

**Saving the Rivers**

Attention has been drawn in an ESCAP report to the level of pollution affecting the waters of the Karnaphuli river. "Alarming" was the word used. And "alarming" is certainly the word for it. If anything, it is an understatement.

The landmass of Bangladesh, the biggest river delta in the world, owes its very existence to two rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. The people of this land owe living to these two rivers and their many branches. This dependence makes Bangladesh particularly vulnerable.

Today, the Ganges suffers from one of the world's highest levels of chemical pollution. The 1,600-mile long river flows for 270 miles through Bangladesh. The water of the Padma is very much affected by what goes on upstream. Forty per cent of India's irrigated land lie along the Ganges; chemicals used in fertilisers seep into the river and flow downstream. Chemical discharge from factories and plants in urban centres dotted along the Ganges usually find their way into the river. The effect on aqua life and soil fertility downstream, over time, can be catastrophic.

But little is being done to control or treat chemical effluence. A polluted Ganges is affecting India as much as Bangladesh. As a result, river pollution has become an area of bilateral concern.

But the picture on the home front is far from a clean one. Blaming others for one's own ills may serve a political purpose of dubious nature. And if action is not taken on time, then the damage done may well be irreversible.

The Sitalakshya and the Buriganga near Dhaka are examples of two very sick rivers. Chemical effluence from fertiliser plants flow in untreated; paints and other chemicals from tanneries and dyeing factories are dumped in the water. No laws to prevent them, no regulation to lessen the damage. The water, as in virtually every river in the country, glistens with oil dripped from engines of motorised boats. The Buriganga looks little better than a badly-maintained sewage drain.

Treatment of waste is an unheard-of concept; storing it some where safe is not worth the trouble or money. Much of this over-populated city's waste is carried to the river, including a great deal of human waste, since as much as 50 per cent of the city's population does not have access to toilets and use road-side drains for the purpose.

The result? Water taken from the rivers is treated for bacteria, but not chemicals, and the polluted stuff is supplied through the taps as "fresh water". Fish has disappeared from parts of rivers, while the rest is being poisoned. The effect of such chemicals and heavy metals on the fish-eating public is not yet fully comprehended, although accumulation of heavy metal deposits on the soft tissues of the brain has been identified as one major cause of brain stroke.

Unregulated industrialisation allied to over-population has been the prime mover behind this state of affairs. The government may not wish to discourage rudimentary industrialisation by imposing regulations and penalties. But how desirable is "development" if it can only occur at the expense of the environment and human health? On the other hand, spending in order to protect the rivers and the environment in general will be money well-spent. The country awaits a well-thought-out, environment friendly development policy.

**Lure of the Contraband**

There are shopping arcades in the city to which women gravitate as much as a matter of course as Newton's apple did on a summer's day. Or to borrow from a more familiar Bengali expression — they swarm over the mazy spots as bees do on a lump of molasses. One need only to read 'smuggled sarees' in place of the sweetening agent to get to the real thing.

In places like Rajshahi or Dinajpur there are markets specialising in selling only smuggled fabrics and other items starting from crockery to everything. No one is overly excited over such open violation of the land's law as evidently most people have long come to terms with the ideas that without the smuggled cow the dining tables in the metropolitan cities could not feature beef and without the smuggled sugar the whole of our northern region would go without that important source of body energy.

There's a regular — albeit punctuated by long intervals — game of cat chasing mouse played with great seriousness and enthusiasm in places like the Ghausia market or Islampur — perhaps to add some colour and excitement to the ennui of staid big city life. The distinguishing thing about the yearly Customs swoop on smuggled sarees is that some of the mouses seem to be informed in advance of the looming danger. But the supremely important thing about these events of great hullabaloo is the utter pointlessness of these sieges as understood by the common run of our citizenry. People firmly believe that the smugglers do not bring their contraband things to a place like Dhaka — far from the borders — without buying safe conduct and retailers do not carry on with their capitially paying business without being helped to buy a regular lining of the pockets of some important links in a long chain. People believe it is only when the arrangement fails or leaks, that the fireworks wake up the surrounds and the newspapers work up quite a din. It is quite useless to blame the young mistress of the house who is so happy at the prospect of going on a visit to any of such inciting arcades. Specially it's not for the master to complain — for he cannot but smoke cigarettes — some 18,000 sticks of them a year, and all of them smuggled.

