

Face to Face

A Myriad-minded Scholar

Dr. Atiur Rahman, senior research fellow and chief of Human Resource Division at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), has something of a renaissance spirit in him. Given the cast of his mind his scholarly interest ranges from environment management to socio-economic aspects of our life. Always at the thick of action, he edits two-environment journals and has been a member, Board of Directors, Sonali Bank since 1996; and member, Board of Trustees, BIDS since 1998. His major publication in English includes Political Economy of SAARC (1986), Peasants and Classes: A Study in Differentiation in Bangladesh, Oxford University Press, Delhi (1986). His forthcoming title co-authored with Binayek Sen is Fighting Poverty: Emerging Perspectives-South Asia Poverty Monitor. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Q: One of your major concerns is environment. You edit two environment journals - one in Bangla, the other in English. Who are your target readers?

A: Before I really begin to talk on substantial environmental issues I would like to answer the question of target readers quickly. We do like to reach the groups which have not been addressed by others. We really want to go beyond the elite class. So, our target group, especially for the Bangla one, the *Paribesh Patra* (a small organisation having branches all around the country), includes even the madrasah students who have never been thought of being covered by any development programme. We want to tell the people that they too need to think about the environment they are in. We want to get scientific and worldly message across the people who are usually left out of any elitist development agenda. So our target group is really ordinary people i.e., school teachers, students, housewives, NGOs, the clubs, social groups and rural educational institutions. We are also reaching policy-makers, environment movement people. As you can see from the nature of the journals we really want to talk in ordinary language, we want to approach them directly. Most importantly we want to project environment as something that not only consists of nature, but also has something to do with your life. We also bring in culture, other social problems into the notion of environment, we want to focus on the ordinary people, on their perception, on their wisdom, on their likes and dislikes. So, ours is a different kind of venture.

Q: In one of the editorials of the *Paribesh Patra* you said that environment is very much a part of a culture. What do you mean by that?

A: When I said culture, I don't want to take it in a narrow sense but to the broadest sense of the term. To me, and I'm sure to many of you, culture means the way of living; how people interact with the nature, with the society, with themselves even, and how they change the environment or live with it. That's very important and that's why I bring in culture. If you really want to understand environment I think you will have to understand how the people come to stay in a certain place. And whether they want to continue to stay and also enjoy staying there. Historically speaking, we got to understand the place we chose to live in, why we have decided to live there and how to improve the

condition around us. This is not only physical but has something to do with your spirit, with the whole pattern of your life. We want to see human being in a total environment.

Q: You are hinting at an integrated approach.

A: Yes. To be more exact, ecological view. There has been a paradigm shift from the earlier view when people used to think of growth only as the source of development. Now people think how to integrate each other, say for example if you want to address the problem of environment you cannot really keep your eyes closed to the issues of poverty. You got to think about the population around you. You got to think about power: Who enjoys the resources, and the people who consume the resources and how they interact and what is left for the others. These are very intricate and integrated issues. That's why we want to go beyond nature. And we want to look at environment from multiple dimensions.

Q: We started to sink deep tube wells back in the 80's by the prescription of World Bank. Now as arsenic contaminated water in the northern districts poses a serious death threat to thousands of people, the same organisation is preaching for shallow tube wells. The reason why I'm referring to it is because we seriously lack local experts who would decide for us what is good and what is bad.

A: A nation has to have intellectual sovereignty. That doesn't mean that a nation will not take foreign aid if needed. But again who decides the terms and conditions? We have to ask ourselves what would be the terms and conditions not as passive recipients but as active participants in playing a significant role in all decision-making processes. This has to come from that kind of intellectual autonomy, or honesty or what I would call a kind of arrogance. We have to decide our own fate as a nation. This is not something just the government or the opposition will look into. As a nation we have to think of our own development: Where do we want to go from here. It's very unfortunate in the Bangladesh context because the country has done tremendous progress in terms of growth, food autarky, and even in terms of innovating poverty alleviating programmes. But what is lacking is that Bangladesh has not been able to design its own development strategy. It has always depended on others for designing its own development strategy. Today Bangladesh doesn't enjoy a lot of foreign

aid. Not even one per cent of the total GDP really depends on foreign aid. Ten years back it was 10 per cent. But our psychological dependence is still 10 per cent. We can't think out our own development strategy. Donors also don't like it.

