

Harunur Rashid: A Principal of Principles

Ekram Kabir feels more educated after an enthralling interview with a straight-forward professor with pro-people and progressive ideologies

The Daily Star (DS): From your professional experience, how would you evaluate yourself?

M. Harunur Rashid (MHR): I have been a teacher all my life; I've taught in educational institutions for about 37 years; I was the director-general of the Bangla Academy, from 1991 to 1996; I've recently gone on voluntary retirement from the University of Jahangirnagar and joined the *Dhaka Courier* as the Chief Editor. Well, I consider myself a humble person, and I've rendered my services in my own humble way.

DS: Is the standard of education at the university level up to your expectation, and can it meet the needs of the country?

MHR: Not at all; the standard has gone down miserably low.

DS: And why is that?

MHR: There are a number of reasons: I'm not sure that I can give you all the reasons. But, for creating an institution and for attaining academic excellence, you need a number of important things. First of all, you need good teachers, and you need an institutional structure that will sustain the efforts you undertake in order to achieve certain goals. Excellency is nothing but setting certain standards, setting certain ideals which you pursue. Now, what has gone wrong with our institutions is that we did not know what our ideals should be. We never set any ideals. We never said that we should try and achieve "this much". The other reason is that the educational structure along with its legal framework failed to give a sense of direction to the sort of education which is necessary for coping with the developmental effort of a country. By "development", I don't mean building only bridges, roads and houses, but also "human resources". If you fail to create human resources on a sound basis, then you may have all the best buildings built, but it's not going to help you. So, our ideals and goals should have been to create individuals who would be able to take on the challenge of a newly-independent country; the sort of challenge a new nation requires to vie and achieve economic emancipation for its people. And for that we should have created a cadre of dynamic leadership. The excellence of universities is to produce people with good qualifications, people with expertise in their own fields. Now the "legal framework" which was created immediately after independence was created in the name of "democratisation". The 1962 Ordinance was tyrannical, so they wanted to democratise it

by bringing in a new set of rules known as 1973 University Ordinance. By doing so, bodies like Senate, Syndicate etc., were also made democratic with representation, election and all that. I think this was a very wrong move. Yes, we needed certain amount of democratisation, but the Act itself is a very sophisticated instrument and our people were not ready to live up to the need of such a sophisticated instrument. As it is the legal framework is excellent, but it also requires excellent people to handle it. We were not ready to fit into that democratic set-up. Because it required a democratic participation, it required elections to the Senate preparing a panel for the appointment of a vice-chancellor. The idea was to choose the right kind of people who would give the right sense of direction to the universities.

What we actually saw was that the teachers were busy in partisan politics; they divided themselves in groups, and they knew nothing but groups. So whatever they did either in the Senate or in the Syndicate, they were doing for their own groups or parties. They didn't put academic ideals above their own petty interest. So that was the reason why these bodies failed the nation.

DS: Are you suggesting that the '73 Ordinance was wrongly implemented, or the Ordinance itself was wrong?

MHR: The Ordinance was an extreme reaction to the '62 Ordinance which was dubbed as a black law. What I am trying to say is that it was a very sophisticated mechanism which we were far from ready to handle. Elections are natural in democracies, but in the Syndicate, it was never intended that out of 18 members 10 would be teachers. The Syndicate is the law-making body, but the member will never frame any rule which is against their own interest.

So we have seen tremendous expansion of universities — physical expansion — we've seen the number of teachers growing, but we have never evaluated what is the standard of either teaching and the students who were coming into complete their courses. Such an evaluation was never attempted. So, the framework needed to be amended but that also was never attempted. In a body which governs the university and where the teachers are in majority, you can never expect that they would do anything against their own interest. For example, there was a floodgate of promotions — within four to five years all the teachers became either Professors or Associate Professors.

DS: Well, it seems that right now we can't change this partisan attitude both of the teachers and students. Is it remotely possible — even under this chaotic situation — to upgrade the standard of university education?