If we smuggle in sarees and cows and sugar, we must be smuggling out at least as much in value. It is for the economists to tell if in so betting our home things out — and quite a part of these are not home-produced and has to be brought in from with a lot of hard currency — we are not throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Smuggling indeed hurts. It does not call for one's understanding of the economist's rignarole to get the proper message from a small piece of news from Chuadanga. A report in The Daily Star of March 2 says the number of weavers in the area was 1400 at the time of liberation. It has come down to — believe it — 500 in the last 19 years. Why? By the grace of smuggling. The Chuadanga weavers' plight is an indication to myriad ways the easy way out can be hurting — to individuals and communities, to trades and profession and to the national economy as a whole.

With the stage set for the formation of a BNP government, many will recall the philosophy of the party, as once explained by its founder, the late President Ziaur Rahman. He elaborated on some of his ideas which still guide much of the thinking of BNP leaders, in three exclusive interviews to S. M. Ali. One such interview, slightly abridged, appears here, reprinted from the Asian Wall Street Journal, which originally published it on September 15, 1978.

**Does the Philosophy of Ziaur Rahman Still Prevail?**

by S. M. Ali

A relaxed, smiling General Ziaur Rahman: exuding self confidence, receives this writer with a firm handshake and immediately creates the impression that despite his past disclaimers, he is all set to play the role of a super-politician — in his own way.

The impression, which is strengthened as the conversation proceeds, has a great deal to do with both the timing and the setting of the interview.

It takes place barely 24 hours after President Zia announced the formation of his political party — Bangladesh Nationalist Party — with himself as its Chairman for a five-year term. And unlike in early 1976, when I met the General in his small barely furnished heavily guarded office at the Army Cantonment in the outskirts of Dhaka, the interview this time takes place at the Government House. The spacious rooms and long corridors of the building carry the echoes of the making and unmaking of the history of East Pakistan and, since December 1971, of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Situated in the heart of the city and facing a children's park, the presidential palace is, architecturally or otherwise, a far cry from an army barrack. Inside the compound of the thinly guarded office cum residence of General Zia, there is even a mosque where the President joins members of his staff for regular prayers. In predominantly Muslim Bangladesh, it helps a leader — and a politician — to be a devout follower of Islam.

Far more than the opulence of his residence, there is also a marked change in the personality of Zia, as the General is popularly called. He seems totally sure of himself, relaxed, eager to talk and not unwilling to listen. Officials in Dhaka, who have worked closely with him since he came to power in December, 1975, at the end of a series of bloody coups, still regard him as a very private person who, at times, can be remote, intense and withdrawn. Maybe with the plunge he has just taken into politics, he is now coming out of his shell. He appears to be, and with a minimum of effort,

Surprisingly, I get the chance to mention this change as I see it in him. After giving me a quick rundown of what he — and his government — has been trying to do to set the house in order, with himself working 16 hours a day; he asks, "But do you find me looking tired?"

In fact, I found him looking more fit and more relaxed than in 1976.

The general talks about the need for his people to free themselves from mental and physical lethargy, the importance of rural development and the role of foreign investment and aid in the country's economic progress. Unlike most Bengali politicians who speak in riddles and metaphors, he is plainly straightforward, reminding me of another general — the late Ayub Khan.



1978 file photo: AWSJ

But unlike the former Pakistani president, he stops short of claiming success for his policies. On the other hand, with his repeated emphasis on creating a rugged society that survives through sheer hard work, he sounds a bit like Singapore Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. His manner even reminds me of the way the Singapore leader often handles a reporter's questions, as he dismisses my query about several extreme rightwing politicians and radical young activists who have rushed to

author Kushwant Singh recently did a cover story on the Bangladesh President for the Illustrated Weekly of India under the enthusiastic headline, "Zia Will Make It."

What worries many experts most is what sort of politician will now jump onto the General's bandwagon, try to control the Nationalist Party from within, and eventually influence the decision-making process. It's a source of concern because the country remains pathetically short of honest, hard-working politicians and administrators, especially among those who are already in the field, and Zia has shown little success so far in discovering new faces.

Another concern relates to the country's search for a viable constitutional

**"We will make it very hard for just anyone to be a politician in this country", General Zia referring to the work-oriented programme of the party.**

join his party, and whether they might turn it into an arena for infighting. With his near total disdain for doctrinaire politics, he seems to regard their divergent political leanings as superficial or transitory, if not both.

