

tourism

IN BANGLADESH

The Daily Star 8

Special Supplement, November 24, 1991

Sea, Sand and the Rakhayan Touch

By Sabir Mustafa

SITTING at the foot of the small Buddhist temple next to the Circuit House on the hilltop overlooking Motel Road, the scene unfolding less than a mile away is a breathtaking one.

The setting sun turns the horizon over an immeasurably vast Bay of Bengal into a celebration of light and colours. Red and orange pierce through the ever-present blue, and the palls of light cloud, stopped still and hanging as if mesmerised by the sheer magic of the moment, bask in reflected glory as colours and light bounce off one side, while the other stays dark by the descending dusk.

Down on the beach, gently sheltered by miles upon miles of Tamarisk or Jhau forest planted as recently as 1973, people gaze in wonder at the brilliant display.

Soon, the incoming tide produces a soundtrack of indescribable power, of roaring but strangely rhythmic sound leaping out of the sea, from far beyond the horizon, an incessant drumbeat of rolling thunder. Whooshing wind swirling high and low above the rising, frothing surf add another, devastating dimension. It is sheer rock theatre and opera rolled into one, the like of which Wager and Pink Floyd could never produce together.

And it all lasts but a few minutes. Yet, the magic lingers on in the mind till it is repeated the next day. Everyday.

Gift to the Romantic

The coast of Cox's Bazaar, an unbroken stretch of white sand running for over 120km from near Maheshkhali in the north, past Cox's Bazaar town, the waterfalls at Himchari straight to Teknaf, is nature's unrestrained gift to the romantic, the adventurous and the aesthetic.

To call Cox's Bazaar a "nice place to visit" would be a bit like calling the Tajmahal a "good piece of architecture". What one sees is enough to leave one stunned and hungry for more. But the real charm is in feeling the place, in letting one's senses be taken over by the occasion.

Quite naturally, the day holds different attractions for different people. For the Caucasian visitor from temperate climate zones, daytime in Cox's Bazaar means an opportunity to sunbathe and swim in a clear and unpolluted environment. The brilliant sunshine, white sands, greenish-blue sea, rolling green hills and tamarisk forests all combine to offer an incomparably idyllic and unspoiled setting.

For the local visitors, just to be by the seaside brings a kind of joy and pleasure rarely felt in the riverine, but overcrowded interior. Sunbathing is definitely out of the question for the average Bengalee tourist and day-tripper, and swimming is shunned by most, possibly out of apprehension of the wide, yawning sea. But paddling or frolicking on the edge of the water or even into the surf is positively in.

But times are changing, and swimming trunks on the beach and bobbing heads out into

the water are becoming a more common sight, especially in the late afternoon. For the women though, having their clothes wet while getting splashed by the incoming tide is just about the most adventurous thing they have managed to achieve by the end of 1991. Next year? A swimsuit or two perhaps, before the bikinis arrive? Perhaps not. After all, a great many of the late afternoon "sight-seers" on the beach near the town are still coming to see sights of the more fleshy type.

But the thought of over 100km of white sand lying under the blazing sun virtually unpopulated for most of the day would probably break the heart of any respectable European holiday resort operator.

But the emptiness has also preserved the essential beauty of the Cox's Bazaar coast, a beauty that once surely adorned the Mediterranean coast, too, before the tour operators got hold of it.

The beach is also remarkably clean, the worst offender being scattered bunches of hay left behind by some careless farmer after getting them dried. And coconuts. But who would really call them pollutants? When cans, paper cups and half-eaten food start to get strewn about the place, that would be the time worry.

Ten kilometres south of Cox's Bazaar town, one comes across a spot straight out of fairy-tales. Himchari waterfalls. Here the hills rise straight from the edge of the sand, and pure, cool, mountain water stream down through rocky hills. But its isolated, unspoiled and idyllic charm is also Himchari's main drawback. While lack of roads to the area would pose no problem for the romantic, he would still find the absence of any public amenities — accommodation even of the most rudimentary kind, food source, lavatories etc. — slightly uncomfortable. For the present, it is possibly the most favourite spot for visitors to Cox's Bazaar, but only for an hour or so, before getting back to the hotels, restaurants and police patrols back in town. But a visitor to Himchari will return time and again, because it is an enchanting, captivating place, even when it costs 400 takas to hire a jeep for couple of hours. But then, the 40-minute round-trip along the waterfront is in itself something to savour.

