

Face to Face

An Editor Apart

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Continued from last week

Q: You used to do the illustrations by yourself and came in close contact with such luminaries of our art Quamrul Hassan, who had done so many covers for you, and Rashid Chowdhury. Why did not you enroll yourself in Art Institute?

A: I was studying at Jagannath College in 1948 and into the sixth month of the course when Art Institute opened its doors to students. I was very much eager to get myself admitted to the subject of my heart, but my father argued as to who was going take me at the middle of an academic session and, most importantly, what I was going to do after having a degree from the institute. He said, "You are making a mistake. Think again." He gave examples of Zainul Abedin and Shafiqul Amin. "Look at the miserable life they are leading," my father said adding, "your future is bleak, I can see." Zainul Abedin then was an art teacher at Dhaka Normal School with a meagre salary of Tk 60. But I was adamant and despite all my father's entreaties I got myself admitted into my dream institution.

Q: But we know you did not continue. Why?

A: In dividing my time between my magazine and

Art Institute I found it increasingly difficult to strike a synergy. But I continued to hang on for three years. When time came to choose my subject of specialisation I was eager to take up Fine Arts but had to discontinue because of my colour blindness. Now I think it was a mistake on the part of my teachers also. How does a colour blind person see things through his eyes? should have been the consideration of my teachers.

Q: May we know which colour you are blind to?

A: Red. Red appears to me in different shades. Sometimes green, or when it is deep red I find it something close to black. So I quit Art Institute. My father had the biggest shock of his life. He asked me disheartened: What are you going to do now?

Q: What did you do then?

A: Back to Jagannath College again. Our magazine *Rupchaya* was quite alive. I was assisted by brother Maidur Rahman who became a doctor later on. He left for America in 1959 and I was once again alone. Besides the magazine I started publishing books. For the first time in the history of magazine I printed a whole novel *Ek Mahilar Chhobi* by Syed Shamsul Haq. This was also Haq's first novel. Then published it as a book. But going into publishing

was another mistake. A handsome amount of money got blocked. It affected our magazine which began to come out irregularly and finally in the 60s, it ceased to exist.

Q: Now out of a vocation, what have you decided to do?

A: I embark on a life of a professional editor.

Q: What to you mean by it?

A: First I edited a magazine 'Detective' published by the department of police, then 'Firefly', an Anglo-Bengali magazine, as an editor for some time. I was also assistant editor with the then Radio Pakistan's news wing.

Q: Did you get resistance from your father in your seemingly aimless life?

A: No. My father never went against our wish. What he did usually was to give his opinion about our decisions, that's all. He used to say that his duty was to provide us with education and the rest depends on us.

Q: You never seemed to hang on.

A: Yes, I was quite restless, never settling down to anything except the dream to have my own magazine. That is the only constant element of my thought.

Q: Didn't you feel that money is important for a good living?

A: Well I would say that I

inherited the ideals of simple living from my father. We were always satisfied with little, with bare essentials. I have seen in my life how people hanker after money and wealth and how they can do anything to achieve them. I was with different organization and have seen the ugly face of dishonesty.

Q: You became the boss of the Newspaper Management Board in 1974. Tell us something about it.

A: This job was an eye opener for me. I consider myself fortunate to see the newspaper industry from inside and the corruption there in it. The enquiry and evolution committee which was set up to assess the newspaper world I was made secretary of it during Bangabandhu's time. I submitted a 400-page report narrating the dark side of the industry. I was with the committee till it was defunct in 1983.

