

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Rapid mechanization of country boats lately has revitalized the declining sector of river transportation and the use of engines, improved locally, have found wide acceptance among the boatmen, according to a survey conducted by (NOAMI) under the Country Boat Pilot Project. Following is a Special Report by The Daily Star.

## The Changing Face of the Country Boats

by S.Y. Bakht

**A** DRAMATIC change has revitalized the declining country boat transportation sector over the past few years.

The traditional country boats, which have evolved over hundreds of years by adapting to local conditions and needs, are finally going through a somewhat vigorous process of mechanization.

The indigenous use of widely available and inexpensive diesel shallow-tube-well (STW) engines in country boats, originally intended for irrigation use in agriculture, has transformed the ailing sector beyond any expectation.

Rapid mechanization of country boats began since the mid 80s. Around 1985, large scale mechanization started in the northern parts of the country, particularly in the mighty Jamuna river, where some areas now show an engine installation rate of more than 90 per cent, according to a draft report based on a survey conducted by the National Oceanographic and Maritime Institute (NOAMI) under the two-year Country Boat Pilot Project administered by the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA). Funded by grants from Norway and the Netherlands, the survey was carried out last year, covering major areas of the country, to assess the impact of mechanization of country boats.

The mechanization process, according to the report, represents native skills which have shown great flexibility in adapting available technology to local needs. These far-reaching and unexpected changes came about at the boatmen's own initiatives and innovations, without any institutional help or help from outside experts.

Thanks to the unique and improvising use of engines, the downward trend faced by this informal sector in recent years has been successfully reversed. Thus, saving thousands of rural jobs and considerably reducing the drudgery involved for the boatmen. Country boats fitted with irrigation pump engines are now operating much more efficiently and have regained the competitive edge against other modes of transports. Commonly known as "Shallow Boats", various types of boats around the country now use engines.

Country boats are a colourful and prominent feature of the country's transportation system. With more than 24,000 kilometers of rivers, streams, and canals that cover nearly seven per cent of the total surface area and as much as fifty per cent during the monsoon period, country boats continue to play a vital role in the nation's transport sector. Used both for ferrying passengers and transporting

cargo, there are enormous numbers of country boats plying the waterways of the largest river delta in the world. As the boats are not registered and no census has ever been carried out on this informal sector, reliable statistics are hard to come by.

According to the most recent official statistical estimates, there are about 456,000 passenger and 246,000 cargo boats currently operating in the country. It is also estimated that this sector alone generates almost 60 per cent of all employment in the transportation sector as a whole and more than 90 per cent in the inland water transportation sector. An estimated 15 million tons of goods are carried annually by the country boats.

Country boats offer a number of advantages over other modes of transports. Having shallow draft, these boats are extremely flexible and can go where larger, mechanical vessels cannot reach. Use of these boats increase dramatically during the rainy season and they provide valuable service during floods and natural disasters. Country boats are generally cheaper in terms of freight rate per ton-mile, particularly compared to trucks and railways, and they are considerably more economical and less damaging to the environment than larger mechanized vessels, the report pointed out.

