

People

Face to face

Farhad Mazhar: A voice of our time

One would feel like quoting from Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography* to describe Farhad Mazhar: *Three passions simple but overwhelmingly governed his life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the sufferings of mankind.* A poet, a trenchant social critic, and a dispassionate scholar, Farhad Mazhar is a unique blend of scholar, aesthete and political activist. He challenges and stimulates our thoughts in every area of our social and political life.

FARHAD Mazhar was born in 1947 in Noakhali. After having his schooling in the small mufassil town of Noakhali, he did his graduation in Pharmacy from Dhaka University and a R. Ph from New York. He also did an MA in Economics from New School of Social Science in New York. He also worked as a registered pharmacist in New York between 1976 and 1980. He was also involved in formulation of the national drug policy in 1982.

Mazhar has specialised in bio-diversity and genetic resources. In 1984, he formed UBINIG, a policy research and campaign organisation. He has over 50 books of poems and essays to his name. His collection of poems *Ebatadnama* has been translated into English by Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak and is incorporated into the Third World Literature course at Columbia University, USA. He is a gifted musician himself and composer of several memorable songs. Lately he has formed a cultural group called *Nabapran Andolon* to revive the oral philosophical culture of Bengal.

The Daily Star (DS): You hardly fit into the notion of a traditional intellectual. With a mane of thick hair flowing over the shoulder and donned in a fatua and lungi you remind one of a hippie of the 1960s or a mystic. Dress, as we know, is a statement. What is that you are trying focus on by being draped differently from the established dress code of the elite class?

Farhad Mazhar (FM): Yes, very truly I am making a statement. And what is that? I pronounce my defiance through my outfit. I try to declare that the existing norms of the society are unacceptable to me. I also defy the way we engage in discourses. I defy at the same time the kind of prototypes that are typical of the modern society. For this modern society, human being is like a product coming out of machine; as if everyone were like the other. So, I have decided to be different.

DS: The fundamental contradiction of the modern society is that it preaches freedom of thought and talks about diversity at a surface level; but, in practice, it wants to dismantle individuality in the name of universal culture or a Coke culture if you like.

