

Face to Face

A Modern Myth-maker

Mohammad Nurul Huda is a classical poet in an un-classical age. He is prolific, always re-writing and attempting to create his own selective canon. His poems are stylish, subdued, deeply romantic in feeling but classically laconic in expression. He has, till date, authored over 60 books. Though poetry is his forte, he moves as elegantly as a poet in other genres of writing, fiction and creative essay to be precise. His poems have been translated into more than ten languages including English, French and German. **Interviewed by Ziaul Karim**

Q: You are labelled as an ethnographic poet. Do you think labelling helps towards a better understanding of a poet?
A: A poet do not necessarily stick to a theme. Various subjects do visit and make up his oeuvre. Nevertheless, a theme may recur or a poet may wear a character which might overshadow other features of his poetry. And on many occasion to identify a poet from among the poets this characteristic helps to single him out.

Q: So, you view labelling as an effective tool in identifying poetic character.
A: Not exactly. I feel labelling is a handy devise, but at the same time I reckon it forces a poet to put on a particular hat which narrows down the perspective to evaluate his works.

Q: Your Shukla Shakuntala enjoyed immediate success. You have seen the Shakuntala myth through the contemporary periscope. The series of poems featured in the volume are stylish, deeply romantic in feeling but classically laconic in expression. What inspired you to peg your theme on myth?
A: I would like to generalise myth a little further, that is, anything that is ancient pulls me like a magnet. **Q:** Your inclination towards is ancient is understandable, but how do you look at them through your contemporary sensibility?
A: Modern poets have tried to renew and revitalize the past, in Eliot's expression 'pastness of the present'. I was conscious of this modernist attempt at myth while writing the poems for Shukla Shakuntala. But then myth surfaced my earlier poems as well. I would say I had a spontaneous inclination

towards mythological elements. It's not really an easy task to look at mythical characters through a contemporary perspective. In the Shakuntala myth, Shakuntala meets Prince Dushmanta deep in Tapaban. They fall in love and their marriage takes place in Tapaban. But their honeymoon does not last long as the curse of Saint Durbasha separates one from the other. Dushmanta does not recognise his love anymore. The pain of separation and the struggle to survive on her own is the theme that sets the mood of the Shukla Shakuntala. I feel that the condition of women in today's world, particularly in Bangladesh, is not different from what it was during mythical India. Another contemporary spectacle that I wore in viewing the Shakuntala myth was women's rights. What I tried to say in my verses contained in the volume was that without unconditional relationship between men and women, social equilibrium is impossible.

Q: In the opening sonnet of the Shukla Shakuntala there is a line where prince Dushmanta, who feels strong physical attraction for Shakuntala, says, "Am I contradicting myself?" The line appears to be a Freudian slip? Dushmanta feels strong inclination for her but considers his urge as a sin as that emotion is not separated from sex hence unholy. Does that reflect the way you look at sex?
A: I'm sure. But this definitely employs the rhetorical strategy of ambiguity. Ambiguity holds contradiction and, at the same time, poetic pronouncement of truth which may or may not be measured in plain prose.

That is the beauty of a poem. If everything is transparent in poetry then it is not poetry at all. And philosophically speaking, no human understanding of anything is linear or unambiguous. For example, think of the famous lines from Jibananda Das: *Sarajini sleeps an internal sleep here/Don't know whether she sleeps here* No doesn't this ambiguity create the mysterious aura of poem. From the very onset, my poems form ambiguities or your may call it the dialectics of my poem.

Q: Let's move towards more fundamental issues relating to your poetic works. How does the chemistry, if I may use the word chemistry, of a poem works beginning from conceiving an image to writing down your emotion?
A: There is no watertight formula of how it works. For different poems the process is different.

Q: What was the process in case of Shukla Shakuntala for the poems included in the volume are sequential or, broadly speaking, elaboration of a single theme. How did you sew the beads into a single theme?
A: To be very frank, no love poem is written without a lover in mind, hence a woman surely was the inspirational factor behind Shukla Shakuntala. But the tragic undercurrent that sets the tune of the poems partly comes from myth and partly from my own experience without which a creation would be artificial. It all began at a very personal level which made me write a few lines and later on I started to build on it. It's a process beginning from emotional level to more towards a cerebral exercise. I wrote the opening line *We met at the west past of Tapaban* and immediately

felt that it would not end there. For a few sonnets it was basically an emotional outpouring of a heavy heart, but then I thought it can be expanded in a planned way to give expression to my thought about the condition of womanhood in this century, particularly in Bangladesh. Shakuntala myth I thought would hold my ideas nicely and portray them convincingly.

