

INTERVIEW

Abul Hasnat : Literary editor par excellence

Abul Hasnat is the editor of the Bengali literary magazine *Kali O Kolom*. Before that he had been the literary editor at the Bengali daily *Sangbad*, where his efforts and vision transformed what had previously been a fairly conventional 'literature page' into a standard-setting one. He and his page broke the existing mould and cast new ones. In the Bangladeshi literary editors' hall of fame Hasnat bhai's place is assured.

He has brought the same dedication and vision to *Kali O Kolom*. Over the four years of its existence it has gradually established itself as the pre-eminent literary magazine of Bangladesh, attracting readers accustomed to high literary standards on both sides of the Bengal divide. A literary editor may have resources, s/he may have the full support of an understanding publisher, s/he may be able to call on a full stable of writers but ultimately his/her work depends on that most mysterious and intangible of things, literary judgement and taste, on an ability to spot the genuine talent amid all the dross and dreck that washes up on the shores of his/her desk.

A courteous (in the old-fashioned sense of the word), almost self-effacing man, Hasnat bhai seemed a little taken aback when I proposed that he answer a few questions about his life and work. When I persisted, he agreed. I am glad that he did, since in the words printed below is glimpsed a world which is usually not within the ambit of English language newspapers--a world whose literary tastes he helped re-shape to a large degree.



photo by abibibi

Literary practice in English will be an important event in the development of our society. I think a few from our future generation will create beautiful literary pieces in English.

Daily Star: Could you give us a brief history of yourself, birthplace, education, et cetera.

Abul Hasnat: I was born and bred in Dhaka. My birth date is 14 July 1943. My childhood and teenage years were spent in Old Dhaka. Till 1952, we lived in Aganbab Deori and Babubazar near Armanitola. Later on, we moved to Juginagar near Wari where I had grown up. I completed my honors in Bangla from the University of Dhaka in 1969.

DS: How did you become interested in literature, and eventually become a literary editor?

AH: I got involved with the leftist politics in my youth and got close to Abdul Halim. He was the one who started me on Sharatchandra, Rabindranath Tagore and Bankimchandra. He inspired us to read the noteworthy creative literature written on the leftist movement during the 40's and 50's. I can never forget his contribution in building my taste for good literature.

After passing my Intermediate examinations, I joined the news section of *Sangbad* as a sub-editor in 1965. I used to work there in the night shift. During the day I used to do politics, which was my sole love and passion. I occupied this post till 1974. At that time, a cultural movement led by the *Sanskriti Sangshad* of Dhaka University took place. It played an important role in propagating Bengali culture in the Pakistan of that time. I was its General Secretary, and later on the Secretary. I wrote scripts for various cultural functions, recited poems in public shows and was involved in similar other different kinds of cultural works. Through this movement my desire for reading literature deepened. Around the middle of 1974, I was offered the post of literary editor of *Sangbad*, which I gladly accepted.

DS: *Sangbad's* literary page, under your editorship, became known for its excellence, for the emergence of so many new authors and writing. How did you bring about that change, and what was it like working in *Sangbad* during those days?

AH: I tried heart and soul to present this page as the true mirror of literary practice in Bangladesh. Poet Ahsan Habib was my mentor in this matter. The literature page of *Dainik Bangla* edited by him was very attractive. I was careful to see to it that the young writers were not ignored. The writers of small towns were very interested in seeing their work in print. We used to get a lot of write-ups from these areas by post and at least two to four selected articles by them were published in every issue of the supplement. I tried to enrich the page with stories and poems of diverse themes. In a short time the literary page achieved a distinct standard of its own. Once in a while we got complaints that the page was becoming too serious. Some even said that only a few enjoyed the high intellectual writings published in the page. But I did not compromise in this matter. It was not an easy task as at that time since *Sangbad* was a staunch supporter of leftist politics, and I was trying to break out of this bent of mind in the field of literature.

Sangbad nurtured young writers. In the following years many of these people became famous and some of them are still seen

walking the paths of literature successfully. May be this was the greatest achievement of the literature page. Editor Ahmedul Kabir supported me by giving me the freedom to arrange the page the way I wanted to.

The lovers of literature used to wait eagerly for this supplement on Thursday. They were very fond of reading from the diverse genres of the page such as essay, poetry, short story, reminiscence, art, architecture, travelogue, book review, and especially the different discussions on contemporary art of home and abroad. Two regular columns of the literature page--*Hrit Kolomer Tane* and *Olosh Diner Haowa*--became very popular. I think the page broadened the mental horizons of young readers and played a great role in developing their literary taste.

