

People

Face to Face

Hayat Mamud: Myriad-minded Writer

Hayat Mamud's name is associated with *Chhotoder Rabindranath* (Rabindranath for children). The book has become something of a classic in the field of biography writing and has been hailed as the most readable and informative guide to Tagore's life and works. He has translated Russian classics from the original Russian and written essays on culture and society focusing on their changing patterns. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Q: How do you evaluate yourself as a creative writer?

A: I do not really consider myself as a creative writer. Apart from two collections of poems and few short stories, I have not done much that would qualify me as a creative writer. What I have written over the years, I would say, are records of a conscious person's reactions to his time and the society he lives in. True, writing is a passion for me. But I find it quite interesting when I see people admiring me as an exponent of juvenile literature. Just see what I have for children — a few biographies, three to be precise, and a handful of short stories and poems. It is said that writing for children is a difficult task and I have done a commendable job in this regard. I have never found it difficult to write for the kids, and have always wondered why people think it is difficult.

Writing biography is what gives me immense pleasure and, at the heart of my heart, I entertain a certain degree of confidence in my ability as a biographer. Writing biography for me is not as creative as writing poetry, novel or play.

Q: How are you going to evaluate Irving Stone's *Lust for Life*, a brilliant biography about the creative life of Van Gogh?

A: But has he (Stone) been ever considered as a creative novelist, I don't think so.

Q: Your *Chhotoder Rabindranath* (Rabindranath for children) aroused in me, like a lot of others, interest in Tagore when I was a child. It is still regarded as the handbook on Tagore. What really inspired you to take biography writing seriously?

A: I have never been a writer for whom writing comes spontaneously. It has always come under compulsion, under pressure

from publishers to fulfil a commitment. The story how I took interest in biography is quite interesting. I had just graduated from university when I received a letter from the Bangla Academy requesting a short biography of Tagore suitable for children. The academy was planning to bring out an anthology on Tagore. Unfortunately, the anthology never saw the light of the day. Naturally, I was quite excited. I did my research and put all my efforts to make the biography interesting.

Few days later, I met the editor of the anthology, poet Habibur Rahman. He was all praise for my work and advised me to elaborate the piece, saying he wanted to publish it. So, all the credit goes to Habib Bhai who thought the manuscript was worth publishing. So the birth of the book was, in a way, a commissioned work. I am not saying that commissioned works are necessarily bad, at least I myself is an example of that. That publication made me a biographer. The biography of Tagore generated so much interest among readers that publishers began to hound me to write Nazrul's biography. But I kept them at bay for a considerable period of time. Although Nazrul's is a colourful character, presenting him in a manner suitable for children never appeared to me as a great idea.

Q: Why didn't you find Nazrul interesting for kids?

A: Do you think the description of his highly undisciplined life-style is suitable for children. Nazrul is more down-to-earth than Tagore, a man with many virtues as well as vices. If one has to draw the portrait of Nazrul one has to include the vices as well. And interestingly without his vices it is difficult to understand him and follow his temperament as a creative writer.

So, the idea of writing Nazrul's biography never really fascinated me. But when my friend Mazoor-e-Mawla became the DG of Bangla Academy, he almost forced me into writing one.

Q: We don't have a tradition in biography writing — be that for kids or for serious readers. You wrote a biography of Nazrul for the children, but I'm sure there is no well-researched biography of Nazrul in Bengali. Except Tagore no one has even been a subject for serious biography writing in Bengali language.

A: Very true. Mainly because the Bengalis as a nation are not very keen to preserve records or memories.

Q: How did you settle the matter of portraying Nazrul for the kids?

A: I spend lot of time thinking about what aspect to focus in Nazrul's character. I thought Nazrul the Bengali would be the right thing to bring under focus. Bengalis are a hybrid nation which is formed by Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. If one tries to emphasise the religious aspect of the nation it will lose its character. Nazrul's life and works are an example of the nation's hybridity. So the main focus of my book is to understand Nazrul as a champion of non-communality.

Q: The Bengali nation which is a melange of different caste and creed and which has always upheld the spirit of communal harmony now put religion above everything else.

