

A Filipino Hero in a Battle against Illegal Arms : Paradoxes in Manila : Call for a Mechanism to Promote Understanding in Asia

WITH so much talk going on here about recovering arms from the universities and putting a stop to the politics of violence, it is high time we started looking for individual crusaders who may wage their battles for peace and sanity on moral and non-political grounds. Such a crusade would put our political parties to shame, and perhaps their leaders wake up to the realities of our situation.

When and where can we find such crusaders in Bangladesh?

While we should not stop looking, we may perhaps turn towards another Asian country just to know what kind of crusader we should be looking for.

The country is the Philippines were a battle, waged by NATURE, an environmentalist group, headed by Reynaldo 'Nandy' Pacheco, is in progress. The crusade is for recovering unauthorised arms held by illegal groups, including business tycoons, and unregistered weapons in the hands of the so-called vigilante factions. I am sure, NATURE will discover that some arms are also held by militant student groups.

Incidentally, this highly appropriate acronym NATURE stands for a somewhat long-winded name of the organisation set up by Pacheco, 'National Action for the Total Uplift and Restoration of the Environment.' It reminds me of another charming acronym — I wonder where I heard it — NOW which stands rather a simple name, 'National Organisation for Women.'

In many ways, Pacheco seems an unlikely hero fighting a tough — and, as some would say, a thankless — battle. We have been friends since mid-seventies, when serving the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia, this writer got to know Nandy, as we called him, then working as the second-in-command of the Information Department of the

Asian Development Bank (ADB) also located in Philippine capital.

The Pachecos lived in a lovely home of their own in one of the luxurious exclusive housing estates in the Philippines capital, held occasional open-air barbecue parties and let their guests carry on with small talks, gossips and rumours, just as we have in our Gulshan-Banani-Bardhara late night parties. But, then, suddenly Nandy would turn a seemingly irrelevant conversation into a discussion on a social project and provide us with a glimpse of his innermost thinking about the Philippines. (Well, this seldom happens with our parties in Dhaka).

Now, on his retirement as the Chief Information Officer of ADB, Nandy has brought his innermost thinking out into open. The main job of NATURE is the recovery of illegal arms. And this is a tough one. Military sources suggest there are at least 250,000 unregistered arms in the Philippines and that includes up to 30,000 guns held by the New People's Army insurgents.

But the National Security Council, another government agency, puts the figure at 800,000 loose unauthorised arms. Meanwhile, a Philippine senator even claims that, since 1986, there are enough illegal weapons in the country to equip the regular Philippine army twice over. It is a frightening situation. But this could happen here, in Bangladesh. Mark my word.

How will Nandy tackle this problem? A NATURE petition calling for strict control of firearms has been signed by two million people, almost

twice as many Filipinos who put their names on a scroll urging Corason Aquino to contest the presidential election five years ago. Nandy probably has other plans in mind, which we should hear about, hopefully in his own words, in The Daily Star special, in not too distant future.

In 1965, when I first visited the offices of the Manila Times, I noticed the sign over the reception desk that if the guest had a firearm in his possession, he should leave it with the security guard. In 1987, more than 25 years later, I saw the same sign when I called on the same newspaper to say a sad farewell to the paper's two owners, Ramon and Chino Roces.

If Pacheco's campaign makes any headway — we pray that it does — the warning about the firearms in the offices of the newspaper and



Anti-violence crusader Reynaldo 'Nandy' Pacheco of the Philippines (above); and a scene of violence on campus in Dhaka, Bangladesh (right).

MY WORLD

S. M. ALI

other establishments may be gone in a matter of years, replaced by a simple message: 'Welcome.' * * *

If the Philippines produces people like Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos to plunder the resources of the country, it also serves as the home of

people like Pachecos and Joses who pursue their idealistic goals against many odds. Like other Asian countries, this vast archipelago in South China Sea remains a nation of vast disparities and severe contradictions.

Jose is none other than the Magsaysay Award winner for Literature, Stenil Jose who,

with his wife, publishes a quarterly journal, 'Solidarity', runs a bookshop of contemporary publications from all over the world and brings out a couple of novels of his own a year — all from a two-floor office in downtown Manila. So, when you have a little time to kill, you come into Jose's bookshop, look at the new arrivals and walk upstairs for some coffee with Stenil and his wife. Then, there is always the prospect of a tandoori lunch at an Indian restaurant situated next door. All this is part of the leisurely gracious living, Philippine style.

