

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

In different parts of the country, there exist palaces, some in ruins and others in dilapidated conditions, which were once the luxurious homes of aristocratic families, vibrating with music and dance, love and romances. Here, in this new weekend feature, The Daily Star staff writers will look at some of these homes and their families, tracing their histories and, in some cases, their tragedies. We start this new series with the Baldah Zamindar family of Dhaka.

## LAST ARISTOCRACIES OF BANGLADESH

# A MURDER THAT SEALED THE FATE OF A FAMILY

by Chapal Bashar

WHAT is wrong with Khoka? Why is he so late to wake up this morning? wondered Mrinalini when she went to call her son. She did not have to knock at the door of Khoka's room. It was open. The terrified mother screamed in seeing her son in a pool of blood on the bed. His head was almost lopped from the neck by some sharp weapon. There was no question that he was dead.

This sensational murder occurred over half-a-century ago in the legendary Baldah House located at Wari area of Dhaka city. The house belongs to Zemindar family of Baldah in Joydevpur.

It was the murder of Nripendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, affectionately called Khoka by his parents. He was the only son of Baldah's Zemindar Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury. Nripendra fell victim to a conspiracy allegedly by his step mother and was killed when he was 32. This unfortunate death shocked his father gravely. Broken-hearted Narendra Narayan, the nature-lover who created 'Baldah Garden', survived the tragedy only for three years after the death of his dear son.

Narendra Narayan is no more. Yet his unique creations 'Psyche' and 'Cybele' - popularly known together as the Baldah Garden, containing hundreds of rare botanical species, still exist.

The Baldah House, which is virtually a haunted house now, stands beside the garden. Anami Prashed Roy Chowdhury, a grandson of Narendra Narayan born to his only daughter Suniti Bala, inherited the Baldah Zemindary and is now living in this house. Anami Prashed now also owns the property of his father. Zemindar Rai Bahadur Atul Prashed Roy Chowdhury of Kashimpur.

Zemindary system was introduced by British rules in India in 1793, which created big landlords who obtained 'Permanent Settlement' in designated areas. The Zemindars had to pay a fixed amount yearly to the government while their income was the khazna (taxes) collected from the people living in the area under them. The tax-payers were considered as subjects of the landlords. There was actually no restriction of fixing khazna on them.

The subjects were often oppressed by the Zemindars and the horrifying tales of such op-

pressions are still in the minds of the people - of course, of the elderly ones. For younger generations, Zemindary system or Zemindars act of oppression are now only part of history. Zemindary system was de-

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clared abolished in 1950 in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) by the government and the decision was implemented by 1958 through payment of compensations to Zemindars. And the so-called subjects became free from the clutches of Zemindars who lost their power and glories they enjoyed for nearly two hundred years.

Now, four decades after the



Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, the nature loving Zemindar who died broken-hearted only 3 years after his only son Nripendra Narayan was murdered allegedly by his stepmother.



The Baldah House, now virtually a haunted house, stands as a mute witness to many ups and downs. — Star Photo.

abolition of Zemindary system, the remnants of Zemindars palaces at different places of the country remind us of exploitation of poor farmers.

However, Baldah's Zemindar family was an exception. It was especially Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury of this family who achieved a place in people's mind for his love of nature that gave birth to the Baldah Garden which is truly the only botanical garden of Bangladesh.

Narendra Narayan was totally different from other Zemindars. He spent much of his earnings not only for the garden, but also for establishing a rich museum and a library in the Baldah House. He also made large contributions to cultural activities as well.

"If you are interested in the background or history of our family, you might feel a little perplexed since there are some complications in our family structure," says Anami Prashed, just crossed 60, whose both paternal and maternal ancestors were all Zemindars. He has had some glimpses of life of grandeur during his early years, which are now only faint memories for him.

Zemindary system has gone. Anami Prashed now owns only the dilapidated Baldah House and some small inheritances in Baldah and Kashimpur. He, himself, handed over the Baldah Garden, the museum and the library to the government in 1962 as he was financially unable to maintain them.

Once, Baldah, located in Joydevpur was the part of Bhawal Zemindary but later became a separate estate. Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, the Zemindar of Baldah during the last quarter of 19th century, had no children. So he adopted Narendra

Narayan as his son to become the heir of Zemindary. Narendra was the son of Mahim Chandra, the Zemindar of Gacha, near Tongi.

When Narendra Narayan approached his friend Mahim Chandra to adopt one of his two sons, he gladly agreed. And in 1894, Narendra Narayan, then 14, became the adopted son of Narendra Narayan and grew up in Baldah.

Narendra Narayan had a cultural bent and kept himself always engaged in cultural as well as literary activities. He wrote some books on different topics. It was he, who had this cultural influence over

Narendra. Thus Narendra Narayan became a lover of nature, music and literature.

