

Face to Face

Dr Abu Imam: One with Archaeology

The Daily Star (DS): What kindled your interest in archaeology?

Dr. Abu Imam (AI): My interest in archaeology was created by the inspiring teaching of Professor A H Dani in Dhaka University. He instilled into me some of his unbounded enthusiasm for archaeology and history of ancient and medieval subcontinents, particularly Bengal. It was mainly due to his efforts that the government of the then East Pakistan offered an overseas scholarship for archaeology. It so happened that I, a newly recruited history teacher at the Dhaka University, was selected for the scholarship. Thus incidentally I got the unique distinction of being the first Bengali Muslim to study archaeology at an undergraduate level in a foreign university, the University of London. The Institute where I studied was the Institute of Archaeology founded by the renowned Professor V. Gordon Childe, who was also its Director. At the institute, I had as my teachers such luminaries as Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Prof Max Mal- lowan (who was incidentally the second husband of Agatha Christie and had a magnificent country house at Davonshire where she entertained us with tea), Prof. Frederick Zeuner, the inventor of environmental archaeology, Prof. K Codrington, Kathleen Kenyon and many others of international fame besides Gordon Childe. Under the interdisciplinary system, I also had to attend classes at the famous SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) for ancient Indian history under the famous Prof. A L Basham, for Sanskrit under Prof. C A Rylands and for ethnology under the famous anthropologist, Prof. Furer Von Haimendorff. Then a junior teacher, the now famous F R Atchinn tutored me. Prof. Zeuner and Dr Cornwall took us to excavations at Southern England and Prof. Rawson who taught us Indian art, used to take us round the museums — the British Museum in particular, and to various industries to make us familiar with the process of manufacture of things, particularly pot-making. The legendary Dr. Plenderleith gave us talks on repair and preservation and we were told to go to Plenderleith when everything else had failed. We were given lessons in photography by Mr. Cookson. I also had to work in a museum for a fortnight and I chose to work in the Horniman Museum. Besides, I attended classes on Chinese art at the famous Courtauld Institute of Art. I also learnt French at the Language Tuition Centre and Russian in the Institute of Slavonic and East European Studies.

DS: Did you acquire any teaching experience in the UK on archaeology?

AI: In 1966, I was elected a Fellow of St. Antony's College at Oxford University where I stayed until 1970 and taught ancient history of the sub-continent and its architecture. I am still a member of that college.

DS: On your return from the UK, you joined several different universities. Did you do so because there was no scope for teaching archaeology at those universities?

AI: The tragedy that has dogged my career is that it was always in the history department, not the archaeology department, where I taught — be it in Dhaka, Rajshahi or Jahangirnagar — simply because of the fact that there was no archaeology department in any of the universities of the country. In the successive Five-Year Plans, we used to put in projects for the university archaeology department, but to no avail. It was only at the fag end of my university career that a magnificent offer came from the Ford Foundation and its archaeology enthusiast, Mr. Joshi. With the generous support from the Ford

Foundation and the enlightened interest of the then VC of the Jahangirnagar University my dream of founding a University Archaeology Department in Bangladesh was fulfilled.

DS: In your newly-founded Department of archaeology, what was your contribution in the field of archaeology by way of providing its direction and proper research programmes along with proper theoretical and practical courses for the students opting for that line of education?

AI: Of course, while planning for the new department of archaeology, I in consultation with the Ford Foundation, had to make provision for teaching the different branches of archaeology. And in this respect, we had to start from the very scratch and without any precedent in any of our universities. We had to provide for proper curriculum. Our resources, however, were limited. So to begin with, I started by training up (at Poona, India, a leading archaeology department, by world standard) our scholars in the basic three branches of our archaeology, i.e., one in early historic archaeology and one in medieval archaeology (Jadavpur University, Calcutta), and also weighing the importance of application of scientific methods in pre-history we sent up a geophysicist for their doctorate. Subsequently, we sent up two more scholars to Poona and they have returned after successfully doing their PhD. Thus we have at present a very strong archaeology faculty in the Jahangirnagar University.

