

Face to Face

# Khondakar Ashraf Hossain: Blending emotion with intellect

**K**HONDAKAR Ashraf Hossain did not have a precocious start as a poet. His first book of poems, *Teen Ramanir Kassida*, was out when he was in his mid-thirties, quite unusual for a Bengali poet. But Bengali poetry readers heard a new voice in his *Teen Ramanir Kassida*. Beginning as a poet of discreet sensuality and emotional wariness, Ashraf in his five successive books ventured boldly into a greater variety of manners and styles. His recent poems collected in *Jamunaparba* show a feeling of pent-up force, of rhythmical energy as well as wit. An avid reader of world literature, Khondakar Ashraf has translated Sophocles and Euripides into Bangla. He is also a trenchant critic of contemporary Bengali poetry and has been editor of the literary magazine *Ekabingsha* for over a decade now. Poets of the eighties and the nineties are largely products of this magazine. He was awarded the *Alauval Purusker* for poetry in 1987.

**Q: In *Teen Ramanir Kassida* a new voice was heard in contemporary poetry. Finding one's own voice is not so easy and you have done it eloquently in your very first book.**

**A:** I reckon one of the reasons may be that I started a bit late. My first book of poems was published when I was 34. And quite understandably that's not the age for, you know, juvenile sentimentalism. By that time a poet's voice, his style, his vocabulary and his particular way of saying things should be fairly settled. I think that has happened in my case as a poet. And I chose not to include my poems of younger days in my *Teen Ramanir Kassida* as I was not very sure about myself.

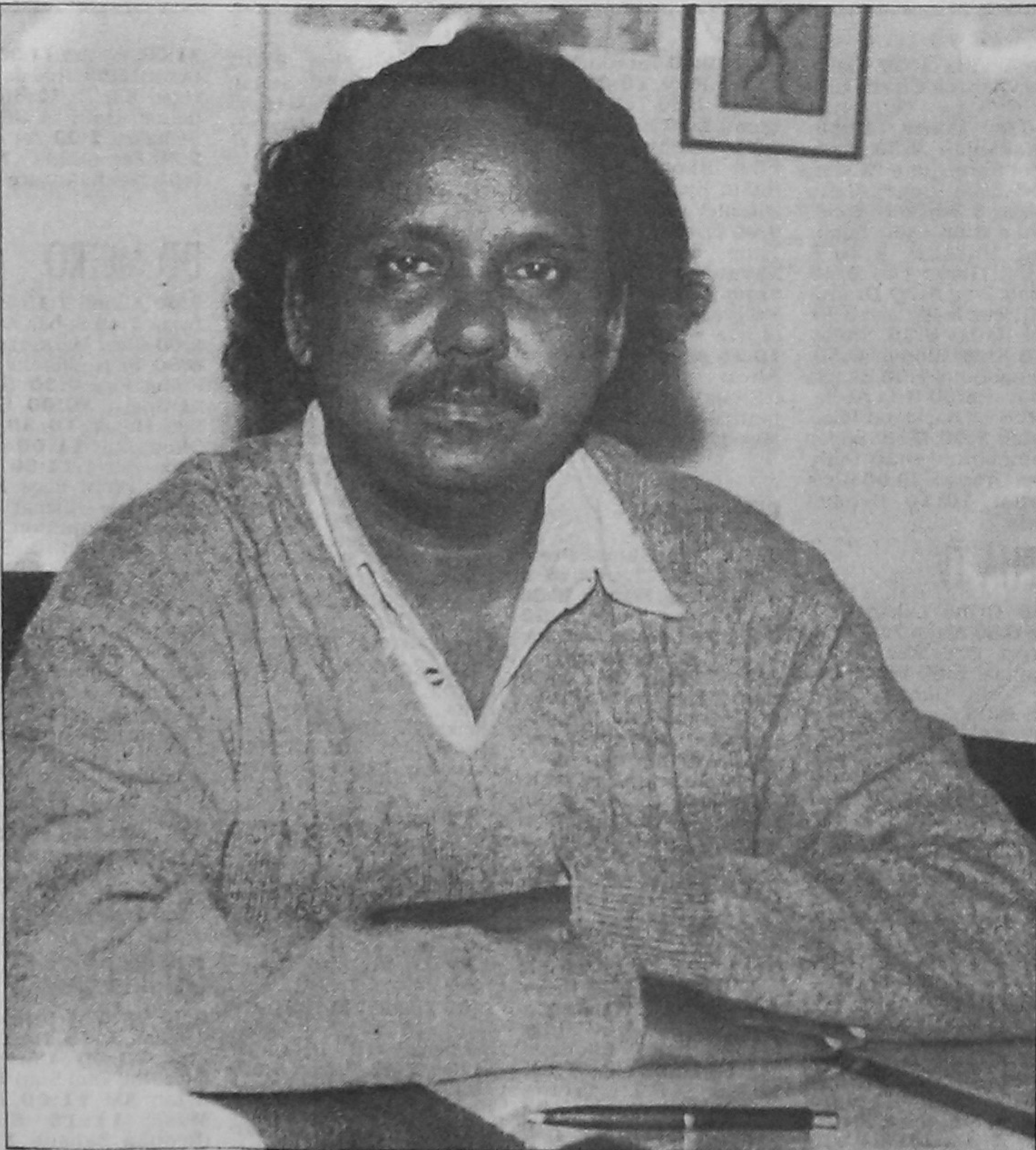
**Q: Was it a deliberate delay as you have said that you were not confident about your poetic self?**

