

Face to face

Selim in Quest of True Spirit of Bengal

Regarded by many as one of the best among the contemporary playwrights, Selim Al Deen has provided us with new theatrical concepts. As Dante has rediscovered Virgil and drew inspiration from him in his creative pursuit, Selim carries with him the great Tagorian spirit of blending the west with the oriental structure without sacrificing anything to Euro-centrism. In the process, he has liberated Bengali drama from western dominance. He is extremely original in fitting in metropolitan sensibility into traditional theatre structure of Bengal to make it contemporary. His first success of reviving traditional structure was achieved with *KirtanKhola* (1981). His quest to discover a native voice comes to a full circle in his latest play *Banapangshul*. Scene after scene comes alive when ideas are thrown from hand to hand like grenades. Selim has also written plays for radio and television. Prolific and cerebral, Selim has come to symbolise the writer and thinker in many variations: an essayist, a roving eye, an activist and a portable conscience. His plays are now taught in as many as three universities at home and abroad including Jadavpur University in Calcutta. Born in Feni, Selim has turned 50 this year. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Q: There is little suspense or sense of ending in the oriental story-telling tradition. The stories of *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* are picturesque, horizontal chains of incident. Climax is basically a western invention. Your later plays, *Kirtankhola*, *Keramatmangal* and also the latest *Banapangshul* tell flat stories and never virtually move towards a climax. Why is that?

A: Well, I never depend on stories; rather my play builds up on characters. In *Banapangshul* a cluster of stories runs parallel. Similar is the case with *Hathadai*. I term this treatment to a story as epic realism.

Q: But *Banapangshul* doesn't have a story-line in the traditional sense of the term.

A: No, not at all.

Q: In *Banapangshul* very loosely structured stories run almost independent of each other, something we have seen in *Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses*.

A: That novel is basically a satire and satires usually do not have climax.

Q: But *Banapangshul* is not a satire.

A: No, it's a tragic-comedy in western definition. But in oriental culture tragedy does not exist.

Q: Now the question is whether we should follow the discourse laid down by the west?

A: If you have your own clothes then why should you borrow from others? I can appreciate a nice cloth worn by somebody but why should I borrow it from him? What I feel is that we should not be xenophobic about what is western; rather, we should learn to appreciate and admire the west's intellectual and creative achievements. Modern outlook and the deepest predicaments of modern man that western poetry has captured and gave expression to has left indelible influence on my play. I myself have done some experiments with theatrical forms that I think are new to the west. I call it new ethnic theatre.

Q: To look for marginalised and exotic culture is now fashionable.

Contemporary theorists and critics are, it seems, bent on discovering cultural 'otherness'. West has an appetite for what is exotic and typically oriental. This new impetus to find out virgin cultural styles and presentations is a new design of cultural hegemony. How do you feel about this?

A: We have our own typical exoticism. Anything that depicts exoticism should not be shunned. If you have followed my plays then you must have seen each of my plays deals with sex. In *Kirtankhola*, homosexuality gets an intimate focus. But as the play comes close to an end, the audience begins to forget about homosexual Chhaymanjan and discover a persecuted soul for whom we feel sympathetic. Do you think that people in our villages don't secretly talk about sex? They do. There are aspects of life which we have to follow and learn from the west. So, there is no question of avoiding the west. Do you think a Greek poet only belongs to Greece? He is for every culture on the planet. To achieve our artistic goal we have to go to the European master artists, poets and novelists. One Virgil or Marlow or Shakespeare (I like Marlow more than Shakespeare) they are not the treasure of any particular nation. For that matter, Tagore is not only ours. It is in that sense Goethe spoke about world literature. According to this great German poet, Hafiz, Kalidas, or Shakespeare are one poet in different names. This is the essence of Goethe's concept of world literature. Goethe composed his magnum opus *Faust*, inspired by oriental cultural ethos but its craftsmanship is totally western. It is such an amazing creation that it has been treated as a divine creation.

Q: You are talking about world literature which, in contemporary terms, means globalisation. But what would be the terms of globalisation? How much shall we take in order to return? These are dicey questions. If the give-and-take is not at the same level then globalisation would only mean new

cultural imperialism. Don't you feel a writer should be aware of it?