MHR: It is possible; I wouldn't say that it isn't possible — but you have to bring in certain changes. Under the present system the vice-chancellor is a prisoner; from day one, he begins his work because he had sought votes from his own teachers. They voted him to power, they voted for him, he's probably scored the highest number of votes and that's how he had political connection, and accordingly he gets the appointment as a vice-chancellor. If a VC is appointed in that way, he is a prisoner in the hands of his teachers. Now, can he really take any action programme which might at times go against the apparent interest of the teachers? To the best of my knowledge, no university has ever made an action programme for the future, say, for ten to fifteen years. That in fifteen years' time we'd like to achieve "this". Every time there's a change of guard, there's a change of role; there's no continuity.

DS: What are the VCs afraid of?

MHR: Well, they might lose their job, there might be resentment among the teachers, he might not have a second term. Actually, it's all about staying in power.

DS: Now let's look at the secondary and higher secondary levels, especially the exam-time. The ongoing HSC exams are in the grip of unfair means, and that too, with the help of quite a large number of teachers. It seems that things are getting out of hand. Do you think that by enforcing "law" through upright law personnel, it's possible to stop this menace?

MHR: No, mere law won't work; awareness is needed. You see, 'education' is no longer deemed as a pursuit of knowledge for the sake of inculcating humane values. It's a commodity now. The students think it's a commodity which is purchasable and the teachers think it's saleable to the students. So, the "education" has moved out of the classroom into the teacher's house. In earlier days, in the state-run schools and colleges, coaching students privately was forbidden. If any teacher was found doing this, s/he would have lost his/her job. That was the rule and attitude of the society then. But today, no one even questions it! Even the director generals of the public instructions, chiefs of the different educational boards

etc., send their ward to the coaching centres! This was unthinkable 25 years ago!

DS: Can't we reverse this by instilling the right value of education?

MHR: You see, to change anything, we need strong political will, a strong government and a strong set of rules to be implemented by strong personalities; personalities with sense of honesty and integrity. The problem is that we have sense of rule which are not bad altogether, but people who are handling those lack necessary integrity and honesty. Look at the society at large, 'anybody' who is 'somebody' does his job half-heartedly. Our attitude is to while away time and complete our tenure. In this respect, we need to be aggressive, we have to put ourselves in a position to command that "this is good and this is bad." And you must have an honest political power firmly behind you. Let me give you an example: if a ticket-checker finds two students travelling without tickets, and put them behind bars, then there will be demonstrations, shutdowns, and the authority won't blame those two, but the checker!

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MHR: You cannot do without politics. But the problem is when political powers choose to give guns to the students — by politics I don't mean this party and that party — then what is the use of such politics? Less than even one per cent of the students at the universities have this lethal power, and politics is simply encouraging these hooligans to do some dirty jobs for these political powers putting rest of the students' future at stake.

DS: Is there any hope for this country as far as the politics is concerned?

MHR: You see what has really gone wrong with this country's politics is that the individual is the smallest unit of which the whole society is made of; and there's something seriously wrong with every individual. Now, generally speaking, there are two standards for every individual in this country. We all say

corruption is bad, we all say unethical things are bad, we all say terrorism is bad, but when the same people are looking for a match for his daughter look for an engineer, or a bureaucrat of the tax department, or a police officer who are all practitioners of corruption. On the other hand we always deliver wonderful speeches against corruption. In this way we lose our attitude which censure corruption. This double standard is everywhere. We say certain things but we do certain other things. It's the same scene at every level. When such a person heads an institution, you can well imagine what would be the fate that institution.

The other thing is — though very sad — that the right person is not at the right place. It's not that we don't have educated, skilled and efficient people ... we have a very good number of people who can run, at least, four African countries.

DS: Well then, over more than two decades, religion-based politics has taken its place; then as far as the morality is concerned, why did these people fail to instill a sense of righteousness in the society?