**A:** That I could write poems, that I was a poet of sorts, that realisation came to me through a long process of soul-search. I was not sure whether I was a poet at all. If I'm not a poet there is no point to start writing just to advertise that I'm a poet.

**Q: So in your case the realisation came a bit late.**

**A:** I wrote poems in my university days and surrounded by poet friends. Mohammad Nurul Huda was one of my poet friends. We were in the same class. When we listened to lectures, he wrote poems sitting in the class room. We used to enjoy that and I envied him because I was not gifted as he was. Huda read out those freshly composed poems later on in our dormitory. I found a similar passion running in me and I also wanted to write. But somehow I could not rise up to the occasion and could not put my thoughts into writing. You can call it lack of self confidence also. Actually the decision to take poetry seriously germinated during my stay in England while I was studying for my Master's at Leeds University. I had lot of spare time in my hand. And I had done a lot of thinking about what I'm going to do after returning to Bangladesh. Should I give voice to the poetic urge jostling and shoving in me or lead a humdrum life of a teacher. But I knew that I have a creative urge in me and it had to find out an outlet. I thought it was time to put the music into words. That was the time when I more or less decided that I should seriously try and write poetry.

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Maybe it happens in a Wordsworthian way, emotions recollected if not in tranquillity then of course after a lapse of time when the inessential details are dropped out and the essence of the thing remains in me as kind of a crystal and I weave the lines of my poetry around that crystal. Or, in other words, emotions are like cocoon on which I wrap my thoughts.

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**Q: Is this process of coalescing true about your latest book of poems *Jamunaparba* which is very much about the present social and political milieu. This volume is a significant departure from your earlier works and the readers discover a biting satirist in you. It seems that increasingly you are looking at the outer world from your narcissist world.**

**A:** Yes, it is partly true. *Teen Ramanir Kassida* was completely about an inner

**By Ziaul Karim**

world; the world of feeling and sensibility. But in the very second book *Partha Tomar Tbra Teer* you will find that I have written poems about politics and about the society I live in.

**Q: But they are not as focused or as satirical as found in your latest collection of poems *Jamunaparba*.**

**A:** I agree that satirical vein is a thing in my poetry which has grown over the years probably because I have been embittered by what is going on not only in the society but also in literature.

**Q: Is this also the reason that you began to take interest in the post-modern writings more?**

**A:** Yes, of course. The tendency to parody and look at things from an unfamiliar and quizzical point of view are very much the traits of post-modern poetry. I have

been influenced by the post-modern doctrine. When I started writing poetry in the early eighties I had not been a reader of this world of poetry which I eventually did. Now that I have read a lot definitely more than I did in my formative years as a poet and I found out that the modern poets hide the emotional content of the poetry and throw their intellectuality over it. If you are serious all the time you may not find the audience. Once you attract the attention of the audience through a tone which is humorous, satirical or which dramatises the situation you get a better audience. And then you can say serious things to them. The post-modern poets speak in a satirical tone, possibly because of this. But I don't think I have lost that crystal of emotion which has always been there in-

side, deep down in my mind and in my heart.