"We will make it very hard for just anyone to be a politician in this country," he says at one point, referring to what he calls the "work-oriented programme" of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

This isn't the only time General Zia sounds overoptimistic and visionary. Talking about the country's lack of resources, he predicts that its food production, now averaging just over 11 million tons a year, can be "doubled," with Bangladesh earning millions of dollars from export of foodgrain.

Although the President doesn't put any time restraint on his target, one can't help recall a recent observation by the World Bank that during the next five years, it's possible for foodgrain production in Bangladesh to average a growth rate of approximately, but probably not more, than 3.5% or about 0.7% more than the population growth.

So, General Zia goes into politics with his touching faith in his country's destiny as well as with a youthful doggedness — he is now 42 — rarely seen in a politician of South Asia, least of all in Bangladesh. No wonder widely-read Indian journalist-

framework for the future. The Nationalist Party must win at least a two-thirds majority in the parliament to make necessary constitutional changes in favour of a clear-cut presidential system, probably of the French model with some modifications. In case the party fails to get this majority, there is certain to be a constitutional deadlock — and probably another group.

These uncertainties have started taking their toll. On the one hand, foreign investors and traders are marking time and on the other, there are signs of restiveness among students, office workers and labour unions. Their demands vary from the release of political prisoners and wage increases to immediate withdrawal of martial law, which is unlikely until the parliament passes a new constitution.

As a senior official says, "All this is part of the price a government pays for starting the liberalization process." Today, General Zia's interest lies in shortening the process. But tomorrow, should anything go wrong with it, he may well feel compelled to change his course, for better or worse.

The writer is the Editor of The Daily Star. He had the above exclusive interview with the late President Ziaur Rahman when he was the Executive Director of the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia.

**Cold Wind from Moscow Blows Across Africa**

Charles Quist Adade writes from Leningrad

THE era of Moscow's "disinterested aid" to Africa is over. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has decreed immediate cuts in aid to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The decree is partly a response to the growing public outcry against Soviet aid to the Third World when the Soviet Union itself is facing serious economic problems.

With empty shop counters and ever falling standards of living, it is easy for ordinary Soviets to make the Third World the scapegoat of their economic woes. In the Kremlin, however, it was a purely pragmatic move. The Soviet Union is reeling under a heavy budget deficit and foreign debt of about \$40 billion.

The US Heritage Foundation says the Afghan war cost the Soviet Union \$15 billion a year, support to Cuba \$5 billion a year, and backing for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua \$4 billion a year.

In Africa, \$5 billion was spent backing the Luanda government in the Angolan civil war between 1977 and 1987, \$1 billion went to Mozambique between 1975 and 1983 and about \$5 billion to Ethiopia from 1975 to 1986.

In all, the Third World owes the Soviet Union about \$5.8 billion rubles, 10 per cent of this owed by African countries.

The Soviets have built more than 340 industrial and agricultural projects in Africa. A further 300 are either being built or on the drawing board while about 50,000 African specialists have trained in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet aid programme began with the Khrushchev reforms of 1954-55, and until

The misfortunes of the Soviet economy are dealing a hard blow to friends in Africa, particularly Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique that have relied on Soviet aid to balance their budgets. Two decrees by President Mikhail Gorbachev mean immediate cuts in aid and an end to favourable barter trade deals. But, the Soviet Union need not cut direct economic assistance. The axe should fall on arms supplies which have been a large component of Soviet aid to Africa.

1964 was concentrated in just a few countries. The underlying principle of Soviet "humanitarian" assistance, the Kremlin told the world, was proletarian internationalism, now described as the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Aid and experts were readily sent to Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Egypt and other countries that declared themselves socialist-oriented. Many factories and hydro-electric power stations such as the Aswan Dam in Egypt were built with Soviet aid.

But some of the first socialist allies were soon lost to Moscow's ideological linc. Ghana abandoned its socialist orientation in 1966. Mali in 1968 and Egypt in 1972. Algeria, Guinea, Tanzania and Zambia toned down their socialist rhetoric, gradually replacing it with Islamic or humanist doctrines. Congo Brazzaville stayed in line but only paid lip-service to the socialist ideals and abandoned Soviet-imposed economic models.

However new allies, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique appeared on the scene after 1975. Each of the three countries was locked in civil war and Soviet military aid proved handy to the beleaguered governments.