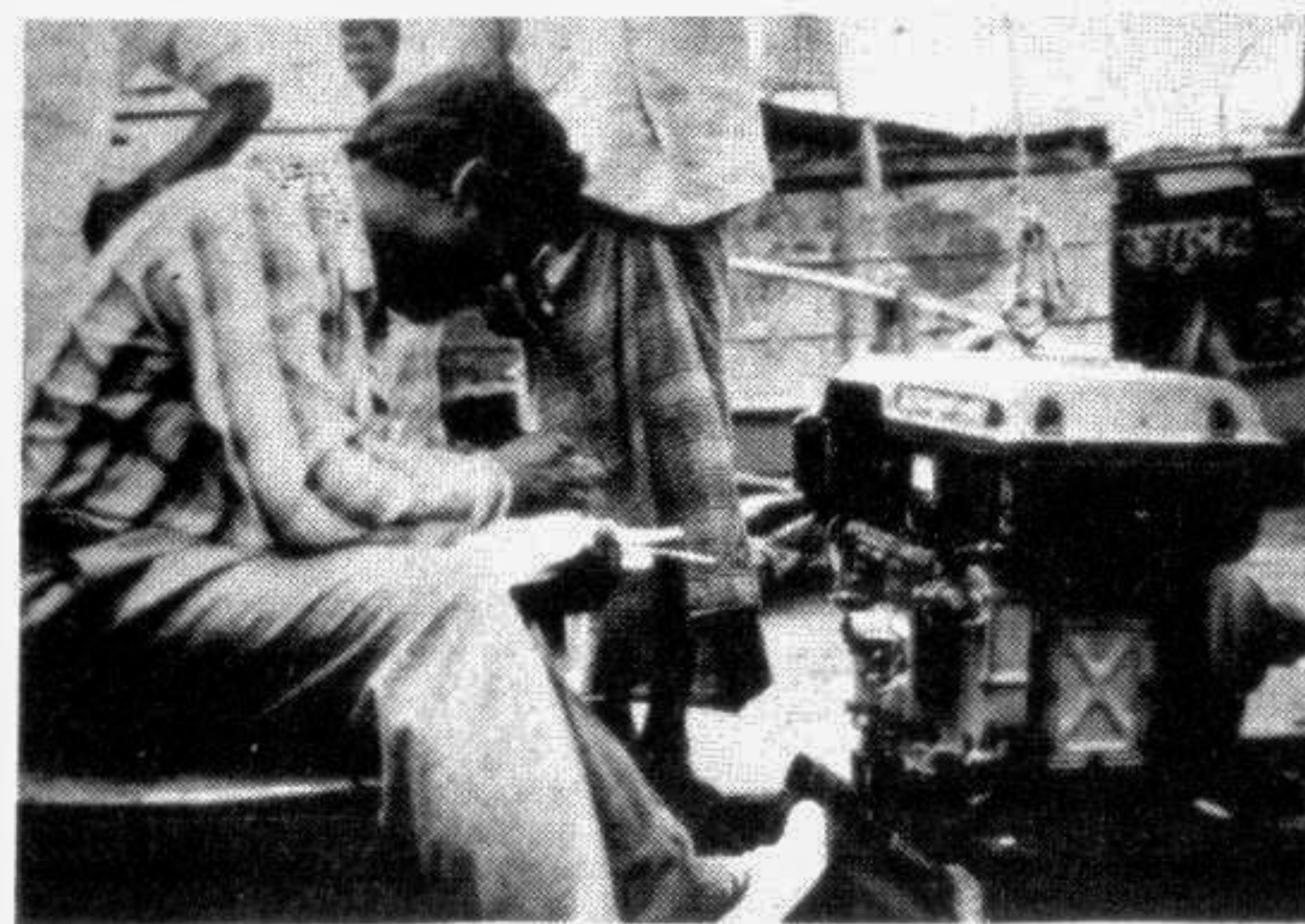
**The ideal country boats in form now is between 250 and 500 maunds of the Kosha-type. These boats have shallow draft and are more suitable for installing engines.**

Traditionally powered by large sails, and by sculling, rowing or towing, country boats are an integral part of the rural economy. Millions of people depend on them for transport, employment and income. These boats are for the most part owned and operated by rural people, with a large number of them being owner-operated. The people working on the boats are generally landless people. Made of wood, country boats are built in the countryside by rural boat-builders.

Over the years, the situation of the country boat people have steadily worsened with the introduction of mechanical modes of transportation, which have enjoyed large subsidies while the country boat sector has been mostly neglected. The result has been a loss of income and employment in the rural areas of the country, since trucks, buses, trains and larger mechanized vessels are owned by wealthier urban people and by private as well as public companies.

While earlier studies showed that traditionally boatcrews enjoyed a better income than that of agricultural workers, more recent studies indicate that their incomes have steadily declined. It is estimated that the earnings of boatcrews have fallen to the level of agricultural workers over the last two decades.

The history of the country boat sector has been one of neglect and disinterest shown by policy-makers and other concerned agencies. This informal sector has never received any form of government or institutional support. Being unorganised, this sector has very limited contact with formal private and public institutions and enterprises. Few boatmen have ever obtained institutional credit, although large numbers of them have now become indirect beneficiaries of credit and subsidies coupled with a somewhat con-



Pump engine used in country boats being tested at Country Boat Pilot Project boatyard in Narayanganj.

through the installation of STW engines on boats.

