Face to Face

Aftabul Islam: This is IT!

Information Technology (IT) is the catch phrase of the 21st century and Bangladesh is not to be left behind in this maze of technological turmoil. One personality who has been at the forefront in taking the local computer industry forward to face the challenges in a developing country is **Aftabul Islam.** He is the current President of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) right after serving two terms as President of the Bangladesh Computer Samity (BCS), the largest computer and IT related group of businesses in the country. He squeezed some time off his hectic schedule to talk to **A Maher** about the present state of IT in Bangladesh and how computers have changed the national outlook.

The Daily Star (DS): How do you see today's IT sector? How much has it coalesced with your original vision as BCS President?

Aftabul Islam (AI): The present state of information technology is not up to standards we would like. A lot of things are wanting - from human resources to smothered political tangles. Human resources are a big issue because without trained people it is very difficult to handle a concept like IT in a country like Bangladesh. Then again, that is not the end of the road - if I may sound a trifle exaggerating, the possibilities are enormous. One of the most important things is the attitude we adopt. The advent of IT into society has changed the whole landscape of business and development in countries pepping into an accelerating 21st century.

It is stark reality that the formula for success of the last decade will be deemed a formula for failure of this decade, if one dares to implement it. According to foreign observers, 8 out of 10 countries are likely to falter with the surge of progress if they do not incorporate IT-based policies.

As for my vision, my subjects themselves have taught and given me immense hope. When I organised the BCS Computer Show in 1998 while President, at the present BCS Computer City, some 300,000 children came from remote districts outside Dhaka to see the show for themselves, learn about the world of computers. There would not be great difficulty in utilising this lot as they are not afraid of the subject, they want to learn about computers.

DS: To what extent are Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) followed in Bangladesh and what are the advantages or disadvantages of its impact?

AI: Presently there is no law regarding Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) in the country. And because of this we are facing many direct and indirect problems. The programming side of IT in Bangladesh is affected; programmers get discouraged if their software is copied by thousands of people. And worse still they cannot sue the offenders because there is no law; we have very good programmers who gradually lose interest and this has an accumulating negative impact on the software economy.

The terms 'cyber piracy' and 'cyber laws' are obscure in our country, the government needs to enact these concepts to strengthen the computer and software industry. When foreign companies want to place orders with our local software development houses, they first want to know if the developer has IPR provisions. What we have been doing for ages, is telling them that the provisions are under way but how long can we keep doing this? Violations of the IPR are rampant - ironically even the Government wants copies of software in their tender bids!

DS: Today IT is the catch phrase in all development sectors. But we have some 75 per cent of the population who are illiterate. Seemingly there is a conflict in visioning - how do you resolve this?

AI: It is true that a significant proportion of our population may be immune to technology. Nowadays the definition of literacy has changed. Globally, a literate person is judged by his academic education as well as his computer knowledge. When governments provide education they also have to train the children - and the overall

society - on basic IT knowledge, it has become an integral part of educational policies in developed countries.

But even if we take 80% of the population to be uneducated what of the remaining 20 per cent? This is still a huge labour force, which can be exploited and nurtured to become highly skilled professionals. They can be exported to developed countries with considerable earnings in foreign exchange. And then think of the Bengali psychology - if the masses see a section of the society reaping the rewards from IT then they are sure to follow suit. They will make themselves educated to follow the trend.

DS: The software industry or software development seems to be the most flourishing IT sector. What is the future of programmers in Bangladesh?

The Internet reach has to be widened; now you can get access only at Chittagong and Dhaka, there is no national network. The national budget does not have figures for computerisation and we are taking about IT!

AI: We foresee a bright future. Opportunities are there and more are coming everyday. But because of problems with the policies and infrastructure we might be heading in a completely wrong direction. What we need are skilled computer professionals to come out of the training schools which we are not getting. We have good programmers comparable to those in India and they may even become better in the next 5 to 10 years. Programmers have to be protected, encouraged and given more facilities. One of the impediments here is the constraints in English they face; this makes others have an edge over them so the English base also has to be strengthened.

DS: There appears to be no love lost between the BTTB (Bangladesh telecom authorities) and the local Internet Service Providers

(ISP's)? What is the score now?

AI: They are still leading. BTTB has a very strong hold on their turf and don't intend to let go easily. They have all the VSATs and can charge at will for them. They defend this by scaring the government with accounts of dire financial losses stemming from any privatisation move. There will be some fall in revenue with privatisation but the profits will be much greater to the whole nation. E-commerce should have been a household word in the business circles but our telecom sector, one of the poorest performers among the SAARC nations, is not providing for simple data downloading. BTTB is also capable of video conferencing facilities but we don't avail of it. A complete overhaul is needed to make BTTB and the telecom sector more social establishments

and the problem is no one wants to stir the pile of red tape and Bengali bureaucracy.