Along with the nature, the people of the area seems to have retained their traditional quiet and pleasant characteristics. Nowhere is this felt more strongly than at the two Jhinuk Markets on the edge of the beach, where shops sell a wide range of trinkets made from a bewildering variety of seashells. Unlike any other tourist spots, these markets are still free of the tout mentality. The shopkeepers may try to get the extra 50 taka out of a foreigner, but he will never hassle the visitors. There is absolutely no hard sell.

Abul Kashem, whose family own two jhinuk shops, said, as a matter of fact, that all the jewellery pieces cut from sea

shells were done by local boys.

"Previously they used to come from Burma, but since the border was tightened up just over a year ago, we have had to learn to do it ourselves", he said, completely oblivious to the fact that he could have easily passed off his product as "imports" to the ignorant visitor and charged a higher price.

But Kashem said, all the trinkets made from elephants bones were still coming from Burma, because the local cutters have yet to find an efficient way to stop the bone dust from getting into their throat and lungs.

"The Burmese cutters have got the method, but until we can do the same we have to keep smuggling them in. Otherwise, that bone dust can kill a person slowly, but easily", he said.

The town has its own charms, even though it is unquestionably one of the poorest "tourist towns" anywhere in the world. The vast majority of the houses are single-storey bungalow types, mostly wooden. But that in itself holds a special fascination for the Western visitor fed up with all the glass, chrome and concrete back home.

The centre-piece of the town has to be the Buddhist monastery called Angga Medha Kyong which, according to Bhikkhu U Pangya Wantha, is nearly 200 years old.

The main temple is built on massive, rounded wooden beams which look old enough to date back to the late 18th century. The wooden floors and stairs creak even at the pressure of a light-weight Bengalee.

Buddhist Scriptures

On the first floor, apart from statues of Gautam Buddha, there are old religious scriptures, written by ancient Burmese monks on long, narrow strips of hard paper. How old? U Pangya Wantha, who himself must be heading for the century mark, could not say.

The inner temple's special kind of segregation sanctity is demonstrated by the notice forbidding women from the large rectangular room, with 18 medium and large-sized Buddha statues, some marble, some bronze, others clay, surrounding the wooden meditation area.

But the place badly needs up keep. The temple itself probably does not have the money to carry out urgent restoration and preservation work, and most of the Buddhists in the area, who look after the monks, are also quite poor even by Cox's Bazaar standard.

There is an essential justice about Cox's Bazaar having a distinct Buddhist flavour.

The town was established in 1798 by Captain Hiram Cox of the East India Company to rehabilitate hundreds of Arakanese Buddhists known as Rakhayans, who were driven out of their homes by the Burmese.

So the town owes its exten-

tence to the Rakhayans whose cultural influence is unmistakable in Cox's Bazaar district as a whole. Unforgivably though, locals, continually refer to them as "Burmese" — hence the existence of the Burmese Market on the main street of the town, where one can buy excellent cotton clothes woven with a kind of skill passed on through generations of Rakhayans.

"We learnt to weave, make cigars and sandals from our parents and grandparents, who learnt it from theirs", U Yna, a Rakhayan schoolgirl who lives in a single room with her mother, brother and sister-in-law within the temple complex, said, adding "But we are not Burmese, we are from here... from Cox's Bazaar".



Parjatan's elephant: Going slower?

Planning for Tourism

By Gazi Sadeq

When we talk about the problems in the field of Bangladesh tourism, there is an ocean of it. In principle, our Government considers it a primary and vital industry, but while implementing, it is one of the least important ones. We never try to understand its complete philosophy. The past growth of tourism (howsoever it was) was inevitable because nature has made this country beautiful, and our previous generation bejewelled it with shrines, monuments, mosques and temples. But the contemporary Bangladeshis keep their hands crossed and enjoy the windfall bestowed by nature and our forefathers. It is high time for us to wake up this slumbering Bangladeshi tourism.

