

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

PEOPLE AND PLACES

SRI LANKA — THE DARLING OF NATURE

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THE call that came to me to be in Sri Lanka as a state guest was quite explicit in its purpose: to observe the Local Authorities' elections to be held throughout the country on a single day, 11th May. The observers' team, as it finally emerged, consisted of sixteen members, eleven from the SAARC countries, one from Australia, one from Canada, one from the Philippines and two from the United Kingdom.

We from Bangladesh had started off with the notion of a SAARC group, and ended up with a broader insignia, the International Observer Group, SAARC, according to my perception, fits in easily within the wider scope of the Commonwealth. How The Philippines, which is neither SAARC nor Commonwealth, joined the group, I never thought proper to enquire. One thing was clear from the start: none of us represented his or her country; each was a member of the group in his or her personal capacity.

Speaking personally then, I was delighted to have the invitation. This was to be my first visit to Sri Lanka and though I knew that most of my ten days' stay — May 5 to May 15 — would be taken up with activities carefully programmed, I also hoped to see much and to hear much beyond the prescribed requirements.

The Local Authorities Elections, which means, in more precise terms, elections to Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradesho Sabhas, have come to be regarded as an important exercise in the nation's political life. For an average Sri Lankan, it is a matter of pride that the nation has enjoyed universal adult franchise for about 70 years now. Record-wise this may be slightly longer than in the case with Bengal (undivided). The story, however, of how well and how unhindered the right

has been exercised by the two peoples, will be different. For Sri Lankans, the Local Authorities have come to mean a lot, and being a highly literate people—in fact the most literate people in all South Asia—they have come to experience democracy working at the grass roots level. The same can hardly be said about the majority of SAARC countries, and certainly not about Bangladesh. The institutional framework exists, but we have failed to infuse life into the body.

The elections are over, results have been published, the matter is ended, at least as far as we are concerned as a group of observers. Our report, finalised and ceremonially submitted to the Commissioner of Elections by the evening of May 14, virtually signalled the dispersal of the group. I would have loved to sit under the shade of a tree sitting round the fire would be grossly inappropriate for a country always warm under a tropical sun — and to exchange notes with other visitors. Most of us were first-timers, and each one of us could very well contribute something entirely individual, while agreeing on some common observations.

Taken together, the resultant picture would have looked more authentic. As it is, mine would be not only personal, incomplete and superficial, but overly impressionistic also. But this perhaps I cannot help.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country but there was nothing exotic about it, not much that was unfamiliar to me. I am used to greenery but the way

Sri Lanka is green excited me. The contribution of the trees almost invariably forming woods, was much higher than would be the case here. I told my friends that I can imagine Bangladesh to be as green and as densely wooded as Sri Lanka is now but that would be a hundred, maybe two hundred years ago. This country has enacted laws which requires a

countryside, we didn't have to negotiate a road that was not metalled, no cows or goats or mules and hardly any slow-moving cart obstructing our drive.

I was assigned to a southern district, Galle. Much of the countryside consisted of plantations, tea and rubber mostly and my eyes feasted on what seemed to be an endless

which marked the election suggested not only a nationwide election managed efficiently but also a people politically mature and emotionally stable.

Turning to the social scene, this predominantly Buddhist country appeared to be refreshingly free from the kind of communalism that has vitiated politics of our subcontinent. Terrorism which only the other day haunted Sri Lankan minds has been successfully quelled. This made a free and fair election possible in the summer of '91 which kept the voters away from election booths only three years ago. The ethnic troubles in the north and part of the east still persist. A political solution is widely advocated, more particularly by the main opposition but the party in power appeared to be rather close-lipped on this question.

With the return of peace in most parts of the country, tourism and garment industry, badly affected in recent years, have both recovered to a great extent. The country had its share of the jolt in its economy due to the Gulf War but looking through the advertisement columns, agencies dealing with manpower export are now doing a brisk business. I find nothing comparable in this country.

A Sri Lankan can be easily mistaken for a Bengali, as far as appearance goes. The island, however, is greener than the delta, less crowded, more varied though smaller in size, and much, much more favoured by nature. It could



Trees, almost-invariably forming woods, make Sri Lanka green and beautiful.