At the same time, artist late Kazi Hasan Habib responded to my request and joined as the designer of the literary supplement section. He understood very well what I wanted and how the page could be made more eye-catching. As a result, each of the issues used to emerge as a unique creation itself. Around 1974, the responsibility of planning the special issues was also given to me. *Sangbad* used to bring out special supplements on occasion of the New Year, the National Victory Day and the National Liberation Day. Along with these we published special annual issues on Tagore and Nazrul, which were also readers' favourites. I would begin preparations for these supplements at least a few months ahead. It pains me to see that nowadays the Tagore and Nazrul supplements do not seem to be published with due devotion and care.

The *Sangbad* page became a model of the best writings in the world of periodicals. I tried my best to maintain this standard as long as I was at *Sangbad*.

DS: We know you are a poet. However, do you feel that being a literary editor, taking care of the writing of other writers, has hampered the growth of your own creative writing? If so, any regrets?

AH: Yes, I sometimes write poems. I enjoy it a lot. Several of my books on poetry, four novels for teenagers and three others have been published. Editing the literary supplement made me read writings of both high and low standards. Some of the writings influence you so much that you lose focus on creating your own literary pieces. It is true that the regularity of my own creative writing was hindered by the pressures of my duties as editor. When one is very busy the creative compulsion reduces automatically. It's a difficult task to bring out a standard literary periodical every week. I

used to feel the enthusiasm running through my body and mind while working on a new issue of the periodical. Though I would plan to write some of my own stuff, I could not do so. Still, quite a good number of creative writings have been produced by me, but I myself did not write much in *Sangbad* itself while being its editor.

Today I feel good knowing that a Dhaka University student has earned his higher degree by doing research on the writings published in *Sangbad's* literature page.

DS: Why did you shift to *Kali O Kolom*? Do you think you have achieved so far what you set out to do?

AH: When the publisher of a literary magazine named *Kali O Kolom* requested me to be its editor, I thought hard about it. Bangladesh has no literary magazine with a high standard. This emptiness is a threat to the literature of Bangladesh and so I became interested in being the editor of this new magazine. While keeping a good relationship with *Sangbad*, I resigned from the post of literary editor and became the editor of *Kali O Kolom*.

We members of the *Kali O Kolom* team work with the aim of fulfilling the need for a good literary magazine in Bangladesh. We have become successful to some extent in achieving our aim. *Kali O Kolom* has developed a readership both in Bangladesh and West Bengal. We hope that this magazine will fill the lack of a standard literary magazine of Bangladesh permanently.

DS: Recently Tahmima Anam's English novel about 1971, *A Golden Age*, was published. Why do you think that the definitive 1971 novel has not been written in Bangla till now? What do you think is the future of English writing in Bangladesh?

AH: I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Tahmima Anam whole-heartedly for her novel. She has brought to life the spirit, desire and dreams related to 1971 in her artistic English novel. Many novels have been written in Bangla on the events of 1971. It is true that no novel has been written on the extent of the war. But since we are very emotional about the liberation war, some problems remain. We shall be able to write a great novel about it when we are able to look at the war more objectively.

At present thousands of young children are studying in English. Their thoughts, consciences and mindsets are being influenced by English. A few talented writers from these young people will hold on to the roots of their Bangladeshi heritage and nurture it through their literary creations. This literary practice in English will be an important event in the development of our society. I think a few from our future generation will create beautiful literary pieces in English.

DS: Currently in the West, the hottest genre is nonfiction--the long journalistic essay, the intellectual reportage, the new kind of travel writing, et cetera. It is relatively rare in our Bangla writing. Why do you think this is so?

AH: A lot of research is being done on Western and Latin American literature. Latin American literature is getting closer to its roots, the daily lives of the people and their heritage more than ever before. Consequently, their literature is becoming enriched by these elements. Our literature has just crossed the teenage years of its life. Has any notable work been done on our prose? Perhaps not. Rather some people are consciously trying to distort the standard style of prose. Prose is the main vehicle of these writings. I don't think we can create something like this unless our prose serves as the steady model for literature.

Interview translation done by Sabreena Ahmed, student of English department at Dhaka University.