Tourism is a jetset, sophisticated and a changing industry. It is like monsoon torrents, which change course every season. When we look back at the history of Bangladeshi tourism, it could be divided into three phases. Before liberation in 1971, tourism in Bangladesh was more a myth than actuality. After 1971 a "diplomatic tourism" flourished in its own way in this newly-born Republic which could not be turned into a proper industry due to lack of tourism infrastructure. It is only recently that the Government has been trying to build an infrastructure for this unseem export industry which is gaining momentum day by day.

The time has now come for us to change this phase towards better quality tourism. It is waiting for us right around the corner. We had been following the path shown us by the westerners, and we had never tried to pioneer them. Now, we have a reasonable experience and we should know how to adapt ourselves to the new trend of tourism. Along with resort tourism, we also have to develop the phase of cultural and historical tourism. The exquisite art and craft, historically exciting

mosques, temples, monasteries and monuments, which are centuries older than the whole civilizations of America and Australia, are the trump cards of such tourism.

At the present trend of global tourism, many sceptical planners authoritatively predict that it is because of international economic recession. This argument is just a matter of passing the buck.

In my opinion, the main reason for the unsatisfactory trend of tourism inspite of having so much of potential is because of the lack of an effective policy and action to be followed. I think in our country, we are a little confused as to where we are heading, whether our target is quality or quantity tourism. If we are heading for quality tourism, then, our product is very inferior to cater to this kind of tourism.

So, at the moment, we really have to stick on to quantity tourism and side by side, develop our product quality for class tourism.

Many international organizations want to conduct their seminars, conferences here because riverine Bangladesh has a natural charm. But the facilities for conducting a world class seminar or workshop or conference, are not that developed. If we can properly develop the facilities for conference tourism in Bangladesh, I am pretty sure we can attract many international conferences in our country.

In tourism the conditions are constantly changing. So there should be a definite policy for tourism which can adjust to changing conditions. If the action programme set forth to be accomplished is not identified in the plan, we do not really have a plan. So many plans are gathering dust because there is no programme for implementation which makes them a collection of information rather than a plan. A plan must be presented in a way that it is a useable document for the decision-makers.

Cox's Bazaar

Charming,
Romantic,
Dull,
Boring...
But Still
the Best
in the
World?

Master Plan Awaits Action

By Sabir Mustafa

AMID all the problems faced by people wishing to spend a few days at Cox's Bazaar, the question being asked most is this: when are we going to see the enactment of a tourism policy and some planned development of tourist facilities?

Not only accommodation, leisure and entertainment for visitors to the dozens of scenic and historic spots around the country, but development of infrastructure is vital if tourism is to become a meaningful industry.

In addition, the development of human resources, through education, in immediate surrounding areas of any region with the potential to attract large numbers of local and foreign tourists, is crucial because it is they who will have to learn to cope and interact with the outsiders.

At the moment, Bangladesh does not have the infrastructure, resort facilities or social awareness necessary for the growth of a successful tourist industry.

At places endowed with abundant natural beauty, such as Cox's Bazaar, where the problem is most acutely felt, the reason for this dismal state of affairs is no mystery: the blame has squarely been put on the leadership in Dhaka, which has never been able to muster enough political will, or show any degree of imagination to tackle tourism.

Without a clear direction from the government, which controls rights to the best tourist spots such as the 122km long Cox's Bazaar beach and islands like St. Martins and Sonadia, the private sector is unlikely to take the risk in investing large amount of money to build facilities.

Good Competition

At Cox's Bazaar, a number of private hotel operators said that the government should allow them, as well as the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) to develop resorts. The resultant competition will do nothing but good for the industry in the long term, they said.

At present BPC is enjoying a virtual monopoly in this field, with the private sector picking up the crumbs here and there. But as total figures of just 1,100 foreign and around 32,000 local visitors to BPC's 185-acre beachfront motel complex at Cox's Bazaar in the past 12 months showed, the bureaucratic machine simply does not have the organisational or mental make-up for an industry that requires initiative and innovation at every level of the operation.