Narendra Narayan bought the land in Wari and constructed a house according to his own taste and liking. He named it East End House, but now it is known as Baldah House. That two storied building had over 30 rooms along with a hall on the ground floor used as museum while some other rooms were for a rare library containing some thousands of books. A small auditorium, named 'Natak Ghar' (Theatre House) was also constructed on the compound of Baldah House for staging dramas and cultural functions.

Over three acres of land beside the house was allotted for Narendra Narayan's long cherished garden. He started creating the botanical garden Psyche in 1909 and completed it in 1936. After that, he

started the work of Cybele, the second garden in 1938. Cybele came to a shape within two years.

Then came the greatest shock in Narendra Narayan's life - the brutal killing of his only son in June, 1940. His son Nripendra Narayan was the honorary Magistrate of Dhaka. He was a well known personality in the city and also a renowned lawn tennis player. The tragic end came when his father was looking for a bride for him.

Sudhangshu Kiron, the young and beautiful second wife of Narendra Narayan was suspected for the murder. It is said that she allegedly provoked their servant Prakash to kill Nripendra. Members of Baldah family believed that Sudhangshu was not happy with Nripendra for certain reasons, while servant Prakash, then 21, was not in good book of Nripendra. That Prakash was beaten by Nripendra for some misdoings only a few days before his killing. Both Sudhangshu and Prakash were arrested by police and they were accused of the murder of Nripendra.

During the trial, it was proved that Prakash was the killer and he was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for life.

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## A LOOK INSIDE THE BALDAH GARDEN

# An Incredible Collection of 672 Species from 87 Families of Plant

by S. Y. Bakht

BALDAH Garden is like an oasis in the midst of a concrete jungle.

Located in Wari, the 3.38 acre garden with its rich collection of indigenous and exotic plants is perhaps Dhaka's most exciting attraction for naturalists and plant-lovers.

Divided into two units of walled enclosures, and separated by Nawab street, Baldah Garden presently houses about 15,000 plants covering 672 species belonging to 87 families of the plant kingdom. Boasting one of the richest single collection of plants in the country, the garden is undoubtedly a national treasure.

Started in 1909, Baldah Garden was the life-time creation of Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, the philanthropic naturalist zamindar of Baldah.

Spanning a period of over 30 years, the founder passionately collected exotic plants from over 50 countries to build up the garden. After his death in 1943, even the maintenance of the garden became a problem. The dedicated Superintendent of the garden appointed by the founder, Amritlal Acharya, looked after the plants with passionate zeal and the garden survived.

After being managed by the Court of Wards for a number of years, the grandson of the founder, Anami Prashed Roy Chowdhury, handed over the garden to the government in 1962. Since then, Baldah Garden is being managed by the Forest Department and is now directly under the

Botanical Garden in Mirpur.

The two units of the garden were thematically named by the founder himself as Psyche as in 'soul' and Cybele after the mother goddess of nature. The Psyche is the earlier construction and is located on the southern part of the garden.

Entering through the heavy iron gates, one is greeted by the Shapla - water-lily - pools on both sides of the walkway. The Psyche houses the richest, over two hundred species, collection of cacti in the country.

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The regular weekly advice column WRITE TO MITA could not be published this week for unavoidable reasons. However, the column will be published next week onward.

THE face of calamity is always the same. It may be a Filipino child who has lost his home—and its parents—in a typhoon, standing outside of what remains of a wooden shack in Manila's slum district of Tondo, conveying the kind of agony that can never be put into words.

It may be an old peasant woman who, too, has lost everything, running away from an Indonesian village which has been just hit by eruption from one of the many active volcanoes in the archipelago, with the ground under her feet still shaking with tremors.

And it may be a mother in Kutubdia, holding a dead child in her arms, with her torn sari barely covering her frail body and her hollow eyes filled with that feeling of despair that we have seen in hundreds of photographs during the past ten days.

One face is indistinguishable from another. The Indonesian woman running away from a village, hit by an earthquake, can well pass for her sister in Kutubdia; the child in Tondo can be mistaken for another in Noakhali, who, too, has lost everything in the cyclone.

There is some truth in the saying that a victim of a natural calamity in a Third World country has no nationality, no ethnic origin. It is always part Ethiopian, part Bangladeshi, part Latin American and, finally, part of a world that exists only in our nightmare.

The face of calamity is indeed the same. What is not the same is the magnitude of the calamity or the way we approach it and tackle its devastating aftermath.

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MOST countries in the Asia-Pacific region are vulnerable to natural disasters, especially typhoons

and cyclones, earthquakes and floods. With improvements made in the early warning system, none of them is seldom caught unawares when one such disaster hits it. But how well prepared it is to deal with the situation is another matter.

The early warning system for an earthquake still remains most unreliable. This explains why some 25 major earthquakes, including volcanic eruptions, which hit many countries in the world during the present century caused such heavy human casualties and often wiped out villages and towns.

As an Indonesian friend once put it, "Look out for smoke coming out of a volcano, dormant or active, and you get ready to move away from it as far as you can. There is no need to look for any other warning."

