

Inspired by a Dull Afternoon

Shamsur Rahman's journey into the world of poetry had an odd beginning, but it has been a fulfilling one. Today marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of his first poem, but he has made his share of blunders too. Sabir Mustafa and Navine Murshid write

It was late December 1948. Shamsur Rahman, then a student of Dhaka University's English department, went to the office of *Sonar Bangla*, one of the two Bengali language weekly magazines brought out from Dhaka. A little apprehensive, he handed over a poem titled "1949" to the editor who barely acknowledged his presence.

While Rahman stood there waiting for some sign from the editor, the man behind the desk gave a casual glance at the poem, then looked up and pointed to the chair. After a couple of minutes, the editor told him that Rahman's poem would be published the next week, on Jan 1, 1949.

Fifty years later, 70-year old Shamsur Rahman can still recall the fear that experience had struck into him. But there was no time to look back. That was not the first poem he had ever written, but certainly the first to be published. And what's more, Rahman still had no idea then that the poem would start him off in a journey that would turn him, 50 years on, into one of the most prominent poets in the Bengali language.

So how did it happen? It was around 1947 when Rahman moved home from Mahut Tuli to Syed Awlad Hossain Lane in Dhaka. One day a young man, a neighbour, approached him in the street and asked him if he was a writer. Rahman had replied "yes", without really thinking about it, because he was not a writer, nor did he have any ambition to be one. But that stranger, one Hamidur Rahman, continued to pester him to write while Shamsur Rahman returned the compliment by pushing him to try his hand at art. "I never knew I would be a poet. I started to write poetry later in life. At first it was for

enjoyment. Some of my friends and I wrote quite often and read out each other's works. One day my friend Hamid asked me why I never gave my poems for publishing. I asked him why would anyone publish them. After a phase of preaching and pleading, I finally gave in", Shamsur Rahman recalls while reminiscing in his Shamoly home.

The poet seemed to have little idea that Jan 1, 1999 would mark the Golden Jubilee of the first publication of his poems. But then, Rahman has never been known as a stickler for milestones or anniversaries. He barely remembers the number of books he has written. Around 75 books, he said, and some 60 of them collection of poetry. His first book was published back in 1961, a collection of poetry titled "Prothom Gaan, Ditiya Mrittur Aagey" (First Song, Before the Second Death).

While his recollection of milestones reached and accolades received are hazy, the child in the poet still thrives. His memory of his childhood remains vivid, as if the images of the boy Shamsur moving from home to school, walking through the narrow lanes of old Dhaka and staring in wonderment at the "giants" society, like the man drawing the horses, were passing before his very eyes.

The little boy, born and bred in Dhaka was rather timid. He never spoke unless spoken to and this feature in him had often led people to believe he was some sort of an intellectual, even when he was not. As a child, he was mesmerized by the waterman who came to supply them water and the lightman who came to light the hurricanes.

"It was very interesting the way they went on with the reg-

ular duties, always smiling and never complaining. There must have been something there that most didn't see. An attraction for the unknown has often made me want to be like them; in fact that was my one-time ambition! I also wanted to be a horseman or a man who collected date juice. Somehow these weird things turned me on!" he exclaims.

One such attraction was towards paintings on glass. On his way to school, he passed a shop where hung many such paintings with proverbs written on them. His liking for them finally led him to go up to the man doing these and ask him to teach him how create such wonders. The old baul look-alike was very interested. Soon, the young lad became an expert in doing these. All was hunky-dory till one fine day the old man scolded him and threw him out. At that point, little Rahman was very upset and never returned to the place. Later, he realized that the reason he was thrown out was that his dear teacher did not want the little child to lead a life like his, which, he feared, he would have.