Q: Can we say that sudden response to something, basically emotional, triggers the urge to write a few lines and then you work on it to give it a final shape as a poem?
A: To an extent, yes we can. But not always. It's true while I write lyrical poems, any line that stirs up my mind I note it down. This works as a capital to be used later. What I do now is at least edit a poem or rewrite it for a number of times which was not the case when I was young. My earlier poems were mostly done in one go.

Q: Shall we conclude that your earlier poems were more inspirational than what you are writing now? And as you are ageing your works have begun to shed emotional content of a mood.
A: Not really. Emotion and intellect walked hand in hand in my earlier works: The union of the two was happy and carefree. Now I experiment more with my form and content. I even use spoken language in my poems. The classical approach that I adopted in my early writing is not there any more. You may call my works are more open-ended and more relaxed now.

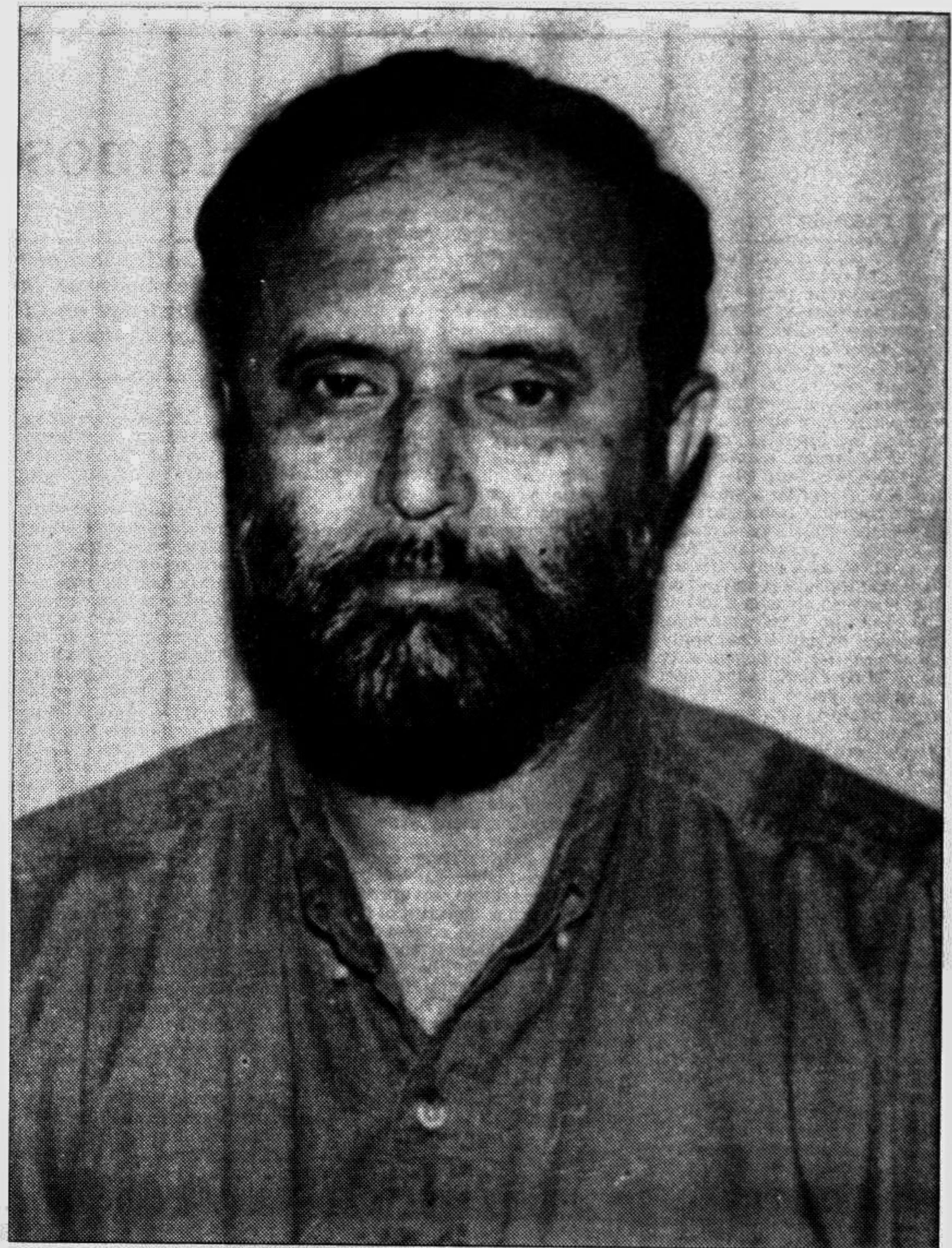
Q: But can we say that you are more conscious about the poem as a craft?
A: A poem is a craft. However inspirational you are you have to set your