In the first few years when archaeology was being offered under the aegis of the History Department as a preliminary to the eventual founding of the full-fledged department (before our boys came back with training) we had naturally a serious shortage of teachers and I found it extremely difficult to cope with the teaching single-handedly with only the help of part-time faculty. So we acquired through the good offices of the Ford Foundation the services of a renowned archaeologist from India, Prof. Dillip K Chakravarti, (now at Cambridge) who rendered valuable assistance. Besides, for the scientific side, I constituted a scientific committee with the senior professors of different science departments relevant for archaeology, who graciously co-operated. I also made provisions for having necessary books and journals, equipment and a museum. Research programmes, of course, depend on the kinds of facilities available — however, considering the age and strength of the department, our achievements so far have not been very small.

The University was situated in Savar where we have carried out exploration and excavation works yielding some important results and further work is being done by one of the teachers of the department. In the field of pre-history we have achieved important results at Mainamati in Comilla and at Chunarughat in Sylhet which are gradually figuring as important steps in drawing up the prehistoric map of Bangladesh — certainly a new and significant development. The antiquities of Vikrampur, for centuries an important political and cultural centre of South-east Bengal and so far neglected by archaeologists, are going to be examined soon. The scholars in the department along with the International Centre for Study of Bengal set are now paying attention with preliminary probes in Waribateswar, a site which has great potentialities shedding light on early historic developments in these easternmost parts of the sub-continent. A member of the department has already made the very important discovery of a particular

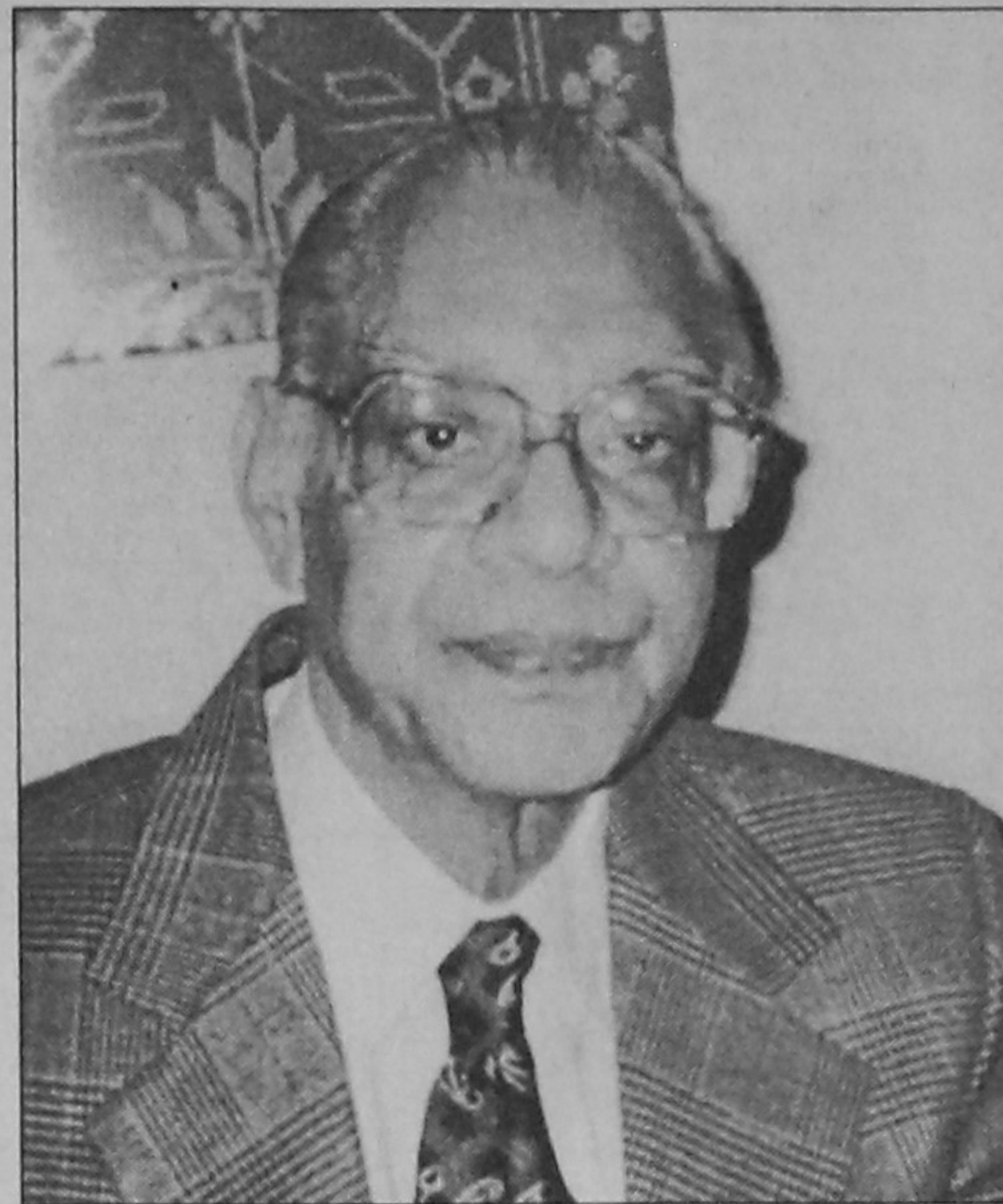
kind of pottery at Mahasthangarh (Bogra) — "the rouletted ware" — that should throw light on the commercial, industrial and cultural history of our country in the 1st centuries of the Christian era. A student of the department recently made the discovery of as many as three hitherto unknown Mughal mosques in Baniachang at Sylhet. Then there is the curricular requirement for the students to do field-work and write reports and every year three or more archaeological reports are being written by students after hard study and research and some of them are indeed of a very high standard-particular mention may be made of the report on pottery-making at Kagipara that the students wrote. Along with pottery, metal working and other crafts are also studied. A departmental journal containing the work of its teachers and students is regularly published. All this means that in both theoretical and practical aspects the department that I founded is making good progress.