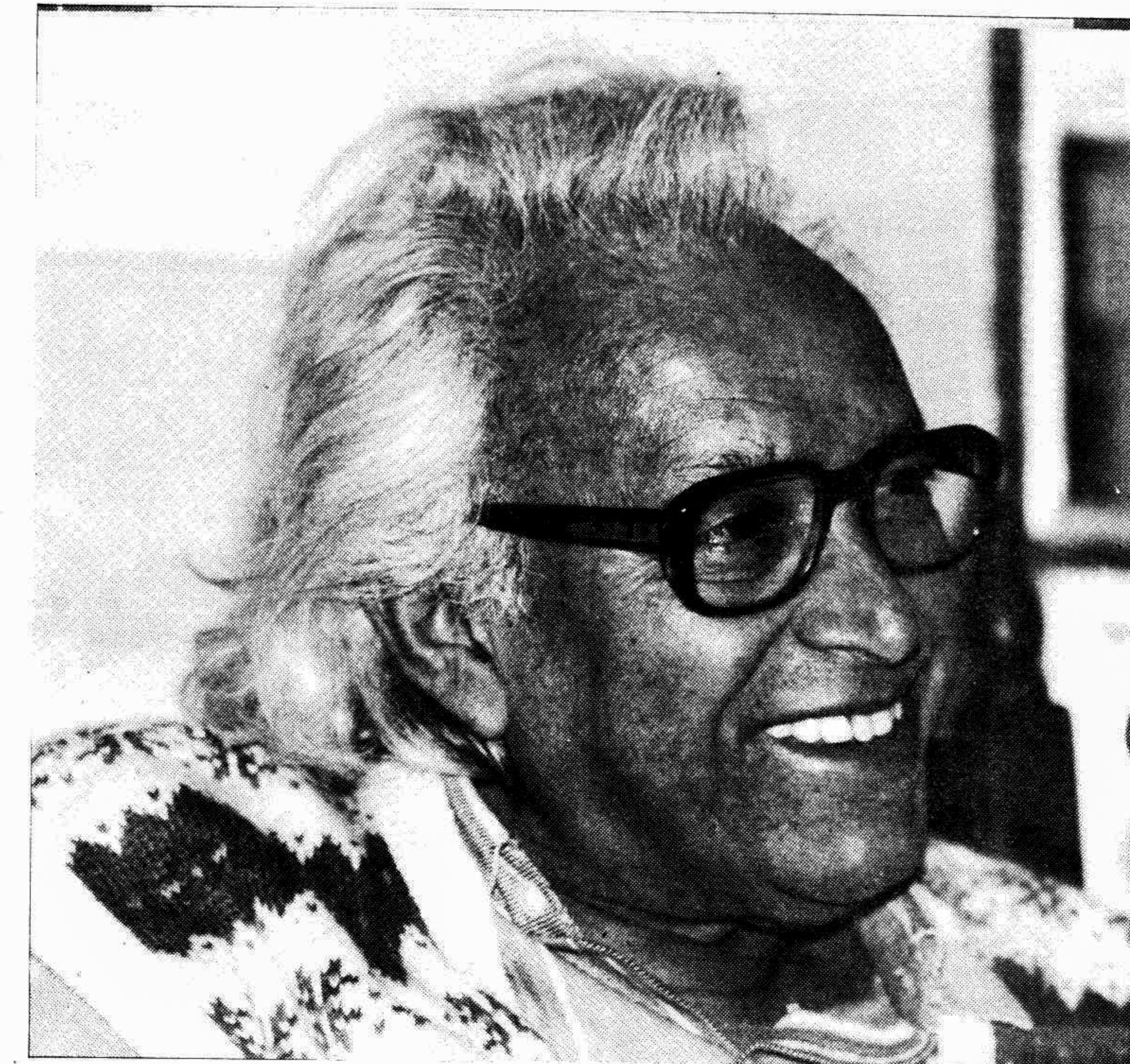
"As a child, I often found myself near *Tara Masjid*. I stood by the pool of water where people came to wash up before prayers and watched the colorful fishes play with one another. They seemed so delicate that I never dared to touch them. Another reason could be that I was scared that they would bite my fingers. Nevertheless, I spent hours watching "color in motion", he recalls.

