

# Abul Mansur Ahmad

(1898– 1979)

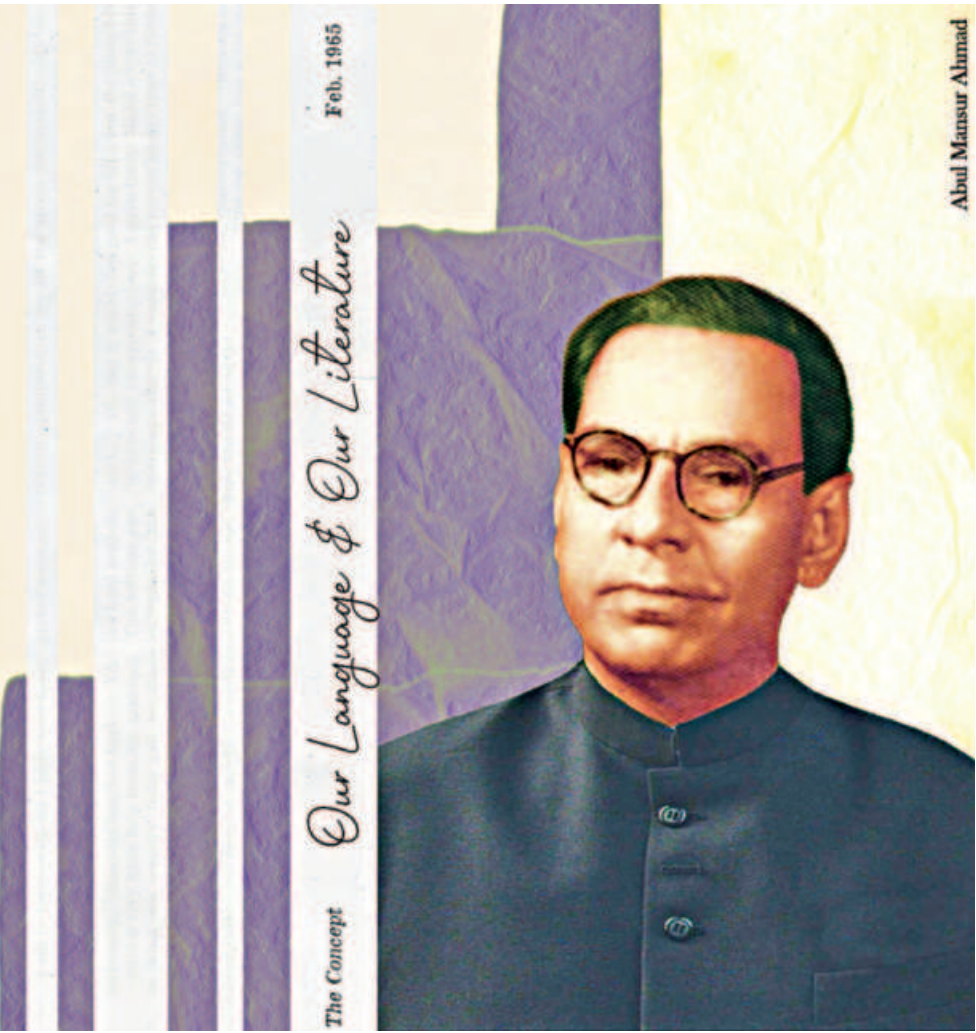
His first satire collection, *Aina*, was published in 1936-37, and the seven short pieces are satirical take on the contemporary Bengali Muslim society. Set in the 1920s, the practices and references might seem unfamiliar to modern day readers, but the cow protection movement and playing of music as part of Hindu festivals in front of mosques caused serious affronts in those times.

SOHANA MANZOOR

A politician and journalist by profession, Abul Mansur Ahmad began his career as a National Congress worker in Bengal. One of the principal authors of the famous “Ekush dafa,” the election manifesto of Jukta Front in 1945, later on, he became minister in different capacities. A man of veritable talent, he is also one of the handful of Muslim writers from the pre-partition era who wrote alongside the predominantly Hindu Koltaka literary circle. At the time, he along with Abu Rushd and Syed Waliullah remained on the periphery of the mainstream, Kolkata-centric Bengali literary tradition, but today they are recognized as the forerunners of Bangladeshi literature.