Considering the number of people involved in this sector and the important role played by country boats in the nation's transportation system, one would have expected a major effort to be made on the part of the government and other interested agencies to provide this struggling sector with assistance.

Once the primary mode of transport, country boats still remain an essential part of the country's transport sector. But, stiff competition from various mechanized transports, coupled with a somewhat con-

spectious absence of institutional support led to the steady decline in this sector. Increasing numbers of boatmen were going out of business in recent years, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs and adversely affecting the rural economy.

Thus, the introduction of STW engines came as a boon for the country boat sector and the timing couldn't have been better for this rapidly declining sector. Mechanization has revitalized the vulnerable sector and made it competitive with other modes of transports. The use of engines, improvised locally, have found

wide acceptance among boatmen, according to the draft report. Boatmen now regard installation of pump engines as absolutely essential to continued operations.

Mechanization of country boats is spreading to almost all regions of the country. Survey interviews conducted under the pilot project scheme indicates, country boats in the north-western and central regions have taken the lead in installing engines, with some areas showing 80 to 90 per cent rate of mechanization. While boats in the north-east are also following this trend, the rate of mechanization in the south is the lowest at about 40 per cent.

Although mechanization started with the flexible use of engines both in agriculture and on boats, there is an increasing trend towards the exclusive use of engines on country boats. A survey of 126 boats using engines indicated that on an average only one in five engines are also used outside the boats.

Lower cost, wider availability and comparative ease of installation and maintenance of pump engines has helped to their use in country boats. The average price of a 8 to 12 horsepower STW engine has declined substantially during the past few years. While earlier, mostly Japanese, engines were priced over Taka 20,000, recently introduced Chinese engines are sold in the open market for as little as Taka 6000.

According to the report, boats of all sizes are installing irrigation pump engines, but the trend is considerably stronger for small to medium sized boats. The STW engines have very limited range and are most suitable for use in boats of 50 to 700 maunds. They are not cost effective for installation in smaller boats of less than 25 maunds and unsuitable for use in larger boats of 800 maunds and above. There is a big price difference between a STW engine and a proper marine engine only a little larger.

A changing trend in building of new boats has been noticed in recent years. The ideal country boats in form now, according to the report, is between 250 and 500 maunds of the Kosha-type. These boats have shallow draft and are more suitable for installing engines.

The engines have enabled boatmen to remain in business, compete effectively with

trucks and larger vessels, and earn a substantially better living than they did before. The study found that the net earnings—where boats have installed engines—have risen strongly for all boatmen, including that of crewmembers. On the more humane side, engines have enabled boatmen to do away with the back-breaking drudgery involved in rowing, towing or sculling a boat. Boatmen also pointed out that engines also provide greater safety against storms and also against river pirates.

A major finding of the study indicates that there is surprisingly less reduction in employment than feared, as a result of mechanization of the country boats. In the survey

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group studied, there has been only a five per cent reduction of employment. The draft report of the pilot project study concludes that, "the average increase in net earnings per boat is a round one hundred per cent, the average direct displacement of labour is around five per cent."

The report also pointed out some negative aspects of mechanization of country boats. Because of technical deficiencies and poor installation, efficiency of the engines are considerably reduced. There is also significant environmental pollution caused by the use of engines. Lack of safety in engine boats due to the absence of a proper gear system is another area of concern.

Although the indigenous mechanization of country boats is a huge leap forward for the sector, there still remains substantial scope and need for further improvements. As the mechanization process is still in its initial stages, engine installations are often found to be less than suitable for the boats. Performance of the engines needs to be enhanced to provide better fuel con-

sumption and less pollution. Mechanized boats also need to be made more safer for passengers and boatmen alike. Thus, a concerted effort should be undertaken to streamline and consolidate the developments made so far and make further improvements.

Fortunately, in recent years the government and other concerned agencies have been showing a much greater degree of awareness to the problems faced by this informal sector. Because of the worsening conditions of the sector, BIWTA has taken the lead in addressing the problems of this sector. It is to be hoped that the government will gradually help remove these problems and enable boatmen to capitalise on the developments and improvements.