International organisations which produce one 'quality of life' index after another may not think much of my statement which, like so many of my theories, cannot be substantiated that per every thousand educated persons, the Philippines may well have the

largest number of innovators and crusaders, among all Asian countries.

The Philippines is full of trusts and foundations providing financial support to many laudable objectives. True, some of these operations may be good covers for tax evasions. But they are in minority.

A new organisation, supported by one such foundation, that caught my attention the other day is the Association for Investigative Reporters of the Philippines. The formation of this new body is very much in line with the general pattern of media development in the country, a development that relies heavily on grassroots communication. Innovation and local expertise. This explains why even in the worst days of the martial law, there was a network of modest community radio stations, spread throughout the archipelago, reflecting the views and opinion of local populations, quite independently of Manila-based national stations. Under the country's present democratic system, this network should indeed be working better than ever before.

What makes this writer sad — and a little angry — is that after all these years, we have not been able to set up a mechanism for an exchange of ideas among developing countries in, say, Southeast and South Asia, to promote modest joint ventures in fields which touch our lives, widen our horizons and stimulate collective thinking.

This is just the kind of pro-

ject that the South Commission which was set up in Kuala Lumpur in 1986 to promote co-operation among developing countries should have gone for. True, its main job was to produce a report, the fate of which still remains unknown to me. However, a number of Asian countries, especially China, India and Malaysia, came up with substantial financial help for the project. It is still my hope that several distinguished persons who ran the South Commission can get active again, with some new project ideas. They have the contacts — and their names.

One such person is Dr Monomohon Singh, the present Finance Minister of India, who served the South Commission as its Secretary General. Next time I am in New Delhi, I will seek a meeting with Dr Singh just to discuss this idea. Then, we can hop over to Islamabad to see Dr Sartaj Aziz, the Finance Minister of Pakistan whose vast experience in international field would be an asset for any venture involving Asian nations. A copy of his autographed book, 'Learning From China' occupies an important place on my bookshelf next to several other signed publications, such as, believe it or not, 'Friends Not Masters' by the late President Ayub, 'Thoughts on the New Society' by the late Ferdinand Marcos, a book on the Liberation War by A.M.A. Muhih, a work on the evolution of oil laws by Kamal Hossain and a book on the constitutional transition in Bangladesh by Moudud Ahmed.

Quite a collection! One day, perhaps a century later, one of my family members will make some extra money — not much, I am afraid — by putting them up for sale in an auction of rare books on South Asia. So, here's an invitation to my other author-friends to send in their publications for my bookshelf. The auction of precious books is only a century away!



A Glistening Guru

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exhibition of the murt degraded creeping by human being. Being a cronic hypercensive, I felt my blood boiling specially because they were doing their heroics before our girls most of whom were in India for the first time and had their share of misgivings well-stocked somewhere up their brains. After some time the group detoured and with them the nightmare passed. This was a very plain demonstration of a how a society of civilised people can be taken for a ride by any group of bullies deciding to give a damn to civilised norms. Only one from the group remained. In isolation he proved most helpful and volunteered evidently good counsel on many points we were it difficult to decide on. On his advice we, rather than going the whole hog to

Sealdah, got down at Bidhan Nagar — for this was the railway inlet for Salt Lake where we must first head for to get to our dear old Guru.

What a shock waited for us! It was dazzling and with the daylight gone out only whistles back and station lighting rather poor — we were not finding our bearings right. However we managed to get down to the road. But it was no road really. Powdered cinder made by rain water into a rather thick gruel through the addition of may be refuse of all kinds not excluding excreta — with welcome puddles every two steps away. This was the entry point to Salt Lake — Calcutta's Gulshan. I kept telling in my mind the ones that were setting their first foot on Calcutta — darlings, don't rush to judgement. Allow this Bengalee people's only

show piece some time to reveal itself in a better light.

The lone mastan transformed himself into the Good Samaritan and fixed up two autorickshaws and helped us into them. Soon enough the scenery improved and after some hedging about we landed on our destination. It was quite a procession of bedraggled beggars that entered the exquisitely marble-tiled, warm and cozy AD 276 — the house of the late Anshranjan Datt Majumdar, a former ambassador of India to Thailand.

