



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

Bengali as a vehicle of abstract thought

Our thought is relatively shallow. It does not have its roots in the total being of the writer and for this reason radiates no life-giving energy to the mind of the community. ... Our vanity, the home spun notions of our provincial minds, our faith in convenient digests of western thought are among our banes. Our debt to sources other than indigenous is well known, and yet we have not assimilated a fraction of it.

MUNIER CHOUDHURY

Buddhadeva Bose in one of his essays expresses the opinion that Bengali prose, "in less than a couple of centuries has achieved remarkable maturity." He, however alleges that it has yet notable deficiencies. Deficiencies, I mean, not in performance, but in potency itself! Reflecting on these supposed fundamental limitations of the Bengali language, he further says: "Bengali prose therefore, is now all right for description, narration and dialogue, the accessory of fiction and *belles-letters*, but seems just to fall short of speculative, critical and philosophical writing."

Had this been the opinion of an ignorant foreigner or that of an infatuated worshipper of foreign idols, we need not have taken it seriously. But this is the view of a writer among whose many achievements must be counted his astonishing ability to discuss difficult aesthetic questions in charming prose and therefore calls for comment at length.

As the question is about the limits of Bengali as a language and its inherent tendencies, the present discussion must keep in view the entire range of our prose literature. To my mind, that would be the best way of dispelling the misgiving of people who needlessly despair of the future of Bengal.

Ram Mohan Roy created a new epoch as a prose writer at a time when Bengali had not developed punctuation marks or the notion of agreement between clauses according to the genius of the language. His *Vedanta*, published in 1815, was the first step towards a fully blown and modern prose. This pioneering effort, naturally hesitant and unsure of itself, is significantly a work with a spiritual theme. Bengali prose thus made its beginning in the abstract realm of philosophy.

After twenty-five years appeared Akshoy Datta on an intellectual scene profoundly disturbed by the conflict between native culture and foreign culture. There was no hypocrisy or self-deception in the response of the

times to new ideals and ideas of life. The impact of it all affected the very heart of society and the individual, and the resultant awakening was so deep and real that Bengalis avidly set about assimilating western and Indian knowledge. In their attempt to know, not merely through English translation but at first hand, the best that has been thought in every language they learnt Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit on the one hand, and Latin Greek, French and German on the other. It was this serious sense of purpose and scholarly pain that made possible the revolution in thought and language in the nineteenth century. Akshoy Datta was important not only as a reformer of language but as an exponent of new ideas. His work entitled *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti* (Nature and Human Nature) does not merely contain a freight in information. His discussion of the laws of nature, the constitution of human nature, the question of human happiness, shows that Bengali had already acquired the power of logical analysis and of representing the complex structure of abstract thought.

The book, *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti*, is not a wholly original work. When however, a great idea leavens or a great change occurs in communal life, and the individual is roused by his insight into it to make its significance clearer to himself and to others by studious effort, language, under the stress discovers its possibilities. Datta was aware that he had used words which were not easy for an ordinary English educated reader to understand. He, therefore, sought to remove the difficulty of such readers by adding to his work a glossary of the unfamiliar words with their English equivalents. In doing so his aim was to facilitate the study of western science and philosophy through the medium of Bengali. His assumption was that his English-educated audience understood the English equivalents he supplied, and for this reason, he gave his alphabetical glossary the caption 'English Rendering of Words Compiled'. That he did not tentatively call it Proposed Bengali

Equivalents of English Words is also a proof of his great faith in the possibilities of the Bengali language.

Vidyasagar was a contemporary of Akshoy Datta. The emancipated mind and love of knowledge that gave distinction to Datta's prose also inspired the prose of Vidyasagar, whose mature skill as a writer was mended by Tagore in these words: "He insisted that you must say what you want to say simply, beautifully and in an orderly manner... In fact, Vidyasagar introduced order into the disorderly crowd of Bengali prose, gave it the sense of period and structure, taught it restraint and neatness, and thus increased its flexibility and functional effectiveness. Vidyasagar's prose is valuable because the mind that it mirrors has extraordinary qualities. One result of his constant study of Sanskrit philosophy was that to him even abstract thought became as clear and definite in outline as sensible images. His consciousness of the modern *Zeitgeist* and a deep faith in western philosophy made the secular content of this prose of irresistible appeal. It was the work of a vastly erudite logician and naturally had a solid logical structure. The spirited but lucid, didactic yet argumentative prose of *Bidhaba Bibaha* (Widow Marriage. 1855) radiates, in its flair for sarcasm and ridicule, the steady heat of the midday sun.