**Q: There is also the element of what is called intertextuality in your latest book which is another trait of post-modernism.**

**A:** This has also increased in the last book. You will notice that my references are mainly to Bangla poetry of the past starting from mediaeval Bangla poetry. There are many allusions to the poetry of the thirties. For example, there are lines from Bisnu De's *Tappa Thungry*, and also from Sudhindranath. These are intertextual weaving which conforms to the post-modernist style. But this has not done not just as a stunt rather this has evolved I think out of the whole process - the theoretical developments in the world which I have read and came into contact with in the nineties.

## When I Was Teenager

**I**T was a time when the Bengali middle class emerged in the society, a time when the Hindus were the Bengali Muslims' main competitor, in terms of money, status and education. It was in the 1940s when Serajul Islam Choudhury, professor of the Department of English at Dhaka University, was a teenager.

"Education was very important. Parents made economic and dietary sacrifices to make way for their children's education. Parents' main concern was to provide their children with a proper education. Civil service was the most prestigious job at that time, and the government was the only employer. All parents dreamt of their children going to work at the civil service," said Serajul Islam Choudhury while talking to The Daily Star at his chamber at the university.

The upsurge that was created in 1948 when Urdu was declared the national language was mainly because the Bangladeshis felt intimidated. They had faced intimidation during the British rule; and they were not prepared to give up their mother tongue without a fight.

"Muhammad Ali Jinnah's speech at the Race Course created a sort of euphoria; it created respect for the new leader; but the prospect of Urdu as a national language frightened the students and those who were imbued with the sense of Bengali nationalism."

Young Serajul Islam Choudhury came to Dhaka after the 1947 Indo-Pak partition. Dhaka was a disappointment for him. There were no lights, no water, no electricity, no communication devices, no newspapers, no trains in Dhaka. Moreover, they had difficulties with accommodation.

"Although my father's roots were in Dhaka, my father never lived in these parts before. His job at the tax department took him, and us, to places and so this was the first time we came in contact with Dhaka."

He got admitted to St. Gregory's School, which, too, was a disappointment because there were only 15 to 20 students in his class! He sat for his intermediate exams on February 6, 1952 - a time of great turmoil in the country's history. His first encounter with atrocities involved in politics took place at around the same time. Students from all over had decided to take part in activities for their mother tongue. Young Serajul Islam, inspired by the atmosphere, joined the Dhaka College students along with his friends. The excitement was met by tear gas fired by the police. He was in pain and had to leave the scene. He later came to know of the firings on students.

The Dhakaitees, popularly known as *Dhakaia Kuttis* were witty, hard-working but poor people whose Bangla language and accent was highly influenced by the Nawabs of the yesteryears.

February's happenings changed the way they thought.

