

# The Daily Star

# WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## EVOLUTION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF BANGLADESH

Muhammad Zamir

In Bangladesh, Bengali culture and its religious heritage have moved within frameworks where they have interacted upon each other and co-existed not in a parallel but as an evolving consciousness.

Social situations, thought and aspirations provide the backdrop of the experience which is the mainspring for ideas. The inner inter-action of diverse cultural forces and predominant historical conditions play an outstanding role in modulating the social norms which reflect ultimately in the heritage and the creativity of the people.

In Bangladesh, Bengali culture and its religious heritage have moved within frameworks where they have interacted upon each other and co-existed not in a parallel but as an evolving consciousness. Through the ages, the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim traditions have contributed to the creation of a culture, rich in heritage and diverse in folk traditions. Culture continued to progress and did not caulk into compartments where one layer was overwhelmed and replaced by the subsequent pattern. This conceptual formation through the centuries led to expressions which were indigenous in character and indicative of the changes Bangladesh underwent in history. The situation adjusted through the centuries, through the migration and the settlement of the Kols, Dravidians and the Aryans, the various establishments of rulers who were Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic or European. The ultimate shape came through the framework of Hindu revival and Muslim resurgence.

The literary-cultural activity in Bengal is presumably as old as the day of the first settlements of the Aryan speaking people of the West. The earliest known specimen of recorded speech in Bangladesh is a short and mutilated inscription on a stone plaque found in north central Bengal written in Brahmi characters. There have also been certain claims by some historians that links had existed between the ancient Bengal civilization and the proto-Indian civilization of the Indus Valley. G.S. Dutt discussed about the striking similarity between the traditional form of the goddess Sri, Lakshmi or Kamale-Kamini (The Lady in the Lotus) with that of the figurine reproduction in Pl. XXII of Marshall's Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization, Vol. I.

Whatever may be the exact point of origin, the Bengali language did pass through successive steps of development. It ranged from the spoken 'Laukika' to 'Carya' (fragments of which are enshrined in the MS discovered in Nepal by Haraprasad Shastri) to the earliest period, to the influence of Sanskrit, Brajballi,



Open-air musical concert by the Chhayanaut group is a yearly affair to welcome Pehela Baisakh, the Bengali new year.

Persian, Arabic in the middle period and then the West since the latter half of the eighteenth century. What had started as the Brahmi script of Asoka's inscriptions finally became printed alphabets as modern Bengali in the type setting machine of Charles Wilkins in 1778.

After the Buddhists receded from Bengal the Hindus occupied a central place both in the politico-administrative as well as the religious sphere. The result was Sanskritization of the language which became the medium of expression of the literate. Sanskrit, which was the court language, overshadowed the Buddhist 'Dohas' and passed on to the native vernacular and enriched grammar and syntax. It also had an influence on the existing rhythm and prosody. However, the progression was formal and lacked spontaneity. As a result after sometime it became more a case of suspended animation.

It was the Muslim conquest of Bengal in 1203 by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji which gave a new lease of life in the development of Bengali culture and literature. The Muslim impact struck a stunning blow to the self-placency of the ruling classes and to the prestige of priest-

hood. The established social and cultural milieu was shattered and out of the debris emerged a new Bengali people. Under the changed circumstances, although Persian became the court language, the rulers helped in the promotion of the vernacular literature. The patronage of rulers like Nasiruddin Shah, Hussain Shah and Nasiruddin Mahmud between the 13th and the 15th centuries saw the rendering into Bengali for the first time of great works like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Till then these had been confined to Sanskrit and to the Sanskrit knowing few.

Sukumar Sen noted 'in the hand of the Bengali Muslim poets, a new poetry emerged. It was a result of the mixture of the secular languages and cultural threads of Iran, Arabia and Turkey'. As a result the liberal mind amongst the conquerors and the conquered were blended within the framework of the new ideas introduced through Sufism. The catholic traditions of Islam as opposed to the orthodox Brahminic influence brought forth a synthesis of values. The result was the rise of Vaisnavism, a combination based on human principles and

the Sufistic vision of the ultimate reality.

Chaitanya brought together the people of Bengal and Orissa and also a large body of men from other parts of India who came in personal contact with him, on a common platform of emancipated religious thought and spiritual emotion. This gave a fillip to intellectual activity and created a new interest in life and a new literary and artistic urge in the people.