What the state can do, as both officials of BPC and private hotel operators at Cox's Bazaar emphasised repeatedly, is to draw up a policy and undertake development of infrastructures on a major scale.

A healthy tourism industry is needed not only to beef-up the exchequer with much-needed foreign exchange, but also to provide holiday and excursion opportunities to the

people of this country. The huge number of day-trippers just wandering around aimlessly on the beach at Cox's Bazaar shows the immense hunger a growing number of people in this country has for a diversion from the drudgery of everyday existence.

Having said all that, we have learnt that a Master Plan for Development of Tourism was drawn up and approved by the previous government last year. The Plan, covering a wide area along the Maheshkhali-St. Martins axis, envisages a three-stage development process, spread over 10 years and with a projected cost of 178 crore takas, was drawn up by a high-powered committee constituted by an order from the President's Secretariat in July, 1989.

At a glance, the Plan seems a well-balanced and appropriate one, which could serve as a good starting point for the development of a respectable tourist industry in this country. In addition, implementation of the Plan could not but raise public awareness about tourism and what it is all about. This is highly crucial particularly for a district like Cox's Bazaar, where the rate of literacy is a dismal 13 per cent.

Unfortunately, BPC officials at Cox's Bazaar were not able to give any clear indication as to the prospects for the Plan's implementation. Despite all the hard work, careful studies and money spent on finalising the Plan, it seems to be stuck in some bureaucratic jungle in the ministry of aviation and tourism. Or is it a political

Implementation of the Plan will be a clear signal to the local as well as foreign investors that Bangladesh intended to maintain continuity of good policies, no matter who the formulator of that policy might have been. A review and even a few amendments to the Plan will not be received adversely, but a total scrapping of it at this stage will send wholly wrong signals to the business and tourism professionals at home and abroad.

The Master Plan lists a number of places as areas attractive enough to be developed as tourist resorts. They include:

Cox's Bazaar's (CB) 122km-long beach; Himchari waterfalls; ancient Buddhist monastery situated at Ramu some 14km east of CB town; the 20 sq. km. island of Sonadia 6.5km north-east of CB town; Maheshkhali island, just 10km north of CB town, where the hilltop Adinath Temple draws thousands of Hindu devotees every year; Inani beach, famous for coral formations and picnic areas, 33km south of CB town; Teknaf, 91km south by road from CB town; Island of Shahpari at the mouth of the Naf river; St. Martins island.

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wildlife preservation projects have also been brought under the jurisdiction of the Plan.

Apart from turning Sonadia island into an exclusive area for foreign tourists, with foreign resort developers possibly getting the lease to build facilities there, most of the other projects concentrate on upgrading existing facilities and developing new ones along somewhat conservative lines.

Short-term projects, supposed to be completed by the end of next year, such as improvement of road communication, expansion of CB town's airport, provision of security on the beach and on highways, beautification of CB town itself, facilities for entertainment, extra accommodation etc. are vital and above controversy.

