

Face to Face

Hayat Saif: A Poet of Cultivated Sensibility

For Hayat Saif writing poetry is an intellectual exercise and not just "emotions recollected in tranquillity". Poetry does not come to him naturally, as the romantics would like to put it. His poems reflect a discernible trend of high modernism where time, history and place appear as recurrent motifs. Hayat's poems represent his time, a time that witnessed a new wave of creativity in our literature, and are testimony to his cultivated sensibility. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Q: Let us begin with an elementary question: How and when did you start writing poetry?

A: I don't know when I first started scribbling. My effort to compose poetry was first appreciated by my elders when I was in school. Poetry writing became an interesting pastime for me. That was the beginning and since then the Muse has never deserted me.

As for the chemistry of a poem's birth I would say, I don't know. Actually, I have never searched for an answer. I sometimes think that probably T. S. Eliot was right that a poet's mind works as a catalyst. It holds within itself information of his own consciousness, information about his own experiences, information of the past, and all these come together at a particular moment to give birth to a poem. It may not be something which you consciously do. I fully agree with Shamsur Rahman when he says, "Someone makes me write." There will always be something unspeakable, however much we try to dissect the very process of writing a poem. You can never fit it into one definition and say this is how a poem is born. I think much is to do with a poet's mind, but then a lot of it has to be the make-up of that particular poet's own mind, his own experience, his own education and his own way of looking at things. That's how one poet is different from the other.

Q: It is said that nothing excites us more than poetry and politics. We all know the role poetry played during the Language Movement and during the War of Liberation. But something went wrong in the past five years or so: Readers appear more inclined to novels these days. Even publication from a leading poet is not greeted

with much enthusiasm. Why?

A: I think one of the reasons is that there has been a tremendous deterioration in our standard of education. The kind of education we now give to our children does not properly plant a seed in their mind which enables them to take a fresh look at life and then understand his place in his culture. That is one strong reason why there is a decline, not only in readership, but also in all sorts of intellectual pursuits in this country at this moment.

Q: But that does not explain the rise in novel readership.

A: The commoners were never great lovers of poetry. Poetry had certain functions in the middle ages, for example. Or, even after that till nineteenth century in our country people wanted to listen to stories presented in rhymes and metres. Since the mid-twenties poetry has drastically changed. In our country it was changed by the work of a few talents who were probably a bit ahead of their time.

This complete change in the poetic language was not readily accepted by the reading public. Besides, books of poems were never great sellers. But then there is always a group, a sophisticated group, who really act as an inspirational source to poets.

Q: A handful of critics are of the opinion that the poems of the thirties, except those of Jibanananda Das, are artificial and largely imitative of those of the contemporary European poets in theme and style. How would you react to that?

A: Well, this theory is in current vogue. It's fashionable. But, we, the poets of the sixties, if I may

say so, and even our seniors are indebted to the poets of the thirties. How can they be ignored? Some may term their works as artificial, but to me a work of art is genuine as long as it talks about life. When it loses touch with life, it ceases to be genuine. So, I am not in agreement with the view that Jibanananda Das apart, other poets of the thirties are not genuine. Artificiality is a question of degree and it depends on how you define it. In poetry, we do not use the language of common people, do we?

Wordsworth also failed to do that. The language he used was not always taken from everyday life. Some elements of the commoner's language are used, but when you use them in a poem it becomes new. In fact, that is the function of poetry. Always renewing the vigour that is in the words, that is in the language. Therefore, the question of artificiality, I think, does not hold ground.

Q: Poetry basically anchors in emotion. As a poet do you think that philosophy, theory and criticism at times strangle inspiration or emotion necessary to write a poem?

A: If I understand your question correctly, you are asking whether a critical appreciation of things stands between your emotions and creation of a good poem out of those emotions. You see, a mind works in a mysterious way. One mind can at the same time be critical and creative. It can be critically creative, it can also be creatively critical. When it is critically creative it produces an article on a particular theme, when it is creatively critical it produces a poem. So, I don't think critical appreciation of things can actually stand between looking at life, understanding it and then

translating that into a work of art. It basically depends on the mental make-up of a particular poet. A poet may try to understand life only through certain emotions and feelings. But then, emotions and feeling are always there in poetry. A poet who looks at life critically tries to understand the meaning of it, those elements will come into his poems. But a critical appreciation of things will never stand between his understanding of life and then creating a good poem.