"I remember a time when I was almost obsessed with a painting of a horse, which reminded me of the 'dool-dool ghora' (swaying horse) of 'Bishadhi Shindhu'. I kept staring that at the store window everyday

wishing it belonged to me. I started to save money for the thing I wanted most in my life: the painting. There was many a time when I spent my savings, unable to resist the mangoes they sold in front of my school. But, finally I did. I was very happy that day, although I thought I should have been happier. I hung it in my room, and spent a considerable time in front of it everyday. Soon, I found myself spending less time in front of it. I realized my attraction was going away. The law of 'diminishing returns' was proved, I guess," he laughs.

"My parents were the ones I loved most and respected most, although I was closer to my mother. My father always wore a stern expression, maybe on purpose, which kept us at a distance. I was a boy of few words and when it came to my father, I was even more silent! However, there was a time when I took up a stand against him. It was after the publication of some of my poems. My father said, "If you can ever become like Humayun Kabir, then you can be someone." At the heat of the moment, I said loudly and firmly, "If I am to become a poet, then I'll be much greater than Humayun Kabir would ever be!" It was just then that I came back to my senses and horrified by my outburst, ran out of the room! Surprisingly, my father said not a word. Later I understood why my father was not so supportive of my inclination towards poetry. He had a friend who was a poet and his attraction for such things took him to places. He had no financial security, no shelter. He ultimately died of tuberculosis. My father was afraid that a similar fate may await his son."

He remembers with fondness his English Grammar teacher at school, Mr. Chinta Haran



Star photo: Zahidul I. Khan

Shom. "The way he taught was so beautiful that every word he uttered could never be forgotten. He was not only my teacher, but also my adviser. He was different from other teachers. During break, he sat apart, reading, I often joined him and talked to him about the academics and aspirations. He was a friend I would never forget."

He also remembers a teacher at college, whom he used to like very much because he always came to class, sat down, closed his eyes and faced the ceiling. This enabled them to bunk classes and go watch movies instead, at the nearby Britannia cinema hall.

At university he remembers Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid, who seemed like 'Amit Roy', of Rabinranath's 'Shesher Kabita' and with whom he now has a very friendly relationship. He remembers Dr. Amiya Bhusan Chakravarty who encouraged him to write poetry. He left an open invitation of visiting his personal library, whenever he felt like it, in order to do better in his academic life. Such gestures from his teachers made life at the university memorable.

The boy Shamsur had little literary pretensions, but at university the dormant giant began to stir. And that on an overcast afternoon too.

"It was a very dull day, the sky was overcast and the mood was melancholy. I was feeling very depressed. Suddenly, and I don't why, I picked up a pen and paper, and started writing a poem", Rahman recalls with obvious relish. But it was the memory of "1949" that moved him more.

That was not only his first published poem, but also because of the role played by Hamidur Rahman, who remained one of his closest friends until the latter passed away. Hamidur came to national prominence in the early 50s by designing the central Shaheed Minar in hour of the Language Martyrs of 1952. Today, the Minar designed by Hamidur is where Shamsur Rahman joins millions of other Bengalees to pay homage to the martyrs.

"When the poem was published Hamid seemed overjoyed, almost as if the paper had published one of his own works", Rahman says.

National recognition for Rahman came in 1962 when he won the prestigious Adamjee Literary Award. The pleasure was all the greater because a group of right-wing writers including the poet Farrukh Ahmed had tried to prevent the award from going to Rahman. They had written a letter to the daily *Ittefaq*, accused Rahman of being "un-Islamic" and demanded that the award should not go to

him. But the jury decided otherwise, and honoured the literary genius instead.