A: Irony of fate. The Bengalis were never like that. The reason lies in failing to understand that language and culture bind us together as a nation not religion. The result is morally and ethically we are rotting.

Q: What are the main identifying factors that sowed the seeds of degeneration?

A: The seeds of degeneration were sowed in

1947 when the subcontinent was divided. More specifically in the politics of the Muslim League and the congress. It reminds me of an incident about which I have written in one or two places: Nehru went to visit poet Iqbal who was at his dead bed. The dying poet asked Nehru whether he understood the difference between him and Jinna. Nehru kept silent. Iqbal said that the "difference is you are a patriot and Jinna is a politician."

Jinna was a diehard Congress, but the dirty party politics of Congress forced Jinna to form Muslim League. For the Barrister Jinna forming a party was a case and had won it.

Now think of the character Jinna, if you look through the prism of fundamentalism, will you be able to call him Muslim even. He used to drink, take pork and never offered prayers. When he first came to erstwhile East Pakistan, local leaders of Muslim League received him with garlands. It is said that Jinna didn't like the gesture as it made his suit dirty.

The first vice of partition was that the whole thing happened on the basis of religion. Next the Muslims take it for granted that the Hindu property was up for grab. The irony is the state-machinery backed it. So from the very beginning the Muslims of Bengal started their life on an unethical and immoral footing. It's like letting a ball go from a mountain. The ball is still rolling. The erosion of value began to take root with partition. Now it has gone deep down into national psyche and spreading infectiously.

Q: Allow me to interrupt. I agree with you that the basis of partition was religion. But what worked as a unifying spirit during the War of Liberation was secularism. How come fundamentalist forces are

rising in Bangladesh?

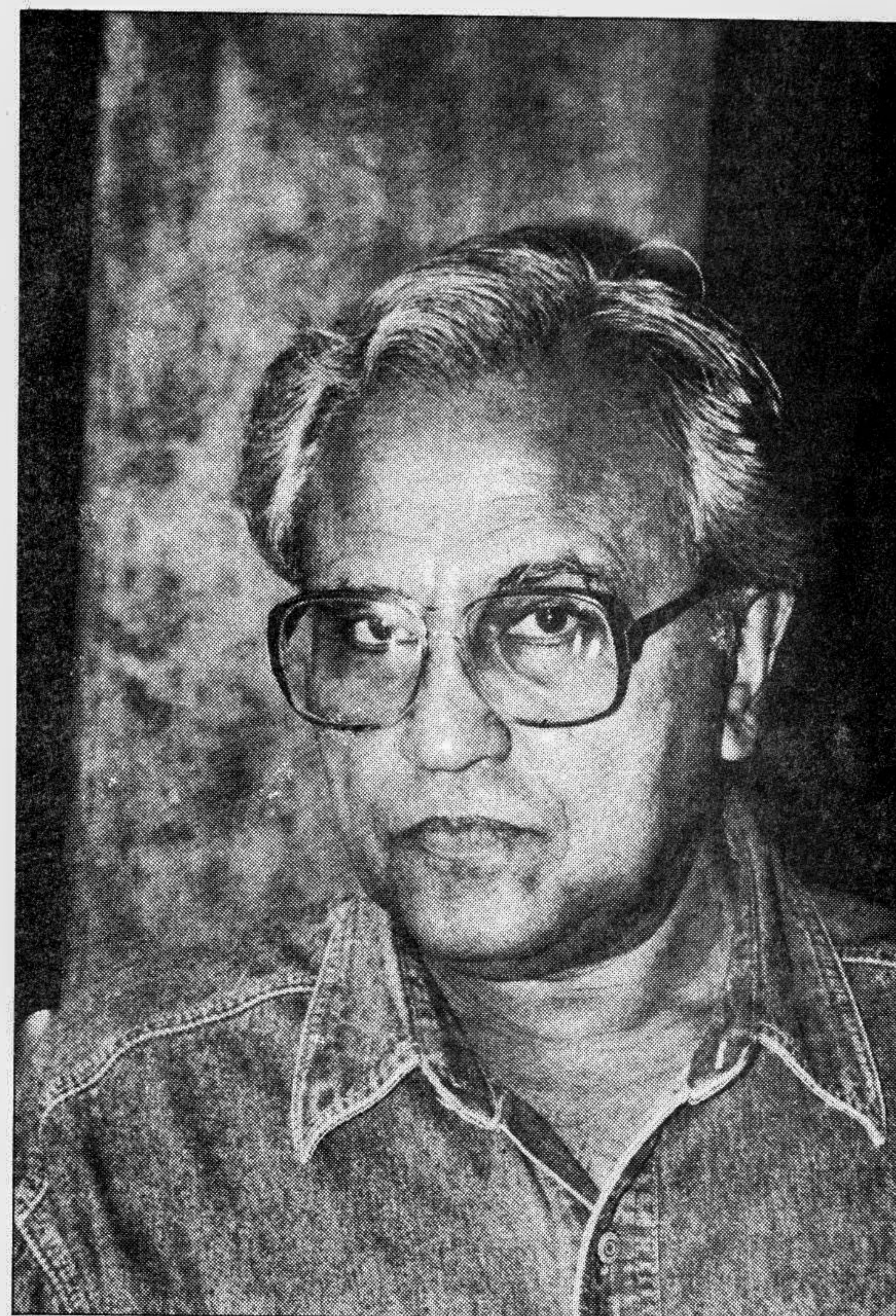
A: The first problem lies within the fact that we did not fight a war of liberation rather we were forced to participate in a war. It is very important to understand the development of the history of Bangladesh. The meaning of independence was never quite clear to the mass. It was in the mind of progressive people. Had we been in war for a long time, had political ideals been gone to the mass then post-independent scene would have been different. No doubt Bengalis are a brave nation and the way they united for the cause of independence is unique in the history of human civilisation. I hold the elite class and the politicians responsible for the present state of our moral and cultural ailment. They found the new state a suitable place to plunder and amass wealth.