Abul Hasnat , *Kali O Kolom* and that enigmatic gharana of the literary editor

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

Just into its fourth year, Bangla cultural and literary periodical *Kali O Kolom* is already the leader in its genre. It's mainstream and establishment, filled with recognizable names and unabashedly wanting to set standards in this field. Not that there is much competition. It's not a pioneering effort because others have tried it before, but it's attempting a more difficult task in trying to be a market leader while fighting some very entrenched names.

Kali O Kolom is no little magazine with a radical heart, a non-existent budget line and running on enthusiasm rather than resources. It's a professional venture trying to turn a literary and culture magazine into a successful market initiative. Obviously, in the process its backers hope to free as much market space as it can from what has been occupied for long by dear old *Desh* from India. After four years of jogging, it is obvious that if anybody can give the Indian magazine a run for its money, it's *Kali O Kolom*. Edited by Abul Hasnat, it's delta land's premier literary editor and tireless promoter of all writers, this magazine has a mainstream style and a table of contents that is both wide and enviable.

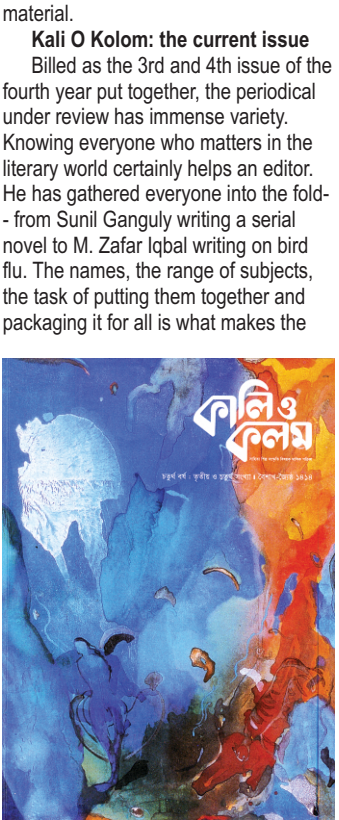
'The Editor of our Time'

Abul Hasnat and literary editorship has meant one and the same for a long while in Bangladesh. He has been dubbed 'The Editor of our Time' and is one of the few who is regularly remembered with gratitude by authors whether young or from the *ancient regime*. His support for them has always been unstinted.

But he is hardly a naïve champion of new writers. If anything he defends the right of good writings to exist rather than pieces by famous writers who have run out of steam. Abul Hasnat is not some woolly-eyed literary saint saving writers from oblivion; he has always been more in love with what writers produce, which explains why he has survived as an editor with his reputation intact.

The journey began in *Sangbad* where the literary page was way ahead of the paper--as is often the case elsewhere too--and probably set the literary standard for post-1971 Bengali literature. If his not-very-well-paid crusading life that had flourished on the brown, ragged, newspaper pages of *Sangbad's* weekly supplement ended one day after many successful seasons, it has found a more solid footing in the quality printed and designed pages of *Kali O Kolom*.

This publication is part of the cluster that is sponsored by the Bengal Group and is certainly the most established of the brood. It's a magazine that between its covers presents a credible case for good taste. Since its inaugural issue it has showcased a lot of quality-edited



editor and his orchestra work.

This issue has a number of quality essays. Gholam Mustafa's piece on the 100th anniversary of 'Charpad' is both illuminating and lucid, written to be enjoyed by the reader. Manzur-e-Mowla digs into Tagore and his English rendering of *Geetanjali*, a work filled with historical references which makes book chasing as interesting as writing a book.

Hasan Ferdous, a prolific documentary commentator on expat life--his own and of others--pays attention to Ali Anwar, a fellow New York resident who has been recently honored for his work on Henrik Ibsen. And the caravan has other notable drivers too.

Apart from the essays, there is large feast of fiction, poetry and personal reminiscences. It's perhaps here that a reader may ask if *Kali O Kolom* is trying to widen its reach or increase its girth. But then, it has something for everyone. In the end this splendid scatter might make sense because who else is on the prowl in this town looking for the best in Bangla literature?

For a man who has in a way sacrificed significantly his own personal literary life in order to breathe life into the work of others, Abul Hasnat's is a remarkable and untold story. Many of our writers today are celebrities partly thanks to TV, but also because Abul Hasnat took an interest in that writer, fashioning in our times the craft of the editor who facilitates literary efforts into art.

Kali O Kolom is a homage to this ignored member of this *gharana* of greatness.

Afsan Chowdhury's four-volume study of the liberation war is titled *Bangladesh 1971*.