The people who give aid some of them at least are enlightened. They think why can't Bangladesh ask for its own share. Why can't Bangladesh ask for its own development, the kind of development which Bangladesh want to pursue. If they want to have two other bridges like Bangabandhu and Jamuna bridges they should decide it. Why others should tell them that you should have it? I think we lack that kind of confidence in ourselves, the conviction that we too can develop our own future. Look at China, they have been pursuing a development strategy of their own whether you like it or not. They were once a very close society, now they are liberalised and a very open society. But these decisions were not imposed on them by others as it were in the case of Russia which crumbled. In China they have their own kind of freedom to decide whether they would go for development of one kind or the other. The other day Dr. Rajagopal Agarwal came to Dhaka. He was with us in the World Bank during the period of 1972-73. Then he was one of the World Bank officials posted in China. Now he is retired. He is very critical about World Bank's role. He was telling me whenever he went to the Chinese leadership and told them that they needed this or that, the Chinese leaders smiled at him saying "thank you very much for your suggestions we will think about it. But the choice is ours, we will decide what to do and what not to do."

Look at a nation who are so upright, so self-respectful and they can decide on their own. I think this is time we can do it too. Earlier we could not probably do it because we were too much dependent on foreign aid. But now not even the one per cent of our total development outlay is coming from foreign aid. Our policy-makers particularly the bureaucrats have been the biggest beneficiaries of this kind of dependent development programmes. They are very reluctant to allow the nation to decide its own destiny. I think that's the most unfortunate part of it.

Q: It's a sort of a quagmire that we are in.

A: Yes. That is right. But we have all the ingredients and forces if we can handle them

well, we can come out of this quagmire.

Q: I'm curious to know what should be the possible steps to sensitise people about environment degradation?

A: I think the best way to generate environment information is to really question the very criterion of development which we are now pursuing. Our development thinkers, including the economists are not giving the right information to the people that the way we are pursuing development is ultimately not very helpful for our environment.

Q: But who is going to perform the role of a watchdog?

A: The civil society, particularly the media. But it is very unfortunate that the electronic media could not come in aid of environment in Bangladesh. In every country the electronic media is playing the most important role in sensitising the people. But look at our television and radio they are not making any special programmes on environment. I must give credit to the print media that they have come of age. Over the past two years the kind of messages they are pouring into people's mind, you know, I think it is tremendous. But then again these messages are going only to the literate ones. Majority of our people are illiterate; they can only see and hear. They need to understand the messages and electronic media can give the best messages. And you know you can reach your target people quickly through the electronic media. The government is now allowing private channels alongside the national channel. I think it should be made mandatory that certain hours be given to environment. This is important for the survival of the nation. Look at BBC or Discovery channel. They are really doing it so well. Why can't we do it. So, this is one way of reaching the people. Secondly, intervention at the policy-making level. Say for example, a group of environmentalists this year really intervened at the budgetary level and succeeded in making it a more environment-friendly budget than the previous ones. It was possible only because a group of concerned citizens really felt that they would have to intervene at that stage.

You have to intervene at the crucial stage when development policies are initiated. I think people should intervene at every stages of the budget making process to make sure that the budget is environment-

friendly. Thirdly, we are going for a five-year plan. I think you should go for a long-term environment-friendly plan. I think really the biggest change can be brought about through educating people. Look at Singapore; its environment is one of the best in the world. How did they do it? Because they had intervened at the very early stage of education.

Q: Are you hinting at introduction of environmental issues at primary level of education.

A: Even lower. It should be introduced at the nursery level. I think environment should be major topic for the kids and they should be made aware that Bangladesh is a very vulnerable country. This country is victim of natural disaster every time. It is also at the lower end of most of the rivers and very much in the cyclone zone. So, we got to be prepared mentally that there could be disaster any time. Secondly, this is a highly populated country. River bank erosion is massive and the resources are very little. We have to be very careful in using our resources so that we can avoid lot of wastage. I think the biggest enemy of the environment is wastage. Our children should be taught that we don't waste our resources. If my kid comes from school and tells me that I should not keep the tap open for so many minutes while shaving, I think that will hit my heart. I think education can really change our mindset. We should try our best to infiltrate environment friendly information to our kids and that's what I'm doing now, reaching schools and colleges with the information on environment.