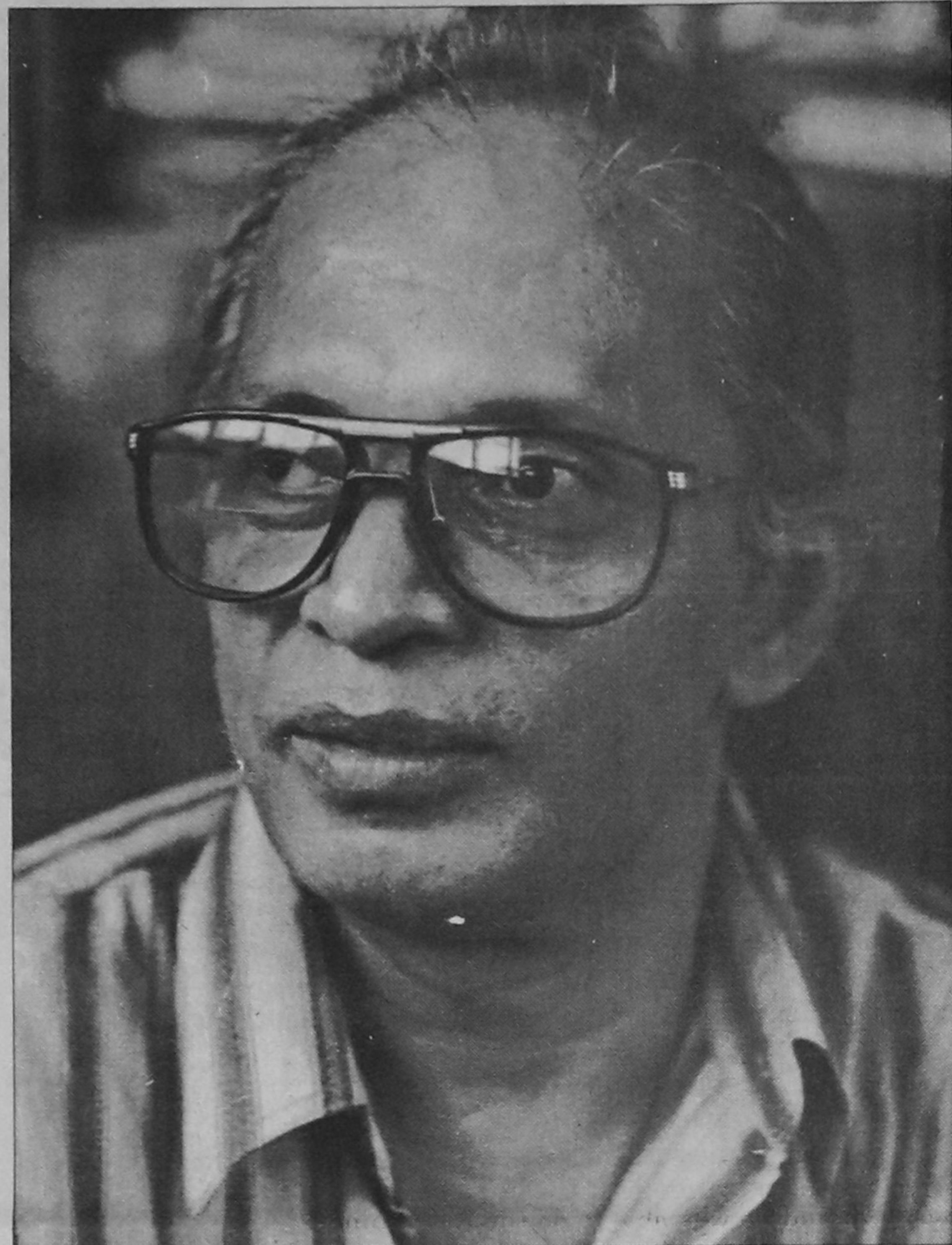
FM: They don't believe in individuality; they believe in individualism. And these are not the same.

DS: Where do you draw the line between the two?

FM: Individualism is egocentrism. It produces a homogeneity in terms of assuming a notion that all human beings have the same kind of ego. My outfit in a certain way is a defiance of that. I don't want to be trapped into a much-hyped monoculture, which would kill my individuality. I think individuality is very important, because it is beautiful to see everyone is different. And that is what I celebrate. I feel that we should develop a politics of difference where one can be different with one's own desire and with one's own preferences.

DS: So, when we talk about national culture or national identity, aren't we referring to some kind of homogeneity which takes away, if we agree with you, our individuality?

FM: You are right. The whole construction of nationalism definitely produces a kind of bogus or illusory identity. I have preferred to live differently and would like to make the statement that in some way I'm not like all of you. And also I don't like to follow the dominant trend of the society to which most of you



have succumbed. Secondly, there is a deeper philosophical reason for my being dressing up differently. In my quest to trace my cultural roots whatever I have discovered I tried to fashion my life in that style of my 'own culture.' I want to highlight the term 'own culture' because I was born in Bengali culture accidentally and not by choice. Since I grew up in this culture I feel at home in it. And all the cultures that are being absorbed into our cultural stream are flowing through me.

In another way my attire is a kind of resistance against the encroachment of globalisation or global culture which is trying to melt me within its own stream. I'm not saying that something is eternally good in my culture what I'm trying to point at is that melting into global culture may be dangerous and I feel I have

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DS: But then how do we participate in global culture or, if that is not the correct

By Ziaul Karim

to preserve a separate identity from this.

DS: If we look at the social and cultural evolution in our part of the world, it is quite evident that we are the product of a hybrid culture. This sub-continent for very many reasons had been a centre of attraction for the Greeks, Portuguese, French, for the businessmen from Asia Minor, and for the British for centuries. And we have absorbed generously the cultural ethos and nuances from a diverse source. So, is the claim for our 'own' cultural roots not also an illusion? What, in your definition, the image of a Bengalee?