Great poets like Vidyapati, Chandidas, and Mohamed Sagir of the 15th and 16th centuries bore the mark of this humanism and intellectual liberation. For the first time in Bangladesh songs were written about the invincible superiority of man and the transcending power of love. Villages of Bengal began to throb with new life. Sagir's 'Yusuf and Zulaikha' and Shaikh Fazlullah's poetry at this juncture can only be considered as impressive. Daulat Kazi, Alawal and Mohammed Hayat in the subsequent 17th century raised the status of the local literary and cultural pursuits even higher in this direction. 'Padmavati' and 'Saif-ul-Mulk Baduzzaman' continued this tradition.

However, while formalised literature evolved around the

Court, it was in the masses and people of rural Bengal that new socio-cultural literary forms emerged. The main contributors of these new forms were the peasants, boatmen, fakirs and village headmen. The persons who composed 'Giti-katha' (Ballads), 'Bachan' (Aphorisms), 'Puthis' and 'Charas' (Folk rhymes) were innocent of formalized educational backgrounds. Yet, all of them became authors of great and noble compositions that stirred the social fabric all over Bengal.

The folk heritage originated in stories, in incidents that disturbed the normal placidity of village life — the chase, the fight or a love affair. All these became the fabric into which the author with his deft touches could embroider silver threads of emotion, religion and motive. The imagery reflected the culture around the people.

These compositions were normally in rhymed couplets and some took three to four hours for their complete recital. Varied tonal inflections were also employed to retain the interest of the audience and impress on their imagination the sacrosanct nature of God's prophecies, or of the immutable strength of nature and the fundamental forces of existence. Bahram Khan's 'Laila Majnu', Kabi Fazlullah's 'Goraksha-Bijoy' and Said

spontaneity of the literary form unfortunately never reached them. Lines of pathos from 'Malua' or 'Malanchamala' of the vast majority of the village population, and was retained in their consciousness but were lost in the towns and cities. It was to be much later at the turn of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries that the importance of these forms would be recognised as modulators of the social aspects of Bengal. It would be understood that the rural social framework had remained, but not the same, after the all embracing effects of the British in Eastern India.

It took the efforts of D.C. Sen, Jastimuddin, Professor Mansuruddin and Moulvi Abdul Karim to collect and point out the everlasting beauty of these forms. Historians, litterateurs and saw in them, in each of them, representations of a life that had passed and would

probably never come back again. Of these Jastimuddin however went one step further. He would have to be considered as not only a collector but also as a creative poet.

A Prolific writer, his works are set in the closing years of the British Raj, and deal with an idealized and timeless peasant society — a rural paradise in the process of decay, where landlords exploit religious differences and inflame them for their own ends. A socio-realist, his poems however lacked the doctrinaire touch or partisan preaching. He viewed his rural characters with sympathy, humour and compassion, balancing his style between the formal beauty of rhetoric and the lively rhythm of colloquial speech.