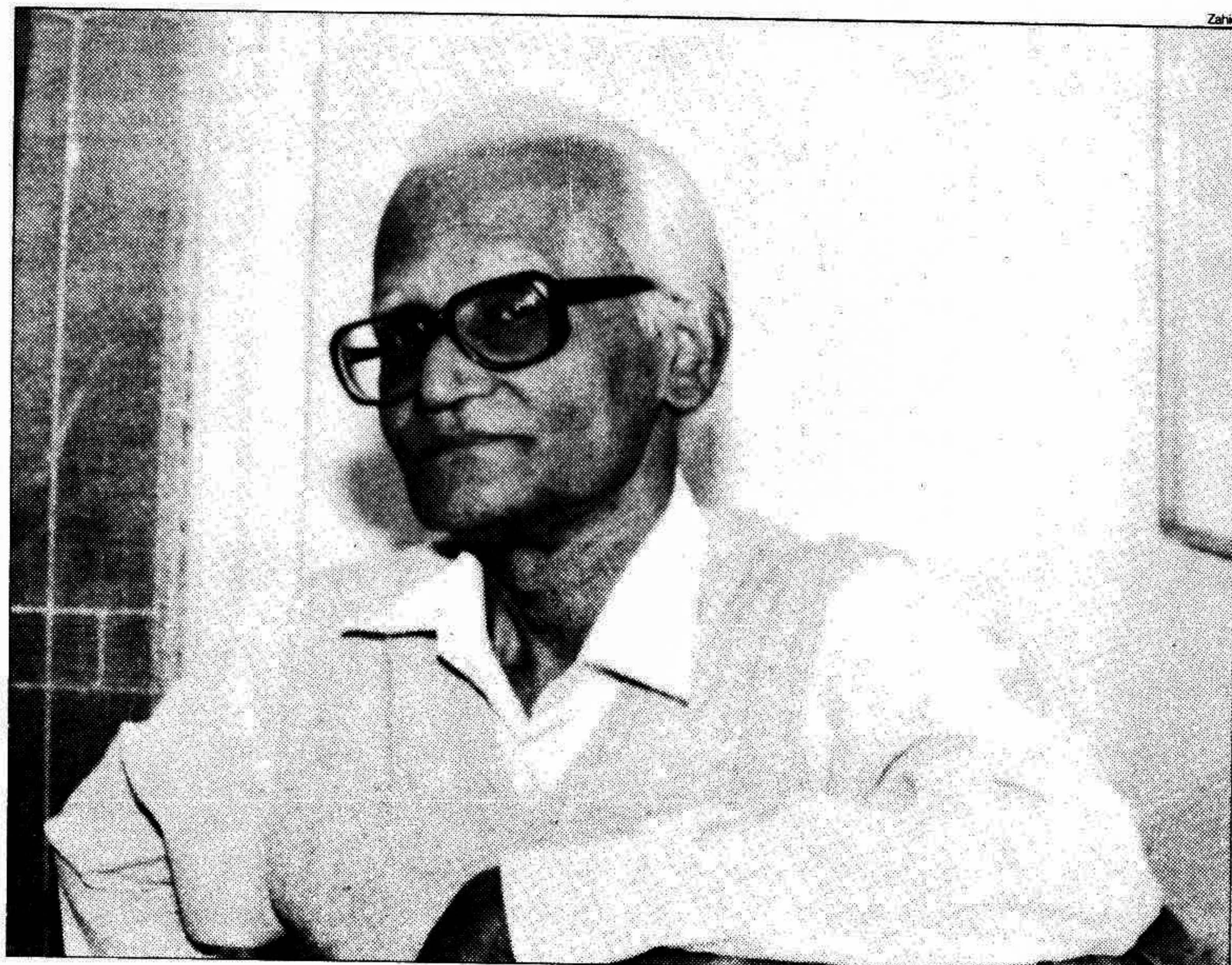
Q: Then what?

A: Back to square one. Again planning to bring out a magazine. But how to do it, where is the money.

Q: Who did to manage the cash?

A: By selling my wife's jewellery.

Q: You started *Mizanur Rahman's Quarterly* in 1983? But what gives you the



idea to name it after you?

A: I'm coming to it. I was thinking about a title for my magazine, but couldn't find a suitable one until I remember an event of 1951 when I just brought out *Rupchaya* and gone to Calcutta. There I became a good friend of renowned poet and fiction writer Premendra Mitra. One day we were in an

adda at Premendra's house when a lanky young lad entered and greeted Premendra as 'Namasker Premendra'. Naturally we looked at him. Premendra answered him: "What brings you here so early in the morning." The young man, Ramapada Chowdhury, became a famous novelist later. Ramapada said he wanted to bring

out a magazine by the name Ramapada's Journal. Premendra was surprised and rebuked at the idea that there was a sort of audacity in the title. But I was astonished and supported Ramapada but everyone else was on Premendra's side. Later I came to know there are instances of naming a magazine after some one's name.

