

In times of conflict, as shells rain down mercilessly extinguishing homes and lives, it is difficult to spare a thought for cultural treasures. Rumours have it that Iraq has stored the relics of its Babylonian heritage in a bombproof, climate-controlled shelter. But the fate of Kuwait's collection of art objects is not so certain. Luckily, one part of this collection happened to be on an international tour when the invasion took place. It is now on show at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, USA, under the name "Islamic Art and Patronage: Selections from Kuwait."

A now-homeless art collection, 'Islamic Art and Patronage: Selections from Kuwait', on exhibit at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, USA, is providing a glimpse of Islamic culture in a period of serious misunderstanding.

## ART AMONG THE RUINS: AN EXHIBITION IN EXILE

A Special Correspondent

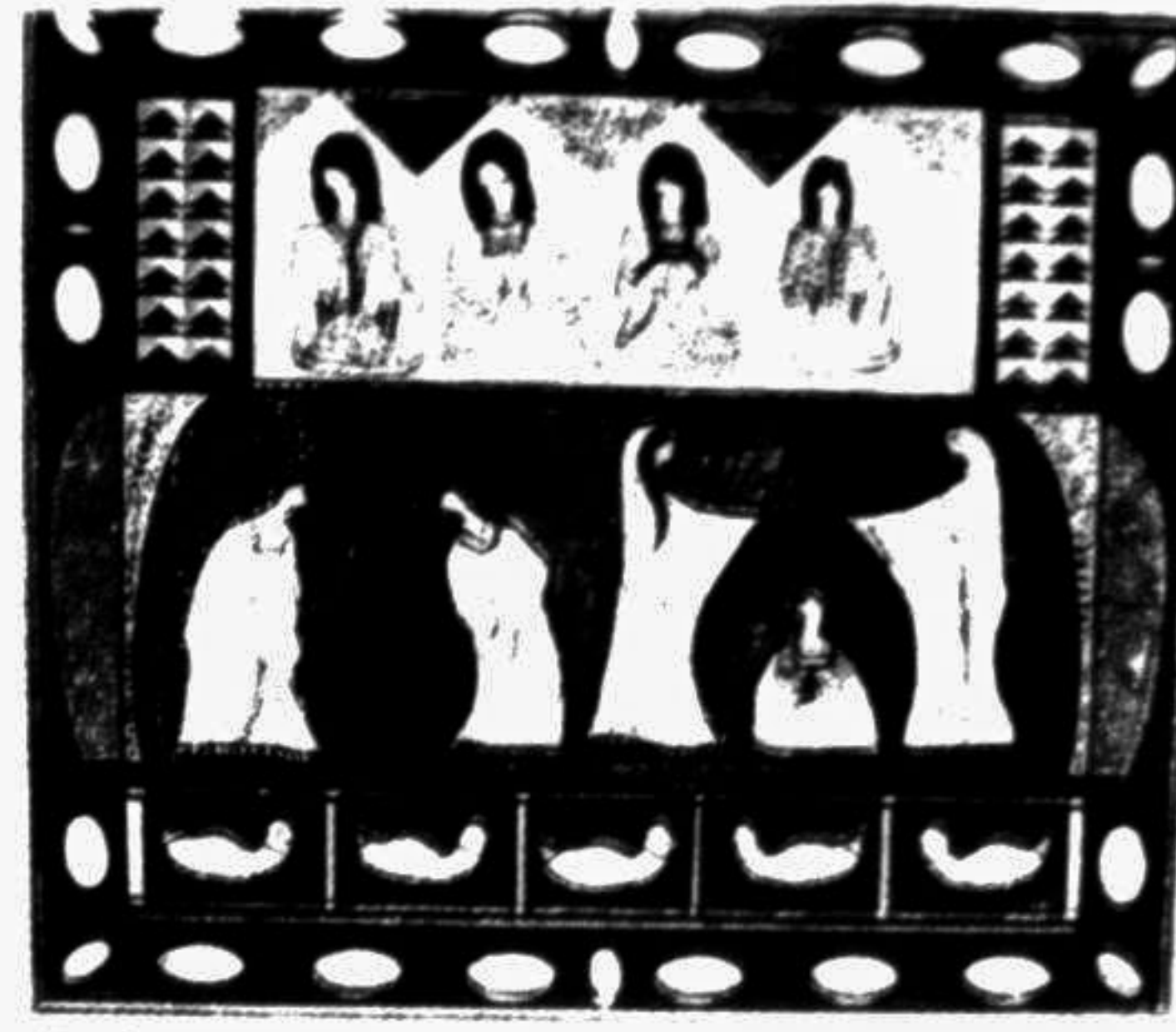
The touring exhibit is timely not only because it has unwittingly saved some 107 artifacts, but also because it provides a glimpse of Islamic culture in a period of serious misunderstanding. Here on the quiet lawns and behind the red-brick townhouse facades of Baltimore, ignorance has bred prejudice, as elsewhere in the world. The organizers of this exhibition believe it can help dis-