FM: I'm not hell-bent to prove that indeed there is something called Bengali culture. By choosing a par-

word to use, other cultures of the world? Or, how should one respond to world cultures?

FM: When I am singing a mystic song of Bangladesh or dressed up in our local attire, I am creating global culture. What would come to me from the so-called centres of the world culture is global and the rest is peripheral. I defy that.

DS: So, you are for active participation in global culture.

FM: Of course, I want to participate actively and react positively with all the cultures of the globe. Everything is interesting to me.

DS: The question of cultural identity has troubled the nation for long and still continues to divide the na-

tion into two. There are people who believe that our cultural ethos should reverberate with Islamic values and lifestyle. On the other hand, the progressive circle adheres to the values and ideals upheld by the enlightened Bengali Hindus in the late-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century?

FM: Let me begin with a personal reference. You can see there is a statue of the deity of learning Saraswati in the room where we are now having a dialogue. She inspires me tremendously. She is a metaphor for me and I worship her because it helps me organise my thoughts. Look at the image of the deity she is standing on, a blossoming lotus

flower with a harp in her one hand and a book on the other. It is a beautiful metaphor that evokes your imagination.

DS: Are you trying to say that we have failed to respond to a rich metaphor culturally available for thousands of years because of our identity crisis?

DS: I think this has more to do with the incapacity of our middle class, who define the cultural norms and shape the cultural psyche, even to understand their own history. And, secondly, what contributed heavily to the crisis is a kind of totally communal and reactionary Bangladeshi nationalism. Our middle class fail to understand that we share through our language and through our living a tremendously rich tradition which you can term as Hindu culture. There is nothing called Hindu religion as such. Even the name Hindu was given by the Persians because they could not pronounce the word Sindhu. So, any community living on the other side of the river Sindhu is a Hindu. On the other hand, Islam brought completely a different type of ethics, different type of allusions to imagine the world to the shores of Sindhu.

People embraced Islam in a large number most of who were lower-caste Hindus. They thought that Islam was more egalitarian and preferred it compared to the caste system of Hinduism. These are all historical facts. Now what should be our task living in the 21st century and inheriting a 'confluence of two diametrically opposed ethical and religious norms?

First of all, I think, we have to identify what are our real problems for our own development and emancipation. I think the classical position of the Left that the imperialism should be the point of focus in the struggle against economic and political emancipation was correct. And in focusing your struggle on the economic relationship which is based on profit and loss you are actually opposing it and at the same time you are creating resistance against the kind of social dynamism, the kind of culture or superstructure it is producing. So, naturally you will search for anything that helps create your mental make-up culturally and philosophically either in Hinduism, Vaishnavism, in Lalou songs, or in Islam. Because in these cultural and philosophical ethos you will gather strength to create a new identity to fight back the phenomenon which is called globalisation.

In that sense I don't make any distinction between Islam and Hinduism. That is the reason why I very clearly say that I'm a Hindu and a Muslim at the same time maybe a Buddhist or a Christian because through modernity I have got of enlightening ideas which originated from Christianity. Well, now those who are wearing shindur (vermillion) or lighting mangal pradip are behaving as a class through their act, representing the elite. And this dominating elite class has nothing to do with the Bengali culture. Those people who think that Rabindranath Tagore and the nineteenth century literature are the only source of Bengali identity are in complete darkness. And are also communal because they do not recognise that the whole nineteenth century Bengali identity is highly communal in the way that the Hindu elite class excluded the Muslims and the Adibasis from that Bengali identity.