This growth of folk civilization had continued till 1757 when came the battle of

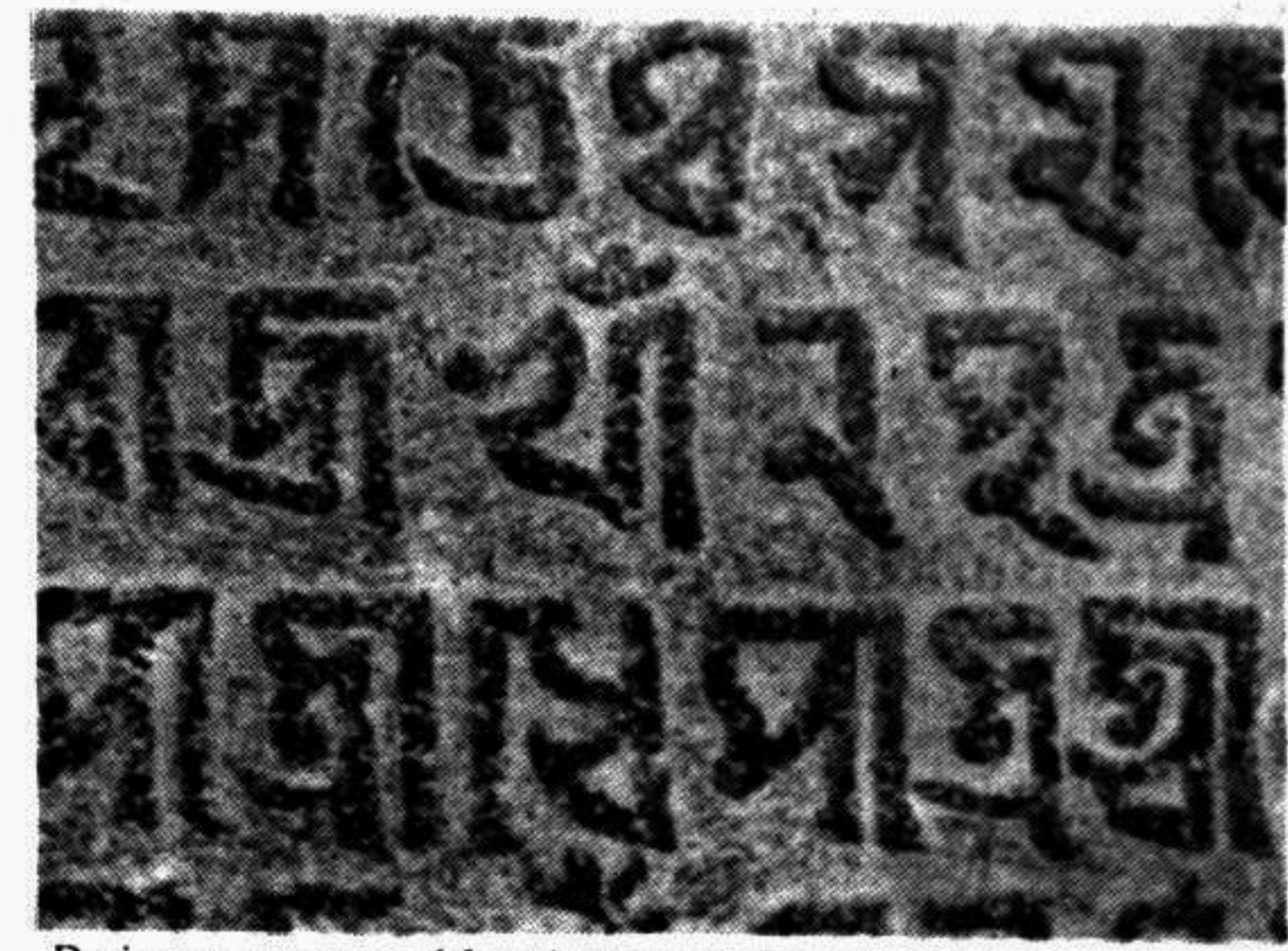
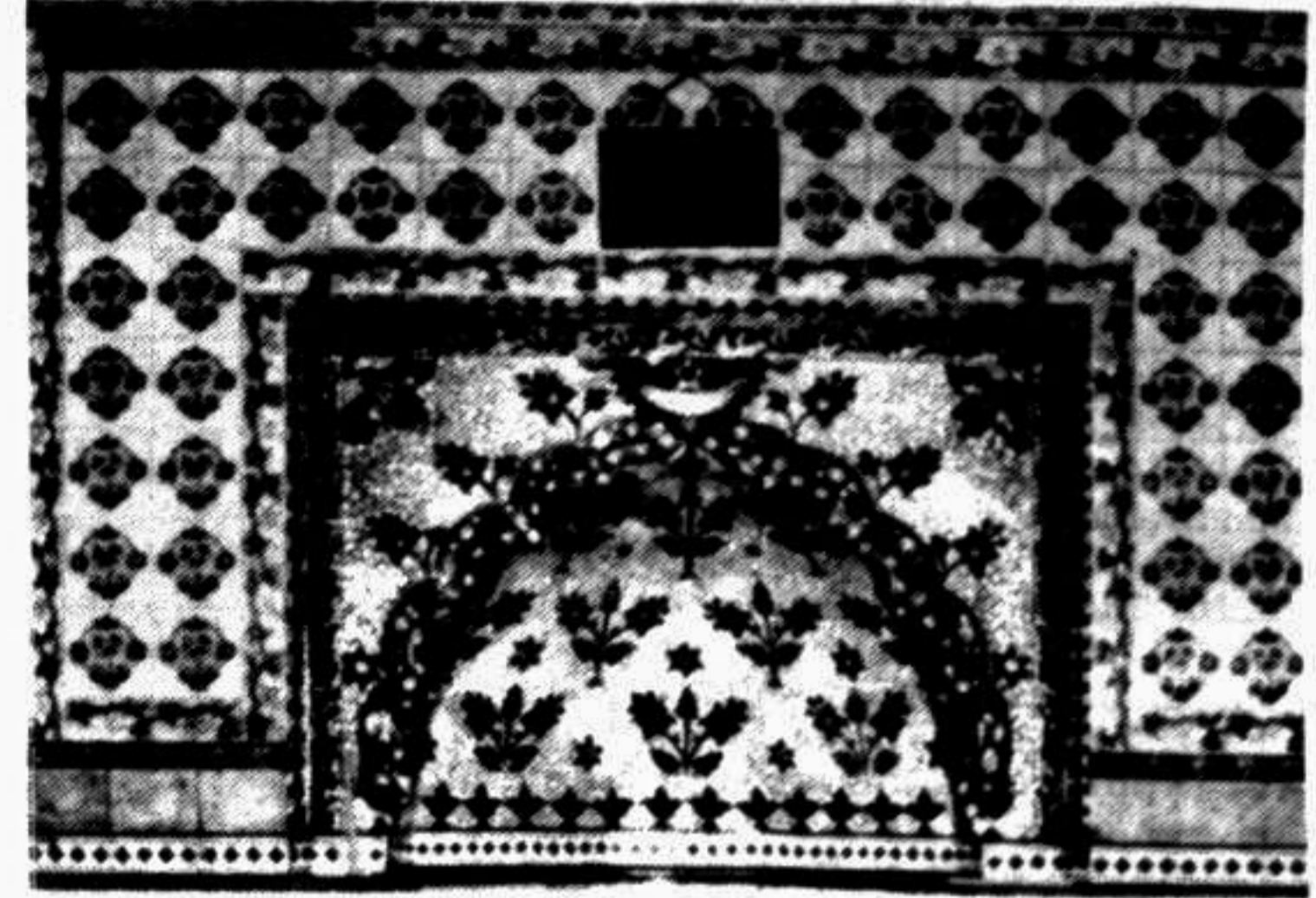
*The earliest known specimen of recorded speech in Bangladesh is a short and mutilated inscription on a short plaque found in north central Bengal written in Brahmi Characters.*