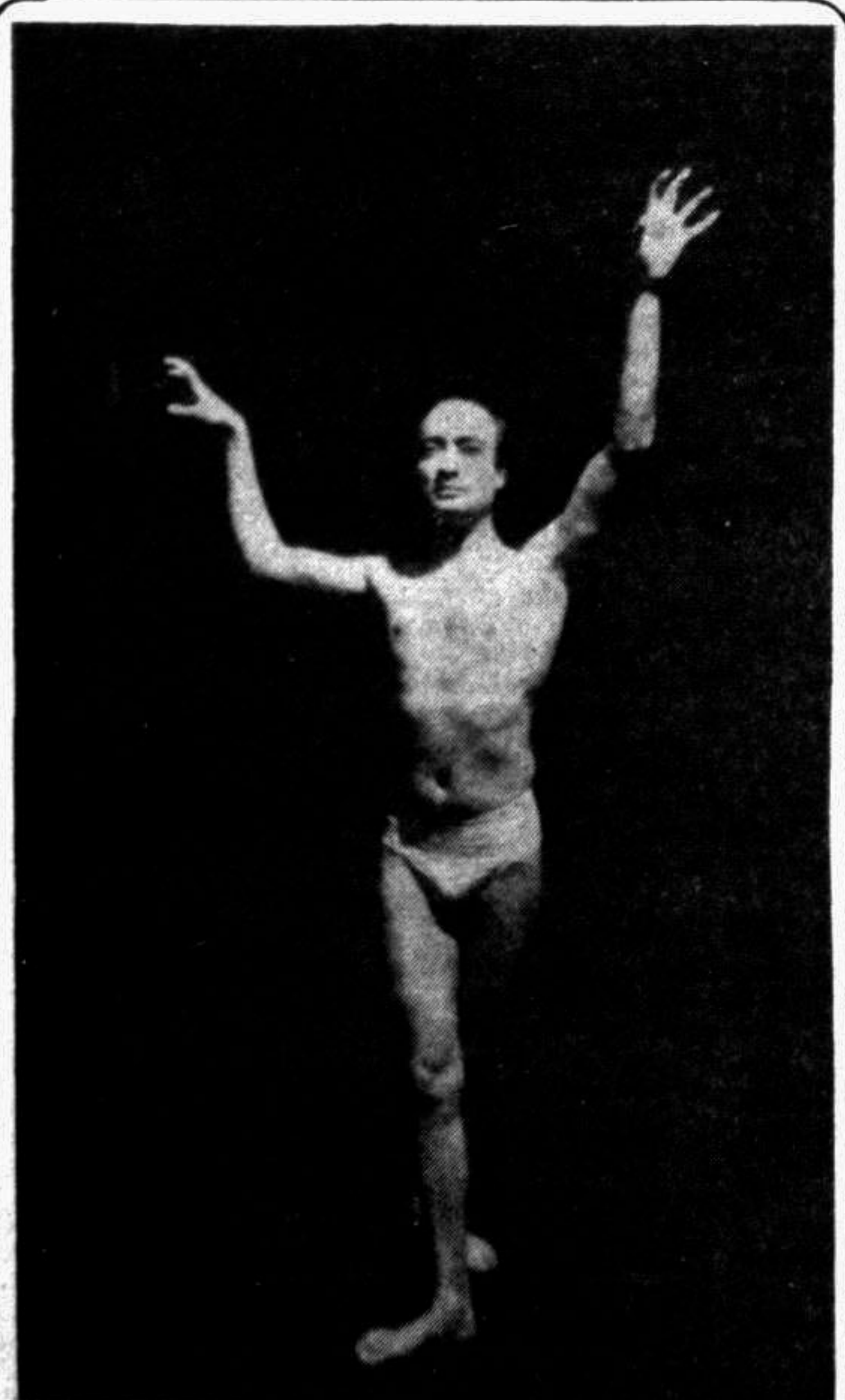
Kamala Boudi the widowed mistress of the house, only quarter-expected us because of communication gap. And could never suspect that if we would at all come, we would be so many. But, a study in unflappability, she set about mothering us in a moment's time. Thanks to her ministrations galore, we were all shipshape in an hour's time and ready for our dream of being received in audience by the Guru to come true.