When I was a teenager . . . In conversation with Faiz Ahmad

FAIZ Ahmad is a noted journalist of the country having been in the profession for over 40 years and that too an eventful 40 years. To him, he may be the intellectual who never got to become fully fitted into a strict definition. This was because Faiz Ahmad's earlier days that shaped his future were much different than that of other intellectuals. The man has authored over 50 books and interestingly almost half or more of them focus on children. As if versatility could not be kept waiting too long, he now owns, arguably, one of the largest art galleries in Dhaka. The founder of *Shilpangan* is also an art critic. *Ekushey Padak* fame journalist Faiz Ahmad gave us an absorbing recollection of the unique days that he had to leave behind to become the present man past his seventies.

Faiz Ahmad was born in Bikrampur near Dhaka around the 1930s. So he was one of those who had seen governments, people and countries change all in a lifetime. In fact he says,

"I am man of three countries, three eras. I was born in British India (then), lived to see and live in Pakistan and now I am a Bangladeshi."

and revolutionising the way people in those days looked at life and society.

Young Faiz was an ardent hunter and horse rider. Fishing too was also in his sporting list. But the amusing thing is all these instances had their endings in peculiar fashion. The family had a gun in the house so our budding hunter had handled guns from an early stage. But one day he shot at a bunch of sparrows with spray pellets from his shotgun. As several of the birds fell to the ground he heard a woman's voice cry out at the same time. He ran to the

me as 'something' else: they became concerned at how my life was changing and being less and less like 'theirs'. Luckily my parents, on the other hand, were proud of their son and secretly liked my courage and view of life."

Faiz Ahmad considers this aspect of his teenage life as one that shaped his future manners and philosophy of life in general. He is particularly recollective of his temperament at that time. He was a boy who had been exposed to higher political philosophies at a young age and took to preaching them