MHR: No, there're two aspects which must be clearly distinguished. "Religious bigotry" and "religion". These two have often been confused by the western press as well as by ours. What you call "fundamentalism" is religious bigotry. Fundamentalism is a very wrong word here; no one can be a good Muslim, a good Hindu or a good Christian without being a fundamentalist. Because "religion" itself stands on some fundamentals which are all good. So, you can't be truly a pious person without being a fundamentalist. Now, anyone who raises a placard saying "I'm the champion of the Qur'an and Hadith" is not to be taken as a fundamentalist the way I mean it. Because no one who believes in Islam is not going to put up a sign saying that he is the only champion of Qur'an and Hadith. If someone is seeking to promote his political ambition by resorting to religion then he is violating one of the basic principles of religion itself. He is using religion for his personal ambitions. If someone wants to set up an administration based on religion, who has authorised him to do that? And these people always don't speak and practise things which are not always religious. You see, such leaders once said that "Surah Bakara should have been in a different way" was violating the Islam itself. When such a distinct line drawn between the 'bigots' and the

religious', then it is bound to lead us to the wrong way. And let's not forget that when Imam Hussain and Yazeed were engaged in war, both the groups were practising Islam; and there were 700 Hafiz-e-Qur'an on Yazeed's side. So, watch out. A man with a long beard and a robe may not be at all a religious person.

DS: This raises an important question. We have a mind-set to judge all the bearded persons wearing robes as anti-independence elements.

MHR: No, this mind-set is utterly wrong and should be forsaken. This mind-set has taken root because of some people, people who are trying to promote secularism in a very wrong way. By secularism, they oppose everything which is religious; anything religious to them is bad and some of them may be agnostics. Yes, secularism originated way back in the 16th century to oppose religion and earthliness. It promoted humanism etc. When we speak of secularism in the subcontinent, we don't mean secularism in that way; by secularism we mean that we agree to co-exist with other religions. *That is secularism.* But these so-called secularists have taken this too far against religion itself, especially Islam, and they consider anyone with beard and robe as religious bigots. I think that's a very wrong approach. This whole attitude should change.

Because, you see, there's a religious movement going on in the country by those who go for *chillahs*, they're absolutely non-political. They don't have any political belongings. But my only hope is that if they could be persuaded to teach a little Bengali, a little arithmetic along with Arabic, then I think our country can become literate in course of, say, one or two years. This is a huge force that could be utilised in a very convenient way.

I only hope — and I strongly believe that it's possible — that everybody rises up to the occasion and comes to a consensus to take the country forward in every sense.

DS: Now since you are in the media, let's turn to it. What do you think about our journalism here?

MHR: You probably know that President Shahabuddin Ahmed has made some changes in the relevant portion which deals with media of the Special Powers Act, which was very much against press freedom. Now the press enjoys a lot of freedom. But the question is not

of government interference; it doesn't interfere in the press directly; what worries me that the journalists are suffering from a kind of self-censorship. They work with a pro-establishment mind-set. And nothing can be as dangerous than this for the freedom of press. I think they should come out of this perplexity.

Well, you did ask me a question about journalists' creative writing. Well, of course there are a few young journalists who are trying to write novels, short stories etc., and they have fared quite well in the Asian standard. Those were all in Bengali, but nothing has been tried as yet to write something in English; the culture simply is not there. I think they should come out of this perplexity.

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When I was a Teenager

KOCHI KANCHAR ASHAR is the only place in the country which the children can claim to be their own, a place where their inner creativity can flourish in their own special way without facing the frown of the elders, a place where an old man with the heart of a child waits to guide them. He is their companion, their mentor and their best friend Roknuzzaman Khan, their very own Dada Bhai.

Once a reporter, now the feature editor, editor of the national, children's and the literature page of The Daily Ittefaq, and the founder of Kochi Kanchar Mela, the national juvenile organisation, Dada Bhai is still a little child at the heart of his heart.

Although born in a sophisticated zamindar (landlord) family of Kushtia, Dada Bhai spent his early life in a village called Pangsha in Rajbari, in the loving care of his grand parents. His mother, Rahena Khatun, was the only child of her parents. Being her only son, Roknuzzaman got all the care in the world from his grand parents.

From my very early life, my grand father's was my home instead of my parent's. Often when my mother couldn't bear the separation, she would write to my grandfather complaining that for how long they had kept her only child away from her. The moment my grandfather read the letter, he would take me back to my parents.

For a couple of days, it was okay but the moment grandpa got ready to set for home, I used to start crying my eyes out. So my helpless mother couldn't help but send me back."