A keen observer of social inequities and the complex socio-cultural milieu of Muslim Bengal, Abul Mansur Ahmad wrote political satires, short stories and novels. He made fun of the rigid and ridiculous social norms and practices that were particularly influenced by religious bigotry and corrupt politics. While it helped in setting his writing style apart from many of his contemporaries, it also made him a target of the Kolkata based writers who preferred the traditional writing that alluded to Sanskrit scriptures and Hindu traditions. Hence for him and many other Muslim writers, the partition of 1947 was an opportunity to improve the impoverished stature of the neglected East Bengal.

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While commenting on *Aina*, the eminent scholar Professor Anisuzzaman said, “The target of Abul Mansur Ahmad’s attach was not on any individual, a community or any particular religion. He revolted against prejudice and superstition in general. Even 80 years after the publication of *Aina*, there is still a need for such a book.” Ahmad’s *Food Conference* was published in 1944, three years before the partition, but it probes the ridiculous political scenario of the

subcontinent that encouraged nepotism and corruption in the name of welfare of ordinary people. His other satire entitled *Gullivor er Safarnama* (1945) is a take on Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and reintroduces some of the famous and fictitious traveller’s adventures. He has written novels and memoirs too, but he is most remembered for his cutting wit and satirical writing. Today marks the 124th birth anniversary of Abul Mansur Ahmad.

## TWO POEMS

BY MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

### If —

If sunflowers shone in the sky  
and clouds floated in lakes,  
how would it be?

Would there still be wars,  
corpses weeping blood,  
bombs annihilating?

If fishes had iridescent wings  
that glimmered as they flew  
to the sun,

and birds had fins to delve  
deep into luminous seas,  
how would it be?

If histories were rewritten  
with  
mogra and rose ink, and  
love reigned supreme,

how would it be?



## Evanescent Rain

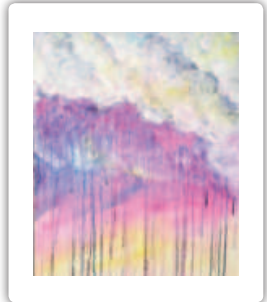
Peace falls like rain.

The birds call in the downpour —  
a koel, the raucous cry of  
a large-winged bird, like the  
hornbill, calling out to its mate.  
The traffic sounds drown the  
patter of rain. The thunder, the  
cawing of crows, an occasional  
chatter of parakeets, a distant  
whistle, all reiterate  
the same.

Peace falls like rain.

When the rain stops,  
will peace cease?

Mitali Chakravarty  
founded the *Borderless Journal* with the hope  
of peace under an  
unbordered blue sky.



# An excerpt from “Relief Work” published in

# FOOD CONFERENCE

BY ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

It was the time of flood. The entire country was submerged in water. The countryside was completely flooded. In some places the tinne roofs of houses or some bamboo poles rose out of the waters to announce the presence of human residence.

The only visible ground was the railway track which had also become sanctuary for the poor, flood affected people of the villages. Those that could not find a place on the high ground had built rafts and taken refuge there with their entire families. All those who lived in the surrounding villages, had gathered here. There was not one spot left on the railway track. Human beings and their animals, cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep—all dwelt side by side in that time of utter destitution caused by natural disaster.

Those who had criticized the building of high railway tracks as signs of ill omen, were now biting their fingernails recognizing their own stupidity. This was a country of recurring floods. If there was no high ground for people to stand on, where would they go?

2.

The leaders of the nation roared and howled at the misery of the flood-affected people. The party workers could barely sleep. The pens of various newspaper editors were bleeding at the misery of the countrymen. Relief committees were being formed everywhere. The press compositors did not have time to sleep; they were so busy in printing the receipt books that their neighbors could not sleep at the sound of the printing machines. The members of the relief committees hung harmonium around their necks and played moving melodies as they collected fund. Their sorrowful songs induced the mistresses of different households to throw down their bangles and ornaments from verandas. The relief committee members sang eulogies for the angels who did that.