emotion into a matrix, think about the use of words and logical sequence or the unity of the composition. The bottom line is: you need to work a lot to give expression to emotion.

Q: What is the future of poetry and, for that matter, literature in general?
A: I believe that as long as human being is there on Earth poetry will be there. The poems written in Greece about 2000 years ago survived. Maybe there has been a lot of transformation in forms and contents, but poetry is there however maybe the changes in entertainment circuit. If a time comes when there will be no book in print form literature will remain in another form — in CD or in something else. For the basic human sentiment has not changed very much, only his mode of reaction has.

There is little difference between the people of classical India and people of 20th century India except for the outward technological advancement. After spending his early days in Cox's Bazar, Muhammad Nurul Huda completed his formal education from the University of Dhaka in 1971. Before joining Bangla Academy in 1973 he had had a brief stint in teaching, and from 1996 he is with the Nazrul Institute as its executive director.

Q: The post-liberation war period witnessed a surge in poetry readership: Poets enjoyed quite a star status and their books sold like hot cakes. But over the past five years or so nobody seems to take interest in poetry anymore. And if you ask me to name a poet of the 90s I will definitely fumble. Fiction, on the other hand, has emerged as the dominant literary genre. And for the first time



Bangladeshi literature has popular fiction writers in Humayun Ahmed and Imdadul Haq Milan. **A:** Not that we did not have great fiction writers before but they did not enjoy teenage readership. The rise of teenage consumer class has effectively changed the readership scenario. I won't say poetry readership is sliding, it remained static while fiction won wider readership largely enjoyed by Humayun and Milan and to some extent Humayun Azad. Poetry readers are mature now. They are choosy as well. Though there is no survey as such to justify my

view but my experiences as a member of the Ekushey Book Fair Committee tells me it is so. In the 70s there were not very many poetry books published. Many a reader of the 70s turned into poets. The initial excitement with poetry after independence died down in the course of time giving way to more good poetry. **Q:** It's interesting to note here that the way the poets of the 50s and the 60s reacted to social events and participated in them and the activist zeal that brought them into limelight is quite missing among the poets of the successive decades. It might be a season for not

knowing the poets of the later period? And there were at least two great literary magazines that provided the right platform for the new literature of Bangladesh to take off. Literary magazines have now been replaced by the supplements brought out by the dailies. **A:** I agree with you at this point. To look at the literary journals published in the 60s we can have a time distance to be dispassionate and critical about it but it is very difficult to be neutral about what is being published now. To evaluate them properly we need to look at them from a time gap.