Murtaza's 'Jogakalandar' with their descriptive power, and realistic presentation of love were better examples of these forms. In them were blends of the Marfati element of the 'Puthi', the Vaishnavic and the Sufistic overtones.

The ballad as a form however never became popular with the Hindu priestly class, who looked down upon it as a monotone which discussed not about tales of gods but about familiar, common events. The purity of sentiment and the

Plassey and the eventual rejection of all that was Western by the Muslims as a reaction to the English conquest. Where the Muslims refused to assimilate and accommodate themselves to the rising star of the English the Hindus adapted themselves to their surroundings. By doing so the Hindus had the chance to introduce into the texture of the contemporary Bengali language, greater Sanskrit terminology.

A school of literature developed at Calcutta the capital of



Design on a mosque (above) and early Bengali script on sandstone, 16th century (below).

British India. The economic and administrative domination by the Hindus and the British and their ability to absorb Western ideas brought forth tangible influences on Bengali literature and culture. English words were not objected to, specially the importation into the language of foreign words for which there were no Bengali synonyms. There was no objection also to Bengali grammar being compiled for the first time by a Christian priest at Fort William.

Luminaries like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ishwar Gupta, Mrityunjay Vidyalkar, Navinchandra, Michael Modhusudhan Dutt and Bankimchandra Chatterjee helped in this transformation of Bengali culture through literature. Being great scholars with intimate knowledge of Sanskrit their themes and imagery were generally mythological or drawn from the pages of Indian legends and history. For the first time the Muslim ruling class who had till recently been significant participants in literature became intruders with their Arabic and Persian influence and were used more as a foil as opposed to the Hindu philosophical thought. The pendulum had swung completely.

This cultural domination in Bengal in its turn, however, had one good effect. It led to the growth of a Bengali Muslim literary group interested in re-asserting their place within the literary-social spectrum. Litterateurs like Mir Musharraf Hussain in prose and Kalkobad

in poetry were foremost.

This growing social and literary consciousness amongst the Muslim Bengalees was however overshadowed in Calcutta by the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore. He had already achieved international eminence by the first decade of the 20th century and secured the Nobel Prize for literature. His poems, stories and dramatic representation across the stages of Bengal, evoked scenes of rural Bengal or the affections of the landed gentry in urban Calcutta. A colossus had arrived, and the fallout was general enthusiasm all around Bengal, especially amongst Bengali Muslim poets. This cultural progression received further impetus from Nazrul Islam. An effusive personality, he imparted in his poems a liveliness which at once distinguished them from the work of his contemporaries. He addressed his works to the youth of Bengal and fired their imagination with a revolutionary zeal. In a language which was a harmony of Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali he brought forth the consciousness of man irrespective of his religion. It was a rich versatile blend. Satyen Dutta had earlier tried to introduce into elegant diction words of Persian origin, but in embellishment it lacked the sensitivity of Nazrul.