However, we are handicapped for funds. This is a kind of department that needs special funds for exploration and excavation, which are expensive. We also need licence for excavation. We need fully equipped archaeological laboratories, more books and journals, more trained people. Ideally we should have more collaboration with the government Archaeology Department, the National Museum, the International Centre for Study of Bengal Art and other institutions like these. And I am indeed glad to see that some of this co-operation and collaboration is already materialising.

DS: What, in your opinion, is the scope for archaeological research and field work in Bangladesh?

AI: A lot is to be done, particularly in pre-history. The most important development in recent years in India is the discovery of a widespread culture which is called Chalcolithic. Sites in various parts of West Bengal have also yielded remains of

Dr Abu Imam is an eminent archaeologist of the country with a distinguished academic record. One of the senior-most educationists of the country, he was a Professor of History at Jahangirnagar and Rajshahi University with a break as lecturer at Dhaka University. He also had the unique distinction of serving as a Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford College of St. Antony's. He talked to *The Daily Star* about his life and work, delving into absorbing archaeological findings. Interviewed by ASM Nurunnabi



this culture. Now the question is: did this culture also spread to this part of Bengal that is now Bangladesh? We have to find the answer. Indeed there are lots of things waiting to be done. We have unearthed many Buddhist religious establishments which have thrown much light on our history — this has been extremely valuable work but at the same time this is valuable as far as it goes. There are lots of questions to be answered about the origin and development of the Bengali people and it can only be answered by the archaeologist and the anthropologist. There are many inscriptions that have still to be deciphered; ancient coins have not yet been studied with the desired depth. Sculpture, architecture, painting and minor arts and crafts have not been studied from different points of view, besides the religious and the artistic, from the angle of their setting and technol-