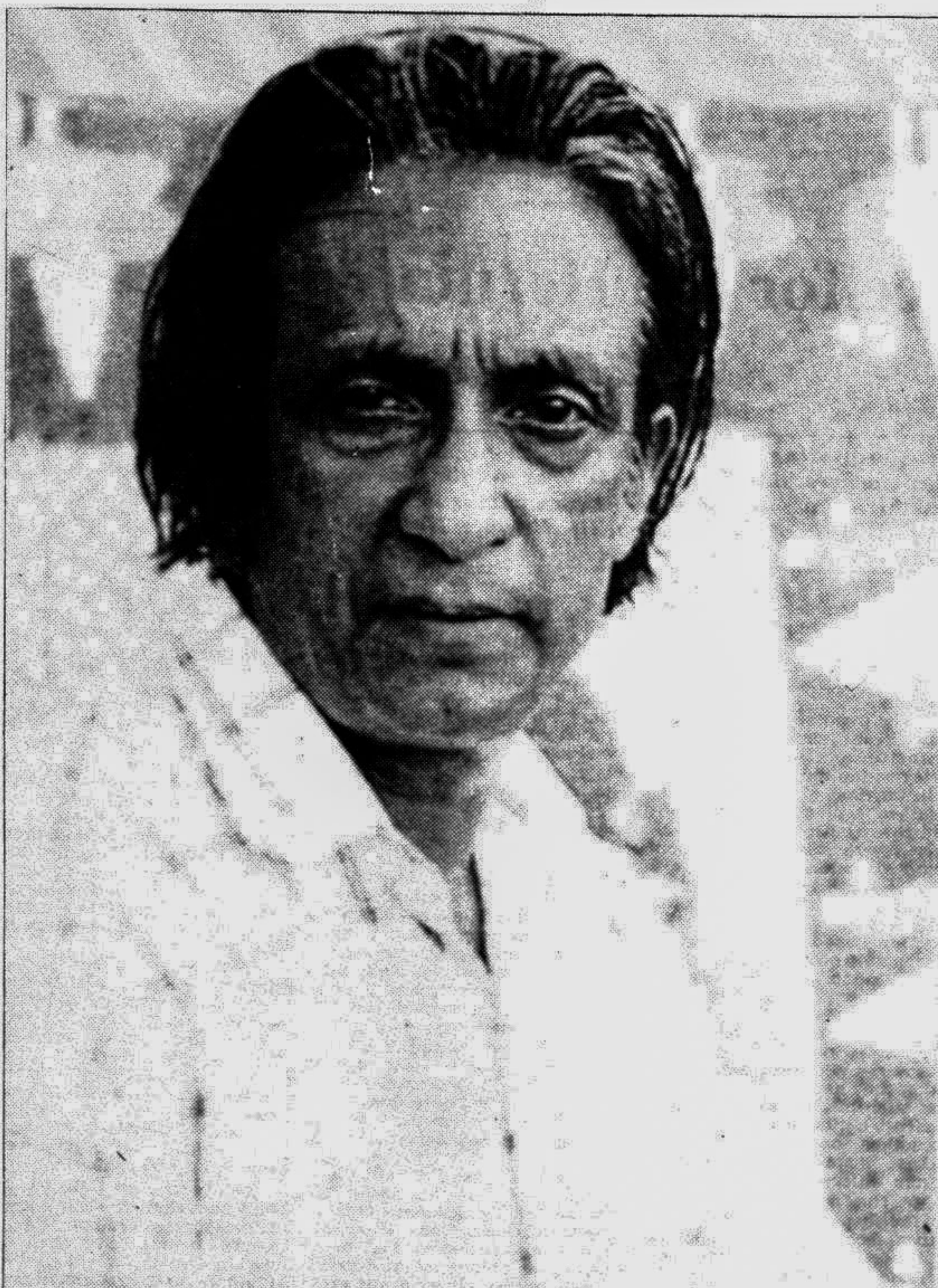
When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH ABDUS SHAKOOR SHAH

by Navine Murshid

HE is a teenager of the late 1950s. Professor and Head of the Crafts Department at the Institute of Fine Arts, Abdus Shakoor Shah spent his teen years in Bogra along with his nine brothers and two sisters. "I wonder how my parents handled all of us together," he exclaimed while talking to *The Daily Star* at his office at the Institute. His father, a Shah, was one of the Sufis who came to Bogra to preach religion. Therefore, religion was important to them. Although young Shakoor highly respected his father, he was very scared of him. "It was not because I was a naughty boy, but because he was very strict. He would set rules and regulations, which, if broken, would get us into deep trouble. Why talk about me? Even my eldest brother, who was thought to be an angel, was terrified of him!" However, he was not scared of his mother. In fact his mother pampered him and he was able to talk to her more freely. Today, he is amazed at how her mother could make every child believe she loved him (or her) most. That was a time when life was simple. Politics was a subject that only parents and elders talked about. Kids were left out of it, because they had no role to play there. "Yes, there were processions and assemblies at times, like that of Jukto Front's, but we hardly took part in those. Such politics never bothered us, and so we were not concerned." Abdus Shakoor's artistic traits took roots from the time he was not even