Little Magazine Activism in the Sixties : An Overview

JYOTIPRAKASH DUTTA

Sometime in the early summer of 1962, a group of Dacca University students gathered outside the then newly-built Dacca stadium to discuss the possible publication of a literary magazine. A few literary magazines did exist then, but it was felt that they were greatly inadequate to the demands of an emerging literature. The decision was taken to publish a literary magazine they could call their own, as well as a manifesto explaining their objectives. A 16-page manifesto appeared within the next few weeks which in sharp language attacked the old, government-favored, established writers for their stale, directionless, establishment-oriented writings. Titled *Baktabya* (there was no editor), the pamphlet advised the latter to retire because they neither had the power to usher in a new era in Bengali literature, nor had the courage to yield to the new. *Baktabya* became a sensation among the young intellectuals. The old guard, however, did not show any sign of even noticing it. But it was apparent that they got the signal all right. The pamphlet appeared, but the promised magazine did not. Differences of opinion among the young rebels ended the venture. Some of them formed a new group, and with almost no resources published a magazine containing 64 pages of prose and poetry by mostly unknown and little known writers.

Saptak (no editor), the first 'little magazine' of the Sixties, was born.

Within weeks, *Saptak* was followed by *Swakhyyar*, and then by *Sampratik*. A stream of such small magazines started pouring out thereafter. Around the middle of the Sixties there were about a dozen of such publications. By the turn of the decade such magazines totalled nearly a hundred and were being published from all the main cities of Bangladesh.

Interestingly enough, some of the young students who called that outer stadium meeting are considered today important literary personalities of Bangladesh. Quite a few of them received national literary awards too. It seems the old guard did

finally yield.

2. The publication of a few small, short-lived, irregular magazines affected the entire literary scene of Bangladesh. Today, any young writer can write whatever s/he wants to in any of the periodicals of the country provided his/her piece has some merit. This was unthinkable back in those days. Those ten years greatly changed the literary spectrum of Bangladesh. It's just not the phenomenon of little magazines that constituted the change; there were qualitative changes as well.

3. Bengali literature took a different course in East Bengal after the birth of Pakistan. "Bengali Moslem writers" one scholar tells us, "...were extremely exuberant over the creation of Pakistan and engaged in the revival of Islamic themes and traditions in their writings. Some of them simply tried to remove the long-felt need in Bengali literature -- telling a story of Bengali Muslims". Then came the 1952 language movement. It provided the direction the country's literature was looking for. A group of young writers emerged with the dedication and power needed to start a new literature. They were the ones we call the writers of the Fifties. They were basically the product of the language movement and hence popularity came to them almost instantly. With that came material success. Many of them were offered official positions and started serving the government faithfully. Some of them possessed the spirit but had to stop for another reason-- the military rule of 1958. Others continued and were joined by the writers of the Sixties. The writers of the Sixties entered a dull, colorless literary world. The emerging middle class's desire for the good life started growing stronger, and under the direct patronage of the Ayub government a new opportunist class emerged. The lack of a democratic social system left the progressive elements in our society in utter confusion. The writers of the Sixties entered their promised land in such a period of transition and emptiness. As a

result, the first few years of the Sixties was a fruitless period of experimentation by the young writers. There was also the problem of publishing their works. Anyone familiar with the state of the publishing business in Bangladesh



knows how difficult it is for a young writer to find a publisher. It's no wonder that Bengali writers always use periodicals to reach their audience. But good periodicals were not to be found in abundance back in the Sixties. In 1957 *Samakal* (edited by Sikandar Abu Zafar and Hasan Hafizur Rahman) had appeared. The very first issue of *Samakal* was so strikingly different from the existing literary magazines of the time--*Mohammadi*, *Saogat*, *Diiruba*, etc.--that almost a scramble ensued among writers to find a place in it. When the Sixties' writers entered the field, *Samakal* was too full to carry any new load. It too became irregular after a few years of publication. In 1958 two university students published *Uttaran* (edited by Enamul Huq), which was equal in quality to *Samakal*. *Uttaran* was regularly published for two years as a bi-monthly, and then as a monthly. It continued for a year, and died. An attempt by the Writers' Guild to publish a

literary monthly was equally unsuccessful. After the first issue the magazine stopped publication for several years. When it resumed, the era of 'little magazines' was already in.