A: This is an interesting question and a point to ponder on. If you look at the Latin-American literature you will see how Tagore deeply influenced great poets like Zemeneh, Lorca, Neruda, Hernandez etc. Now that question is how we will save our literature from European cultural hegemony. My answer is: our soil will save us. We will absorb whatever is necessary to enrich our own literature. When the forester in *Banapangshul* says, "See that fox, even it is under the rule of government," he is being critical of the government. The concept of state and government is western but the way my characters understand the concept of government is local. In the age of globalisation a conscious writer will take whatever is necessary for him but through a strainer. As an economist will suggest us import of which commodity harm our economy, so would writers warn as about how much we should and should not take from the west.

The western culture has given birth to tragedy. On the other hand, the Bengali cultural taste has given birth to *pachali*. It's an art form mixing dance, drama, ragas and story-telling. The whole thing is strewn together with what can be called an epic attitude. What I have done in *Banapangshul* is that I have taken the form of *pachali* to construct the structure of my play, thereby eliminating structural dependence on western drama. All I'm trying to point at is that we don't need to rely on western forms. This is not to say that we don't need to seek inspiration from playwrights like Ibsen, Strindberg and Hopman. We, at Dhaka Theatre, believe that we have been successful in rewriting the Modern Bengali theatre grammar whose life-blood has always been the western theatre. The sense of climax or tension that forms the heart of the western theatre has been eliminated from

my drama and music, dance and virtually a linear story taken the place of western structure. In the middle age people used to gather under torch to enjoy *pachali*. As far as entertainment is concerned, it was a democratic play offering enjoyment for everyone. What we mean by people's theatre today, *pachali* was in every respect upheld that spirit.

Dhaka Theatre found in *pachali*, a thousand-year old theatre tradition of Bengal, a suitable vehicle to revive the theatrical form that has its roots in our culture. But there are areas where I drew heavily from the west. Character build-up is one such area where the west is unparalleled. In building my characters I have followed the west. Moreover, although I have taken the form of *pachali*, treatment of the whole play is modern. I have tried to understand my time through the periscope of a traditional format and in doing so, I have, in fact, rediscovered my past.

To portray the modern man we can't do without the concept of the subconscious mind which is the discovery of the west. And the concept of democracy has also

originated from the west. We had the system of kingship in Bengal and it was thought that king had the blessings of the almighty.

Q: Allow me to point at the epistemological tradition of Bengal. The *sahagiya*s or even the *bauls* preach a knowledge that is passed on from gurus, that is, formation of knowledge has always been thought as authoritarian and not empirical. On the contrary, empiricism has been the foundation of western knowledge.

A: True. But Lalon pronounced his allegiance for the mass, particularly the marginalised. Lalon says that the freedom of our souls can not be achieved through religious rituals. We hear resonance of the same spirit in Tagore also. We should not feel that the Bengal is spiritually and philosophically impoverished. Ancient Bengal has given birth to some profound school of

thoughts. Natism is one such example. So, we have our own brand of thoughts. Natism emphasises that through *sadhana* (meditation) one can reach the spiritual plane. This school of thought has influenced major philosophies of India and even Taoism has been shaped by it. The next most important philosophical tradition to develop in Bengal was Sufism. The sufi in the middle age made Islam democratic. They said in worshipping the god there is no difference between a Chandal, a Brahmin or a Muslim. That is why we see irrespective of caste and creed everyone is greeted equally at the mausoleum of Hazrat Shah Jalal. The third school of thought *Daita-Adityabhad* or Dual Monism was put forward by Sri Chaitanya. The essence of this thought is unity in diversity. For example, here we are talking about the same subject or sharing the same passion. *Daita-Adityabhad* asks are we two or one? And says that we are one since our aim is one.