ogy, and trade and commerce and so on. The pre-Mauryan history is in complete darkness and yet, from the glimpses in the classical (Graeco-Roman) records there are grounds to believe that there were strong kingdoms in these eastern parts — it is the archaeologist's task to find out the truth since indigenous written records are not available. For that matter even the nature of Mauryan rule in Bengal is not very clear. Except for a few stray sculptures, the pre-Gupta period history is also in darkness. Recently, however, elements of a very interesting composite culture — a kind of Gandhara-Bengali culture — have sprung up.

These people were nourished by the merchants from the Gandhara region, now the modern Northwest Frontier Province area and were of the Kharoshthi sect as against the usual Brahmi of these parts; they settled in the sea-board area of south-

west Bengal. The famous ancient international ports of Chandraketurah and Tamralipti of roughly the last centuries of BC and the first centuries of AD have been recognised, throwing light on an entirely new aspect of our culture. Now it should be the Bangladesh archaeologists' task to trace how this kind of culture spread into the maritime areas of Bangladesh. For finding answers to all these, we have to undertake a diligent search for sites and cultural objects, inscriptions, coins and sculptures involving years of study. We have not even established any pottery sequence for Bangladesh archaeology. The somewhat enigmatic site at Waribateswar opens up new prospects of solving, may be, some of these problems. As I have said archaeologists attention is being drawn to the very important but hitherto neglected site. Various discoveries are gradually pressing upon us the necessity to find out and analyse the nature of our relationship with the Arakan-ancient, early medieval and of course medieval indications are there that it was more active than we have thought it to be; here again the archaeologist has a vital role to play. Similarly, Bengal's and particularly Bangladesh's relationship with South-East Asia in the field of commerce, maritime activities (via the southern parts of Bengal), ideologies, culture, religion, migration of people, has not been studied adequately on the basis of the material remains. So is the case with our relationship with Tibet and Nepal, the importance of which is now gradually being realised. What is important is exploring a few more promising sites and applying all the latest means (scientific and otherwise) for analysing, studying and making the evidence yield more information

than it was possible only a few years ago. However, for that we must have at our disposal latest scientific means and people trained in the use of these sophisticated technologies. Mahasthangarh has great potentiality courtesy of being occupied from presumably pre-historic to the medieval times; let us wait to see what results the Bangladesh-French Mission brings out. In our preoccupation with Varendra, we have tended to ignore the glorious history of Samatata (south-east Bangladesh). However, Mainamati finds in recent years have opened our eyes to its glories and achievements. Therefore, it has become imperative to intensify our search for more sites in the Samatata region that may yield more answers on the political, commercial, cultural, industrial, and artistic history.

There is also a lot of scope for research in the archaeology of the medieval period as exemplified by the discovery of the hitherto unknown Mughal mosques in Sylhet and also in the field of interpretation of already known inscriptions, coins and architecture for the purpose of social and economic history — a study that has not been attempted so far. The great potentiality of medieval archaeology has been recently demonstrated by the discovery of a whole complex of ruined medieval mosques at Barobazar.

DS: Do you think the present measures for preservation of historical relics in the country with particular reference to those in Dhaka are adequate? If not, what are your suggestions in this regard?

AI: The Archaeology Directorate is the custodian of the historical monuments and relics and there is no reason to think that they are not aware of the sacred responsibility that they

been entrusted with; but at the same time there are signs that there is some weakness somewhere, particularly at the lower level and I think the staff at this level have not been motivated enough about the importance of their duty and vigil — for these ruins have no apparent value in their eyes. For this some motivational training is necessary. But at the same time it is to be remembered that it is a two-way thing — what I mean is that along with the custodians, the public should also be aware of the value of their heritage and be co-operative and motivated to preserve and be kind to the visible evidence of their achievements in the past, not vandalise them and prevent others from vandalising. Indeed a motivational campaign should be undertaken at all levels; school curriculum should include archaeology and national heritage. I should also mention about another recent threat to our heritage — widespread smuggling for private collection.

