



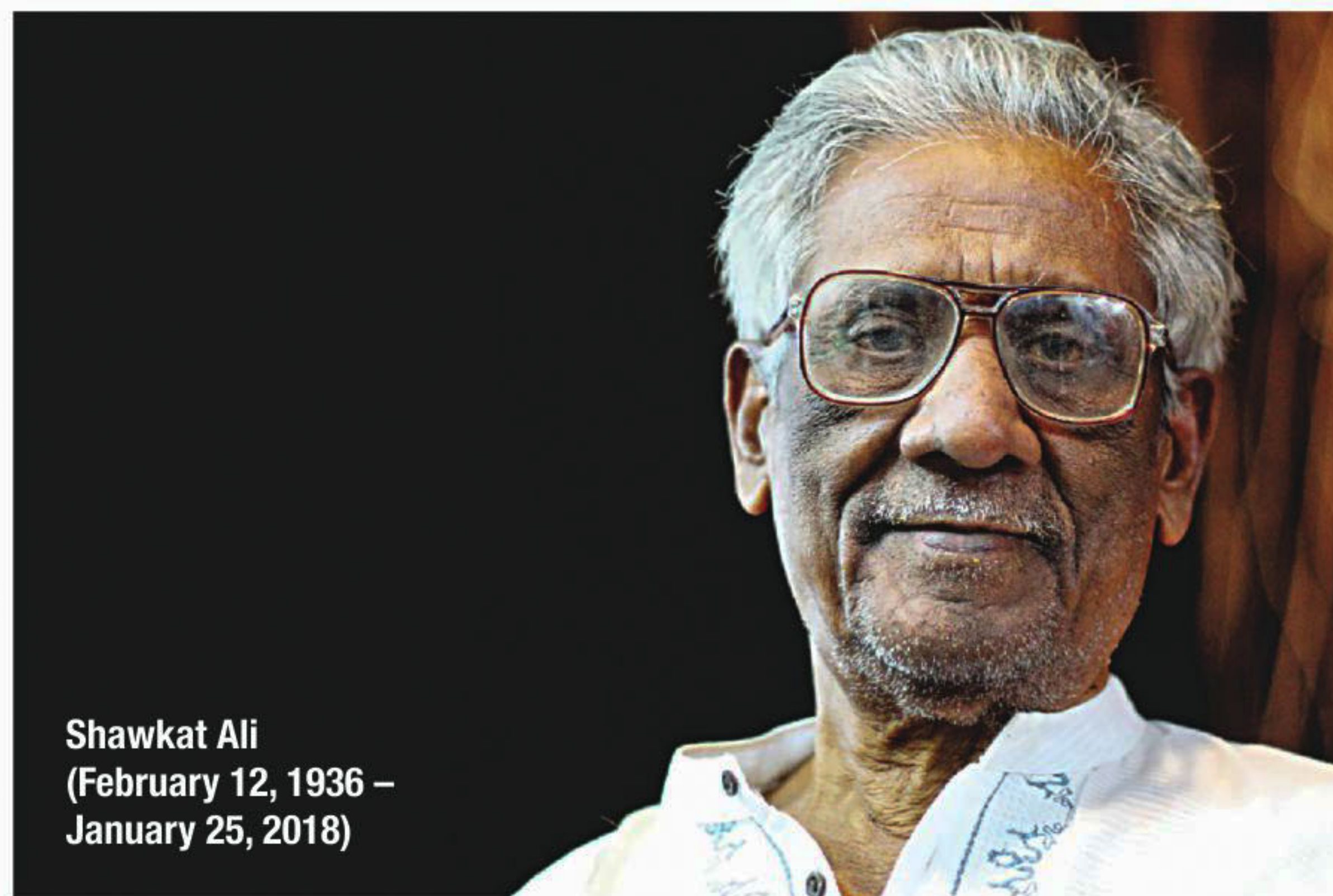
"Quality literary works often go unnoticed"

Shawkat Ali, a prominent Bengali writer who contributed to Bangla literature for the last four decades, was born on February 12, 1936, in Dinajpur, West Bengal. His major literary works include *Prodoshe Prakritojon*, *Bashat*, *Warish*, *Uttorer Khep*, and *Dakkhinyaoner Din*, among others. He experimented with Bangla language and wrote his masterpiece *Prodoshe Prakritojon* in which the lives and struggles of the marginalised people of Bengal in the middle age were depicted. This literary genius passed away on January 25, 2018. On the occasion of International Mother Language Day, we publish excerpts of an interview of the writer in which he talked about his own literary works, the structure of language in his writings and the need to recognise the important literary works of Bangla literature. The interview was first published in *Shaptahik* 2000 in 2006 and translated for The Daily Star by Naznin Tithi.

Given your long-term teaching experience, how would you evaluate the education system of Bangladesh? When we were children, our *Balyashikkha* book would start with Bangla alphabets (au, aa, ka, kha). But nowadays the very first book for children starts with sentences and the alphabets come at the end of the book. This is a major fault in our primary education system.