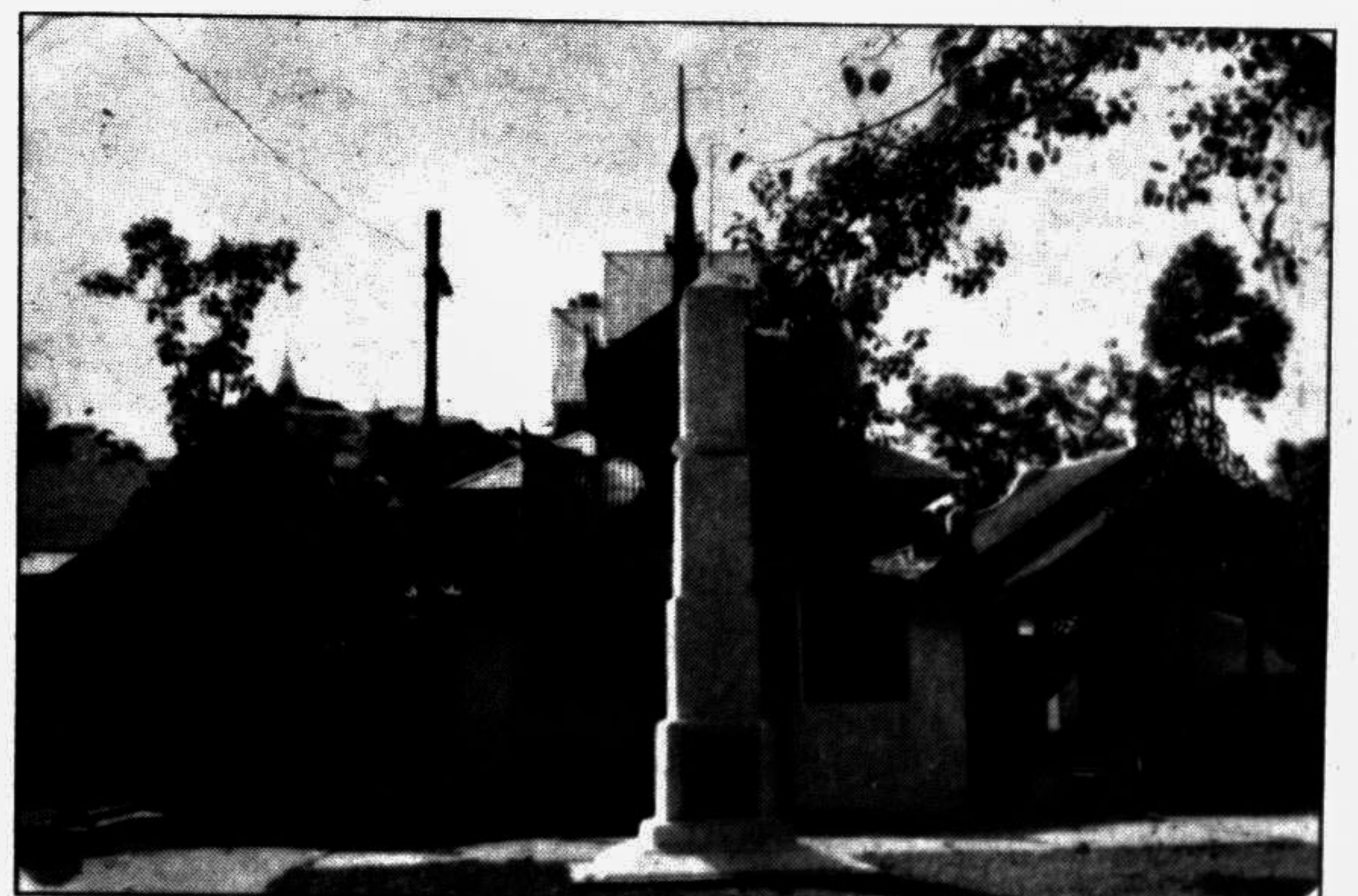
However, the single biggest expenditure in the 32-crore taka short-term plan, has been allocated for the construction of a golf course near the beach at a cost of eight crore takas. Considering that only a minuscule number of local and foreign visitors (they are not tourists, strictly speaking) are the golf-playing types, one can safely assume that the course was meant for the personal benefit of former president Lt. Gen. H.M. Ershad. It is debatable if the industry at its formative stage can afford such extravagant spending on fringe facilities as a golf course surely is. Eight crore takas could be infinitely better utilised by developing training facilities for more universal beach sports such as water-skiing, speed-boat racing and big game fishing in the Bay.