Q: Can you give an example?

A: Yes, I can readily remember 150-year old *Herper's Magazine* which is published from New York. Interestingly enough the first newspaper that was published in 18th century was after one Mr William Hiki. His newspaper was called Hiki's Gageteeer.

When I was a Teenager...

IN CONVERSATION WITH K G MUSTAFA

ALTHOUGH he was eighth among his 14 brothers and sisters, K.G. Mustafa, one of our renowned veteran journalists, never felt deprived of the love of his family as a child. This was perhaps because his eldest brother was the compass that guided him and it was he who played the crucial role in his life.

"My father, a peer (religious holy man), was away from home most of the times. That left us under the care of my eldest brother and mother. For this reason, I was never very close to my father. The age gap between us contributed to this alienation. However, we shared his ideology and believed in him to be right. He taught us never to let the British dominate us in any

cricket and were having trouble putting up the stumps. We were fiddling with it, when, to our utmost surprise, my father intervened to put them up straight. Now I realize that if he was at home more often, we could have been very good friends," he recalled.

"I was jailed in 1949 along with Bangabandhu. There, my father wrote me a letter telling me never to lose faith and belief in Islam. I kept his word, but I redefined faith," he told *The Daily Star* at his residence.

What was the environment at home?
"I grew up in a surrounding where everyone studied. We were taught that education was the biggest asset one could have. Everything else followed that.

By Navine Murshid

class 8, he told me to read all the works of Sharatchandra. In class 9 he assigned me to read Bankimchandra. Then in class 10, Rabindranath. I later realized how important this was to build a foundation of knowledge," he said.

What were his childhood days like?
"My childhood days were in the post war periods of famine, hunger and poverty. The economic condition of the whole nation was severe. I came to existence in the midst of hardships and hurdles. Our home was by the river Jamuna. We saw the shore breaking, destroying homes and lives of many until it was our turn to pack

whistle at playtime. At that moment, even wild horses could not keep me from racing out to play. However, I was not a naughty boy. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I was rather stupid. When guests came over to our house with cycles, my elder brothers disappeared with them trying to learn to cycle. To this day I cannot cycle! My only dark side was perhaps that I was very stubborn. But this stubbornness did me a lot of good at times because this was also seen as a quality when it came down to sincerity and being focused. I remember when I was in class 6; I was appearing for the minor scholarship. It was monsoon then and it was raining cats and dogs for about fifteen days. I was

and I had to get there. Time was running out. I took a pair of fresh clothes and tied it around my head. Then, I set out to cross the river swimming. As I jumped in, the current suddenly swept me. When I looked up I saw that I was half way down the river, which meant half the way nearer to school! So with the help of the current I crossed the river. The principal was startled when he saw a drenched me with the application fees.

"You will get this scholarship. With your determination, you will do very well in your life," he said with tears in his eyes. I was overwhelmed that day. That was one day I felt proud to be stubborn.

"Stubbornness brought about a major change in my life. My eldest brother wanted me to be a doctor, but as I was weak in Math I decided not sit for ISC exam. My English teacher, Prof Chakravarty, who made me inclined towards communism, told me to give the IA exams instead of the intermediate science exams. So, that was what I decided to do. Then, my brother stood in the way. He said if I was not going to be a doctor, he would not finance me. I wasn't about to be let down. I said I wouldn't need his money. And thus started my work in the newspaper in Calcutta. I joined the *Dainik Azad* and later the *Dainik Ittehad*. I maintained a job and continued my studies in Political Science and International Relations and side by side became a journalist."

He has come a long way; he has seen the world: the dark sides as well as the brighter aspects. Standing on the threshold of the twenty first century what would be his evaluation of the changes gone by? What would he tell the present generation?