It was however Bankim who realised fully that the Bengali language, if properly tapped, could express the whole gamut of human thought and feelings. The novelist has left the mark of this conviction in his own wonderful and various creation. He imprinted on the face of our prose his realisation, simple as it is, that language is complex or simple, strong or mild, ornate or plain, strictly according to subject matter. Bankim discussed abstruse ideas of western philosophy in his Miscellaneous Essays with such ease and naturalness that it ought to evoke the admiration of our usually unperceptive readers.

Bankim achieved, while attempting

abstract definitions of literature, a subtle and suggestive prose, extraordinarily free from verbiage and capable of rendering complex thought with effortless ease. Even when one does not agree with him, one feels the charm of his manner and his power of lucid persuasion.

Eighteen seventy-two saw the publication of *Banga Darshan* and 1891 that of *Sadhana* presented Tagore to us. In *Sabuj Patra* (1914) Pramatha Choudhury made his appearance, officially as it were, in the field of Bengali prose. After him came to mention a few names at random, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, Buddhadeva Bose and Annadasankar Roy. Two Muslim writers also produced significant works in Bengali. Humayun Kabir wrote his *Emmanuel Kant* and Qazi Abdul Wadud his *Goethe*. Ramendrasundar wrote his aesthetic criticism in a language characterised by a tendency to overanalysis. He however displays an unexceptionable wealth of facts and thinks in words aptly chosen and tautly woven in the fabric of his prose. Pramatha Choudhury treated Trivedi's subject in a racy conversational idiom, and opened up the limitless horizon of a prose able to explore the infinite resources of our spoken language. In his hands dry abstraction seems to glitter by contact with the artist's refined sense of beauty.

Rabindranath served the profession of letters for sixty-five years. There is hardly an important branch of knowledge on which he did not shed light. In his superb prose, during the period. His mind ranged at ease over aesthetics, philosophy, science, politics, sociology, painting and sculpture. Years after his death, he still remains without a peer in skill, facility of language and the richness of ideas as an interpreter of abstract thought. That no region of thought, however, difficult and far lying is today inaccessible to the Bengali language could be illustrated from his writings alone. It is needless, of course, to add that the writer's medium must possess what Annadasankar calls virtue and fire. I am convinced that as

a vehicle of abstract thought Bengali today is well past its adolescence and youth. Owing to the interest of our thinkers in metaphysics and religious discussion, their anxiety to apprehend the fundamental reality of life poetry the State and the universe this aspect of our language has developed most. It seems as if the ceaseless experiment of more than a century, with the resources of our language, was designed to cause its fullest unfolding in this direction rather than in any other. In respect of conveying objective, scientific, and technical information our language is indisputably deficient. But this must be understood in the light of the fact that science has not entered our practical life yet in more than a rudimentary form. Hence Bengali is yet to absorb the great scientific and mechanical revolution of our times.

It must, however, be admitted that the prose found in abstract writing in Bengali is in quality and structure far from satisfactory. The reader here is unaware of the resources of the language while the writers blame its inherent incapacity. The reasons for this unhappy state of affairs must be many and I am unable to go into them all. I should, therefore, content myself by analysing a few works published in recent years and attempting an estimate of their merits in general terms.

When Syed Sajjad Husain writes on national heritage I do not reproach his style, nor do I commend it. The writer does not perhaps pay much attention to style in discussing the abstract questions of cultural tradition. But his aim has been realised. A valuable idea which is neither novel nor complex, but deserves wide currency, has been put across in clear language. It does not matter very much that Sajjad Husain uses English phrases like sense of values where he could easily find an appropriate Bengali phrase for it. His ideal is not the kind of prose whose quality is determined in every word, clause and sentence used, but the logic and compelling pressure of an idea imperiously demanding expression.