Q: What were the post-independent political blunders?

A: The inflated ego of the Awami League. They thought the independence is an Awami League's gift to the nation. So the party that wins freedom should form the government was the Awami sentiment. There were suggestion from different quarters to form a multiparty government but Sheikh Mujib did not pay heed to it. I think that was the grave mistake which he had to pay dearly.

Q: How would you explain formation of Bakshal and atrocities of Rakkhi Bahini?

A: I don't know how to explain all these, but I can tell you about the conversation I had with comrade Moni Singh in Moscow just after Sheikh Mujib's assassination. I asked comrade Singh whether it was their suggestion to Mujib to form one-party government. He laughed and said not at all,



I can tell you about the conversation I had with comrade Moni Singh in Moscow just after Sheikh Mujib's assassination. I asked comrade Singh whether it was their suggestion to Mujib to form one-party government. He laughed and said not at all, Sheikh Mujib did it following the advice of Fidel Castro. But the major problem with the thought process of Bengalis is that they don't follow anything seriously and strictly rather do their own improvisation guided by whims. Sheikh Mujib did exactly that. It is like getting a design done by an architect and then changing it at will. I have nothing against one-party government but to do that you need strong administration at which he paid little or no attention. He ruled the country like a Zaminder would run and since he enjoyed a mythical popularity he thought whatever he would say would be the law of the land. A modern state could not be run like that.

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When I was a Teenager

HE has composed music for almost 2000

songs, even trying his voice with some of them, and is one with an art called music. A member of the International Music Association, 74-year old Samar Das is an epitome of a composing maestro in the cultural arts of Bangladesh. But this does not hide his numerous contributions to the musical arena in various places worldwide.

When did this passion arouse the versatile composer to such heights? Samar Das had an amusing, if not comical, childhood spent on trying to urge music up to his priorities. So we asked him about it. With a smirk, he mumbled something about his childhood days ... and that got us started.