Q: Perhaps the most difficult proposition for a poet is to reflect on the future of poetry. What do you think?

A: This is a very difficult question to reflect upon, because I'm not a prophet and cannot look into future. But then having looked at the long history of humanity, growth of human culture one can sort of expect that that barren time will never come when at least a portion of the population of any country will stop appreciating beauty, will stop appreciating a work of art, will stop appreciating good poems.

Q: Tell us about the poets who have influenced you most and shaped up your poetic vision?

A: Difficult to identify. Maybe all of them whose works I have come across. The greatest influence was, of course, Tagore which is the case with almost all the Bengali poets of post-Tagore era. He taught us to speak the language and incidentally the primer that was given to me when I learned alphabets was by Tagore. Tagore's works had a great influence on our family. Then in my boyhood I was greatly influenced by the poems of Nazrul. I used to recite his poems. Later came Jibanananda Das and

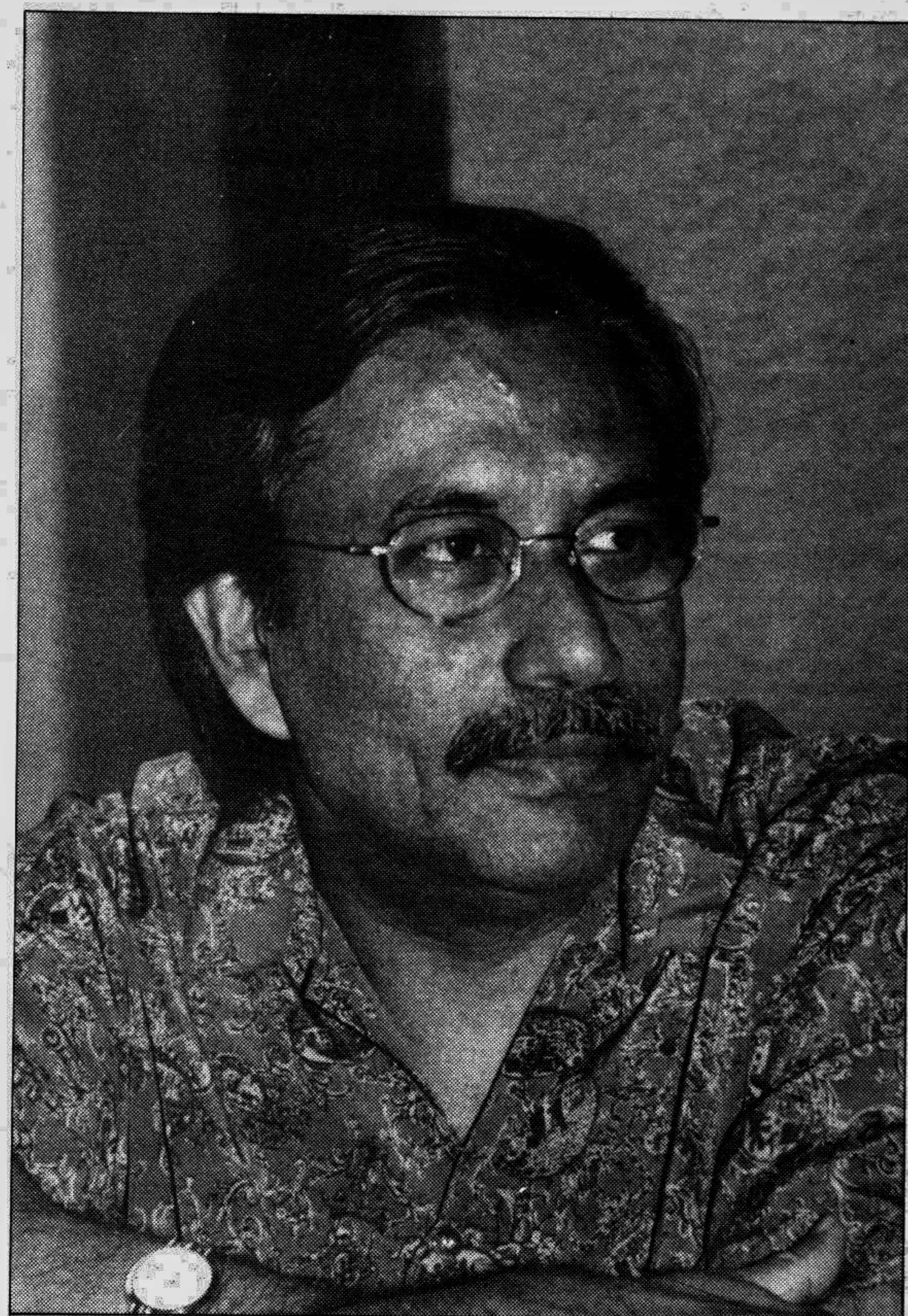
Sudhin Dutt. In Sudhin Dutt I found someone who was creating poetry out of a limited diction of Bengali. And then he played with that diction, he explored the languages of India, particularly Sanskrit from where he had collected lot of expressions and used them brilliantly in his poems. I have always believed that a very accomplished artist is he who very consciously tries to create a work of art like the work done by an architect or a sculptor. That influenced me very greatly and I was within that ambit for a very long time. I think it is only recently that I have tried consciously to come out of it and construct a language of my own. I was also greatly influenced by Yeats and definitely by Eliot; then, at a later stage, surprisingly by Dom Moraes.