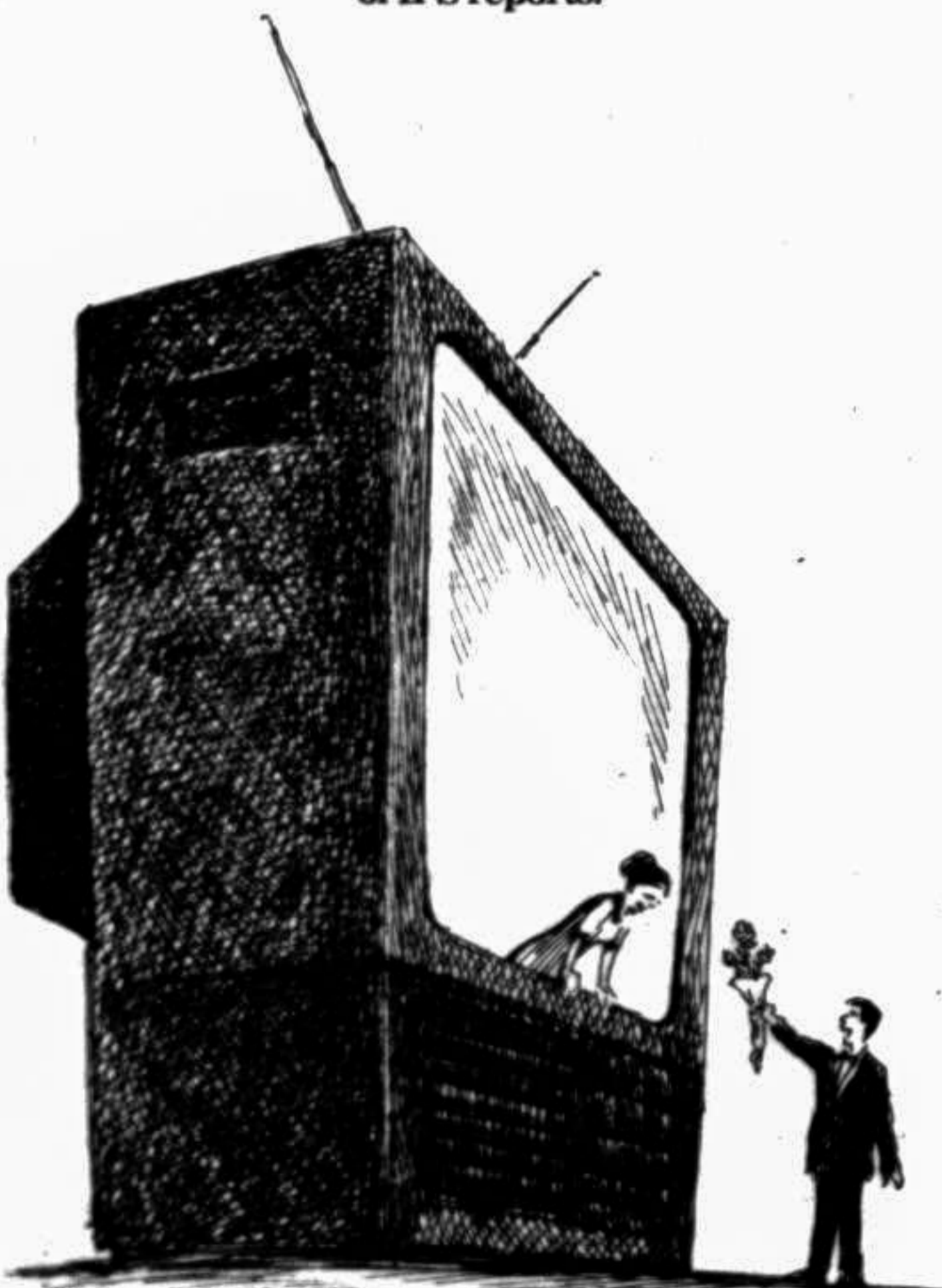
without exaggeration be called the darling of nature. And when I remember those lovely houses, brickbuilt and with red-tiled roofs, many of them almost hidden behind a thick grove of coconut trees — shanties and mudhouses are a

rarity — and when I keep only this in consideration, the beauty of the average houses and the standard of housing, I am tempted to say that Sri Lankans, in respect of the quality of life they have attained, are perhaps the first among South

Asian peoples. A noted educationist of the country, the author is a former Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University and a former advisor to the erstwhile government of Bangladesh.