Similarly, this room where we are engaged in a conversation has a table, a lamp, a door but all these represents a room. So where should we lay emphasis on: unity or diversity. Even if we look at the western critical thinking we would, for example, see in Longinus that he is looking for a unity to describe literature that is sublime. What we at Dhaka Theatre is trying to bring under focus is that what the west has been striving to achieve through scientific knowledge, the east has sought to attain it through emotion. It's interesting to note that the Bengalis did not even accept Indian classical music; rather, it is observed that in the middle age people in this part of the world used the ragas in diluted forms in story-telling. So ancient Bengal has traditions of borrowing from different sources but that is to fit the Bengali taste.

Q: Allow me to point at the epistemological tradition of Bengal. The *sahagiya*s or even the *bauls* preach a knowledge that is passed on from gurus, that is, formation of knowledge has always been thought as authoritarian and not empirical. On the contrary, empiricism has been the foundation of western knowledge.

A: True. But Lalon pronounced his allegiance for the mass, particularly the marginalised. Lalon says that the freedom of our souls can not be achieved through religious rituals. We hear resonance of the same spirit in Tagore also. We should not feel that the Bengal is spiritually and philosophically impoverished. Ancient Bengal has given birth to some profound school of

thoughts. Natism is one such example. So, we have our own brand of thoughts. Natism emphasises that through *sadhana* (meditation) one can reach the spiritual plane. This school of thought has influenced major philosophies of India and even Taoism has been shaped by it. The next most important philosophical tradition to develop in Bengal was Sufism. The sufi in the middle age made Islam democratic. They said in worshipping the god there is no difference between a Chandal, a Brahmin or a Muslim. That is why we see irrespective of caste and creed everyone is greeted equally at the mausoleum of Hazrat Shah Jalal. The third school of thought *Daita-Adityabhad* or Dual Monism was put forward by Sri Chaitanya. The essence of this thought is unity in diversity. For example, here we are talking about the same subject or sharing the same passion. *Daita-Adityabhad* asks are we two or one? And says that we are one since our aim is one.

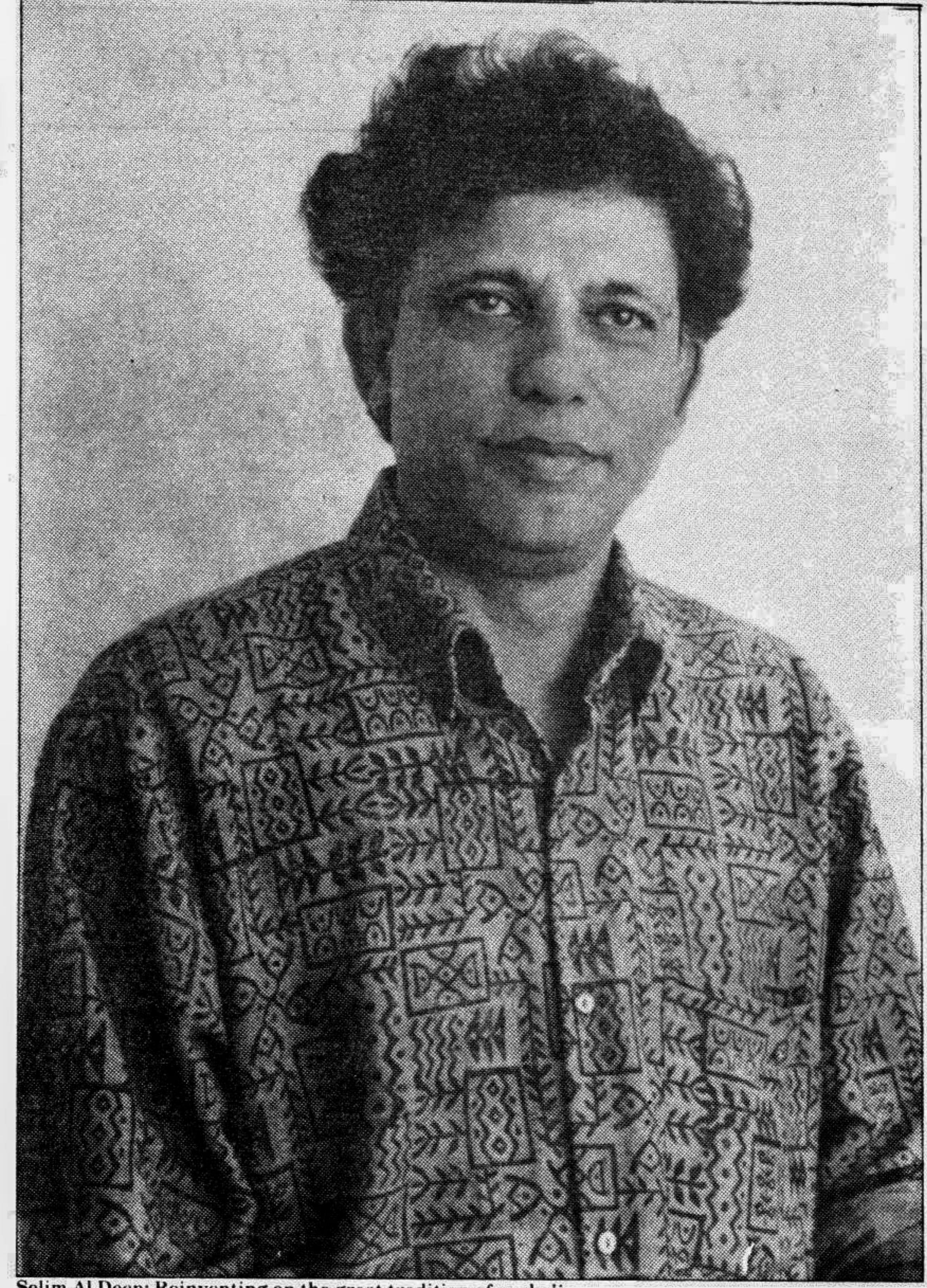
Similarly, this room where we are engaged in a conversation has a table, a lamp, a door but all these represents a room. So where should we lay emphasis on: unity or diversity. Even if we look at the western critical thinking we would, for example, see in Longinus that he is looking for a unity to describe literature that is sublime. What we at Dhaka Theatre is trying to bring under focus is that what the west has been striving to achieve through scientific knowledge, the east has sought to attain it through emotion. It's interesting to note that the Bengalis did not even accept Indian classical music; rather, it is observed that in the middle age people in this part of the world used the ragas in diluted forms in story-telling. So ancient Bengal has traditions of borrowing from different sources but that is to fit the Bengali taste.