Q: We have so many laws on paper but the point is they are not being implemented. Ours is a country where good laws most of the time remains confined to the policy-makers' level. What role the civil society can play in this respect?

A: Civil society can do a lot. But again, a civil society can be effective when government is responsive to the demands of the civil society.

Q: Osmani Udayan can be referred to as an example.

A: In a situation like this I think the civil society has to go back to the roots and address the issue from the constitutional point of view. The Constitution says we are the owners of this country. So the owners' voices must be heard. That kind of messages has to be given to the concerned. The government gets concerned when citizens ask too many questions. So, we will have to be



very strategic as well: which are the issues we should really highlight and how to move forward. I think media again is a helping hand.

But what we really need is co-ordination. We are doing some thing by different organisations and we are not co-ordinating. Parash, is the NGO which is trying to bring in all the activists together.

I think that's the best way. Environment is a united issue and we should fight environmental problems unitedly irrespective of political and economic differences which we may have.

Q: Let's stick to a more topical issue. How do you look at the transshipment issue which is a subject of volatile political wrangle now?

A: I look at the issue of transshipment from a broader perspective: the regional co-operation. You all know this part of the region had an integrated economy one day. In many other countries in South East Asia and Europe they have opted for regional co-operation because the economy cannot operate in this age of globalisation on its own. They got to co-operate.

That is the idea. If my neighbour is in trouble I will be helping him and if I'm in trouble my neighbour will be helping me. That kind of understanding is really needed for any kind of economic co-operation. If we really want to

survive in this era of globalisation and competition I think we got to co-operate. This is an overall kind of background in which the issue of transshipment or transit should be looked at.

Q: Globalisation is now the buzz word and we all are psychologically for it. But in real terms if we remain a passive recipient of what is bombarded at us or keep receiving what flows in from outside will that not be imperialism in a new bottle?

A: You are very right. But you are asking this question too late. I think as a nation we have already surrendered our economic sovereignty when we signed WTO agreement and also we have opted for many of the economic reforms imposed on us by the donors because of our involvement with them. We couldn't really safeguard our interest around those time. Now, as I told you it is too late, many people are rethinking about globalisation. Globalisation has a lot of positive and negative things. On the positive side, you have the access to the global goods and services at a very low and competitive price. But on the negative side, our technology, our infrastructure do not allow us to produce cheaper goods and for that matter we cannot have an access into the global market. China, Singapore and Malaysia have benefited a lot from the global market. But

around that time we were sleeping we did not prepare ourselves from gaining at the global market. Even then, we have little bit of space for manoeuvring. Up to certain period of time we can take advantage of the leverages as a member of LDC's. But we are not taking any advantage from that. We are talking only. It's time we got to patent many of our resources. There may come a time when the UN or the develop countries will claim that this is their resources. Would you believe it that the United States has been claiming that *basmati* is their patent. India did not ask for it earlier. Now they have gone into a legal battle for this. Do we have the infrastructure or mental preparation to raise a legal war like that against the developed countries? That's why I say we got to think very independently and we got to safeguard our knowledge, our system and everything and that is not forthcoming. Given a situation like this globalisation probably will be going against many of our interests. But again we are in a situation that we can't even avoid that. It requires a lot of soul searching whether we should go for an open kind of development or we should be a closed kind of shop. I think we should not go into a close shop approach at the same time we should not open so much that we become vulnerable. So there has to be a fine balance.

When I Was A Teenager...

IN CONVERSATION WITH SALAHUDDIN

By Sonia Kristy

He is arguably the first star, in its real sense, in the country's football arena. Kazi Mohammed Salahuddin, better known as Salahuddin to his countless fans, may not be directly involved in the game anymore; however, football is and will remain his passion.

The eldest son of Kazi Mohammed Shafi and Shimki Shafi, Salahuddin wanted to achieve something in his life and set his priorities right from almost childhood. "I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted to become a footballer and after retirement, for football is a short career, I wanted to be a businessman. That were the two things I decided as my goal when I was in class 6/7 and worked for it all along."

He fulfilled both the ambitions and his family was supportive all through the way. Salahuddin and his brother and sister were given all the opportunity to do whatever they wanted to do.