pel the mists of misrepresentation that shroud Islam. Having begun its tour in the Heritage Museum of Leningrad, the collection arrived in the US on December 9. It is scheduled to tour American museums till April 1992. Ms. Esin Atil, historian and curator of Islamic art at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, selected the pieces to be included two years ago, from the 7,500 artifacts of the Kuwait National Museum's Museum of Islamic Art. The director of the National Museum, Sheikh Hussa, and her

husband Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, had begun the collection in 1975. Pieces on display include paintings, fine jewelry, and intricately carved objects d'art. The items cover the 8th to 18th centuries of the Western calendar. Curators believe that the exhibit will give Americans a chance to form more informed views on Islamic civilization. Even before the war, the image of Islam tended to be at best aggressive. Armed conflict in the Gulf has encouraged propaganda depicting in-

human enemies, as war always does. These works of art, in their small way, counter that deformed picture. Moghul India, Persia, and Moorish Spain figure in the exhibit, symbolizing the extent and variety of one of the great world civilizations. It is a surprise to many visitors that Islamic culture is not limited to the Arab world. Public response has been welcoming. Unexpectedly large numbers of visitors have passed through the gallery gates. Reviewers range from the enthusiastic to the ecstatic. The exotic

tone of the collection attracts visitors, even on this museum-rich East Coast. The non-representational qualities of Islamic art, the intricacies of geometric patterns and calligraphy, are foreign to Western art. Articles such as knives, combs, and spoons are transformed from the domestic to the artistic. The educational value of such an exhibit is enormous. The Walters Art Gallery encourages visits by children. Supervisor of School Programmes Elizabeth Eder has created an interactive "Islamic learn-



A Kuwaiti painting depicting Islamic heritage.

ing centre." Each morning, before the gallery opens to the public, school groups are given guided tours. The children have a chance to learn basic calligraphy and Arabic signs and symbols. The Islamic veil, the Arab turban and robe, and dazzling swords capture the attention of even the most indifferent of children.

Having been introduced to the subject during their learning centre tour, the children are more prepared to appreciate the collection and its background. A helmet inlaid with silver becomes all the more fascinating to a young boy because he now knows that the peaked top is to accommodate the

turban. A time-line of historic events and a huge map showing the Islamic world during the ten centuries spanned by the collection decorate world of the centre. In one corner is a reading area with books on Arab subjects. The young visitors can play games based on the history of culture.

Unfortunately, the pieces in this collection, and six articles now at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in a show entitled "Romance of the Taj Mahal," are possibly all that remain of Kuwait's art treasures. The contents of the Kuwait National Museum are rumoured to have been trucked to Baghdad and released into the illegal art market.

The art-lovers of Baltimore, however, are grateful for the insight they have gained into a culture and a civilization so little known to them. Despite the Saudis half a world away, they can more easily see that the enemy is, after all, human, just like you and I.

and Comilla Rural Development Academy among them, also have stalls displaying research publications pamphlets and brochures. Amnesty International is also represented at the fair.

Although this years book fair is bigger than that of the last year, it certainly could have been better organised. The fair ground at the Bangla Academy premises is quite unkempt, with uneven ground and is filled with pot-holes. Lighting is very poor and the stalls could have been made a little more attractive.

Book fairs seem to have a serene and congenial atmosphere unlike the hustle and bustle seen in other fairs. Book-lovers perhaps come with an open mind to browse through a wide variety of books on display and find the ones they would really like to read.

Novels and poetry books are popular among the readers and seem to have good sales, according to book-sellers at the fair. Children's books and research-oriented books on political history are also in good demand, they said.

Books written by women writers apparently fail to attract buyers, as readers are somewhat unaware of the quality of women writers, said Sayeda Zaman, running the stall of Bangladesh Lekhika Sangha, displaying some 300 books written by about 60 members of the women writers' association. "People seem reluctant to buy books written by women writers, we literally have to convince them about the quality and urge them to buy our books," explained Mrs. Zaman, herself a writer and a member of the association.