Q: How would you evaluate the works of the poets of the thirties? They are considered as the architect of modern Bengali poetry and a major influence on the subsequent development in contemporary Bengali poetry.

A: Well, I'm sceptical about their literary achievement.

Q: Why?

A: If you look at Tagore's oeuvre you will see that how his Oriental spirit has absorbed western romanticism to elevate it to classical romanticism. Let's shed light on Tagore's chemistry of appropriating the west in an eastern recipe. Tagore accepted the western spirit, not the philosophy, absorbed the speed not the values. The result is: passionate romanticism of Byron, Keats and Shelly has been elevated to a height of classical romanticism. It seems that the unfulfilled western romanticism for the first time enjoys a sense of fulfilment in Tagore. His poems are a testimony to the fact that we can borrow



Selim Al Deen: Reinventing on the great tradition of *pachali*

partmentalisation or thinking of watertight forms free from the influence of the west. But if you look at the modern Bengali literature of the past one hundred years you will see we have, with the exception of a few, depended heavily on the western norms, values and aesthetics.

Q: How would you evaluate the works of the poets of the thirties? They are considered as the architect of modern Bengali poetry and a major influence on the subsequent development in contemporary Bengali poetry.

A: Well, I'm sceptical about their literary achievement.

Q: Why?

A: If you look at Tagore's oeuvre you will see that how his Oriental spirit has absorbed western romanticism to elevate it to classical romanticism. Let's shed light on Tagore's chemistry of appropriating the west in an eastern recipe. Tagore accepted the western spirit, not the philosophy, absorbed the speed not the values. The result is: passionate romanticism of Byron, Keats and Shelly has been elevated to a height of classical romanticism. It seems that the unfulfilled western romanticism for the first time enjoys a sense of fulfilment in Tagore. His poems are a testimony to the fact that we can borrow

ture does not want us to dress or behave or talk the same. Even in Quran, Allah points us at the diversity of creation to feel and understand the unity of creation and ultimately the Almighty Himself.