Q: It seems very contradictory to me: first you are influenced by Yeats and Sudhin and then Eliot and Dom Moraes.

A: Yes they are world apart. There are all sorts of different influences that might shape one's psyche and thoughts. So, in spite of the fact that they are apparently different the fact remains that all of them are poets.

Q: Non-native English writers have earned universal acclaim with new cadence and fresh images. How do you look at the rise of this new breed of writers?

A: I don't think it is a fad. It is going to continue for some time. But saying that the English has been overtaken by the non-English is going a bit too far. I still think if you write in English the whole history of English language and literature is behind you. And you cannot completely segregate yourself because whenever you use a language you should bear in mind that the language has arisen



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out of certain historic events through a flow of time. What has happened to English particularly since

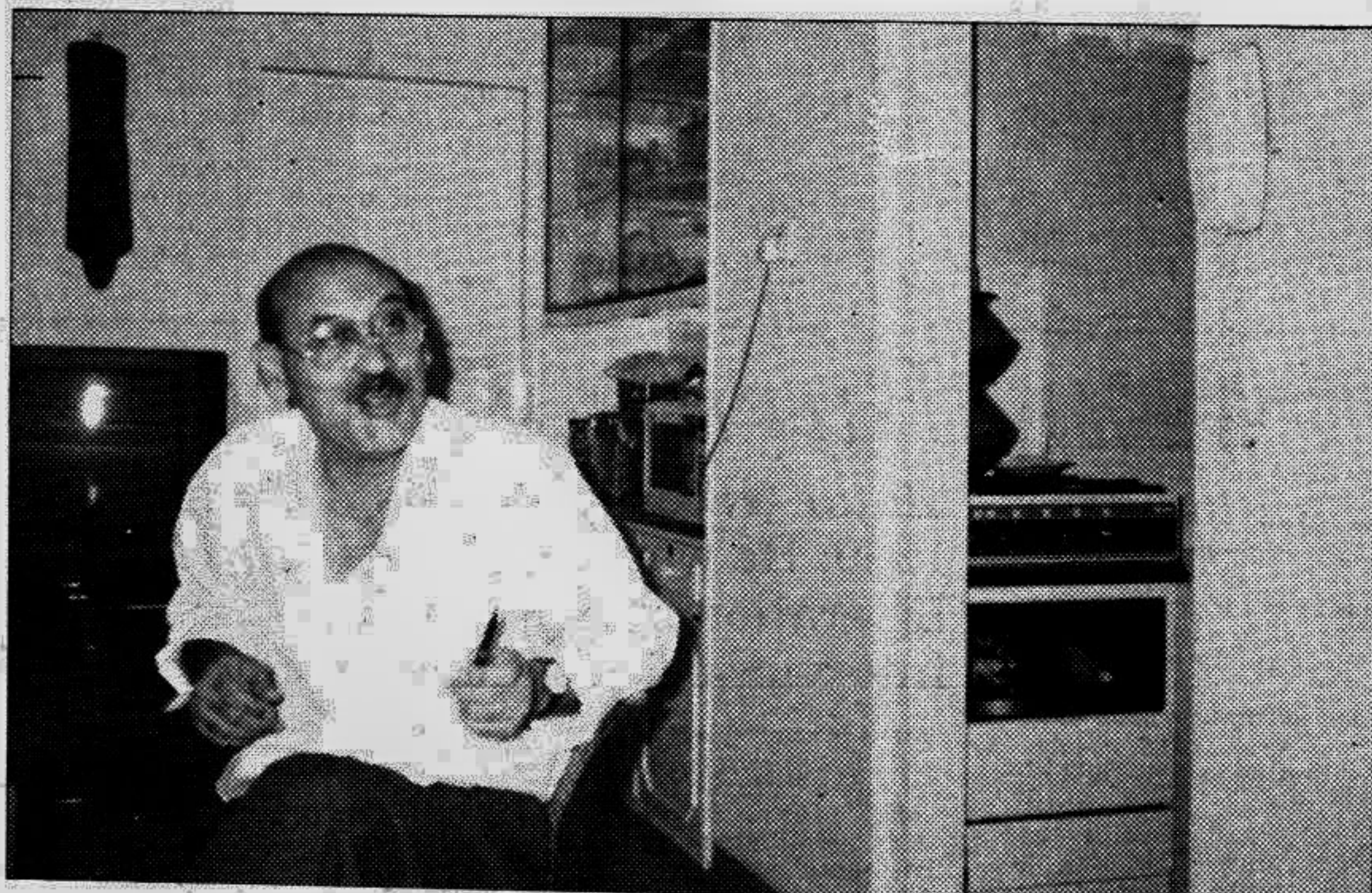
the Englishmen went out and built up an empire for themselves is that different culture started influencing