"Today, the world is at one's hand. What a little child learns in two hours sitting at home took years in our days. Today people are closer and it is easy to keep in touch with international affairs. This is definitely a good thing because this generation can learn a lot more than we were ever able to. My advice would therefore be to utilize this advantageous position of new technology and modernity to the maximum." With these words, the interview came to an end.

"Soul Search"

Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A: To get on with one's life in one's own way.

Q: Do you have any recurring nightmares?

A: do not have recurring nightmares. But I have gone through nightmarish situations a number of times in my life. The first encounter was in Calcutta, in 1946, during the Great Calcutta Killing when in an alley near the Ripon College our entire family was surrounded by a hostile Hindu mob armed with spears, swords and knives, while a truck of a relief agency was taking us to a safer shelter. Then when Ayub Khan proclaimed martial law in 1958 I felt almost suffocated. And can any one of us who lived in Dhaka during 1971 ever forget the daily nightmares of those dreaded days? Finally, the martial law of the 80's when we had one of the worst autocracies of our times. The experiences of those terrible times is the theme of my book of poems 'From Nightmare to Nightmares'.

Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?

A: When I feel satisfied with myself.

Q: What is your greatest fear?

A: I don't think I have a fear-complex. I have not been fearful of anything except recurring illness. I got sick so often and for such long periods that I have come to accept them as my normal companion.

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

A: reckon taking up a government job was the greatest mistake of my life.

Q: What makes you cry?

A: When I find myself in a situation in which I cannot help a fellow being.

Q: Who is your role model?

A: have never wished to model myself on anyone.

Q: How important is money to you?

A: Money is very important. In our social system you couldn't live a fruitful life without it.

Q: What is the quality you most like in a man?

A: Honesty of purpose, courage of conviction and integrity of intellect.

Q: What is the quality you most like in a woman?

A: Of course beauty. Is there a man who does not admire beautiful woman? But beauty does not lie in physical features only. A beautiful mind should go

Abul Hussain
Poet



"I am deeply disturbed. Our achievement in science and technology has been tremendous in this century. Great vistas have been opened in the realm of knowledge. Yet, have all these improved the quality of mankind?"

along with it. Purity of heart, charm of character and satisfaction in her place in life as mother and wife, make a woman admirable.

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

A: Both are important to me. I did not want my professional and personal life to be different. Tagore once said 'do not seek the poet in his biography!' What I have written has always been linked to my life. At least I wished it to be so.

Q: Are you afraid of death?

A: No why should I be afraid of death. I know death is inevitable. I will go without regret when my time comes. There is no choice, as I had none when I was born. I rather think death is the ultimate fulfillment of life. It's gives life its meaning.

Q: Which book has influenced your life most?

A: Tagore's *Geetabitan*. It provided me with the ultimate in Bengali values and taste.

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

A: I don't believe in re-birth. Long ago I wrote in a poem entitled 'This Life' that I never wanted a lot of money, never ran after wealth, nor hankered for

power or waved the flag of religion. They all said I have wasted my life in this world. How shall I answer on the day of resurrection? Yet, if I ever got an opportunity to come back I wouldn't ask for anything new. I would like to live the same life over again.