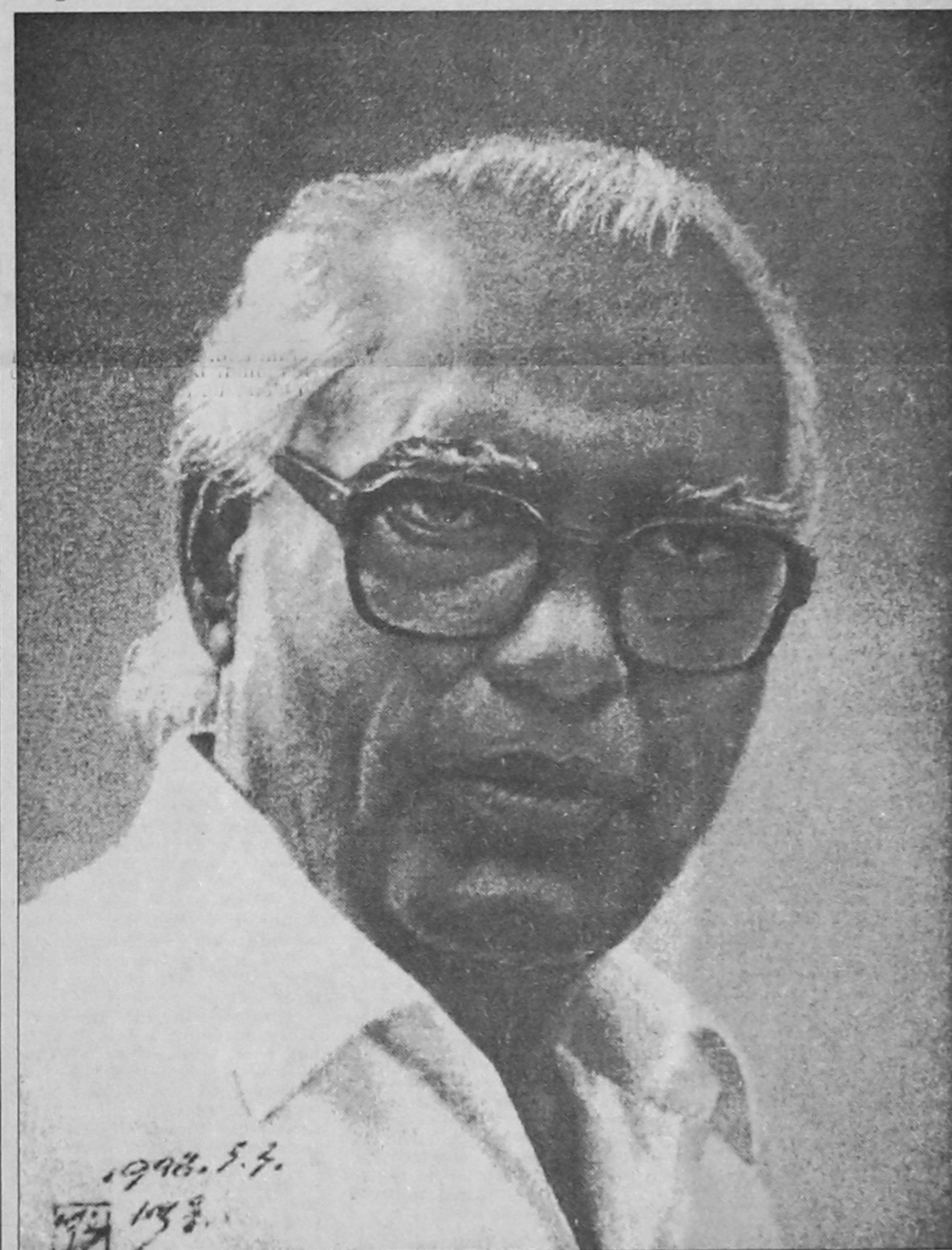
By A Maher

sound and found out that one of the pellets had hit a woman on the banks of a pond. From that day onwards he never cocked another rifle.

Horse riding also pranced in a bad way for him. Once he took a horse unknown to him for a ride. When he returned, it would not enter the owner's house and angrily rode his mount onto a barbed wire fence. That episode ended his future ambition in the sport.

As for angling, he did fish from time to time even though his family thought of it as a lowly sport for a boy belonging to family like

extroversively, (in his words "while still in shorts!"). He went as far as speaking against family doctrines in support of the tenant peasants; at 15 years of age he organised meetings (still in his shorts) and directed the village people to act against zamindar practices that hurt them. But at the same time his leadership qualities and social beliefs reached the ears of some famous Communists in the locality (of national fame now) who fed him with Communist literature. This, teenager Faiz, unknowingly spread to the peasants. The result of all these was him



Faiz Ahmad at 65

His teens were one of restlessness, rebellion and full of ideas that more often than not drove his elders mad. The family was the well off, affluent one of those periods enjoying a rather high social status. This 'being over the others', however, soon got to young Faiz who disliked it secretly (and later more openly) thinking why people had to treat each other differently according to social status only.

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theirs. "I acted in a manner that was not approved by my family. And, as we were a huge family of *chachas*, *mamas* (uncles) and other relatives, all our activities and family happenings used to go around pretty quickly. You see, I wanted to hunt, fish and go horse riding and explore nature. I wanted to find answers to questions in my head by myself, play with other children of my age - in a word I was something of a 'daredevil'. My relatives had never seen such a boy in the family deviating from the strict patrician ways and doing what I was doing. At one stage, they even began to isolate

being sent to his elder sister in another town by a fed-up family.

One incident he recollects is when he sheltered a small peasant boy because he was to appear in front of the community stalwarts who were to hand out judgement for a misdeed of the boy. His crime: he had a scuffle with a zamindar boy in the heat of an argument.

Today Faiz Ahmad thinks minority of the teenagers are indiscipline but they are the ones who call the dangerous shots that cripple youth by sucking them into terrorism, violence and social adversity. There are of course deficiencies in administration and education but the rise in arms has given the scene a uniqueness, thinks Faiz Ahmad.

"Do you know just how much a gun in your hand can transform you? It gives you a feeling of tremendous power over others. So when young people see army men coming to power by brandishing guns, what kind of an example is set before them?"