DS: Could you tell us something about e-commerce? Can Non-Resident Bangladeshis help to bring about promotion of IT in business?

AI: E-commerce is the growing new art, or actually a science, of shopping and trading through the PC. It's basically paying virtual cash through the Net to any part of the world from your desktop. E-commerce brings about a revolution in the local market structure. The theory of distribution of a product is shattered because the middlemen are broken. Take the example of our traditional cloth weavers in the village. Normally he would sell to someone who would then come to the city and resell the garment to a bigger shop that in turn ex-

plodes the price and sells to the public. The weaver gets a minimal amount and the value is eaten up at all the reselling points. But with e-commerce the weaver can contact the big seller directly, maybe half way across the globe at half the cost, and sell his product at a much higher price. In this way both benefit and the poor are not deprived of their rightful price.

Now, the Non-Resident Bangladeshis can play an enormous role in promoting this. What we lack is some sort of platform for them to speak from. They need a forum to address, which the government has so far failed miserably to see. They give us a glimpse of their contributions by the very fact of the exclusive positions they hold abroad. There are numerous Bangladeshis working in corporations like IBM and Intel; these giants even have our people in their cov-

eted research sections. Can you assess the huge impact NRBs can have on our IT industry?

DS: There is a growing concern over mushrooming IT centres and 'computer training schools' in the city with regard to the qualifications of the tutors. How much is really being taught in these places?

AI: Actually there is no accreditation board or committee for these institutions at the Government level. It is supposed to be under the Ministry of Science and Technology but even there qualified people are needed to oversee the activities of the private centres. The rapid growth of these centres has had a positive effect in that it has ushered in competition and now the institutions are delivering more. At first some unscrupulous owners swin-

died and ripped off students but that is now being checked by competition.

DS: How much has tax reduction on computer accessories helped? Is there any cases of smuggling computers or chips to and from India?

AI: Tax reduction has helped no doubt - it has pushed computer-related sales to capture 60 per cent of the market. Earlier it was just the business community, now it is the students and educational institutions that have been purchasing the most, making a growth rate of 40-50% an encouraging reality. But slashing tariffs are not the only step. There has to be a 'hand-holding' attitude of the government with the IT business community that is very important; the government cannot just lower taxes and let us drift - that is of no use. Support with infrastructure, protective laws and parallelism in ideals is a must for improvement of this sector.

As for smuggling we see many items like spare parts of machines, cigarettes and drugs being reported in the press. Have you ever read news of computers being smuggled? There is no point in smuggling to India because of the price difference in Bangladesh and the selling point in India. You see, the prices in Singapore - where a significant amount of computer goods are imported from - and Bangladesh is not much. So as a businessman I would not find it economically cost effective to practice such a trade. And then there is the cumbersome task of transporting a whole PC set across the border which further reduces the chance of smuggling; even if it crossed the border it would only go as far as Calcutta. More importantly the seller there could not give warranty for a product from Bangladesh so there would be no customer at that price.

DS: There is a crying need for infrastructure in this sector. What complaints do you have in this regard?

AI: The Bangladesh Computer Samity is not a Government organisation. So it obviously needs assistance to improve a sector as important to national interest as information technology. The role of the government in this regard is essential so it is unfortunate when we cannot fit in together more efficiently.

We lack some very basic things and it is not because we are poor or backward There is still no concrete IT policy in the country on a national level. This is a crucial guideline to moving forward, otherwise we would have to grope about aimlessly in a super-fast changing field. There is also no IT park although we have heard some talk about it; these facilitate everything from one place, from hardware to data transfer - governments are supposed to do these, not private entrepreneurs. Again I emphasise on working together with the government.

Sometimes it is really frustrating to see us (the private sector) implementing something and the government going in exactly the opposite direction. Read Alice in Wonderland! One of the things I have been advocating is updating of the Jamilur Reza Committee (JRC) Report which is an important blueprint for us - the present (original) one is obsolete.

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When I was a Teenager ...