Because of the prevailing democratic air in the country, publishers are predicting that sales at this years book fair are likely to be much higher than those of the last year. "Last year's sale was not so good at the fair, probably because of the political upheavals at that time," said a book-seller, adding, "we are hoping that sale this year will be better as the political atmosphere is more congenial."

The Ekushey Book Fair will continue till 25 February and will remain open from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. everyday excepting Fridays. On the Fridays, hours would be from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. with a recess for prayers from 12-30 p.m. to 2 p.m.

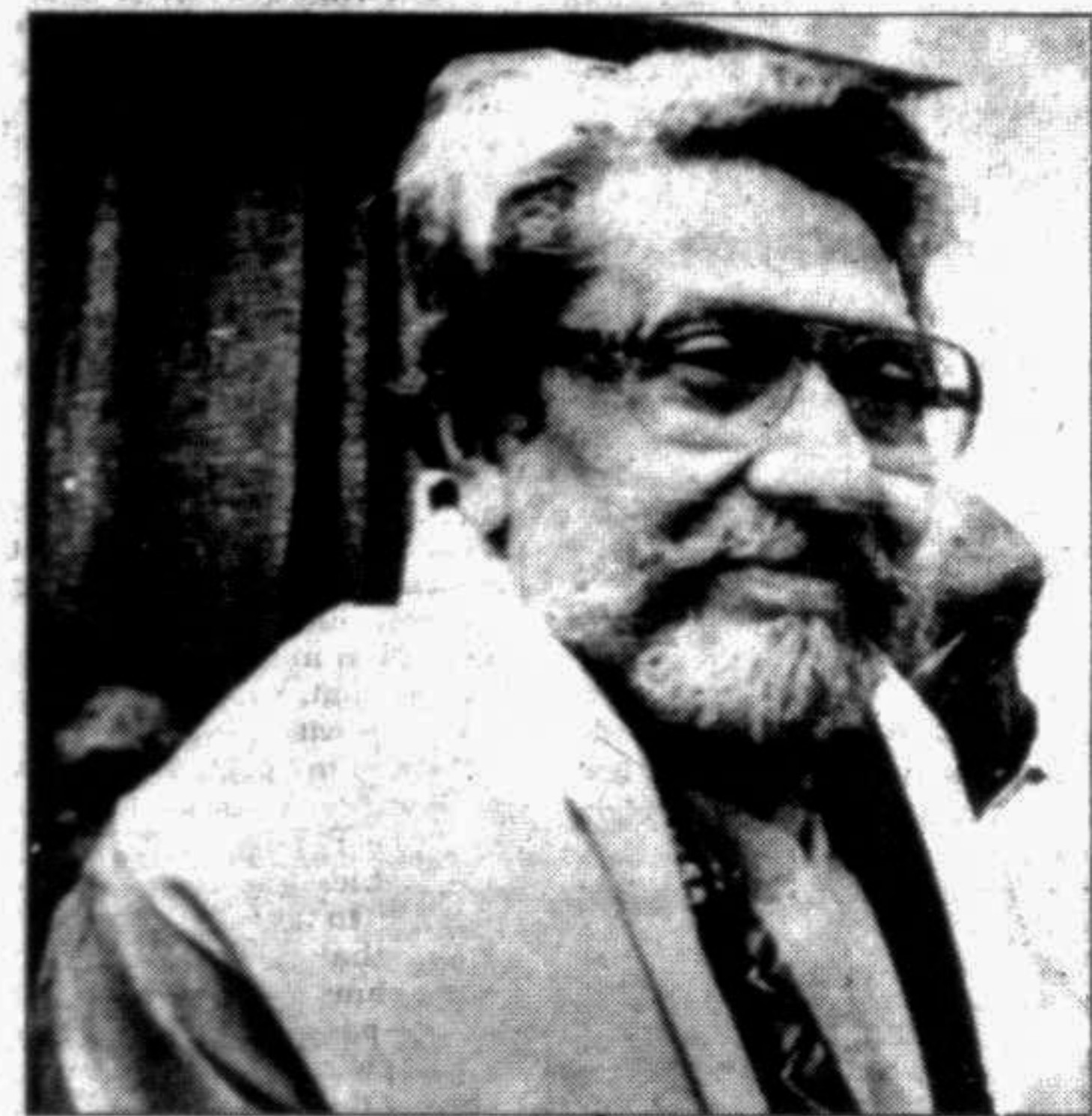
At a time when publishers are heard lamenting about the limited and declining readership, book fairs greatly help acquaint readers with new books creating new readership. Judging from the success book fairs have enjoyed in past years, more book fairs should be organised around the year. And not just in Dhaka, book fairs should be arranged in other cities and towns as well.