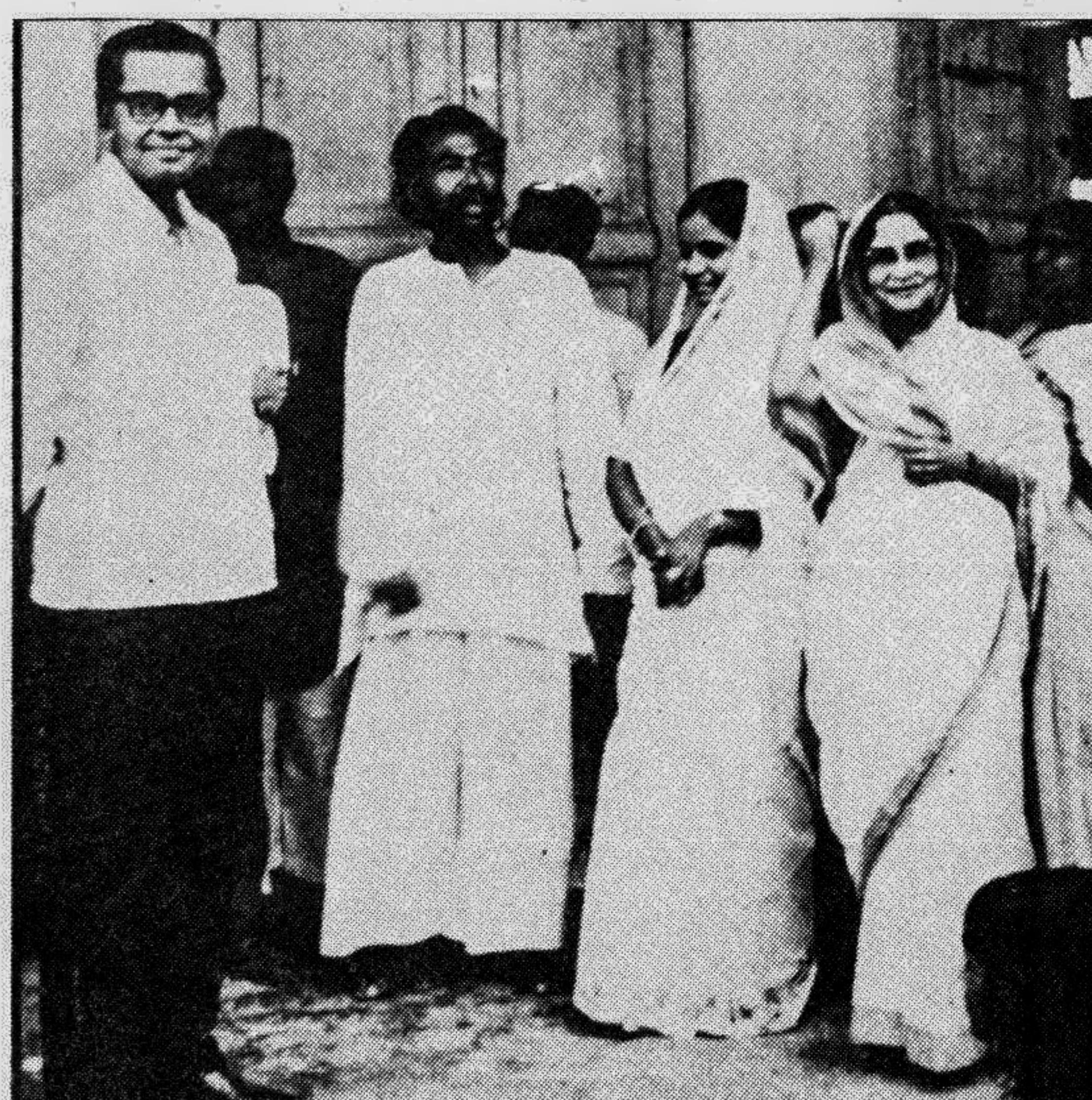
Thus Roknuzzaman preferred the simple rural life of Pangsha rather than the sophisticated Moulvi bari. The few memories he has about the place are not happy ones. As his father, Moulvi (not a madrassah pass but a sophisticated Muslim) Mokhaeruddin had a moderate zemindari, he was the head of the village. Often there used to be shalish (arbitration) at his place and often the sentence would be beating the convict up with his shoes. It used to prick young Roknuzzaman's conscience seeing a grown-up crying aloud after being beaten up with a shoe.