Today, Rahman sees similar kind of intolerance holding back the march of freedom and free thought in Bangladesh. He finds religious bigotry and political fascism disguised as fundamentalism spreading their tentacles across the width and breadth of society, trying to stifle liberal thinking and the nurturing of Bengalee cultural heritage.

"The main threat to literature today comes from religious fundamentalism. I may choose not to write a certain thing, but when there is a threat to my life then my freedom to think, to express and experiment is curtailed", Rahman says.

But despite all the threats emerging in recent years, Rahman finds literature in Bangladesh in sound health and in good hands. He does not share the fear that poor development of literature in Bangladesh has allowed writers and poets of West Bengal to dominate Bengalee literature. It is not a view he simply holds, but one he is able to back with a string of examples.

He points out that Syed Shamsul Huq has produced some excellent works. Similarly, he names Rashid Karim, Shawkat Osman, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, Hassan Azizul Huq, Mahbulul Huq, Akhteruzzaman Ilyas among others as front-ranking litterateurs in the Bengali language. He says that popular novelists such as Humayun Ahmed and Imdadul Huq Milon have added a new dimension to literature and elevated a certain section of readership to a higher quality of books.

"It is true that everybody is in a hurry to become writers and poets, and there is no patience to produce major works. But Humayun and Milon have not harmed the reader's habit by producing short books and easy-reading. In fact, they have enriched literature by adding a new dimension and creating new readership", Rahman says.

While the life of a poet is never fulfilled, there is much Rahman has achieved, much love he has gained. But even amid all the adulation and admiration, he nurses a regret, not a bitter one, but a regret all the same. And that was his decision in 1957 to join journalism.

"One of my biggest mistakes in life was to join the Morning News, which was controlled by Pakistani interests and worked against Bengalee nationalist aspirations. But it was also a mistake to join journalism at all, because I believe a writer cannot develop properly if he works as a journalist as well", Rahman says, terming journal-

ism as "literature in a hurry".

He made another blunder by joining the *Dainik Pakistan* in 1964 as an assistant editor. This job involved him in writing editorials, commentaries etc., and that, he feels harms literature most. "Writing jobs at newspapers use up portion of a person's creative energies, and this happens day in and day out. So he is not able to utilise the full potential of his mental faculties when he tries to concentrate on purely literary works", he says.

Now, standing on the threshold of the new-year what would be his hopes for the new-year?

"I would like to see my country prosper towards higher economic growth. I

would like to see the admonishment of religious prejudices and restoration of freedom of religion in the constitution. Personally, I would wish well for all my friends and relatives. I would like to live for a long time, to contribute to this world, to my Bangladesh, a lot more of my quality work. I would like to live a long life, to see this beautiful, wonderful world change its stance. Perhaps, wishes don't always come true, yet you can't stop people from wishing. Perhaps dreams die fast, but people still go on dreaming, the ever-young poet ended dreamily.

The undoubted master of poetry invites all to love one another, respect one another and come back to one's roots.

"Soul Search"

Alauddin Al Azad
Poet and Novelist

Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A: When a woman loves me.

Q: Do you have any recurring nightmare?

A: No. Sometimes I dream of a tumultuous sea.

Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?

A: Tendency for writing too much.

Q: What is your greatest fear?

A: Becoming a writer short of greatness.

Q: What has been the greatest mistake in your life?

A: Not to take science at Intermediate level.

Q: What makes you cry?

A: When I see politicians lie

Q: Who is your role model?

A: Rabindranath Tagore.

Q: How important is money to you?

A: Not much. I want money for a decent living and buying books.

Q: What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?

A: Professional life.

Q: Are you afraid of death?

A: Yes. I don't want to die.

Q: Which book has influenced your life most?

A: *The Arabian Nights*.