In Conversation with Kaiser Haq

By Navine Murshid
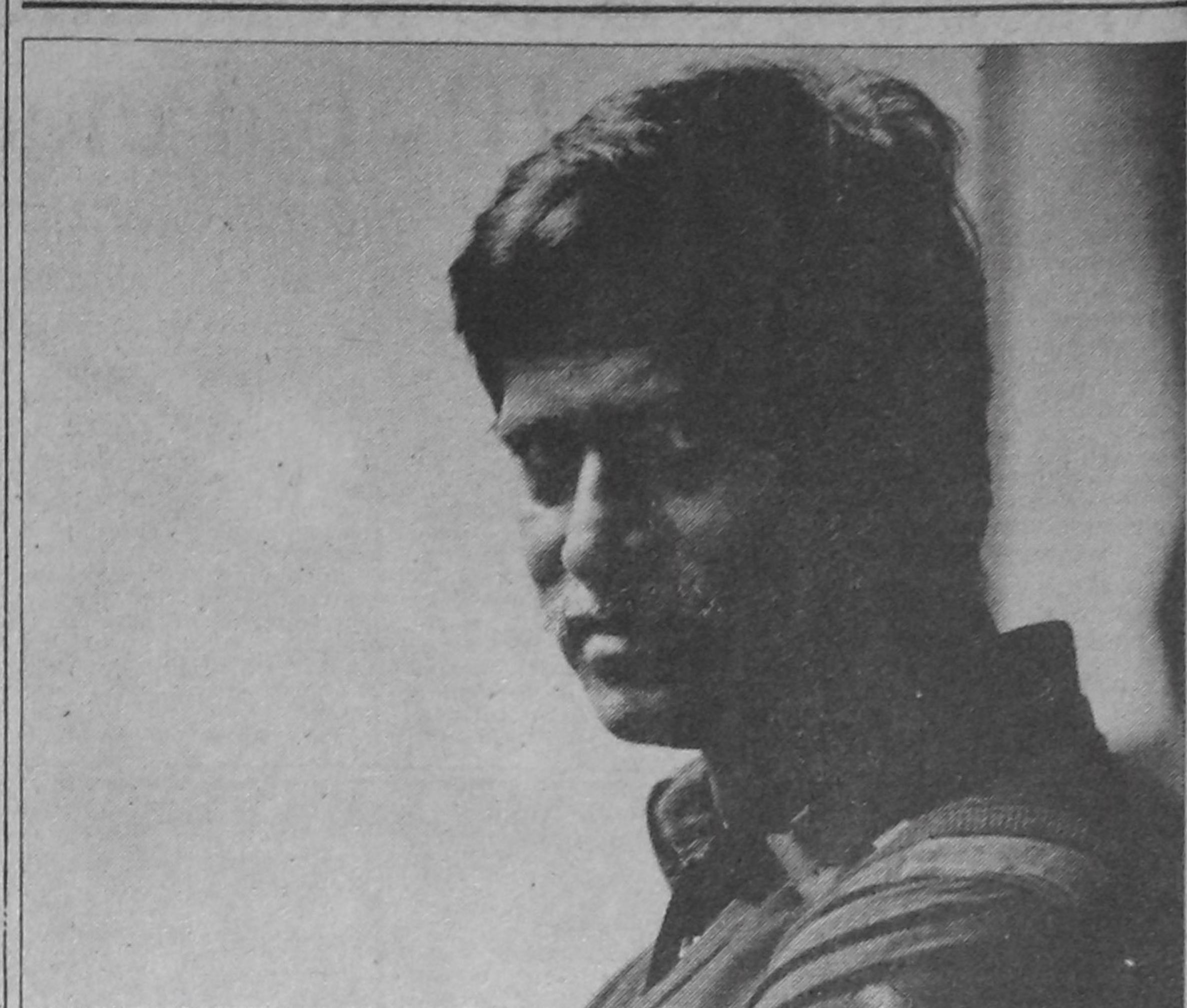
IF there is one event in his teens that shaped up his entire life, that was his encounter with D H Lawrence's poem *The Snake*. A product of the 1960s, Kaiser Haq, a professor at the English Department of Dhaka University, a poet and a writer, found in this poem a freedom that he never had before.

"At that time most poems I had come across were traditional English poems with meters such as Iambic Pentameter and so on. There was an alien flavour there that never came naturally to non-English speaking people. *The Snake* opened the world of free verse for me. I realised there was more to poetry than rhythm, rhyme and meter. Of course, free verse has its own rhythm and meter, which may often be more difficult to capture, but at that time it was like a relief; it signified that I could be a poet too," he said while talking to *The Daily Star* at his Lake Circus residence.

Kaiser Haq proudly claims to be a teenager of the 1960s because it were a significant decade next only to 1920s in importance. 1920s saw emancipation of women, girls starting to wear miniskirts and have short hair; the same thing re-emerged in the 1960s. In art, the 1920s saw an outburst of high modernism; in 1960 there was yet another explosion of creativity and expression. It was the time of new fiction, post-modernism, new journalism and a complete change in lifestyles.

"The 1960s will remain an important point in time. And I do feel good I come from that era!"