Modern philologists now claim that once human beings had only one language for communication. Don't you feel life will lose all its colour if we were to speak the same language all over?

If great classics like *Shahnameh*, *Odyssey*, *Mahabharata* were possible in an age and time when there was hardly any communication possible, then I don't see why we have to import from other languages to enrich our literature. And from the same logic, I don't feel there is a need to present our sensibility in the language of the Raj. This may be an imperialist design to cement their grip of hegemony on cultures of Asia and Africa. Or it may be a blunder of the time. Future writers, I hope, will look at it as one of the major mistakes of the century.

I have always felt that when it comes to creation I should write in my own tongue otherwise my people will not accept it. Moreover, when I know that most of my fellow countrymen could not read or write, it is my duty to speak in a language that they can understand.

When I was a Teenager

EVERY child deserves an opportunity to move ahead, an opening for a bright future and a chance to shape up his or her career the way he or she wants," Ozair Farooq, Governor, Rotary International District 3280, Bangladesh told The Daily Star during a candid conversation at his Purana Paltan office. An accomplished Supreme Court advocate, Farooq talked of an unrealised wish in his teens as he took a trip down memory lane.

"When I was a student of class seven, one of my elder brothers died. Second in the family, he worked in Chittagong and had once told me that he would have me enrolled in a good school there," reminisced Farooq, who was the eighth among five brothers and four sisters. As fate would have it, his premature death put to the aspirations of the 13-year-old kid.

Nevertheless, schooling, albeit at the primary school in his village in Noakhali and later at the high school three miles away, was, in no way, inadequate, and he was always among the top in his

class. "My father wanted me to pursue madrassah education," he said. "But when I got the primary scholarship, he changed his mind and decided to send me to high school. In fact, after matriculation, he took me to Chittagong and had me enrolled at the Chittagong Government College there."

He had always wanted to study in Notre Dame College, Dhaka, but was unable to do so because in those days the college had no dormitory. On the other hand, he had no relative who lived in the capital city. Therefore, Chittagong Government College it was.

Farooq wanted to be an engineer, for he believed that being an engineer was the ultimate success.