Aid to Africa, Moscow now admits, was not so productive or useful after all. For instance,

the Soviet Union bought cocoa from Ghana and cotton from Egypt at prices below world market levels. In return they supplied low quality petroleum and machinery, sometimes doing shoddy construction work as well.

The attitudes of ordinary Soviets have also been greatly changed and the euphoria has given way to anger and resentment. Gone is the eagerness to help the victims of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. Gone, too, are the days when the arrival of an African in Moscow was greeted by cheering crowds.

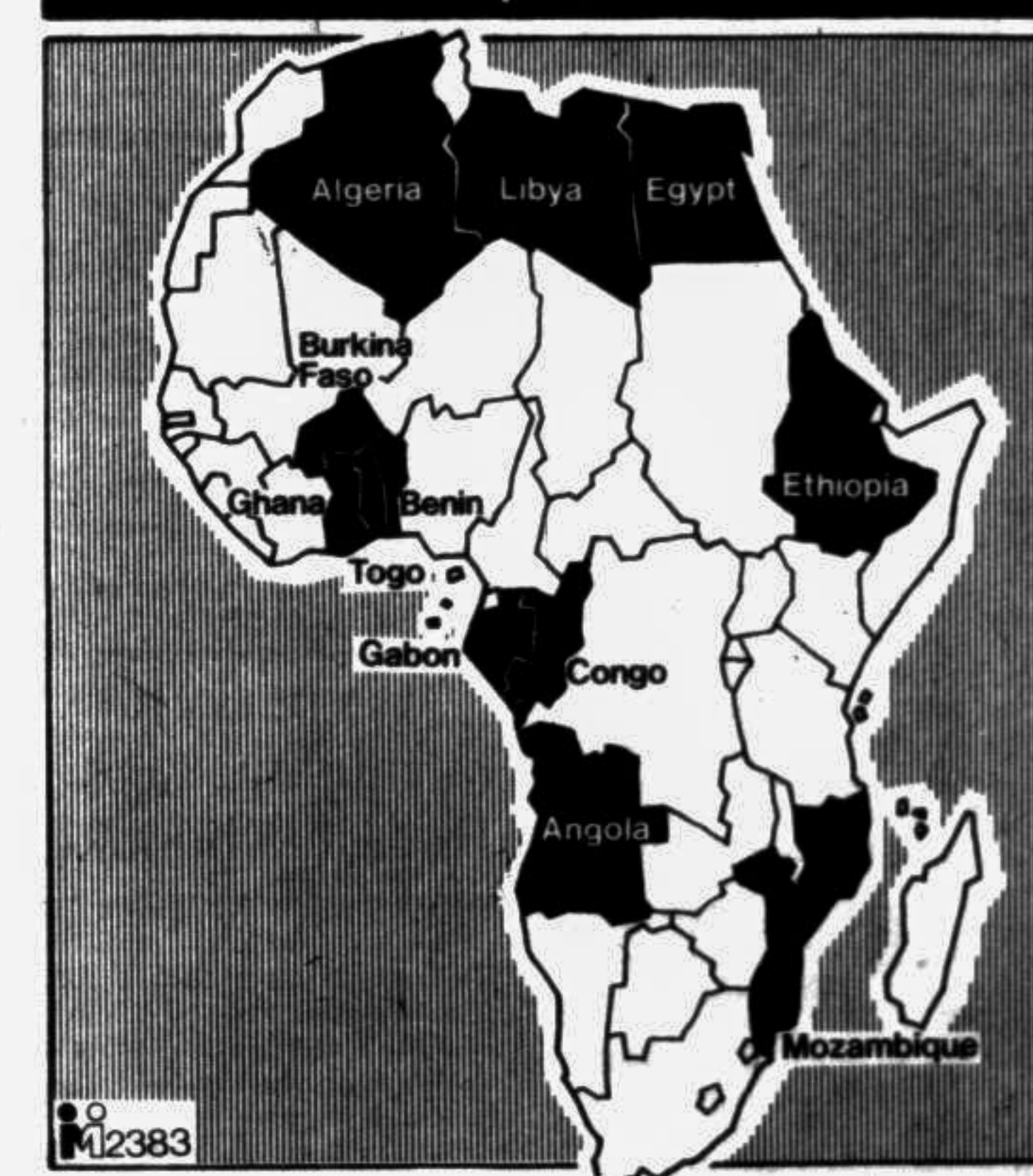
"Why feed these good-for-nothing when we can hardly feed ourselves?" is the expression one hears so often these days.