"But the punnah festival was not so bad. On the new year's day, subjects of my father used to offer a small amount to the zemindar as khajna (tax). The subjects were also treated with batasha (kind of a sweetmeat). There used to be lathikha (folk festival). Although I could never attend the concerts as I had to go to bed early, the lathikha was great entertainment."

His grandfather's place had altogether a different environment. His grandfather Mohammad Rowshan Ali Choudhury was the editor of the monthly Kohinoor and also an active politician of the Congress party. This mingling of literary and

IN CONVERSATION WITH DADA BHAI

By Sonia Kristy



Dada Bhai (Extreme L) at Comilla conference in 1973. Begum Sufia Kamal (bespectacled) is also seen in the picture. Courtesy: Monthly Chhotodar Kager

political environment had a strong impact on Roknuzzaman's mind. "I was acquainted with

the words hartal, picketing, procession, rally etc., from my very childhood. When I was in primary school, Jawaharlal Nehru's father, Motilal Nehru, died and a mourning procession was brought out. As the

procession was passing through our school, I saw my grandfather leading it. The entire slogan, mourning people and my grandfather's appearance tempted me so much that I ran to join the procession quitting the class. My grandfather didn't object but our headmaster did. He dragged me back to school."

At the age of six, Roknuzzaman lost his mother and started living with his grandparents permanently. And couple of years later when Rowshan Ali died, his brother Yakub Ali Choudhury became his guardian. Yakub Ali Choudhury, an eminent writer, was the first Muslim to receive a literary award. Under the guardianship of this confirmed bachelor grandfather of his, Roknuzzaman spent his adolescence. When he was in high school, after the annual exam, the young Dada Bhai often spent a couple of days on fishing boats with the fishermen of his village.

"Throughout the day they used to catch huge hilsha fish with a special kind of net and I was the mesmerised viewer. The taste of those fresh hilsha was simply out of the world. The fishermen were extremely affectionate to me, because I was not a snob. Sometimes they used to let me handle the net. To my

utter surprise, I once caught quite a large hilsha fish. When I returned home they gave the fish to me and I ran home dancing to show it to my grandparents. It was a great experience."

Life at school was also fun although Dada Bhai was not a mischievous student. His grandfather Yakub Ali had never lied throughout his life and this quality was also bestowed upon his grandson. So, whenever there was a need to make some kind of appeal to the headmaster it was the young veracious Roknuzzaman's job, for the headmaster knew that he wouldn't lie.

"When I was a student of Pangsha George English High School, there was a grand function to celebrate the silver jubilee of King George the fifth. Students of all the school in the entire thana had to participate in that function. I still remember a couple of lines of the song we sang in that function. It was something like — God save our gracious king, long live our noble king, God save the king.

Sport was very much part of young Dada Bhai's life. He used to play as a goalkeeper of the school team. Once he broke one of his fingers and after that he started playing as a half-back. And he wasn't a bad player either for everybody used to call him junior Jumma Khan, a famous booter of those days who used to play for Mohammedans.

"I was also good at writing sports reports. I was then a die-hard reader of the

Anandabazar and used to write sports reports on different tournaments of our school copying the Anandabazar sports reports. The newscaster Sirajul Majid Mamun's father ASM Obaidullah was our English teacher and also a sports lover. He used to call me, 'the sports reporter' and everytime he read my reports he used to make great comments about it and praised my skill in Bengali. But our Bengali teacher's opinion was on the contrary, as I was the weakest in Bengali grammar. Whenever I failed to answer any of his questions, he declared in a frustrated tone that I was going to bring disrepute to the Choudhury family. That seemed really ironical. One was impressed and the other frustrated about my skill in Bengali."

While recalling his earlier days, Dada Bhai lost track because it looked as if he wasn't sure what to leave out — those days of going to the Chaitrasangkranti or Durga Puja mela, roaming on the banks of Chandana River, beating drums throughout the night to guard litchis from the bats and those delicious and fresh food that are so rare today.

"Life has really changed a lot. Everything has become so mechanical and commercial," laments Dada Bhai as he comes back to present and looks into a bleak future for his best friends, 'the young generation'.