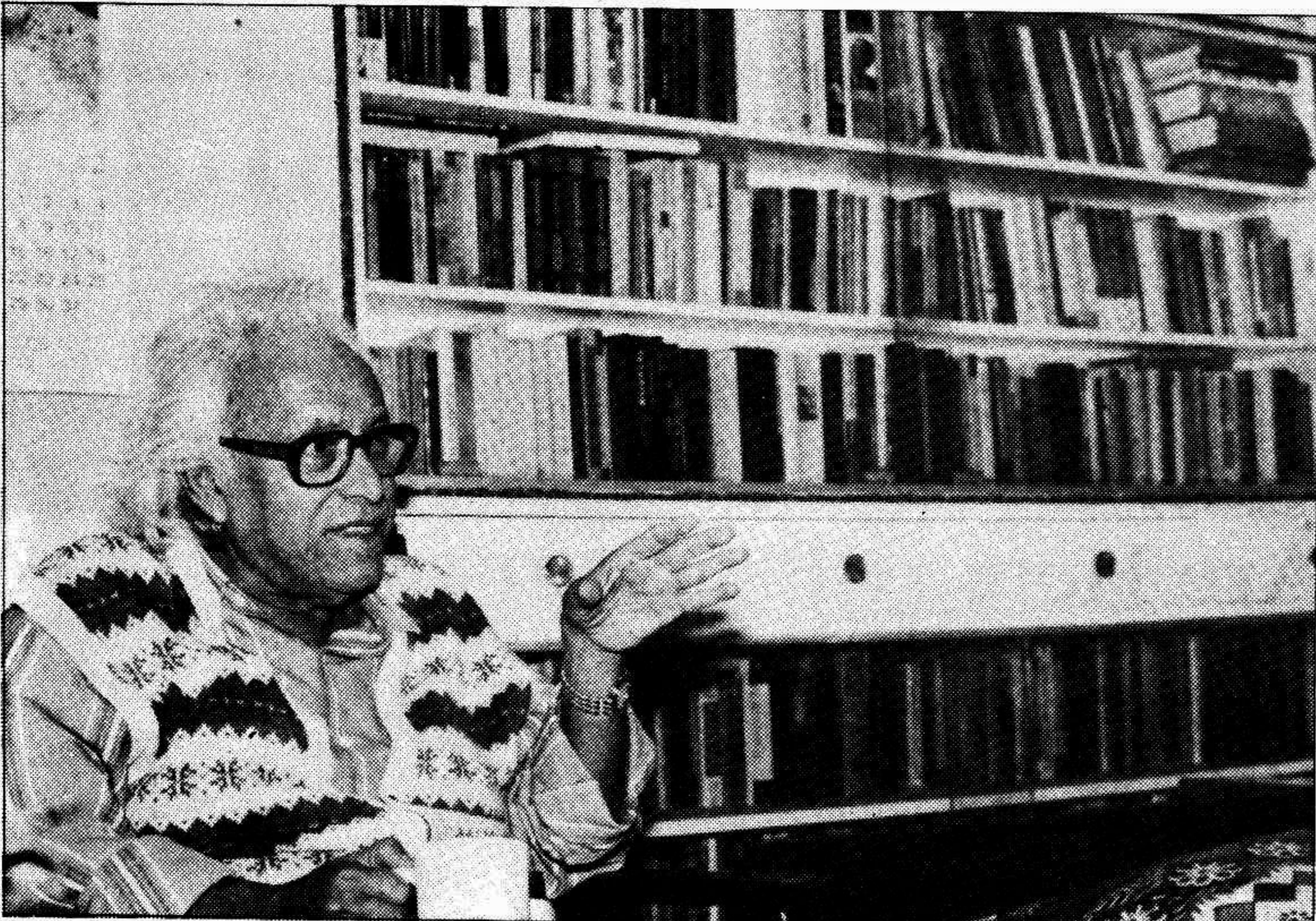
Q: If you were given a chance to start all over again from zero what would you want to be?

A: A physicist.

Q: What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st Century?

A: Possibility of sudden death, because if that occurs I shall not be able to complete my major works.

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim



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Zahidul I. Khan