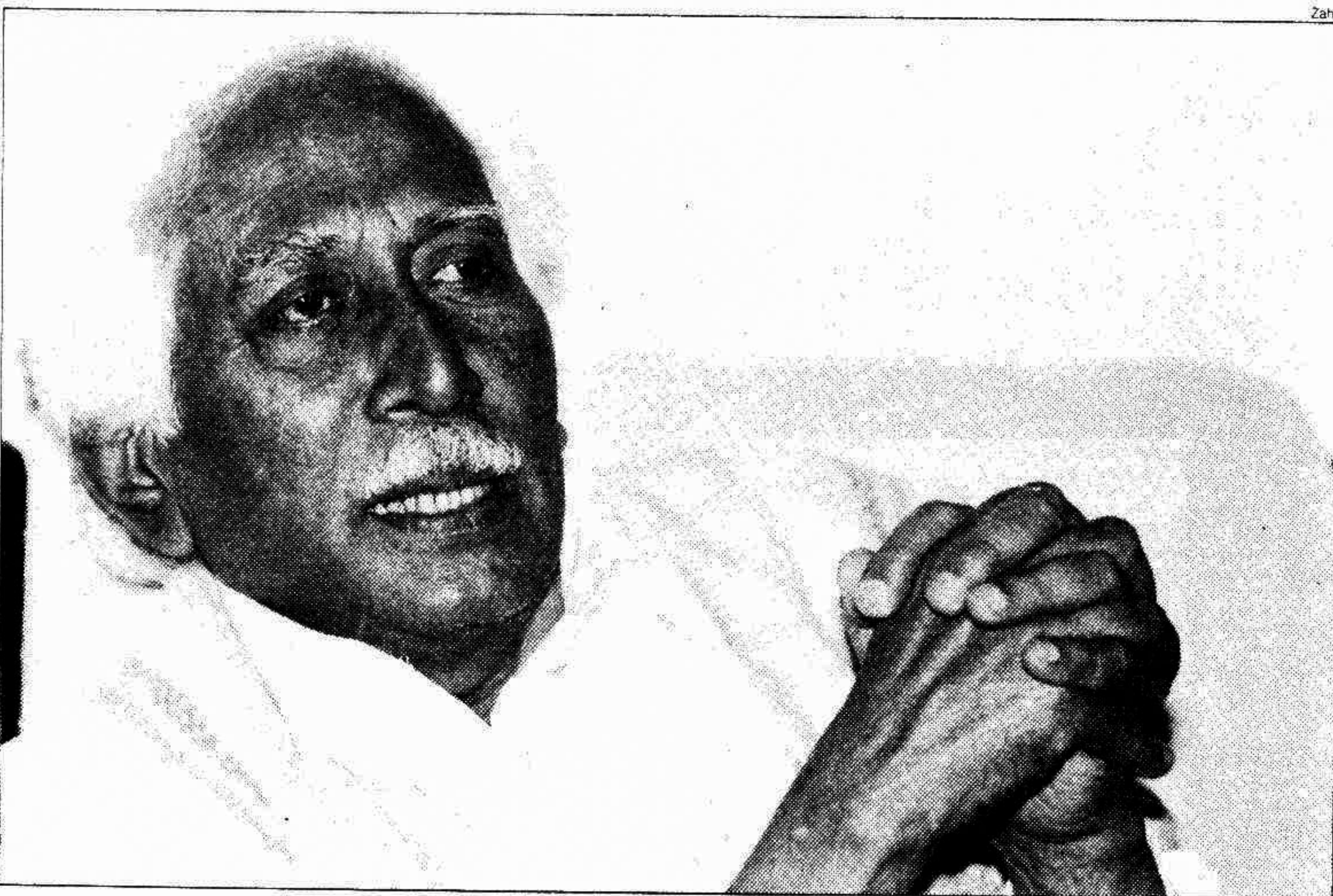
Q: What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?

A: I am deeply disturbed. Our achievement in science and technology has been tremendous in this century. Great vistas have been opened in the realm of knowledge. Yet, have all these improved the quality of mankind? Has man become better? Do the great majority of men and women lead a better life today than they used to do in the past? Has greed of the strong and the powerful lessened? I have great misgivings at the fag end of my life. I often wonder what kind of world we are leaving for our posterity.

Q: If you have to sum up the philosophy of your life in three sentences, what will that be?

A: I am a liberal. I always wanted to live a good and honest life and follow the dictates of my heart and conscience.

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim



"I was jailed in 1949 along with Bangabandhu. There, my father wrote me a letter telling me never to lose faith and belief in Islam. I kept his word, but I redefined faith."

way. Although we were scared of him and considered him to be hard and coarse, we could sometimes see his softer characters. For example, once my friends and I were playing

The environment at home got me into the reading habit. Although my father wanted us to become 'moulanas' my brother made sure I was not led into that direction. When I was in

up and leave, or get swept away along the tide. Yet, we found joy in our lives. I was a sports fanatic. From football to badminton, whatever it was I was there. We had a coach who used to blow the

unable to pay my application fees due to this and the last day had arrived. The school was across the Jamuna and there were no boats to take me to the other side. I was getting worried