"My mother was the ruler of the house. We were actually scared of her instead of my father, for he was one of the best fathers one could ever get. His only concern was to make sure that we get a good education. We were allowed to do everything, provided we studied well. He was one of my best friends. When I lost him about four years ago I not only did I feel the loss of a father but I felt the loss

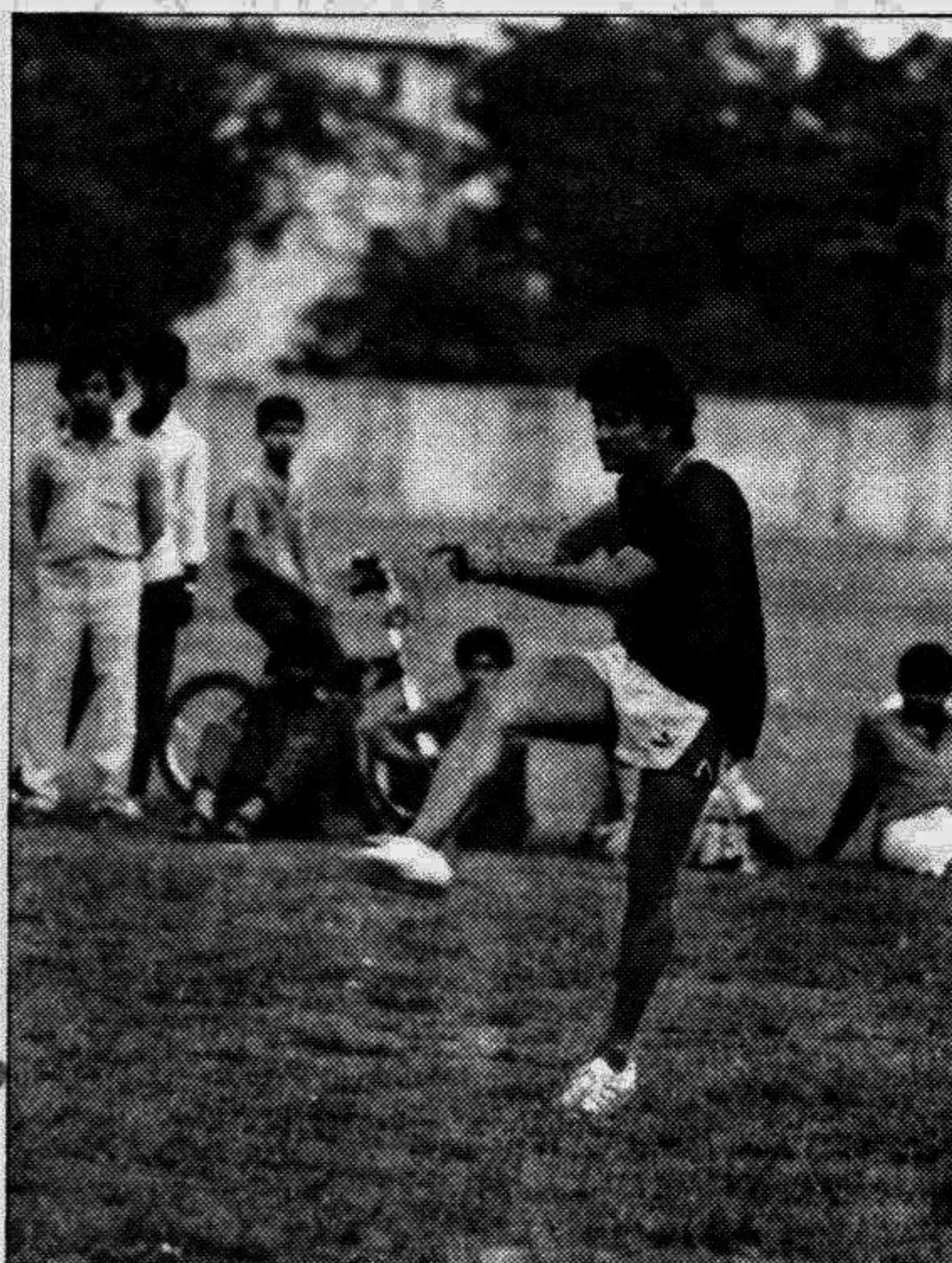
of a dear friend." Being the student of Shaheen School, an airforce school where sports was considered an important factor and almost compulsory, sports entered very naturally in young Salahuddin's life.

"I started with athletics and later played some cricket. Then all of a sudden I found out that football was the most popular game and at that stage of my life, popularity did appeal to me. So I decided to switch to football."

