in a dramatic fashion then you are just advertising the superficial, and often there seems to be nothing very much beyond that.

To me, writing ought to be a quiet kind of a thing where the reader can read and then take in its effect in a slow-release fashion, much like time-lapse photography. It is this sort of style I'm personally attracted to. It is so much more effective, because once you influence a person gently over time, then the effect is a lot more permanent and effective, rather than someone who is impressive one minute and altogether forgettable the next minute -- like certain fashions or trends, or even like a loud noise which soon disappears. A slow well-paced murmur, or an elongated baritone of a hum, actually stays in the sensibility of a human being a lot longer and is perhaps more meaningful.

ZK: Does emotion compel you to write? Or do you wait for the right mood to inspire you?

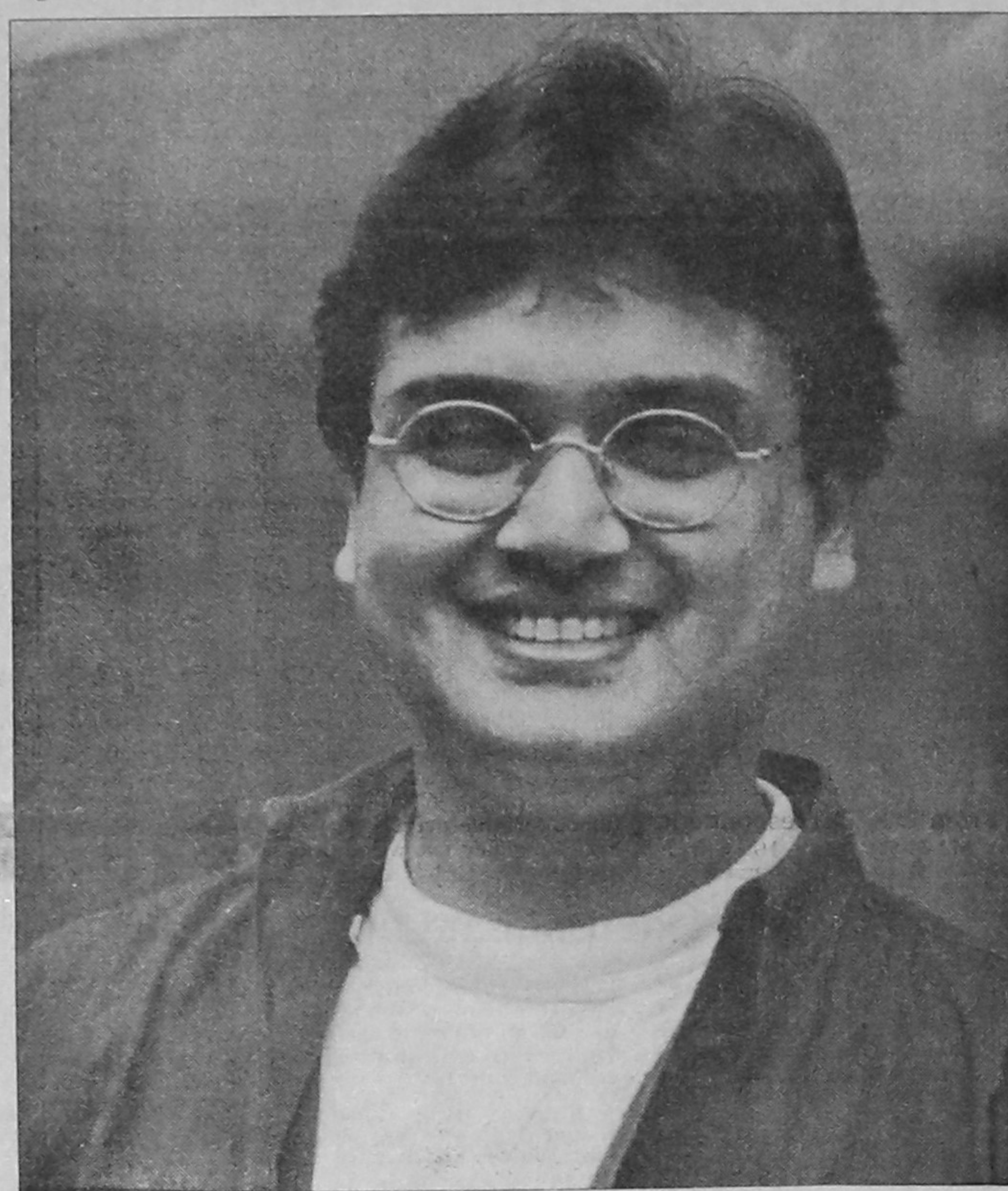
SS: I think it is a combination of both. Being a writer is like being a strange kind of a beast. Writers tend to have invisible antennas on top of their head which pick up radar-signals -- odd-things while you are looking at ordinary scenes, snapshots of other conversations, a glimpse of something somewhere -- so the ordinary everyday scenario acts as a rich well-spring of ideas for me. Even as I speak to you, I might be simultaneously processing an entirely different idea or thought that might have just struck me -- it is a complex parallel process. These, of course, may be just fragments, or overheard figments, voices, or images. If it is something strong and compelling, I generally try and make an effort to write it down. I don't necessarily carry a note book, so it could be on the back of a bill, or on the palm of my hand. If I am in a restaurant I would write it down on a piece of napkin, or find an excuse to get some toilet paper to scribble on it.