So, in that summer of 1962 there were practically no literary magazines where the young writers could publish their works. A magazine of their own was urgently needed but they didn't have the organization and financial support to undertake the publication of a regular monthly or bi-monthly magazine. Moreover, under the then Press Law, the publisher of a periodical had to get a clearance from the Intelligence Branch before s/he was granted a publication license. The young writers finally found the way to beat the regulation. They decided not to publish a regular magazine--instead they would call the publication a 'collection', and there would be no editor.

This is how the 'little magazine' got started in Bangladesh in the Sixties. While they may not have conformed to generally accepted notions of 'little magazines', they did serve the same purpose: an assault on conventional modes of expression and airing fresh, new literary talent.

4. *Saptak* was published in 1962. Yet it was not quite the first little magazine of the land. Seven years earlier a group of writers of the fifties published a collection of writing in magazine form and called it *Kabikantha*. There was no second issue, however, until many years later. Still *Kabikantha* should be considered the pioneer. It may be presumed that the writers of *Kabikantha* felt the same way as the writers of *Saptak* and *Swakhyyar* did. But their agony must have been short-lived because

the very next year the famous monthly literary magazine *Samakal* appeared. A total of three issues of *Saptak* was published during the eighteen months it existed. Some of the well-known names of Bengali literature in Bangladesh to-day were associated with *Saptak* and wrote in it on their way to literary frame. The splinter group of the people assembled that summer evening at the outer stadium published *Swakhyyar* and in quick succession was followed by *Sampratik*. It was as if *Saptak* and *Swakhyyar* together were conducting a literary workshop in Dacca for about two years. In 1964 a group of young people styled themselves as the 'Sad Generation' and started publishing literary pamphlets defying all conventional literary values of the time. A regular magazine was soon published by this group with a declaration, "We are a group of promising, sex-propelled young men, who are against all set values and all rules and codes of conduct. We are against all illiterate journalists, know-all professors, and newspaper critics." However, after some time the magazine *Kanthaswar* (edited by Abdullah Abu Sayeed), reversed its earlier stand saying, "We are a group of observant writers." *Kanthaswar* continued for several years, and at a point ceased to remain a little magazine by joining the mainstream. However, over the years *Khanthaswar* published some of the finest writings of Bangladesh-- prose and poetry. *Saptak's* group broke up for various reasons. A year later two of the seven people from *Saptak* published another magazine primarily to introduce unknown writers. Their magazine *Kalbela* (edited by Jyotiprakash Dutta and Hayat Mamud) did roaring business for about two years and then disappeared. An extreme political consciousness and unusual beauty were the two characteristics of this magazine. The first issue of *Kalbela* had to be burnt and reprinted because of its content. The editors had second thoughts about facing Ayub Khan's police! *Kalbela* added a new taste to our literature. The well-known weekly *Desh* of West Bengal devoted a full page in discussing

and praising the third issue of *Kalbela*. *Purbalekh* was another little magazine of the Sixties mainly devoted to poetry. It intended practicing pure literature, and published poetry by young poets and old poets alike. *Rupsa*, *Pratidhwani*, *Samaswar*, *Polimati*, *Kranti*, *Tridhara* were other little magazines of the period that earned some reputation. By 1969 there were so many of these 'little magazines' that it became almost impossible for anyone to keep track. Though mainly centered around Dacca, the literary movements of the period through little magazines soon spread into other cities of Bangladesh. *Karnaphuli*, of Chittagong, *Bipratik* of Bogra, *Sandeepan* of Khulna were renowned for their quality. Rangpur, Jessore, Netrakona, Mymensingh also had their share of little magazines, it has been said. It was in the late '60s that another group, mainly from the Engineering University of Dacca, made its appearance. They called themselves 'Naa' group--meaning 'no' to everything, and were more concerned with the physical beauty of their magazine than the content. The artistic beauty of some of the issues of *Naa* was really astounding. *Naa*, as usual, lasted for just a few issues.

5. What can be said about the little magazines of the Sixties? That period is regarded as an extremely bright one in our literature and the little magazines definitely ushered it in. They added much new blood to Bengali literature, gave it a broader outlook and provided the variety and sophistication lacking in the past. The writers of the Sixties received nothing much, both in style and content, that they could follow from their predecessors. They had to take lessons from their own lives and their own time. They themselves had to do all the soul-searching. During a decade of repression and suffering, they instilled in their writings timely political consciousness and implanted the sense of Bengali nationalism.

Jyotiprakash Dutta is a well-known Bengali writer.