Since most experts agree that the chances of preventing a natural calamity are minimal, if not non-existent, countries should concentrate on preparation for damage control as well as for relief and rehabilitation of victims of the disaster.

A few countries in Asia, like Japan, Taiwan and Hongkong, have committed sizable resources to their own programmes in this field. Typhoon shelters built in Hongkong, Taiwan and along the vulnerable coastal belt in Japan have certainly helped in saving lives and reducing devastation caused by natural calamities. During a visit to Beijing, we

talked a bit about the vulnerability of the country to natural disasters, especially to floods caused by great rivers flowing through this vast country. (Is the Yangtze, the third longest river in the world, still called the 'Sorrow of China'? I wonder.)

However, when it comes to typhoons, China is in a somewhat different—and perhaps luckier—position, despite its long coast. Records show that in recent years a number of typhoons which originated in the Pacific or in the South China Sea, hit the Philippines, Taiwan or Hongkong and then slowed down into storms as they reached the Chinese shore. "Can you be sure about the future?" we had asked a Chinese friend. The answer was in the negative. The pattern keeps changing, mainly due to ecological imbalances brought about by nations and peoples, and we can never say what lies ahead, except that, for all concerned, it will be worse, perhaps even for the lucky ones.

The lucky ones? Despite their long coastline, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia are seldom hit by typhoons. Yet these countries do understand what South Asia, especially Bangladesh and India, goes through every year—sometimes several times within 24 months—as victims of natural disasters. Thailand and Malaysia have just offered substantial assistance to the relief operation in Bangladesh.

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## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



The fate of calamity is always the same.

IF there is a country in Southeast Asia that share the same kind of tragedy as Bangladesh, it is the Philippines. It is also the country that can offer us a few good lessons in damage control, especially in preparation that must be taken before it is hit by a typhoon.

During the five years in the late seventies when we lived in Manila, the country was hit by about a dozen typhoons—about one big one a year—causing considerable devastation in Manila and in the province of Luzon. (In 1976, a major disaster, perhaps the biggest in recent history, hit the Philippines' province of Mindanao when an earthquake, followed by a tidal wave, left nearly 10,000 dead or missing.)

What can we learn from our Philippine experience?

Each time a storm started brewing in the South China Sea, threatening to develop into a typhoon, the country would be put on alert several days before it was likely to reach the archipelago. The two evening news-casts in the country's five television stations—the number may well be the same today—would take special care with their weather reports. With the help of the latest satellite pictures, the commentator would chart the course of the storm or the typhoon, as the case might be, discussing all the probabilities. (Example: "If the storm follows its present course and develops into a typhoon, it can hit

the northern part of Luzon some time late Saturday evening. However, if it changes course it may move towards the Vietnam coast.") Daily newspapers, in English and Filipino, would treat the weather report just as seriously as the electronic media. Meanwhile, warning signals would be going up or down, depending on the position of the typhoon. It is a sense of

urgency that would mark the general attitude, in the government, among members of the public and in the media.

This writer was told that a "Disaster Relief Task Force", set up by the government years ago, stood by as a permanent agency of the administration. It went into action almost as soon as a natural disaster hit any part of the country.

According to my informant who was a cabinet minister, he and all his colleagues would place their services at the disposal of the task force and immediately leave for the disaster area, if it happened to be outside Manila. (Here, in Bangladesh, it was an important TV news on Monday night when three cabinet ministers left for Chittagong for a three-day tour—"A big deal", this writer muttered to himself—and there was no news then how other government leaders were helping with the relief operation.)

This writer once teasingly suggested to a high Filipino government official the fact

that it was Manila, the capital, which was most vulnerable to typhoons probably explained why the administration was always so alert in dealing with natural calamities. It might have been a different matter if it was an outlying province in the archipelago that suffered most from storms and typhoons.

To put this argument in the Bangladesh context, we wonder if the people in Chittagong and the coastal belt would feel better protected against natural disasters if the capital of the country was shifted from Dhaka to the port city. Just a thought.

AS recorded in an almanac, it is now part of global history that out of 11 worst storms, including typhoons and cyclones, which hit parts of the world between 1864 and 1977, India and Bangladesh had each a share of three, thus making more than half of the total. If we add to it the cyclone of 1970, recorded under the category of tidal waves, that killed over 200,000 and the big flood of 1988, we would be at the top of this list.

Some unusual ones mentioned in the almanac, caught my attention.

On October 5, 1864, most of Calcutta was denuded by a cyclone, killing over 70,000 people.

In 1642, rebels destroyed the seawall, presumably an embankment, in the Chinese town of Kaifeng, causing a flood that killed 300,000 people.

And on the Christmas Day in 1974, a cyclone destroyed almost the whole city of Darwin in Australia, causing mass evacuation.

There are many more, but none as heart-breaking as the devastation caused by the last week's cyclone in Bangladesh.