## Sombhu Mitra Turns 75

### Quest for the 'Other Theatre'

by Samir Dasgupta  
Special to The Star

At seventy-five Sombhu Mitra deserves to be looked at from various angles by admirers and detractors alike. Hailed as the doyen of modern Bengali theatre by many and spurned for 'escapism' by not a few,



Sombhu Mitra: Harmonising dialogue with acting.

Mitra remains a controversial theatre personality today. His brief honeymoon with the Indian People's Theatre Association, which he had formed along with Bijon Bhattacharya and others, marked the beginning and end of his tryst with socialist realism of the Marxist variety. Mitra rightly felt that for all its liberating traits, the movement initiated by IPTA was slowly but surely drifting towards a politically determined and purely agitational art movement, heedless of the essential need for the freedom of the artist himself. Not that there weren't others in IPTA who also had a feel of the question thrown up by Mitra. But it was perhaps enough for them to take shelter under Gorky's dictum: "When the playwright analyses the class traits, cultural tastes, beliefs and mores manifest in a number of common individuals and then

projects these on a 'representative' person, he creates what may be called a 'type character'. That becomes art," realising little that the formal statement needed to be seen through. Sombhu Mitra was certainly the first among those who, refusing to bask in the glory of Nabanna and the theatre of "collective consciousness" it successfully represented, consciously eschewed what he saw as a truncated view of social (or human) reality.

It was fairly obvious even in 1948 when Mitra along with like-minded people formed Bohurupce that what he was basically averse to was IPTA's unquestioning acceptance of a doctrinaire interpretation of "socialist realism," rather than to incorporate the social content of the suffering class's existence and protest as such. It is from this angle that Mitra was at the time wrongly

dubbed by many as a 'renegade' or an 'escapist'. A fairer judgement today would demand that he be described as one who in fact enriched the original search for a socially relevant theatre by IPTA. Torn between the collectivist art of class struggle and the deep concern he felt for the freedom of the artist, Sombhu Mitra formed 'Bohurupce' in his quest for the "other theatre." But the "critical realism" which came to be pitted against the doctrine of "socialist realism" was to crystallise slowly. *Bohurupce's* earliest productions, *Pathik* (1949) and *Chherataar* (1950), were but echoes of Mitra's IPTA past. His search for a natural relationship between content and form found its reflection in his choice of *Raktakarabi* (1954), *Dakghar* (1957) and *Raja* (1964) as well as in Ibsen's and Sophocles's plays, a few of which he successfully adapted for the Bengali stage and audience. One may add to the list his role in the production of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo*, in collaboration with Fritz Benavita, to indicate the nature of his selection from foreign literature.

Sombhu Mitra may be said to have synthesised the positive content of socialist realism with the freedom of the artist to depict it as a many-sided phenomenon, the social significance of which is put into focus by the inherent forces of conflict afflicting the present, the collective reality in terms of the individual's predicament, and often in terms of conflicts within the same individual, went on until he rediscovered, as it were, the multidimensional qualities inherent in Tagore's plays, such as *Chaar Adhyaya* (1951).

For, the generalised man or woman is one who is in no way different from the members of the audience. And this is precisely the reason why Mitra has been eminently successful in developing a form of acting which is closest to the common man's way of expressing emotions in joy, sorrow, anguish, anger and love. In a valuable essay on the subject of acting, Mitra laid down the broad principles (not rules) which must be observed before the actor can inculcate such natural diction and thus bring out the intended meaning of the words spoken. Stanislawsky came in handy to begin with; but Mitra learnt from Stanislawsky's workbook without ever turning his mind and eyes away from his own social milieu and the way human beings are used to communicating in given situations. This how he sought to harmonise dialogue with acting.

Sombhu Mitra's style of acting had to conform to, as well as serve as a catalytic agent in, his "critical theatre" and thus stand in sharp contrast to the style of acting made popular by Bijon Bhattacharya in the context of the mass theatre. The difference between the two is glaring enough to indicate basic attitudinal and philosophical differences between the two great theatre personalities and contemporaries. But it is necessary to guard oneself against positing the facile conclusion that Mitra is a protagonist of art for art's sake. There can be no question that all that Mitra had sought to deal with is social reality.

Samir Dasgupta will be writing regularly for the Daily Star, from India.