DS: After your retirement as Professor of History at Jahangirnagar University, what has been your present preoccupation?

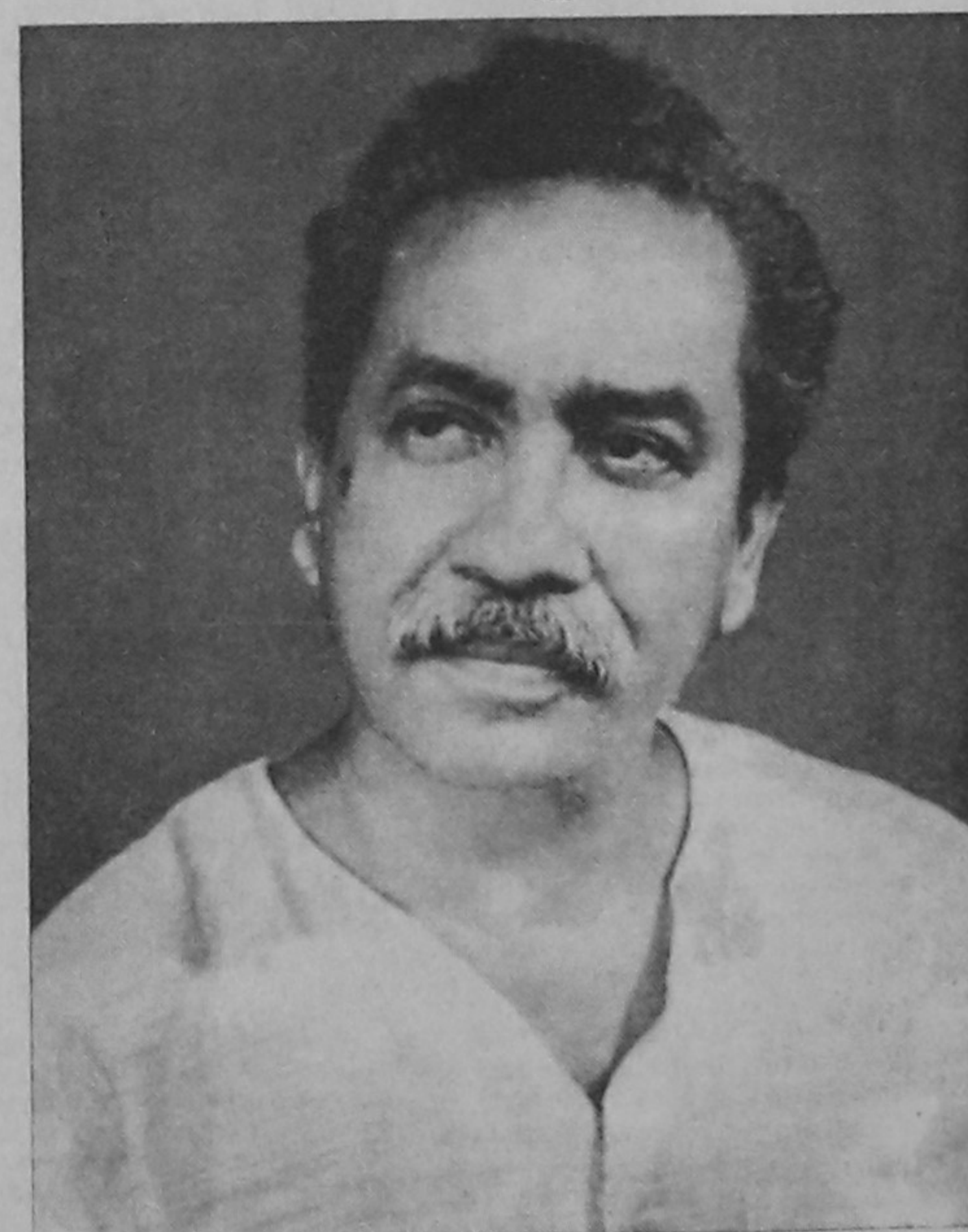
AI: I am presently engaged in writing a book on Mainamati besides preparing a book on "Selections" from the 19th century weekly newspaper "The Moslem Chronicle". I am also preparing a new edition of my "Cunningham" which is no more available in print. I am also actively engaged with the activities of the International Centre for Study of Bengal Art. Recently I delivered the Foundation Day Lecture of the Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Govt of West Bengal at Calcutta. I am also on the Editorial Board of the Bangladesh Encyclopaedia. So you can see that I am quite busy intellectually.