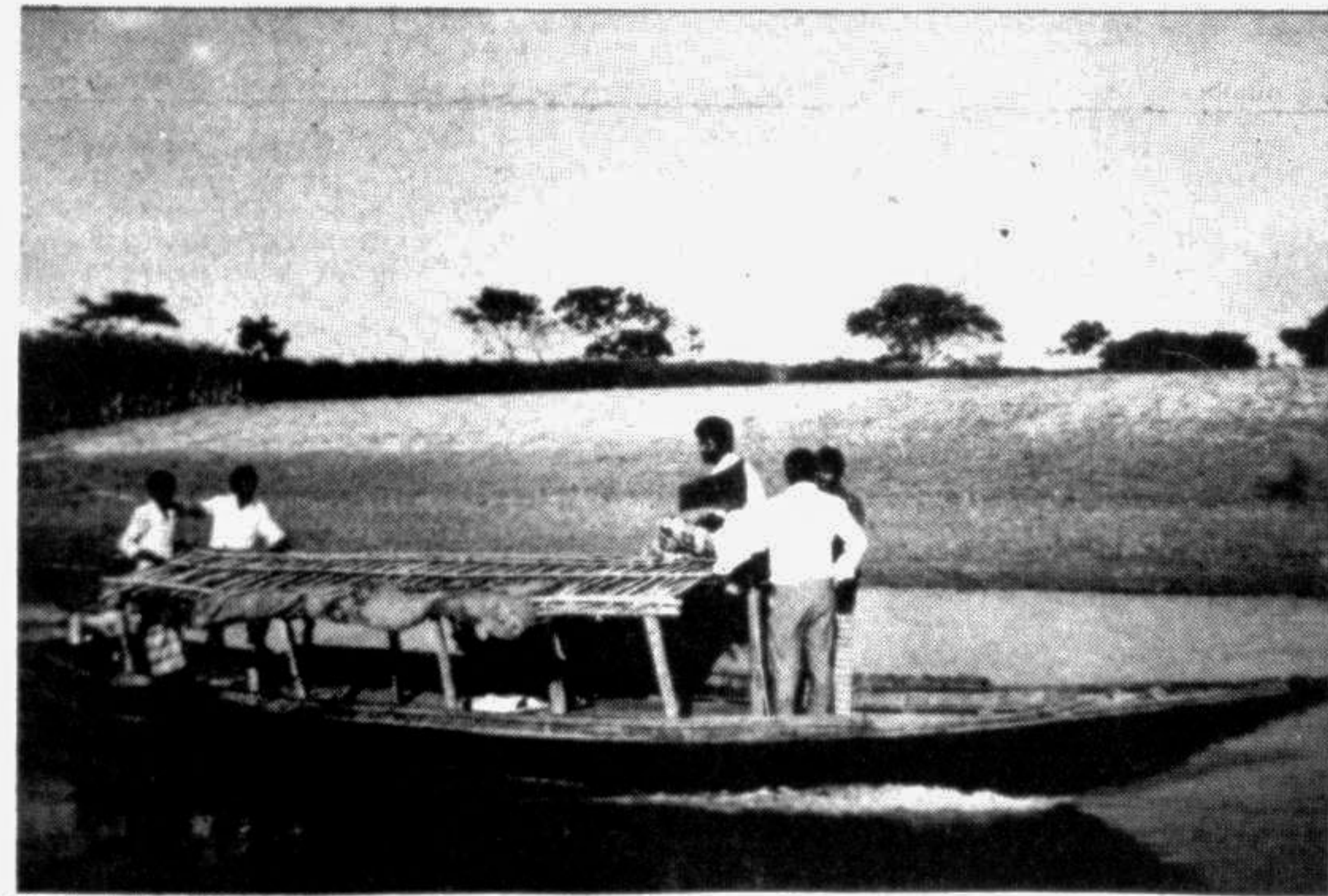
The Country Boat Pilot Project is a step in the right direction. Started in 1990, the two-year project aims to improve the socio-economic conditions of the boatmen, chiefly by making country boats more competitive with other modes of transports.