the English psyche. The change thereby is only natural. This is happening to other languages as well.

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH ABUL HAYAT

by Navine Murshid



My father had once said in passing that he wanted me to be an engineer. That somehow remained in my mind. Therefore, I went into engineering. But, that too with a certain reluctance. My parents probably had high hopes but they never actually did anything to inspire me. Today, I as a father, try to provide my daughters with incentives to study, I pressurise them a bit when I feel I should and I take interest in whatever they are doing. My parents did not feel its importance."

high hopes but they never actually did anything to inspire me. Today, I as a father, try to provide my daughters with incentives to study, I pressurise them a bit when I feel I should and I take interest in whatever they are doing. My parents

did not feel its importance. That does not mean, however, that I blame them. This is the kind of problems that people probably face when they are the first ones in a family who are really getting proper education. Another difference he

finds between his relationship with his daughters and the one he shared with his parents is the element of friendship. He was extremely scared of his father. There was a wide communication gap there. It was with his mother that he

was close to. His mother was the one who laughed with him, consoled him when he was hurt, beat him up when he was being naughty and was there whenever he needed her.

"There was only one time that my father slapped me. I was about thirteen then. He had asked me to go to an uncle's house who lived next door and tell him to lend him a certain amount of money. I had said 'no'. I felt bad to go and ask for money. I felt small and it hurt my ego. Even when my father repeated the request I boldly told him that I could not go and ask for money. He looked at me for a moment and then slapped me across my face. Today I realise that he must have been in huge financial constraint and forced to borrow money. He could not go himself because he felt small too and wanted his son to do that. This was an amazing aspect of my parents. Even in the hardest of times, they shielded us from the cruel side of life."

In his early teens his mother was his companion to the movies. His mother watched Hindi movies of Dilip Kumar and Bengali films of Uttam and Suchitra. They became his favourites, too. The phenomenon of skipping classes to watch movies came in when he was in college and later when he was a civil engineering student at BUET.

"The kinds of movies we watched are the kinds that parents today want their children to watch. All of them were beautiful and healthy. I should say I was

lucky to be a teenager at a time when cinema halls showed healthy Bengali films as well as English films."