The Guru

There was a description of Madame Curie in the autobiography of Helen Hayes, the American Shakespearean actress of legendary fame. She saw her taking an afternoon stroll on the Queen Mary. The great scientist was very particular in shunning company and even curious eyes. Hayes had to see her from a formidable hiding. We tend to forget all memorable sayings and scenes — in such a memorable passage she tried to put across the idea that it was a spirit radiant and ethereal that she saw sauntering. Marie Sklodowska was very evidently all mind and no body. It all came to me when, all trepidation, I approached the great man's bed. A well-built man bearing himself straight and chin-up till a couple of years back — he has shrunk. O lord, even as a disemboweled mummy shrinks over thousands of years. He looked decidedly less than one-third his normal size. He was all bones and nothing beside — except for a film-thin veneer for skin. But the sheen of that skin arrests you instantly.

Then he speaks. He finds it very hard to move his tongue. Still he would speak. And he speaks articulating perfectly each phoneme, each word, the whole sentence. And they were all wise and kindly words. Spiritually, intellectually he was at the height of his powers and he had very little of the body he grow into. Even during metabolism has come down to the level of a yogi in meditation.

Dr Sallaja Ranjan Majumdar was completing the last but one day of his 91 years on this earth. We ten from Bangladesh were there to see him enter 92 and wish him to live forever if only that were possible.



Expatriate Bangladeshi mime in France Partha Pratim Majumdar, one of the star pupils of world famous French mime artiste Marcel Marceau, on the stage giving performance at a show held recently in Paris, in aid of the cyclone victims of Bangladesh.

THE success of the international campaign to preserve the endangered elephant has ironically pitted China's ivory carvers in a different battle to preserve an art as well as a living.

For the 2,000 craftspeople in China's ivory-carving industry, Jan. 11, 1991 will be remembered as a black day. The day marked the enforcement of the ban on the import of ivory from Africa and the export of articles made of ivory out of China.

Although the move was considered necessary to protect the endangered elephant, many fear it could signal the end of China's 2,000-year-old craft of ivory carving and put thousands of artisans out of work.

The International Trade Treaty on World Endangered Species met in Switzerland in October 1989 and reached an agreement to ban the international trade in ivory from January 1990.

The Chinese government did not decide to impose the ban until a year later. But even before the move was taken, the country's ivory factories were already running in the red. As producer of the most exquisite and expensive articles made of ivory, China earned around US\$10 million a year from its exports of the articles, said Wang Yongqing, an official of the China Arts and Crafts Co (CACC).

"Ten million dollars is not a large sum compared with the annual three billion dollar earnings of CACC. But it means a lot to 2,000 workers who earn a living out of them," said Wang.

Ding Yuting, one of the 18 first-class masters at the Beijing Ivory Carving Factory, for instance, earned well over 1,000 yuan (US\$192) a month when the largest ivory-carving factory in North China with 521 employees earned more than US\$500,000 a year.

"Now I can hardly get more than 400 yuan (US\$75) a month," he said. As a master craftsman, Ding's payment is guaranteed by CACC. The other workers are not so lucky.

The Beijing Ivory Carving Factory, a collectively owned enterprise, has remitted over six to eight million dollars to the government since it was started in 1958.

"The ban has put us in debt all of a sudden," said Zhang Song, the director of the factory.

Zhang admitted that the decline in Africa's elephant population had begun to affect China's ivory-carving industry since 1980. But the said he never anticipated international attitudes toward the use of ivory for art objects could change so abruptly.

"We did okay up to June 1990," he said. "Then for the second half of last year, we failed to get a single business order. Now we are 13 million yuan (US\$2.6 million) in debt," he said.

The director said the factory's debt consists mainly of finished ivory articles that have no market now and 20,000

Endangered Ivory Carvers

The ivory trade ban imposed to protect the endangered elephant is threatening to kill the centuries-old Chinese art of ivory-carving and put thousands of artisans out of work. Chen Ya reports.

kilogrammes of tusks that are in storage.

The factory managed to ensure an average personal income of US\$460 for its workers last year. But since January this year, Zhang confessed he could hardly pay the workers' basic salary since the banks have refused to grant them any new loans.