This project, the way it is planned, is an unusual development in that it involves democratic participation of the target group and seeks advice in finding viable solutions to the problems, said Dr Reider Kham, a socio-economist and principal author of the draft report. The main objective of the project is to research the present situation in the sector, technical improvements and provide help in building institutions.

Research into the present situation has already been carried out and the findings documented in the draft report titled "Navigating the Winds of Change: Mechanization of Country Boats in Bangladesh". According to the report, the main emphasis of technical improvements to be carried out by the project will be to concentrate on making the performance of the engines better and safer, yet avoiding technically advanced solutions which are difficult to learn or expensive to implement. Areas identified for improvement by the project include installation of keyboards for better sailing capabilities, improved rigging, improved engine installation and testing of simple gearboxes. A project boatyard has already been set up in Narayanganj.

The pilot projects also intends to help strengthen the organisational aspects of the country boat people. This will also involve organising boatmen's groups for credit and other purposes, as well as working with planners and politicians to obtain more resources and support for the sector.

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Typical Kosha-type country boats, which have shallow draft and are most suitable for irrigation pump engine installations.

## A Tribute to Abu Sayeed Ayub

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Abu Sayeed Ayub

**W**ALKING up the dark stairs of a two-story old house at 14 Wailullah Lane in central Calcutta, two or three evenings a month, at times made me a little nervous, and this feeling of unease would increase when I reached a room on the first floor, ready to knock.

It was an absurd feeling. After all, on these visits, I was assured of a warm welcome from one of the gentlest persons we had known in those days, one whose appearance, once described by an admirer as a sculptor's dream, matched his disposition.

Perhaps, one cause of my self-consciousness was the knowledge that this gentle person was also one of the formidable intellectuals of the then Calcutta, one who was regarded by many as the greatest authority on the modern Bengali poetry, and whose work was discussed by local intellectuals here at a meeting at Bangla Academy last Tuesday, the late Abu Sayeed Ayub.

The other cause of my self-consciousness had something to do with the kind of people who often spent their evenings at Ayub Sahib's place, young intellectuals, writers, poets and even political activists.

Then, studying in a Calcutta college, I had earned the privilege of joining these select gatherings on the introduction of one of Ayub Sahib's closest friends, the late Syed Mujtaba Ali.

At these gatherings, there was always a lot of stimulating discussion that followed no set course, like in a good Bengali ADDA, on subjects ranging from literature to politics. Since Ayub Sahib spoke softly, almost in whispers, we seldom

heard loud voices inside the room. Few, it seemed, ever got worked up over arguments. In any case, for most visitors, the main purpose in coming to the 14 Wailullah Lane was to listen to Ayub Sahib, often against the background of Tagore music, played on gramophone.

It was really the erudition of Ayub Sahib, then in his late thirties or early forties, that served as the main attraction for the evenings. Subjects he was most interested in were philosophy and modern Bengali poetry. However, in the process of becoming experts in both, he had travelled through the writings of Tagore, the English poetry and, surprisingly, an enormous amount of political literature, including Marxism and the communist view of the contemporary world. At what stage, he regarded himself as a Marxist in a broad philosophical sense and when exactly he turned into a humanist—he probably remained both Marxist and humanist at the same time—this writer would not be qualified to say. However, in this context, this writer recalls that his own introduction to the Soviet Union was through a book that Ayub Sahib had picked up from his bookshelf and asked his young guest to read, a fairly well-known book titled, "Russia Without Illusions." In those days, Ayub Sahib made no secret of his belief that socialism provided the answer to many of the problems of India. But how close he was to the Communist Party of India, I would not know.

Years, if not decades later, Abu Sayeed Ayub became the Editor of the "Quest", the Calcutta-based journal of the

Congress for Cultural Freedom which then served as the intellectual front against Communism, a close cousin of the London journal, The Encounter. If the two editors of the British publication, Spender and Kristol, were unaware of the fact that the Congress received indirect funding from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), probably through the Asia Foundation, one should not think too unkindly of Ayub Sahib's ignorance on this matter.