The resultant resurgence of Tagore and Nazrul would lay the cornerstone of cultural progression. It was best seen in Shahadat Hussain, Ghulam Mustafa and Sufi Mutahar Hussain. Of these Shahadat Hussain contributed most in the field of the style of expression. The resilience and rhythm of Rabindranath Tagore's language had influenced him very deeply. He tried to use 'chaste' words and imitated quite successfully the metrical form used by Tagore. His expression and his pride for the universal man set 'ablaze the consciousness' for the eternal spark. However, it did not stop there. The flowering of culture in literature, art and music would continue.

What had started as an awareness amongst the Bengalees living in Calcutta and Dhaka in the Thirties of this Century blazed in the Forties and the Fifties in post-Pakistani Bangladesh. Farrukh Ahmed, Abul Hussain, Ahsan Habib, Syed Ali Ahsan and Sufia Kamal were to achieve a blend of the Islamic and the Tagorean traditions. They became guides for the literary and cultural horizon of Bangladesh. Ahsan Habib with his social satire, Sufia Kamal with her social consciousness and the others with their esoteric spiritualism stamped discernible traits on

Contd. on following page

## In Her Father's Footsteps

her family is held. In particular she always took the view that the education she was privi-

League for Democracy. In May 1989 it swept the board in one of the greatest electoral tri-

**Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's leading politician and dissident, was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European parliament on July 10. She was, however, not in Strasbourg for the award ceremony since for the last two years she has been under house arrest in Rangoon.**

*Statement on the occasion of the award of The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament to Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma by her husband Dr. Michael Aris Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford Visiting Professor, Harvard University*

leged to receive from the age of fifteen in Delhi and Oxford had been a preparation for serving her own country.

Just as it was a combination of fate and free will which brought us together as husband and wife in 1972, so it was both historical accident and her own choice which took her back to care for her dying mother in 1988 at the point when Burma witnessed wave upon wave of popular demonstrations calling for political and economic change.

Suu eventually formed a political party, the National

umphs of all time, winning more than 82 per cent of the seats contested in a free poll.

She herself had already been placed under house arrest ten months earlier, but by then she had taken her campaign of civil disobedience for human rights throughout the land. In a clear demonstration of the popular will, the people of Burma voted for their hero's daughter who had returned. They voted also for the woman who had proved herself in the fire of politics by her own dedication and intelligence.

Since then more than a year

has passed and the country is no nearer the promised democracy than before the elections. Indeed it seems to me further away than ever, but who can tell? Suu is still locked up alone in her won



home. This month she will enter the third era of her political detention. The military authorities have even forced what remains of her party to dismiss her as their leader. And they continue to apply relentless pressure on her to go into exile. Our sons and I are unable to have any contact with her whatsoever.

Let me try to resolve one of the less weighty contradictions causing the difficult situation in which Burma now finds itself. Since I am the foreigner who will always be married to Suu, I put it one record now that I have absolutely no desire to interfere in the domestic politics of my wife's country. Long ago we agreed that

although I believe in her cause I would never attempt to influence her in her public life. She is her own mistress.

I believe, however, that it is not unreasonable to try and influence the authorities into allowing our sons and me to pay her regular visits. Surely this is not too much to ask? Would it not accord with the norms of civilised behaviour everywhere and with the Buddhist principles of morality and compassion upheld by all Burmese?

We would like to see her and talk to her. We miss her. Burma must find its own way forward. But I think this will only happen when the constant appeal she and so many others have made for meaningful dialogue aimed at peace and reconciliation has been answered. She herself will not give up this struggle on any account until that has happened, not until she is quite sure Burma has taken the right path and she has done her duty.

Only then will she be able to devote herself to her family and to writing as the present authorities have said they would prefer. Her father before her had always intended to do this himself once the struggle for independence was achieved, but his early death prevented it.

Although we now have no means of communicating at all, I know that Aung San Suu Kyi accepts this great honour of the Sakharov Prize in the name of her people and not for herself. Here is a moral victory shared by all who struggle and suffer for human rights in Burma and throughout the world.

We regret that due to his other professional commitments, Mr. S. M. Ali has not been able to write his column 'My World' this week.

Editor, Magazine.



A Santal belle of the county's northern tribe who retain their own cultural lifestyle. Star Photo by Mohsin