The economic losses are not what worry Zhang — "the

state will not let us go bankrupt," he said — but the possibility that China's traditional art of ivory carving would be lost forever.

The shortage of ivory supply in the last decade had already affected the training of young workers in the factory, he said. Now the ban is threatening the very survival of the art.

"Normally, it takes five years for a quick learner to be-

come a qualified ivory carver," Zhang said. "As we could not train our young workers properly in the past 10 years, our youngest skilled carver is now in his 40's."

CACC has decided to preserve at least the carving techniques by substituting other materials with similar texture and colour, such as bone and artificial ivory.

It has also decided to allow some first-class masters to continue to carve in ivory and train promising young craftsmen so the art can be preserved.

Meanwhile, masters like

Ding Yuting live for the day when the ivory trade "will gradually pick up again when the elephant population grows".

Chen Kelin, director of the National Office of Importing Endangered Species, said the elephant populations in the southern African countries of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa are being preserved and are likely to grow.

"A supply of ivory from southern Africa can be expected within the next few years if the elephants there to enjoy favourable conditions," he said.

But when elephant ivory will again be made available for carving remains uncertain.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I have problems stopping my 13 yr. old daughter from doing the things her friends do. I am thoroughly opposed to the way some of her friends behave such as using too much make up, always listening to loud and rock music, and being rude to their parents. My daughter has also started doing the same thing. She has become distant from me and is very moody. Please advise.

Distracted Mother, Banani.

Dear Distracted Mother,

Thirteen is a difficult age when children start to realize they are growing up and yet are restricted from doing things that grown ups do. Usually this stage passes and by 15 they settle down. Please don't get alarmed by your daughter's behaviour. Use humour, patience and understanding to deal with her changing moods. If you have given her a secure and loving home, she will certainly come back to it. Sheer pressure is also very strong at this stage and young people lose face if they don't follow their friends.

Shabnam, Eskaton, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,

Last week you answered a woman who wrote about the servant problem. This is a common thing in Dhaka and I have given up long ago trying to solve it. They will always remain ungrateful and lazy. It is not easy to accept it as you advised. When you have spent time and money on a person, you expect something in return. And do you yourself practice what you preach?

Shabnam, Eskaton, Dhaka.

Dear Shabnam,

I try to practice what I preach though admittedly it is not very easy. I will still insist that it is not right to brand a group of people as ungrateful and lazy without considering the circumstances under which they behave as they do. We usually apply double standards when we deal with them, and in many cases deny them the minimum human dignity that everyone is entitled to. We all know that their behaviour is related to the socio-economic background they come from. It basically stems from a sense of insecurity and mistrust built up over the years.

Dear Mita,

Do we have any laws to stop someone from disturbing the whole neighbourhood? Last week a rock band played till 2 O'clock in the morning in a house in Dhanmondi which was opposite a heart clinic. No one, including myself, asked them to stop or complained to the police. Why do we remain silent in the face of such gross infringement of our privacy? I want to know the legal position of neighbour who want to stop this nonsense.

Salma Karim, Dhanmondi.

Dear Salma,

You of course have the right to complain to the police and the responsible people can be charged for disturbing the peace and creating public nuisance. The reason why no one complains is because our sense of privacy is not so well defined. Just as we don't hesitate to infringe on others' privacy, we don't really mind when others do the same. In a sense we are very tolerant and will take a lot of disturbing before complaining.

Shamin, Dhanmondi.

Dear Mita,

Schools have reopened and this is causing traffic congestion, not just on main roads but in residential areas. Since the last few years countless schools have opened, of which 80% are in residential areas. The traffic during drop off and pick up hours causes inconvenience to passers-by, neighbours, etc. Some people cannot take their car out of their gates because some parents' car, with the driver missing, has been parked right in front. What can be done about this? I am a sufferer as I live next to a school.

Shamin, Dhanmondi.

Dear Shamin,

I am afraid that nothing much can be done about your problem. The schools will remain where they are and parents will have to come to pick up their children. What you can do is request the authorities of the school which is just next to you to make sure that no one parks the car outside your gate, and if they do, then the driver should at least be present. The rising number of school-going children has resulted in the proliferation of schools, therefore this small inconveniences will have to be tolerated. Incidentally traffic jam is caused by wrong parking rather than by the presence of these schools.

Shamin, Dhanmondi.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toybee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.