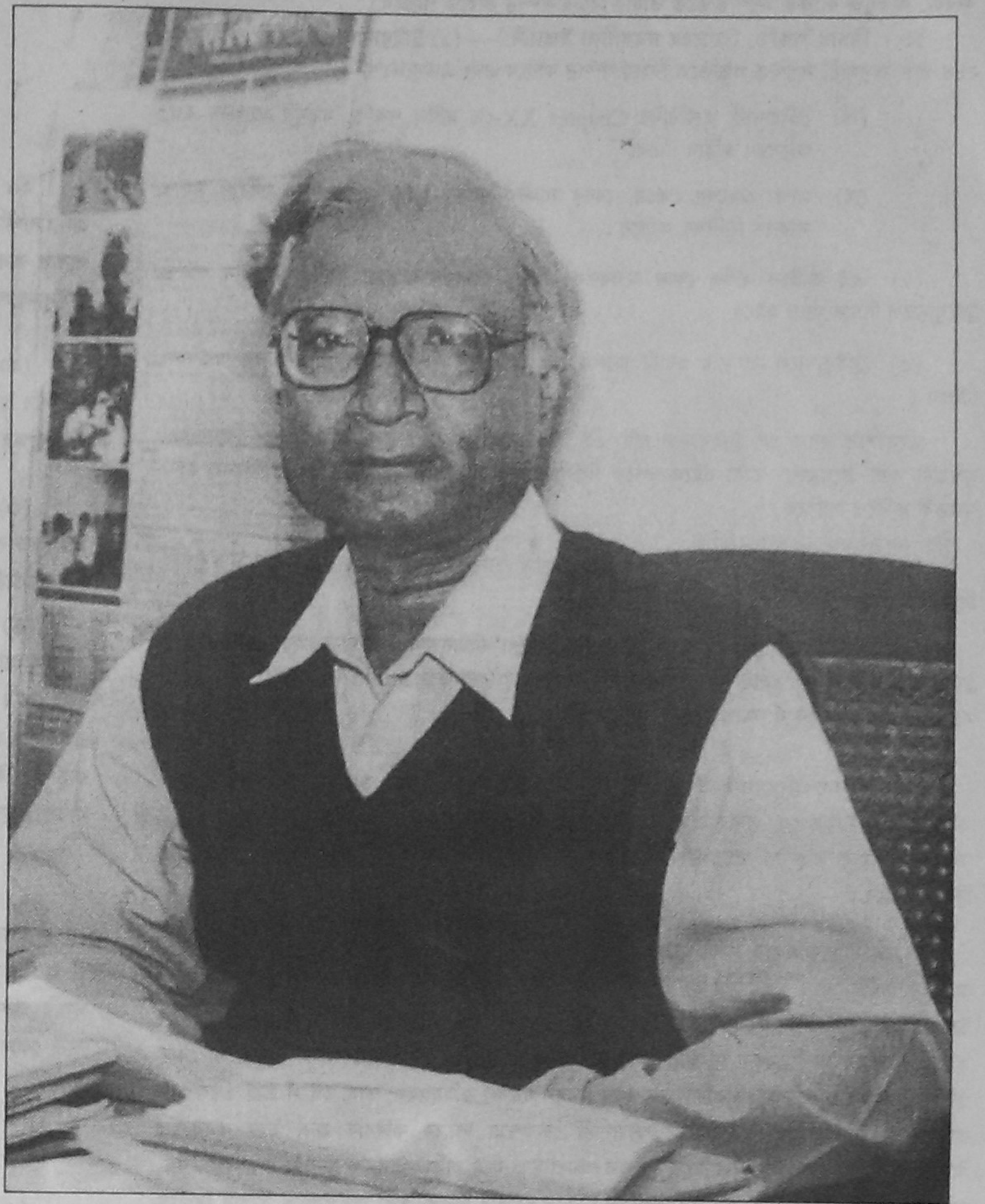
February 21 was the turning point in the cultural and political scenario. The animosity between the Kuttis and ordinary Bengalis suddenly dissipated. They never participated in our activities, and at times, even tried to stop us in our endeavours: tried to impose upon us their beliefs. When it was preliminarily reported that two students were killed, they were shocked. That had an electrifying effect and their attitude changed. This is mainly because students were prized.

At the time, Dhaka University, according to Serajul Islam Choudhury, was not an ideal institution. Those who couldn't go to Calcutta went there.

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# In conversation with Serajul Islam Choudhury

By Navine Murshid and Ekram Kabir



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Most families at the time were supportive of the Language Movement but parents were worried of getting victimised.

"The job factor was great for our fathers. They were always scared that their jobs will be taken away. It was very important that they had a good record in the police verification report. Involvement in the Movement meant fatal consequences as far as career is concerned."

He had dreams of becoming a civil servant because that was a sacred job; a civil servant was held in high esteem. Visions, in those days, were limited. Very few aspired to be doctors or engineers. But what was missing was the fear of unemployment. No matter what anyone did,

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number of Hindu professors to leave Dhaka University. Therefore, there were many positions that were vacant. The trend then was to get into lecturership and then join

ond, the fact that this job was not transferable! I did not want to move around places all my life. Moreover, I fell in love with Dhaka, which they called a city of 52 bazaars and 52 lanes."

So, has the society changed since he was a teen? "It has," says Serajul Islam Choudhury.

Today he feels that the kind of affection that was present in those days is not present anymore. Then, the family emanated 'togetherness'; today, the family has lost a lot of its past glory. In their adolescent years, they were closer to nature; they had, unlike today, all the greenery to feel proud of. Yet Serajul Islam Choudhury hasn't lost faith; he looks forward. Today's teenagers, as he says, have already a broader horizon in everything.

they were always sure to make a niche for himself in the job market. Doctors had opportunities to go abroad on scholarships; there were plenty of job opportunities for engineers; if someone wanted a profession at the University there was always the position to become a lecturer.

For him becoming a teacher was a natural process. In the 1950 riot, the refugees were instrumental. The non-Bengalis, particularly the Biharis, were in a bad state. They wanted houses, shops and other amenities. At that time, the Hindus started to desert Dhaka. The Hindu Bengali middle class felt their safety at stake. This caused a great

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