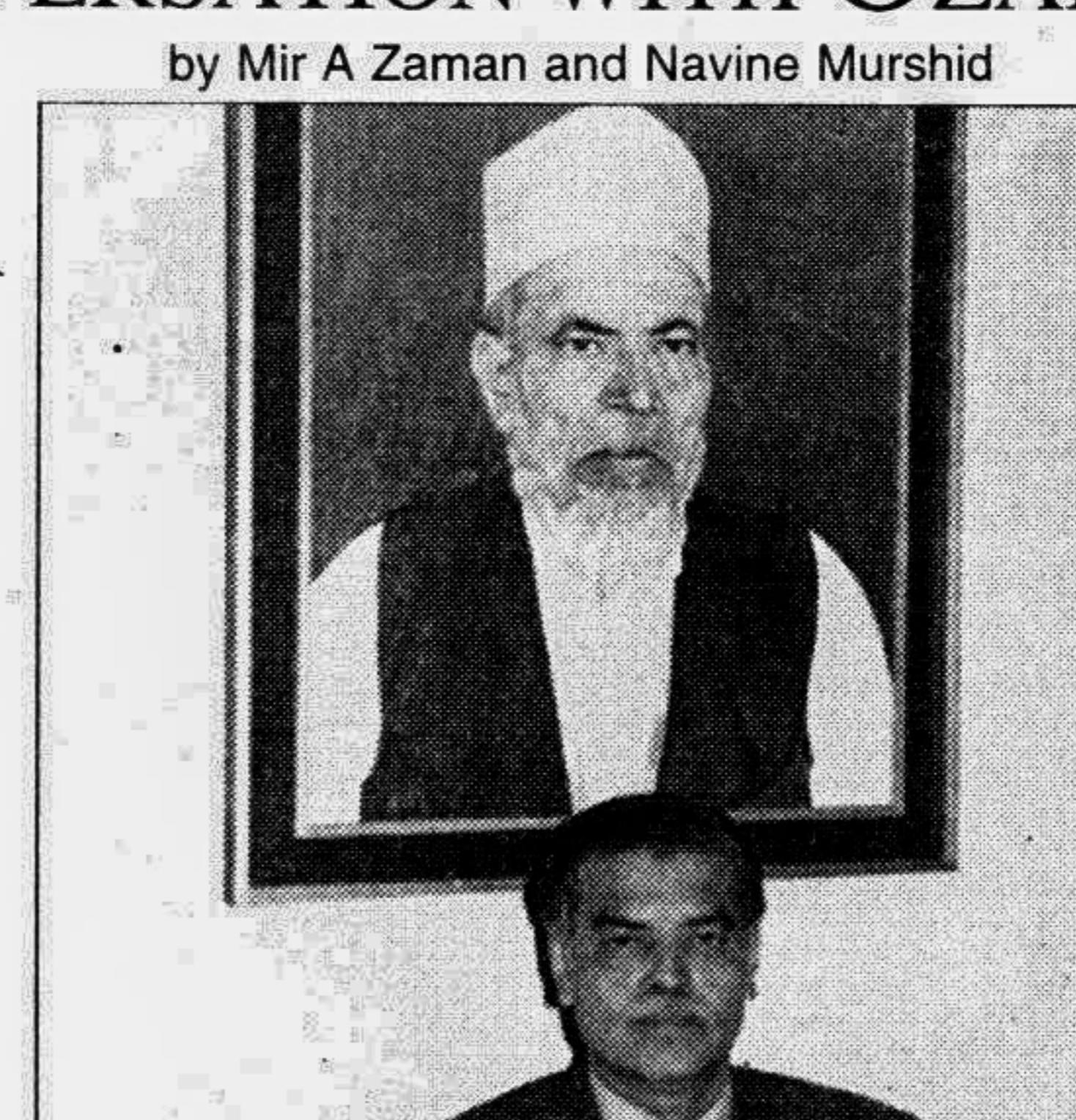
"When the principal asked me what courses I wanted to take, I told him, 'Everything that would help me become an engineer.'"

At college, he had a rude awakening.

"For the first time I became aware of my academic inadequacy. I realised that I was, after all, not a brilliant student, although I was regular and

IN CONVERSATION WITH OZAIR FAROOQ

by Mir A Zaman and Navine Murshid



Ozair Farooq with the portrait of his father who he considers as his role model

his father was his first encounter with the world of *yatra* (a form of theatre).

"When I was a student of class six, once I went to my

eldest brother's in-laws' village. There one of his brothers-in-law took me to watch a *yatra*. Although I felt bad about it, and I still do, I could never get myself to tell my father about it."

His father, late *Alhaj Ali Nawab*, was his role model, his idol and above all, an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

"I was very close to him. Literally, I was his walking stick; wherever he went, I followed."

Alhaj Ali Nawab was the *imam* of the village mosque and a *pir* (spiritual mentor).

"We are the descendants of one of Muslim saint Hazrat Shah Jalal's companions. My grand father was also a *pir* and so was his father. It ran in our family. My father, in fact, gave up his job in the police and took up teaching at a madrassah. Naturally, the whole family was religious-minded and rigorously pursued spiritual advancement."

Lower-middle class

family it was; still, charity got priority above anything else.

"My father taught us not to deny a man in distress. He was the one who imbibed in me the spirit of philanthropy."

He was also the man who introduced him to urban life.

"Our village had no electricity or any sign of modernisation. I clearly remember how I clung to my father's hand as he guided me through Chittagong to the college. For the first time, I came in contact with electricity, with telephones and all the things that I had never seen in the village."

Farooq has very little memory of his mother. This was perhaps because he lost her at a very young age. He remembers his mother as someone who was very weak and fragile; someone who suffered a lot from illness. He was a student of class five when she fell seriously ill, moving away from household chores and spending more and more time in bed. He watched his mother become more like a child. When he was in class nine, she passed away.

The lesson is still there in him. It is from his father that he had inherited the love of giving, of finding happiness in making others' lives more meaningful and healthy.