So when I sit down to write, I have all these ideas and phrases in front of me. Sitting down and writing requires discipline because writing doesn't

just come from the middle of nowhere -- that is just the inspiration perhaps. But having had the inspiration you need time to put it all together and build the piece brick by brick. I sit down with poetry two or three hours everyday -- and it is not necessarily that I write a new poem every time -- very often I don't, but I could be revising poems that I have written before, or maybe review a book of poetry, or simply just reading and enjoying a book of poetry. It's my own quiet way of staying with poetry.

It is quite important to write things down when they first strike, because often I find that if I don't do that and try to remember it later, it might altogether leave me, go away or vanish. Sometimes of course, it might happen

Continued on page 7



Profile

Born to Bengali parents in 1964 in New Delhi, Sudeep Sen attended St. Columba's School, and completed his graduation in English Literature from the University of Delhi. As an Inlaks scholar, he completed an MS from the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in New York. In New York, he first worked for a corporate consultancy firm in Manhattan, and then for the leading literary magazine *Boulevard* as its assistant editor.

Upon returning to New Delhi, he began his formal journalism career with an Indian national daily. He also simultaneously pursued his film-training, making several documentary films. While still in New York, his first documentary film, *Babylon Is Dying*, was nominated for the American Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Student Emmy Award.

During the winter of 1992/93, he was the international poet-in-residence at The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, and in the spring of 1995, a visiting scholar at Harvard University. His writings have appeared widely in leading newspapers, magazines, and journals including -- *Times Literary Supplement*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, *Evening Standard*, *The Scotsman*, *Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *Harvard Review*, *Poetry*, *The Times of India*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Indian Review of Books*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Statesman*.

Sudeep Sen's latest book, *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), was awarded the prestigious Hawthornden Fellowship (UK). He is only the second Indian after thirty years since Dom Moraes to be awarded the Hawthornden Fellowship. The book was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize in the USA. At 6:45pm next Thursday on June 1, 2000 -- Dhaka will witness the publication-launch of his first bilingual English-Bangla edition of his book -- *A Blank Letter -- Ekti Khali Chiti* -- at The Indian High Commission Cultural Centre in Dhanmondi.

Sudeep has done over 200 readings from his work worldwide at numerous universities, colleges, bookshops, literary & arts festival, conferences, and on radio and television which include -- Columbia University, Harvard University, University of California at Berkeley in USA, and Royal Festival Hall, Commonwealth Institute, Arvon Foundation, Universities of Kent, Hull, London, Sussex in UK; University of Nice in France, and University of Konstanz in Germany.

At the Jerusalem International Poetry Festival a few years ago, Vikram Seth and he represented India with great aplomb. Last year, he was invited a writer representing both Britain & India at the world's oldest poetry festival in Struga, Macedonia. He does so later this year, again at Villenica in Slovenia, and Naples in Italy, where his work appears in Slovenian and Italian translations. His work has been previously translated into French, Spanish, Scottish, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Macedonian, and few Indian languages, among others.

Currently he lives and works in London, New Delhi and Dhaka, dividing his time between them. He is working on a major anthology of 'South Asian Writing in English', and his forthcoming books in English are -- *Blue Nude*, and, *Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent*.

an interesting thought, then how can you write about it without being obvious or blatant -- there lies the challenge for me. So, it's a question of writing in a very textured way, with multiple levels, with various layers, all overlapping and distinct at the same time, as well as being lucid.

ZK: Are you obliquely referring to Coleridge's maxim "poetry is best words in best order", or is that subconscious when you write? From an architectural point of view, it seems Louis MacNeice has heavily influenced you.

SS: The architecture of a poem is very important to me, partly because of my own inherent interest in architecture itself. Had I not read English literature, I would have been an architect now. In fact, it was very very close -- choosing between the profession of being an architect and teaching litera-

about this poem is -- if you turn the poem 90 degrees on its central axis, then a different kind of mirror-line mimics the shape of the island of Manhattan itself and its reflection on the surrounding waters.

Another poem, a long sequence, 'Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames' (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio as a verse-play, and premiered in London as a stage-play by Border Crossings) is based on a series of eight etchings of a British artist, Peter Standen. The entire poem is set in rhymed couplets reflecting the presence of two principal characters -- man/woman, lover/other, life/death -- and the other essential dualities. But they do not appear as obvious rhymes (like the translucent choral refrains in the poem) -- they are wrap-around rhymes as opposed to end-stopped rhymes. The four stanzas in