Therefore, his effort towards football began. In those days, football coaches were not readily available for an amateur. What Salahuddin used to do is, he would go the British Council and there in the library he would find books on how to train him on his own. That is where he picked up the techniques. "I used to make my own methods for training and then tried to practise it over the ground."

Nothing appealed to him more than football and to become a good player he gave his utmost effort. At five in the morning he got up from bed and went from Dhanmondi (where he used to reside then) to the Dhaka University field. He practiced and returned home to get ready for school due to start at 7.45a.m.

Studies were not neglected either.



Our first football star in his prime form. The picture was taken in the 80s. Source: Family Album

"I was an average student. On one hand, I tried to make sure that I secure a good grade so that I won't be punished at home. On the other hand I didn't wanted to be called a street footballer, for there is a notion that players, especially footballers, don't have brains and I didn't want to get recognised that way."

The schoolteachers however encouraged Salahuddin's endeavour towards football. One of his drill teachers named Sikander Salahuddin gave him a lot of time to explain to him different methods, but Salahuddin never followed those.

"Though his support and encouragement meant a lot to me, I believed that if his methods were right he would've been in the position where I wanted to be. Instead of that, I kept on reading and asked my relatives and friends coming from abroad to bring video-cassettes and books on football."

Television in those days was not that publicised and we then had no VCR. However, my father bought me a projector and so I watched football on the wall. By the time I got those cassettes I was probably ten years behind my time but it helped me tremendously. George Best from Manchester United was his favourite. This great player

from Ireland was the one who brought football into this limelight.

Until then, Salahuddin's played for himself and for his school team. He started playing for the school team as a forward when he was in class seven. And each year he inevitably received a number of cups, only for football but also for athletics. Therefore, each year he received at least seven trophies including the championship trophy. It had become such a regular event that while he was being awarded at the school assembly, the students, instead of clapping, kept booing at him.

Even his family was getting a bit tired of seeing so many cups each year. Therefore, Salahuddin figured out an alternative and profitable means. Many students would do anything for those trophies and Salahuddin made quick bucks by selling those to them!

"By then I wanted to get over with my school life for it began to get hectic for me. I couldn't continue my studies and practise at the same time. So while I was in class nine, I applied for matriculation in private. I appeared for my matric and class nine's final exam at the same time. Nobody knew about it and the money I got was from selling my school trophies. Few days after taking

admission in class ten the result came out and I found out that I got a first division. I cut off my name from school, got admitted in Dhaka College and let my parents know about it. They were flabbergasted but couldn't object for my result was good and I had got admitted to the best college of those days."

Then started his life as a professional footballer. In 1969, a club named 'Uari' took him in for trial. He remained as a reserved player for couple of matches and then luck struck. One of the regular players got hurt. He was given a chance to play and at the age of sixteen, in his debut match he got a hatrick. From a reserved player, he became regular overnight. The next year Mohammed took him in and from then he never had to look back.

At sixteen, he started to make quite a handsome amount - five thousand taka per month. During those days, one could make a return trip to Karachi for two hundred taka. "I wanted to keep my allowance as well so didn't let my parents know how much I made from football."

Soon came the year 1971. And eighteen years old Salahuddin decided to join the war of independence.

"I told my parents about it. Though my mother freaked out, my father gave me full support.

He gave me ten thousand taka and I, along with one of my friend, started for Agartala. There I participated in a couple of operations. And when the Swadhin Bangla Football team was found, Sheikh Kamal who was my school friend asked me to join the team. We played throughout India raising money for our independence."

Soon Bangladesh became independent. In 1972, when Sheikh Kamal was thinking of founding Abahani, he insisted that Salahuddin join the club.

"I thought he was joking. Who would leave Mohammedan, which was like Manchester United, and join an unknown club like Abahani? But Sheikh Kamal kept insisting. So I finally told him that if he formed a very good team that had the potential to be the best I would join it. Kamal had then said, the team would not only become a national champion but would also win Asia. He was right. We became champion five times."

This outstanding talented footballer of our country always kept his priorities high. "I didn't have the life of an average teenager. I didn't have time to hang out with friends, to party or have any kind of recreation. All I wanted to be is the best footballer of the world. Though I couldn't become the best of the world, my affair with football made my teen years really special."