thirteen. He spent hours trying to draw long straight lines with one stroke, just like his elder brother who was studying Engineering at the time in Dhaka. "He also provoked me at times saying, 'There is a very famous artist in Dhaka. Can you ever draw like him?'" I smugly used to reply, "Good artist in Dhaka? That is not possible. Good artists live in Bogra only!" I later came to know of Zainul Abedin's works from the magazines, and soon all I could think about was how to be an artist. "He was a regular visitor at Puja festivals. 'The decorations there always mesmerised me. I used to watch in awe how they made a snake from mud. It was so real, so beautiful that I could stare at it for hours. Perhaps, this too planted the seeds of passion for art and crafts.' One of the most amazing aspects of those times was the abundance of food. 'Food was unbelievably cheap, especially when considered in today's context. A single person could not carry shopping worth of Tk. Five. It was that huge. I've seen people feeding cows with various vegetables because there was excess and would soon rot. I also came across fishmongers who would bury their fishes in the ground, because there were no other use for them. At that time, no one would've believed it if anyone said that one-day, people die out of hunger. There were numerous mango trees planted by the government, the fruits of which could be consumed by anyone who desired. Today, such things



are unthinkable," he said. His para-level friends were his true friends, especially so because they spent so much time together. Not

"Today I fear going out after dark. Two men walking past me at night seems like muggers even though they may not be so. We are becoming increasingly paranoid, but not without reason. There are positive sides as well. Technological progress is unprecedented and the new generation has a lot of opportunities to excel in life. In my time, we had to struggle to achieve something. Today, the children are being given the chances on a golden platter. I would urge them to make good use of it."

only were these friends his mates at fishing, they were 'partners in crime' since, the neighbours never

allowed them to take fruits from their trees if they went alone, they would go in huge groups and make sure that their demands were met. "It was only when we went in such large groups that they listened. Thankfully they never complained!" Interaction with his school friends was limited to time at school and the few occasions when they would go to other districts to play football. Therefore, they never really considered each other as good friends. The students' relationship with their teachers was surprisingly very good. The village teachers were very caring and always made sure that they were not overburdened. If something was left undone in one class, instead of giving it for homework, the teachers would reschedule it for the next day. "This way, we not only respected the teachers, but also had incentives to do well." After his intermediate exams, he followed his brother to Dhaka in order to study at the Institute of Fine Arts. He was apprehensive, but his desire to study art overpowered his homesickness. In Dhaka, he resided with his brother, who was able to teach him how to live an independent life. It was Dhaka that transformed young Shakoor into a matured, experienced Abdus Shakkor Shah. "That was the time when televisions had started to come into the market. He remembers being astounded at how pictures and sound could come out of a box. "Basically that was the time of change -- a time when technology started to have an impact on our society. It

seemed as though there was something new every day. I then realised that the villages had access to none of the upcoming technologies. In fact, people there never even heard of it. It surprised me how two places that look so similar can differ at such length." He feels that the main problem that engulfs society today is the rise in terrorism and crime rates. No one is safe even at home. "Today I fear going out after dark. Two men walking past me at night seems like muggers even though they may not be so. We are becoming increasingly paranoid, but not without reason. "There are positive sides as well. Technological progress is unprecedented and the new generation has a lot of opportunities to excel in life. In my time, we had to struggle to achieve something. Today, the children are being given the chances on a golden platter. I would urge them to make good use of it." About the present status of art in Bangladesh, Abdus Shakoor Shah is very optimistic. He sees the contemporary and new generation artists as innovative, enthusiastic and brimming with new ideas. Even though this is a poor, third world country, the standard is comparable to any other country of the world. Any words for the teenagers of today? "This is the time of technological progress. At this time, don't get so caught up in your work that you forget those for whom you are you: your parents. Listen to them. They are always right!"