When I was a Teenager... In Conversation with Bhasha Sainik Gaziul Haq

GAZIUL Haq is one of the champions of our glorious struggle for the mother tongue nearly 50 years back. Popularly known as the *Bhasha Sainik* for his role in the Language Movement, Haq was also the author of the first song of the Language Movement, *Bhulona Bhulona, Ekushay February Bhulona* (Don't Forget... Don't Forget 21st February). A lawyer by profession, Gaziul Haq has represented many a famous personality as well as celebrated cases and is still raring to take

of 13, when he was a student of Class VI in Bogra. At the age of fourteen, came "the turning point" of his life. Politics took a turn for the serious and gave the budding teenager a harsh exposure. He took part in his first procession and got the taste of British law. It was the time of the anti-British movement and one of the senior marchers told him to bring down the Union Jack from atop a building and replace it with the colours of the Muslim League. And that too from a police station! Our young activist slithered up

By A Maher



At 15 he wrote a poem against the British Raj and almost got arrested again. In 1948 and at 19, he headed the "State Language" procession. Earlier in 1944 he had witnessed Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq present a closing argument in Bogra court. The young kid was captivated and readily made up his mind about what he wanted to be.

sued the latter with more resolution then he could have extended the North Bengal District championship to greater achievements. One incident Gazi remembers is that of a prank played at school and which highlighted his commitment to friendship.

It was actually a classmate who wanted to play the prank on one of our teachers. He found a big frog on the school premises, killed it, and put it under the teachers table in the classroom.

"He was a clever chap; the dead frog was placed there on Saturday so since Sunday was a holiday (in those days) the frog started to rot by the next class on Monday. The whole classroom was filled with a putrid smell. The teacher ordered a search and I actually helped him find the dead frog. Then he began to suspect me and grilled me to disclose the culprits. I told him I couldn't because he was a friend of mine and would get caned if found out. The teacher got infuriated and I got caned."

Even then the adamant Gaziul Haq would not betray his friend and the dim reached the ears of another teacher in the next room. He heard the whole story and was both surprised and proud of the boy. From that day onwards he became a very fond student of that teacher.

Gaziul Haq's earlier life

shifted between versatility and turbulence. Haq recollects how he was into music. He played tanpura, sitar and even learned to sing from his mother and a brother. He was in fact quite good because when he used to indulge in *adda*, one of the trends in those days was to let your voice fly in a circle of friends. In between these, revolutions touched the life of our growing advocate and reminded him of his patriotic responsibilities. At 15 he wrote a poem against the British Raj and almost got arrested again. In 1948 and at 19, he headed the "State Language" procession. Earlier in 1944 he had witnessed Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq present a closing argument in Bogra court. The young kid was captivated and readily made his mind about what he wanted to be. However, he studied history at Dhaka University before switching on to law.

Today, Haq misses an important aspect of life from his days of youth. "Don't you think people nowadays lack that sentiment of warmth and caring?" he asks. "Nowadays friends stab friends, friends plot another's downfall. The youth are getting increasingly devoid of a manner that comes from the heart. We need to care, love and help each other. These simple things are simple things but they build youth in the way they were supposed to be built."