## Write to Mita...

In response to requests from readers, we are going to start a new column "Write to Mita" in our Friday Magazine. This column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family law, social and interpersonal relationships. It will be run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor who will be assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer. Please address letters to Mita, Daily Star, G.P.O Box-3257 or to 28/1 Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000. All correspondence will be strictly confidential.

Dear Mita,

I am a young mother of a 6 month old baby girl. She is our first child and also the first grandchild of the family. My problem is the over concern and unsolicited advice given by relatives, especially my in-laws, regarding her upbringing. They insist on commenting on everything starting from feeding, changing diapers or giving her a bath. I cannot do anything without their interference.

This is making me tense, annoyed and at times rude to them, which I later regret. What do I do? Am I wrong to feel this way? Please advise.

Tense Mother

Dear Tense Mother,

Please do not feel guilty for reacting this way as many who read your letter will sympathise and relate to your problem. Having a baby the first time, though a joyous experience, can be in many ways traumatic, tension provoking and frustrating. Adjusting to the changed family patterns takes time, and patience. But remember, that advice is well-meant as nobody means any harm to you or your baby. The baby being the first grandchild in the family is the reason for the over-concern and unsolicited advice. They say what seems right to them. It is up to you to take their advice or reject it. Whatever anyone says, you and your husband will have the last say on matters relating to your child. My advice is to read books on baby care and seek the help of experts. If the interference becomes intolerable, politely but firmly tell them that this is not the way you want to bring up your child. Discuss the problem with your husband, not in a confrontational way, but as with a partner.

Dear Mita,

I have been married for 20 years. My husband has always been a kind and considerate person and we have a reasonably good marriage. Recently his behaviour has undergone a change which is causing serious problems between us. He has become moody, irritable and snappy. He loses his temper easily and shouts at the children and the servants. I have tried many things but nothing I say or do satisfies him. Frankly I am alarmed by this behaviour as this is causing friction, fights and arguments between us. Please advise.

Yours, Fed Up

Dear Fed Up,

You have not given me some basic information in order to advise you: for example, how old is your husband, has any change taken place in his personal or professional life lately, etc. Often people approaching mid life go through emotional, psychological and physical changes which manifest themselves in the kind of behaviour you described. This

The annual Ekushey Book Fair organised by the Bangla Academy, in cooperation with the Bangladesh Book Publishers and Distributors Association, got underway in the city on Tuesday.

Inaugurated by Professor M. Innaas Ali, the three-week long book fair is part of the Bangla Academy programme to mark the Language Movement struggle of 1952.

Every major publisher in the country is represented at this fair. Numerous new books are geared for publication around this time and it is said that more books are sold at this fair than in any single period of the year.

Bangla Academy alone sold about Taka 8 lakh's worth of books at last years book fair.

Many publishing houses participating in the fair are publishing a number of new titles at this year's book fair. Among them, Mukaddhara alone is bringing out some 70 new books.

Bangla Academy is publishing 10 new titles including Ferdous's 'Shahnama', a six-part series of translation of the epic roetic work written by the Persian poet Ferdousi a thousand years ago. The translation was done by Muniruddin Yusuf.