Even before joining the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Abu Sayeed Ayub became a staunch critic of Joseph Stalin, perhaps as early as at the start of the fifties. By then a student of Dhaka University, this writer had kept up a sporadic correspondence with his Uncle Ayub. From this end, there were short notes, full of naive political questions, often prompted by what was going on inside the left movement here. Replies from Ayub came promptly, in long hand-written letters, always in English. In one such letter, he went after the Russian dictator, "A Lenin is born only once in a century", he said, "and Stalins will always destroy Trotskys." I have lost the correspondence, a precious possession perhaps mistakenly left behind in one of the rooms of the Saltmullah Hall, but my memory retains this beautiful line penned by Ayub Sahib.

Interestingly enough, while Ayub Sahib himself drifted away from Socialism—I cannot

pinpoint the time—it was his elder brother, Dr. A.M.O. Ghani who drifted in to take the place where his younger brother once belonged.

A medical practitioner, he lived with his family in two adjoining flats in a three-storey apartment building at 5 Pearl Road at Park Circus, the address that was known to a sizeable section of the intellectual community as well as virtually to all left activists in Calcutta. Dr Ghani ran his own clinic which was within the walking distance of his apartment, and it was always packed with patients receiving free service from the doctor.

If Ayub Sahib had embraced Marxism as an intellectual, Dr Ghani entered the left movement as a social worker and, unlike his younger brother, stayed on. For the Communist Party of India, he proved to be an asset and eventually won a seat at the West Bengal State Assembly. When he passed away a few years ago, the Pearl Road was renamed as Dr A.M.O. Ghani Road by the Calcutta Corporation, a fitting tribute to a dedicated public figure.

At some point, probably in the late fifties, Ayub Sahib started living in one of the apartments at 5 Pearl Road. Uncle Mujtaba Ali also moved in but much later. And so did a few others, like Habibur Rahman, the architect brother of Mrs Ghani, who designed a number of modern buildings in New Delhi and was appointed the Chief Architect of the gov-

ernment of India. If the buildings he designed attracted a lot of attention, so did his marriage to Indrani, a beautiful young woman—she became Miss India at a pageant—and later acknowledged as a great Indian classical dancer, one of the greatest of her time. Then, there was Mustafa Anwar, the son of the late well-known poet, Gulam Mustafa, who had just married Sushmita, dividing his time between flying planes and singing Tagore songs, doing both with skill and precision.

People who lived in different apartments at 5 Pearl Road had their own occupations and circles of friends. But visiting them once in a while, or would get that wonderful feeling that they were all bound together in a shared life style sustained by music and dance, poetry and literature.

This writer who was then living in another part of the world knew little about what was going at various apartments in that three-storey apartment building at Park Circus. For Uncle Mujtaba Ali, this was probably the most productive period of his life. But was it also the same for Ayub Sahib? I wonder.

It is good to learn from Gouri, Ayub Sahib's wife, currently visiting Dhaka that publication of collected writing of Abu Sayeed Ayub is now under preparation. He was anything but a prolific writer. But whatever he wrote, in Bengali or English, was always worth waiting for by his devoted readers. The same should be true about his collected writings.

The footnote to my recollections of Ayub Sahib falls outside my faded memories. It

happened only the other day, perhaps just about ten years ago, certainly more recent than what we have been talking about in this column.

At a dinner party in New York, my host, Wajidur Rahman, a Bangladeshi diplomat, introduced me to one of my fellow guests, Indrani Rahman.

The famed Indian dancer remembered me, somewhat vaguely, and we started talking about life at 5 Pearl Road.

"They all led charmed lives, full of music and poetry, song and dance. They lived in a kind of world which perhaps no longer exists," I said to her, as if thinking aloud, not quite sure what I meant.

But, I think, she understood.

She said, "At the end, there was so much of sadness too. You probably know about the last lonely years of Mujtaba Sahib, fighting his own battle with his dwindling creative energy and totally exhausted physical strength. Perhaps you know that Shameem, Dr Ghani's younger son, committed suicide, about Mustafa Anwar who died in a plane crash at the height of his career in Pakistan. The Ghani Sahib has passed away and Ayub Sahib is a victim of a long lingering illness."

The party was still going on when I took my leave and started walking back to my hotel. It was snowing and the night was bitterly cold. The road was deserted and New York suddenly seemed inhospitable and I felt like an unwelcome intruder. I suddenly wanted to walk down to 14 Wailullah Lane and knock at the door, if only I could find it.