Seven-year old boy Samar saw music early in the family. His father used to own a store merchandising in musical instruments. This is where Samar got exposed to violins, pianos, guitars and flutes, what more his father was also a good piano tuner. From there on young Samar was arrested with an unending thirst for music, one which was blind as a young heart and would see no opposition in its stampeding path. He might have had an invisible advantage. The youngest of Jitendra Nath Das and Komolini Das's two daughters and three sons, the responsibilities of family life could not find a sturdy platform on his restless shoulders; Das was

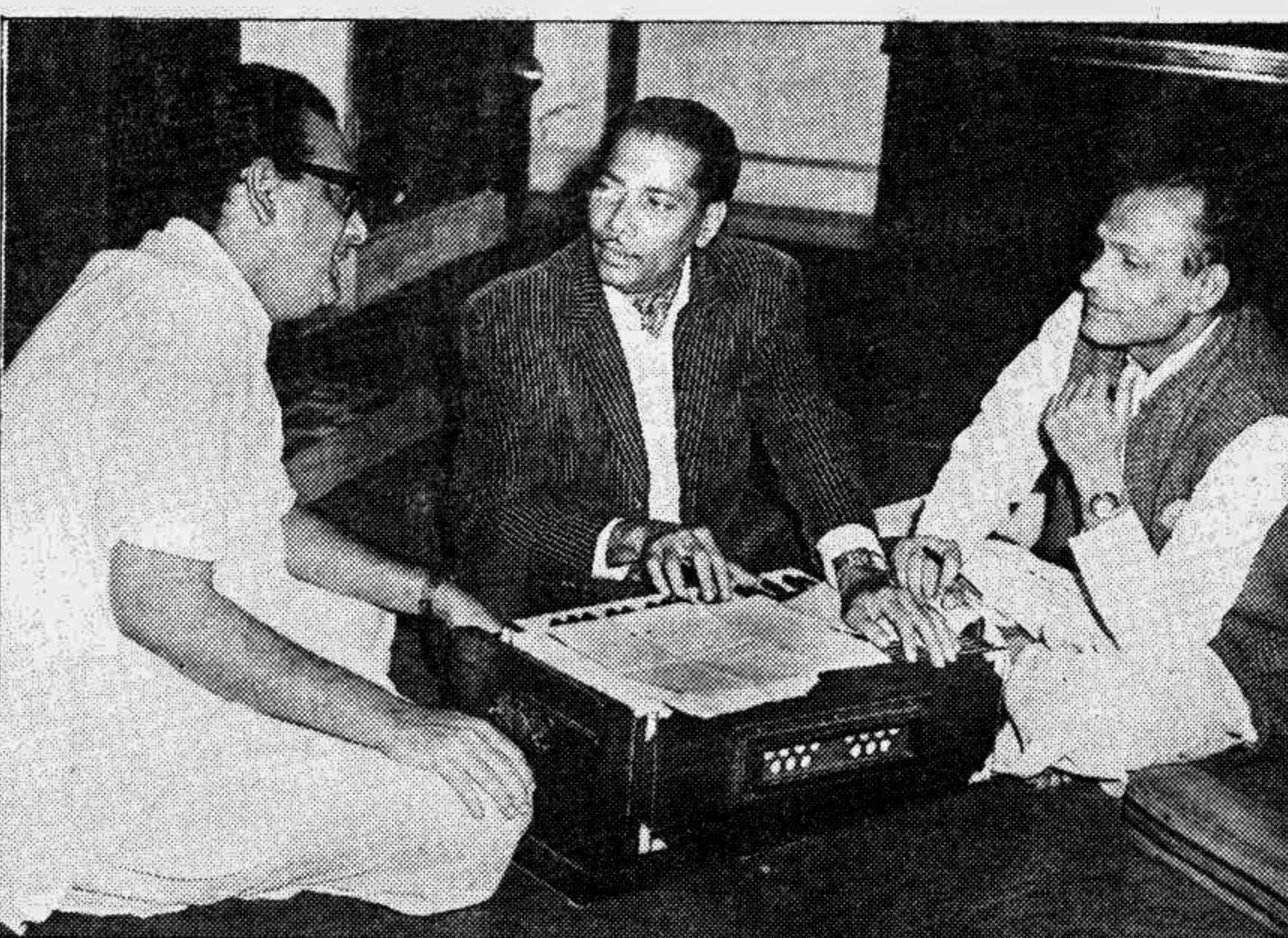
only too happy to bide away with music alone.