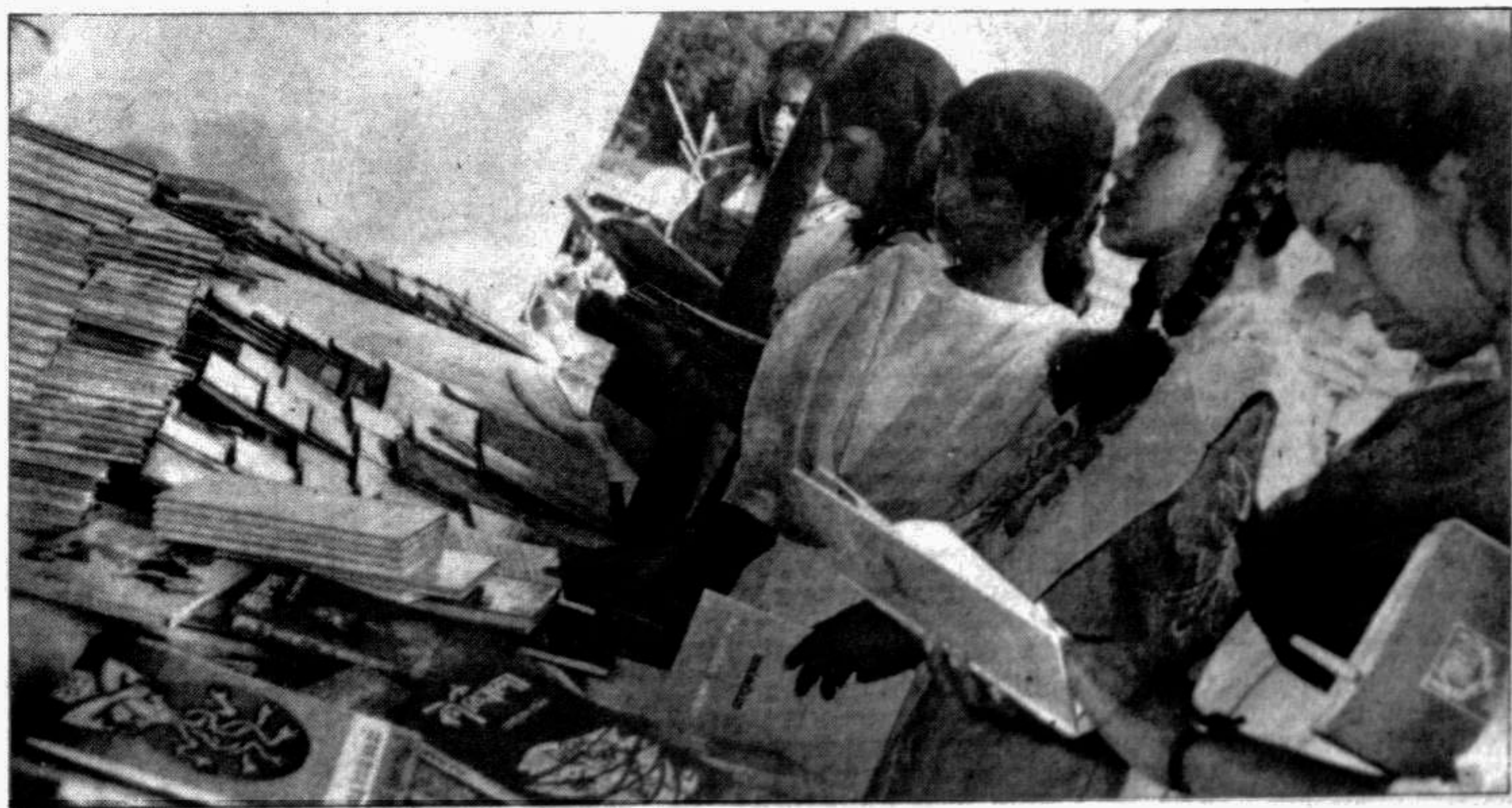
With about 200 stalls, including 150 for books alone, this year's book fair boasts the largest number of stalls. There are audio-video stalls selling poetry recital and music cassettes and documentary video

## Ekushey Fervour Starts with Book Fair at Bangla Academy

by S. Y. Bakht

cassettes. Handicrafts, calendars, dairies, posters, flowers and even lapet pins containing political slogans are being sold in various stalls. Food stalls and hawkers displaying their wares on the fair-ground can be found scattered all over the place.

A number of NGOs including Bangladesh Rural Advancement Council, Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh



Young book lovers converge on a stall on the opening day of the book fair at the Bangla Academy.

## TV Friday

### MORNING TRANSMISSION

- 8-00 Opening and recitation from Al-Quran
- 8-10 News in Bengali
- 8-15 Cartoon: Adventures of the Galaxy Rangers
- 8-40 Children's programme
- 9-10 Film: Mork and Mindy
- 9-40 Probaha: Current affairs
- 10-00 News in Bengali
- 10-05 Educational Film: The Ascent of Man.
- 11-15 Moner Mukurey: Retelecast of old drama

### EVENING TRANSMISSION

- 3-00 Opening and programme summary.
- 3-15 Alor Dishari: Children's programme on Islam teaching.
- 3-40 Movie of the Week: 'Mistress', starring Victoria Principal, Don Murray and others. A once ambitious actress' career goals change when she falls in love with a wealthy married man. After many years of blissful happiness and worry-free living as his mistress, she suddenly is thrust into an alien world in which she must survive on her own when he unexpectedly dies.
- 5-50 Sports Programme: Football.
- 6-45 Janamat: Programme on population.
- 6-55 News in Bengali
- 7-05 Modhu Chhanda: Modern songs.
- 8-30 Film: Just Our Luck
- 9-00 Biswa Natak: World drama.
- 10-00 News in English
- 10-30 Film: L.A. Law
- 11-30 News