My grandfather had studied in a *pathshala* under the *gurumoshai*. He could read and write Bangla quite well because he learned the alphabets first. This method of learning was so fruitful that those who went to *pathshala* and studied up to grade V could easily read Bangla. They could even read the books of Vidyasagar or Bankim. Students these days after completing primary education cannot read Bangla properly, let alone rapidly.

Those in favour of this method hold the view that if this method of teaching can be



Shawkat Ali
(February 12, 1936 –
January 25, 2018)

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN/PHOTOSEUM, FEBRUARY 28, 2012

In Bangla, 'ka' is always pronounced as 'ka,' and never pronounced as 'cha'. Thus applying the western method in teaching Bangla language doesn't make any sense.

In the past, students had to study all the subjects up until matriculation. We had studied geography, history, science, etc. Thus we had a strong foundation. I have noticed that young people today do not even have the minimum knowledge about history or geography. That's why I think primary and secondary education of our time was way better than that of today.

Bangla is a very rich language and Bangla literature is of such quality that it can compete with the literature of other languages and win international awards. Why is it that after Rabindranath Tagore no one has so far won any prestigious international awards?

The kinds of experiments that were done in modern European literature were not done in Bangla literature with the exception of Syed Waliullah who carried out such experiments. He had created high-quality literary works. During his lifetime there was no discussion about his writings. He only got a little recognition after his death. Or take for example the novels of Akhtaruzzaman Elias. People often talk about *Chilekothar Sepai*, but there is hardly any discussion about his other major novel *Khowabnama*. We need to recognise these

high-quality literary works....

Adwaita Mallabharman wrote *Titash Ekti Nodir Nam* in 1956 but the book was published three years after his death. It captivated the attention of literary circles and was much-talked about long after his death. When we read that book and held discussions on it, we realised that he portrayed the life of ordinary people of this region so beautifully—like Tarashankar did in his writings.

We often do not recognise these types of genuine literary works. And it is our collective failure. It is the failure of the writers and critics. We do not know how to praise good literature. We do not even have an interest to familiarise the world with our quality literary works. This failure is due to our narrow-mindedness. Also, our writers often run after cheap popularity and do not write on any serious themes. This has serious consequences on quality literary works as they often go unnoticed.

Does the structure of language have a part to play here? For example, although Bankim Chandra would use difficult words in his writings, there were also elements of humour. And Rabindranath made the language so lucid. At present, Humayun Ahmed has been using very simple language to tell complicated stories...

The environment a writer wants to create

through the use of his language must be consistent with the subject matter of his writing. I don't think the way readers react to the language used should be of any concern to the writer. In *Prodoshe Prakritojon*, I used very difficult and archaic Bangla words. In most cases, I tried to avoid the *apavrangsho* form of the main Sanskrit words and used the undistorted ancient form of the words because the story was not based in the modern age. The protagonists were of the time of Laxman Sen-Bakhtiyar Khilji. I thought, if I had to successfully portray that period, I would have to use the language of that time. Thus I used the old form of the language. Had I used the modern form, my readers might have been satisfied but I may not have been.

Why then are the verbs in the colloquial/spoken form?

Although the story is not based in the modern age, I cannot simply deny the language of the contemporary time. Bankim Chandra used 'khaiyachhi,' 'koriyachhi' in his writings, but people of that time did not use those verb forms in their day-to-day spoken language. On the one hand, I tried to create an atmosphere of the past, but on the other hand, by using the verbs in the colloquial form, I also tried to assure the readers that my book is not outdated...

Bashat and *Warish* are two of your novels that have been written in the context of partition. Why are you so interested about the memories of the partition of Bengal?

The novel *Bashat* was mainly based on my life. I was born in Dinajpur of West Bengal which was a big district. After the partition, the place we used to live in fell under India. We had 20-25 *bighas* of land there. My father used to practise homeopathy and my mother was a teacher at a local secondary school. She also had a diploma from the Sreerampur Textile Institute. In 1939, when my mother went to Sreerampur, she took me with her. I was a four-year-old then and was admitted to a missionary school. But we could not stay there because of the turmoil of World War II and returned home.

My father did not want Pakistan while

We often do not recognise these types of genuine literary works. And it is our collective failure. It is the failure of the writers and critics. We do not know how to praise good literature. We do not even have an interest to familiarise the world with our quality literary works.

applied in countries like the UK, US, France, Germany, etc., it can also be applied in our country. What they do not understand is, in the languages in these countries the pronunciation of the vowels and consonants is never the same. For example, in the English language, 'i' in the word bird is pronounced as 'a' while in the word bit, 'i' is pronounced as 'ee.' Also, 'c' is pronounced in different ways—as 'cha' and also 'ka'. That is why they start with sentences, not the alphabets. But our language is different from these languages.