1963 - the year he was thirteen. He was getting ready to leave St. Gregory's School to join Fauzdarhat Cadet College in Class 7. In the music scene at that time was Elvis Presley of whom young Haq was an ardent fan. When the Beatles entered the picture, he looked at them as a threat to Presley's greatness! However, after a while he learnt to compromise, and like both of them! Inspired by such music legends, he and some of his friends at cadet college joined the music club and played occasionally. However, Cadet life did not suit him well. Within no time, he was tired of the rules and regulations; tired of the strict, orthodox environment. What added to his sorrows was the fact that his Gregorian friends had more freedom; they could whatever they felt like while he was stuck at a cadet college. So, after two years of cadet college he was out of there and back to St. Gregory's.

"Yes, I was allowed to go out more and I had a lot more freedom. It felt great. Looking back now, it was fun, I suppose. But my friends in Dhaka could go and watch movies while I couldn't. And I wanted freedom."

He may have appeared to be a very carefree and fun-loving young chap, but he

"I realised that the world is really a dark place; it is a place where for every improvement concomitant is degeneration in other areas. Even in my teens, when life was interesting, there were artists/writers who forced me to explore the darker side of life, e.g. Kafka, Sartre, Kamini."

was serious when it came down to books. He spent many wonderful moments reading at the USIS library at Topkhana Road.

"But I wasn't a nerd. I read Plato, but at the same time I read James Bond. At Fauzdarhat I finished the whole of Sherlock Holmes. It simply drew me in. I certainly never thought that I would grow up to be an intellectual!"

Politics had already entered the young Kaiser's life, mainly through conversations overheard at mealtimes. He was therefore quite aware of political changes. He went to his first protest march with some of his Gregorian friends in the late 1960s. Protest against the Pakistan rule had already started at some places. They joined a procession and later went to Madhur Canteen where leaders spoke and they listened.

Then, the very idea of sitting at a political meeting was so great, that he did not really perceive what was going on. Young Kaiser changed his ambitions with the drop of a hat. From being a socialist to being a pilot, he had wanted to be almost everything when he grew up. However, in mid teens, he began to be seriously interested in Literature.

"I think it was because of one of our teachers, Brother Hobart, at Gregory's. He had an excellent approach to teaching. He would read out aloud something, and the critical appreciation that followed was very interactive. He had the ability to impart knowledge and I was drawn in. He gave me the feel of writing."

While his relationship with his teachers could be classified as friendly and warm, he felt his relationship with his parents was strange. He felt it was very formal.

"The whole attitude was 'children have their own lives, and so do parents'. There was no intimacy. There was affection, but we were all very distant."

A difficult time for the family was the time when one his three brothers got lost. He had gone to pay his college fees, and never returned. He was nowhere to

be found.

"It had a depraving effect on the whole family."

In his teen years, girls played their roles in his imagination only, like it did in most cases.

"I had very little contact with girls because of the social conditions. It was frowned upon. Girls belonged to fantasies only and I believe it was the same for the girls. One or two of our friends talked to girls sometimes and even managed to have romantic affiliations, in which case, we would pester them with questions.

"When someone wrote a love poem in the school magazine he would never hear the end of it. We would go on and on about it. It was a very repressed society then. It still is."

A very embarrassing moment in teens however had nothing to do with girls. He was made the class captain in Class 10. In spite of that, he was given detention one day.

"I was furious and embarrassed. My ego seemed to be at stake!"

Then came university, For the first time after kindergarten he was at a co-educational institution. He didn't know what to expect. He found the place very nice and the environment healthy. Students were few and students went there to study! Dhaka University gave him an exposure to English Literature and Philosophy that made this combination very appealing to him. He was advised against Philosophy so he ended up in English Literature, but he still feels attached to that combination. The end of his teens saw the beginning of the Liberation War of 1971 and he went off to fight.

In retrospection he feels that he was full of life; he felt he was immortal. He thought that there was a wonderful world out there that waited to be conquered, which one could fashion for himself. As he grew up, he realised the fallacy in it.

"I realised that the world is really a dark place; it is a place where for every improvement concomitant is degeneration in other areas. Even in my teens, when life was interesting, there were artists/writers who forced me to explore the darker side of life, e.g. Kafka, Sartre, Kamini."

The life, the spirit, the exhilaration that was present in his youth found way to pessimism today. Perhaps, rightfully too. With Bangladeshi illegal immigrants everywhere, with cheaters in every sector, with false Freedom Fighters, with bank defaulters and a chain of things gone sour, he sees not much reason to feel optimistic.

"I adopt 'entropy'. In layman's words, it basically means that the more order you try to create, the more disorder results. We are like that today!"

Any words for the teenagers of today?

"Be cool!"