All his life, Hamid had only read about flood affected people in newspapers. He had never seen anything like this first hand. Listening to the songs of the relief workers and also witnessing the miseries of the people, his heart absolutely melted. He had just got the salary of his month—a total of Taka 43. From there, he took out three 10 Taka notes and handed those over to the leader of the group collecting money. The fellow stared at Hamid in amazement and asked his name. When he gave his name, he indicated to the others to shout out his name. Hamid walked away in mortification from the place as he



heard his name being shouted in ovation.

3.

Early next morning, hearing the sound of a motor vehicle, Hamid stepped out of his house. He saw that the best-known lawyer of the local Congress Bar along with some of his followers was standing at the doorstep of his humble abode. Hamid started to look around for a good seat among his broken chairs. But the leader restrained him and said, “No need for politeness. I have come to thank you on behalf of the poor flood affected people. You have such a great heart; you certainly cannot remain in hiding. You have been selected as one of the members of the relief committee. We’ll be so proud to have you among us. Please attend our meeting.”

Uttering all these words in one breath, he took Hamid’s hand in both his hands and gave it a mighty shake. Then he jumped back into his car and raised both his hands

to salute Hamid again. The car left and Hamid stood there, dumbfounded.

4.

In the afternoon, while he was still at the office, Hamid received an invitation to the meeting of the Relief Committee. He had never been involved in any kind of services for his motherland. Hitherto, he had only observed those noble patriots from a distance and prayed for them from the core of his heart. However, he felt distressed at the thought that he was also one of them.

Avoiding friends and acquaintances, he went to the meeting with trepidation. Discovering himself among the dignitaries of the district, he felt mortified. He had seen all these people from a distance and he held them in high esteem. He could not think of himself as great as any of these people.

Seeing Hamid entering the venue, the chairman of the meeting introduced him to the others with words of excessive praise.

Hamid sat quietly with bowed head.

There was much discussion at the meeting. People debated over various issues. The sufferings of the flood affected people were given in details. Hamid felt goosebumps all over his body while listening to those. He did not hear everything, nor did he comprehend all.

At the end of the meeting, everybody turned to congratulate him. It took quite some time for Hamid to understand that he has been assigned to inspect some of the relief work centres.

5.

Hamid’s prayer for leave to work for the afflicted humanity was immediately granted. For the first time in him life, Hamid dived into relief work to help the flood affected and famine inflicted people in the rural areas of the country. The first few days he really had a difficult time to adjust with the routine of the relief work.

He had expected it to be arduous and also something godly; but it did not quite seem like that. Distributing two and half kilograms of rice to the skeletal peasants stuck in the water and sleeping at night is the luxury of tents in blankets and quilts made him feel guilty. He felt unease as he played cards and had tea and smoked with others engaged in relief work. But his companions made him see and he also realized that they needed to be in good health if they wanted to keep on working. He tried to accommodate himself and soon realized that most of the fund was used for the upkeep of the relief workers. Only some marginal amount was being spent on the actual relief work. But because of his limited experience, Hamid did not say anything. Maybe, this is how relief work operated and if things did not go like this, there would be no relief work at all.

6.

Hamid went on to inspect one of the relief centres. He saw that rows of half-naked men, women, young and old, children sat with tickets in their hands in front of the tent set by the relief committee. Young women, barely covering their faces and chests bowed low and yet they held their tickets in the air. Everybody knew that the rules of the Relief Officer were stern and everyone who wanted to receive help, must be present and show the tickets as well. The infants at their mothers’ breasts threw their limbs around in hunger and hampered the efforts of their mothers to cover themselves.

Hamid shuddered and he asked the officer in charge in an irritable voice, “Why are you making them wait? Why aren’t you letting them go?”

The In-Charge replied without being bothered, “We’re not done with counting. Where are you, Nagen? Get the book and see where we are...”

The staff called Nagendra pulled out a think registrar book and started calling out names. The answering responses came from the rows of attendees. Problem arose with women who would not respond loudly. After threatening them that they would not get help if they did not cry out in response, they complied.

Then they started the ticket checking. One person was marking the tickets with red and blue pencil. Another person was going behind him and handing over about a *chhatak* (1/16 of a *ser*, which is slightly more than a kg) of rice to each. Most did not object and took the rice gratefully. A few hot-tempered men tried to argue, “What will we do with so little?” But the relief workers barked and their poor fellows kept on muttering under their breath.