But in a sense it has always been there, just waiting to explode. In 1978, for example, railway workers in the Siberian town of Ulan-Ude refused to load meat which was being shipped to Angola — for years, the groceries in their own town had been empty.

Until about a year ago, no one dared comment about the problems of Soviet relations with the Third World. It was one of the "closed" subjects. Now, at last, Afro-Soviet relations are being discussed openly in the media.

Izvestia ran a list of 17 African countries indebted to the Soviet Union soon after the

**Soviet aid recipients**



return of Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze from his historic visit to Africa, the first by a Soviet Foreign Minister.

It may be a bit too tempting now to exaggerate the shortcomings of Soviet aid. For some countries, however, it

came when they most needed it. It is hard to imagine Egypt without the Aswan Dam or Guinea without its Soviet-built bauxite plant.

Africa is also grateful for the Soviet role in the liberation struggles of Angola, Mozam-

bique, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The Soviets accepted loan repayments in local currencies or in commodities which saved on the meagre foreign reserves of African countries, something the West has been unwilling to do.

Africa may be in dire need of aid, but the Soviet Union is not much better off either. Soviet economist N. Shmelev says Moscow needs new loans of about \$200 billion to come out of the current crisis.

The International Finance Institute predicts that the Soviet Union could be on the brink of insolvency by the end of the year as its foreign debt soars to \$57 billion.

But a large chunk of Soviet aid has been in form of military hardware, and any cut on this should be good news even for the simple reason that it may reduce Africa's military expenditure.

Between 1980 and 1984, Soviet economic assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa was about \$2.1 billion compared to \$5.9 billion in arms supplies. For North Africa the contrast is even more telling: \$650 million in economic aid and \$7.9 billion in arms transfers.

The Kremlin need not really cut economic aid to Africa. All it needs to do is reduce drastically or cut altogether the military component, while maintaining economic assistance at current levels. — GEMINI NEWS.

(Exchange rate: \$0.548 = 1 ruble)

CHARLES QUIST ADADE is a Ghanaian journalist. He has worked as a press officer with the Hungarian Embassy in Accra and written for the Ghanaian Times and the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation.

**To the Editor...**

**Overcrowded Dhaka**

Sir, Even just a decade ago Dhaka was not so over-populated as it is now. The roads of the city are not only crowded by pedestrians but by different kinds of over-loaded vehicles.

The problem of overcrowding is still unresolved, although the number of buses, mini-buses and tempos are increasing everyday.

It is during our two most important festivals that we observe it even more. Even though special train and bus services are started, it

is of no relief. The public transport remains equally bad. Passengers are seen travelling on the roof of such fast moving things like trains. A fall would inevitably mean death.

The main cause of all this is that every day a large number of people are coming from the rural areas, and adding to the population of already crowded metropolis. Unless an effective check to this influx is made, no increase in transport or housing is going to come up as a resolve.

Aliya Begum, Gopibagh.

**Art of Mehindi decoration**

Sir, Till recently the art of decorating the palms of womanfolk, with Mehindi leaves was not so popular and common as it is now.

That does not mean that women or girls did not apply the paste of ground Mehindi leaves on their palm to colour and decorate them earlier. This was then done on special occasions like weddings, Eid, etc. But the decorations and designs were more simpler in nature.

Lately, we notice that there has been a new innovation in this area.

Girls, ladies are using Mehindi alright, but of late they are most probably influenced by our neighbouring countries, where floral, pastel designs play a predominant part in the art.

With it has come the cone mehindi which makes it easier to use and make beautiful but complicated designs on the palm. Before, the design mostly used was a star or the crescent moon. Now there are courses which teach people

to learn this art. And many are earning a living by practicing it.

It is a novel thing in our city culture these days. Why don't we go for more of innovations, some purely our own, in the area!

Rebecca Rafiq, Shyamoli.

**Book Fair**

Sir, The Book Fair at the Bangla Academy is much awaited an affair for both those who love books and those who write them.

Unfortunately, for the last few years the fair has

not always been a place to go to. This is mainly because a number of people find this as an opportunity to have fun at the expense of others. They take this as a chance for eve teasing, and various other kinds of unpleasant activities.

This year also an unpleasant incident occurred and led to the closing of the fair before schedule.

We request all to respect at least the occasion for which the fair is held i.e. the "Ekushey February".

Wasim Huq Banani, Dhaka.