Scouting for Spouses by TV

Trendy marriage-minded Chinese are eschewing the services of the traditional matchmaker, appearing on television to actively look for a spouse. Zhao Hong of IPS reports.



In a country where the search for a spouse is a task largely left to official matchmakers or relatives, appearing on television to actively solicit a partner is nothing less than a revolution in Chinese behaviour.

But ever since it opened in September, Beijing Television's (BTV) dating game programme, 'Let's Meet Tonight', has been a runaway hit with the capital's 10 million viewers.

"It takes real guts to appear on TV," said a young Beijing girl. "But people are more open now. They are not afraid to be shown on TV looking for a spouse."

programme does not appear to be in danger of running out of men and women to feature in its four times weekly show. The station is swamped with applications to appear on the programme despite the stiff, 60 yuan (US\$12) entry fee.

TV opens up a new way for people to seek love. It is a revolution from parent-arranged marriages, matchmaking offices and marriage ads in newspapers in that people have more choice and a clearer image of the subject," said BTV chief editor Yu Zhifang.

Each programme features a selection of five subjects shown working, playing, reading or cooking in two-minute video-taped sequences. The anchor or the subjects themselves describe their characteristics, hobbies, family background, and marital history to prospective partners in the vast televiewing audience. Those who have appeared

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WITH so much sadness and grief touching our lives — a great deal of it affecting me personally — even the thought of writing another nostalgic piece about the 1960s seems irrelevant, out of place, insensitive and almost irreverent.

"It is alright," says a colleague encouragingly, "to provide some relief to our readers by writing about other times and other places." I respond to his comment with a nod, but remain undecided.

My mind is focussed on Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the last of the three outstanding editors I am due to write about. But instead of remembering our happier times together, like during the shooting of the movie, 'Jago Hua Savera,' I think of some of his sad poems, especially on Africa and Palestine, finally the one he wrote on the suffering of the people in Bangladesh during 1971, which had the refrain, "How can I wipe your blood with my tears?" The poet had read it out to me during our surprise meeting in Bangkok in the early seventies.

Suddenly, the chain of my thoughts is snapped and my recollections of Faiz are drowned in the flood water breaking over the banks of Monu, Surma and Kushliara, the three rivers which, judging by the devastation they have caused in greater Sylhet, can now be dubbed as great killers.

Yet, all the three rivers had their places in my childhood, and later in my adolescence — we even named a sister after Surma — and the only images they have in my recollections are of gentleness and tranquillity. (Recollections can indeed be almost ridiculously selective. I remember when the three rivers were full after the rains, but there are no clear memories of floods.)

Growing up as children at Maulvi Bazar, we learnt to swim, among other things that we all learn as kids, first in a pond and then in Monu. It was like graduating from the elementary class to the advanced course in swimming, another difference being between bathing in the stagnant water of a pond and having a real proper wash in the running water of the river.

Now, after all these years, it is sad to call Monu a killer.

Maybe these rivers — Monu, Surma and Kushliara — are not killers. They are just angry, angry for what we have been doing to the nature, within the country and outside, for upsetting what we say in the newspaper language, the ecological balance or, to put in plainer terms, for messing things up.

panorama of green. In retrospect, I wonder if the sights I saw was the normal sight since it was a holiday, being an election day.