For his involvement with the world of plays and theatres, he is grateful to his father. His father was the general secretary of the Railway Club Wajullah Institute in Chittagong. Every month they staged a play. Young Hayat always tagged along with his father to watch them. Soon, going there became an addiction. Within no time he began to picture himself performing and he began to dream of being a performer one day.

Reading storybooks was one of the greatest past times during his teen years. Detective stories particularly interested him. Dev Shahitya Kuthir and Chittagong Co-operative Book Society played a major role in providing young Hayat with the books he liked. He still recalls the names of Swapnan Kumar and Nihar Ranjan among his favourite detective-book authors.

"In absence of television, radio and other entertainment tools that we have today, books were my only sanctuary."

The friends that he made during his teenage years still have a special place in his heart. With some he still has contact while others have drifted away. Recently, he met a friend at a filling station. They have not seen each other for over thirty years, but all it took was a look at him to recognise his old college friend.

"I think this bears testimony to our closeness during the teen years."

At the age of twelve,

during his summer vacation at school, a friend of his, Humayun, went to his grandpa's home, a land of fruits like mangoes and jackfruits. When school reopened, Humayun did not come back. Death was an unknown entity. He remembers the shock his young heart had, the sense of loss and helplessness. He could not imagine that Humayun would never come back. Following the incident, little Hayat became quiet and soft-spoken.

Change is inevitable, he believes. People today are more practical and realistic. Today's teenagers have a lot more opportunities; they have a wider horizon; they have exposure to the world via the media and therefore are broad-minded. Yet he worries because in the wild rush towards progress, people are becoming more materialistic. They are losing their values, their sense of right and wrong.

"Exposure to the life styles in the west have helped us come out of our dogmatic views like there should be a distance between parents and children. My worry is that while taking in the good things, we are adopting the darker, aspects as well."

"Previously on seeing a neighbour cry, a fellow being felt compassion and warmth. Today such emotions pass us by. We see pictures of dead bodies in the newspapers every day. But it fails to evoke the shock it used to. We have become immune to such deadly aspects of life. Today, we worry about ourselves only. I wonder, why, only to find no answer."

CHITTAGONG in the late 1950s might have not been the most exciting place on earth to live in; however, that was where stage and television personality Abul Hayat spent his teenage years. Although he comes from Murshidabad, it is with Chittagong that he relates to. "Blood connection," he says he has with the port city.

Birthday parties were something children of that time were not familiar with. His thirteenth birthday, as he recalls, was just a day like any other. That it was his birthday, that too his thirteenth one, was of no significance at all.

"This was the norm. No one celebrated birthdays. Teenagers had no significance, either. First, you are a child. Then, when you finish school, college and university, and you start earning, you are an adult. There was no such transition as teenage life," said Hayat while talking to The Daily Star at his Circuit House Road residence.

Hayat was the only son in the family, but that did not make him a pampered boy who expected everyone to cater to all his needs — certainly a rare sight these days. He was a well-mannered and good-natured boy.

"I was a very innocent boy and never thought anything ill about anyone. This made many of my class mates take advantage of me. But this made me realise who my real friends were."

In spite of growing up in the midst of his two older sisters and two younger sisters, not to mention his mother, girls always made

him shy. Whenever people of the opposite sex, old or young, visited their home, he was nowhere to be seen! It is much later when he was a first year student at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and he started acting with females that he was able to come out of his reservations.

"It is not that I never fancied them, but I was so shy that I would never come out to meet them. Yes, it was rather surprising since I studied with girls up to Class 3 or 4. I don't know why I never had the courage to face females."

Girls at the para (neighbourhood) were like sisters. In fact, the whole neighbourhood was like one big family. No one ever imagined the girls to be anything other than sisters. Moreover, the chauvinistic boys of Bataly Hill area felt a sense of duty and responsibility towards the girls.

His family hardly had any inclination for the academia. His two elder sisters studied only up to Class 5 and were married off. They were much older than he was and so he never got a chance to be very close to them. It was when they had been married off that he realised the value of having elder sisters. His studies continued in a rather reluctant manner. There was no enthusiasm, no ambition.

"My father had once said in passing that he wanted me to be an engineer. That somehow remained in my mind. Therefore, I went into engineering. But, that too with a certain reluctance. My parents probably had