Studies were there, it seemed, as an ordeal. Why? "I tried to get away from the tedious books and studies itself. I was ... terrible in my studies."

We decided not to probe further. The young musician did his primary schooling at the Saint Gregory High School in the then bustling Laxmibazar, Patuatuli area of Dhaka (now Old Dhaka). So how did his parents cope with this energetic Gregorian? Well, for one thing, they had to put up with constant truants as well as sudden disappearances from home. If Samar wasn't at school on a fine sunny day it was because he was pecking in at one of the singing classes by reputed *ustads* of those days. Some of those famous teachers also invited him into these sessions.

Leisure and sport was a part of teenage life for Samar Das. He used to play football in school and even in college. And even frequented the famous cinemas of Calcutta with his friends when on a break from school.

Samar Das insists that he probably took a solid step towards his passion when he started playing the flute. In 1945 and at 16, he performed with a group of other musicians for the All India Radio from the Dhaka Centre. Payment? Does five taka per month sound too meagre? Not to music-mad Das. Even at this age Das learnt to play three other musical instruments and



his most educational experience was probably with teacher and guru the late Loknath Sutradhar, with whom he practised the violin. The other three instruments were the accordion, piano and guitar. As with all achieving men, travel was written fate for Samar Das. As his parents grew concerned with their son's precarious position in his studies they decided to send him to

Calcutta. There Das became a student of Saint Paul's College, and where many of the comical instances of his teenage life occurred. Since he stayed in the dormitories (hostel, as he insisted), freedom was a newly-found incentive. But it was short-lived. The strict orthodox ways of the school's administration was too binding for the new student. So he adopted intricately timed routines and plans to

slip away in the late hours to enjoy musical soirees in the city.

We pestered him for one funny incident. And so after beckoning his school-goer son to excuse himself, he described the "plot".

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three or times but once the patrol got the better of him. He was summoned to the provost's office and waited for the inevitable. The provost inquired about his interest in music. Then, after light punishment and a warning, he was asked to perform at the cultural function of the school.

It was during his time at St. Paul's that Samar Das, parallel to his studies, undertook extensive training with notable composers like Timirbaran and Vishnudas Shiralee. His merit also came under the attention of Indian maestros like Kamal Dasgupta and Pankaj Mullick. When he was fifteen the famous HMV company called him for an audition after which he worked there and in those days earned 250 per month. In all, HMV was a significant part of Das's life; he worked there for eight years.

Rabindranath Das was a person who influenced teenager Samar Das hugely. He might have been just the break Samar could have hoped for. The elder Das lived Bombay and asked Samar to come and visit him during his vacations. And what else did his visit chance than a meeting with the melody legend S. D. Burman. From here lady luck kept staring at him. After returning to Dhaka, another door of fortune opened. The sub-divisional officer (SDO) called upon the services of his father, who was a skilled piano tuner. As he was working at the

SDO's residence, he saw a "left-over" guitar and inquired if it was for sale. It in fact belonged to the SDO's daughter who had left for London quite some time back. Jitendra Nath Das told the SDO about his son's passion and the officer graciously offered the guitar as a gift.

Samar Das recalls, "The moment I got the guitar it was like getting hold of treasure. I used to play all day long, and at night inside the mosquito net I would play till I fell asleep. This was a real boost for me."

The present day Samar Das was critical of the present day standard of music. Here in Bangladesh, he thinks music has lost its charm. "Look at the musicians now. How many do you think are really deep in their knowledge of music? There are some but the number is too few. Also nowadays you see so much imitation in all spheres of music. Cultural invasion has not even spared our Deshi melodies."

The present generation has also come under fire. "Today's young musicians should be more educated in this art before venturing into a musical career. You cannot just start playing an instrument and start singing and become a musician. In our days we had something called 'basic knowledge'. If you perform classical, you should at least have a good classical foundation to practise on." And so the guru ends.