Wayside clusters of men, little gossiping crowds, small groups of young women, of elderly ladies on way to polling stations or returning, no sign of hurry or bustle anywhere except perhaps in vehicles carrying partymen, out in their patrol to see how things were going — such were the sights that greeted our eyes throughout the election day. The absence of conflict and commotion which I witnessed, the climate of peace and participation

Maybe these rivers are angry because, over the decades, we have done so little in looking after them, for we have done nothing — or perhaps very little — by way of dredging up the silt forming on their beds, which has made it more and more difficult for them — and for other rivers in the country — to carry all the rain water even before the advent of the monsoon. What has now become inevitable is still being described euphemistically as "floods." What a deception.

ON Monday, we joined several hundreds of people, men and women, at a milad to pray for the departed soul of Enayet Rasul Chowdhury, an official of the United Nations Development Programme

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(UNDP) who had been the coordinator of the UN agency's relief operation in Chittagong. He had been working almost round the clock for weeks in reaching relief goods to devastated areas. Last Friday, he returned to his temporary residence at Chittagong thoroughly exhausted, complained of severe shoulder pain and passed away a few hours later of heart attack. Chowdhury died in harness. He was only 52.

Judging by the kind of people who had packed the hall of what looked like a community centre, people who

A Sad Week that Ends with Good Talks from Friends

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

entire UN system. Whether people like Enayet constitute a stable minority or a marginal majority in the United Nations is beside the point. What is important, they are there, not

through his maternal side. If I have to pick up one single village from my childhood recollections that I loved most, I would say, without any hesitation, Bhadeswar.

more vividly — people. Whether there was something in their genes or their ancestors descended on the village from somewhere we cannot even speculate about, people of Bhadeswar always seemed to be the best looking people I had known in my childhood. All men were handsome, with good features and fair complexion, and all women, especially the young ones, were just gorgeous. Even older men, with their flowing white beards and dressed in spotless white, moved around with grace and beauty that I can not remember to have seen in any other village. (Again, my recollection is being highly selective, as if there were no ugly faces in Bhadeswar!)

In Dhaka, I ran into my relatives and friends from

a couple of hours with two of our noted experts one morning last week. It was an unscheduled unstructured free-wheeling and largely off-the-record discussion that covered a whole range of issues, from problems in economic planning to the debate over the form of government in Bangladesh.

It was one of the most stimulating discussions on Bangladesh, and that too, with our own experts, we had had for a long time. At the end of the discussion which we had continued over an unscheduled lunch, we realised, a little to my dismay, how little we have promoted the interaction between the media and our intellectuals.

This was one of the cogent points brought up by the noted Indian columnist, Chanchal Sarkar when, on our invitation, he addressed the editorial staff of this paper one afternoon last week. As he put it, the issues that we write about or comment on have become far more complex than they were even a few years ago. We can deal with these issues with necessary expertise, first, if journalists reach out to intellectuals to learn through interaction; secondly, develop their own reference libraries; and thirdly promote the concept of specialisation, even on a modest scale, among reporters and features.

While my colleagues responded to the talk by Sarkar by asking him several good positive questions, my mind was focussed on things we must do in carrying out the ideas put forward by my friend from New Delhi.

At the end of the discussion, we could draw only one conclusion: The Daily Star will be a good paper to read every day when it becomes a good paper for journalists to work for. There is a challenge that lies in the invisible linkage.



THE WRATH OF MONU: The overflowing river — angry for what we have been doing to the nature — takes a bridge down. — Star Photo by Enamul Haque

always particularly visible, taking up one challenge after another, giving their best — sometimes their lives, as it turned out in the case of Enayet — to 'the job in hand.' (The expression comes from an international civil servant who is fighting his own battle against the use of UN jargon. To him, 'the job' sounds better than an "assignment" or a "mission.")

Among those who attended

There is hardly much I remember about the village that we visited a couple of times during our school holidays. There were no roads, then connecting the village with Sylhet and we reached Bhadeswar by boat. There were hills, plenty of fruit trees, fish ponds and muddy paths running through good peuca houses.

However, there was something else I remember a bit

Bhadeswar from time to time. Some of those gorgeous girls I knew once are now grandmothers, but good-looking grandmothers. And men? No, I have not looked at them all that closely.

If you know what that the expression, "recharging one's batteries" really means, you would appreciate what it was like for me and a few of my colleagues to spend