Modern Hospitals

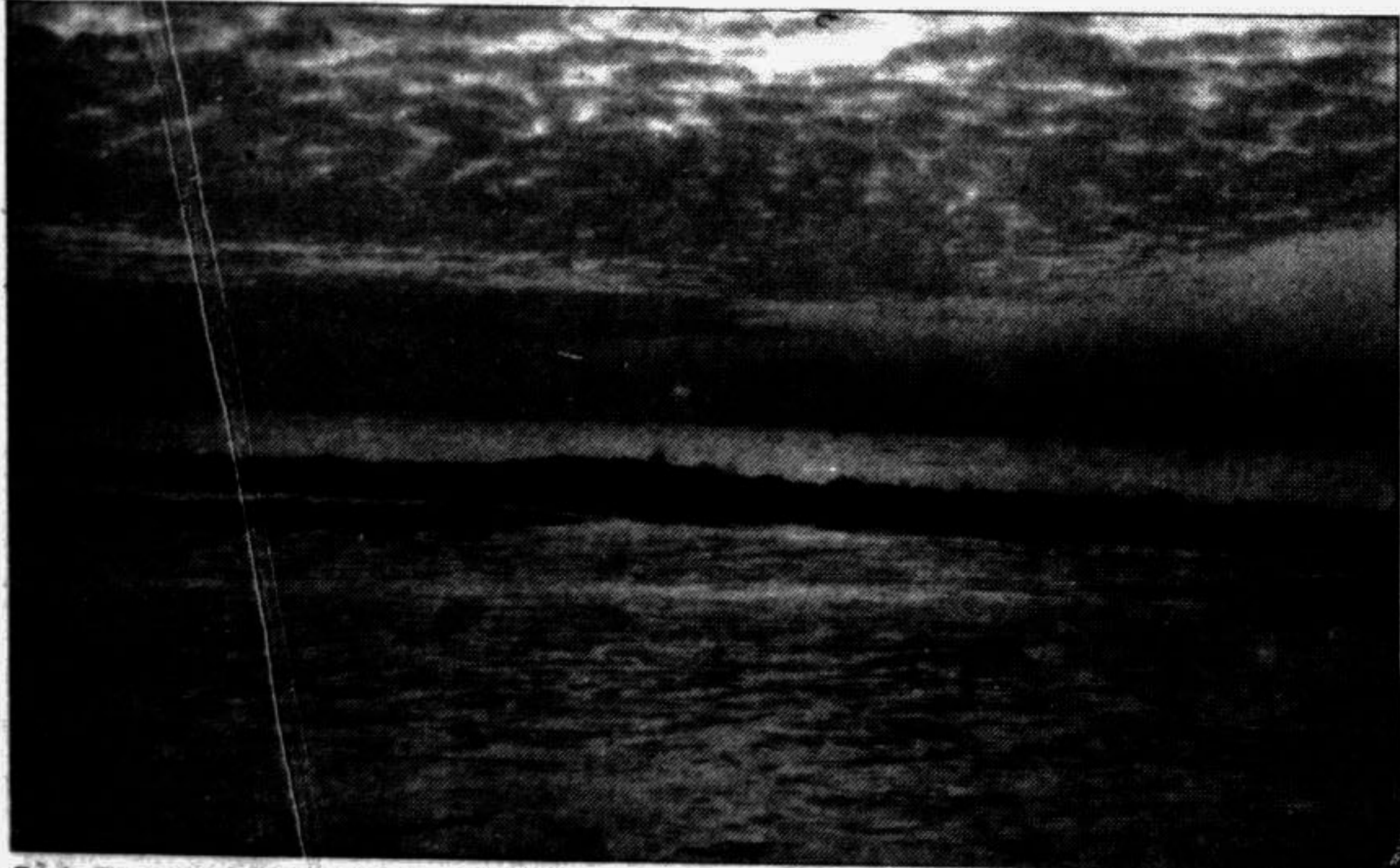
Construction of a modern hospital is long overdue, as is expansion and improvement of the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar highway. The medium-term plan has provisions for both of these, but so step has so far been taken to these multi-crore projects into operation.

The same applies to the long-term segment of the Master Plan, where an allocation of 100 crore takas has been allocated to build a railway link between Dohazari and Ghundum through Cox's Bazaar. This railway would provide the all-important direct rail-link between the coast and Chittagong and through to Dhaka and beyond. The private sector has also been asked to launch shuttle services between the port city and the coast, using low-cost short-take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft. But given the prevailing disinclination among our investors to take long-term risks, the idea of such a private airline may not come to fruition for some time.

While the private sector has been given little opportunities — or shown little initiative of its own, whichever way one looks at it — to develop facilities other than low-grade hotels away from the prime spots, it is clear that great things cannot be expected from a sector run exclusively by bureaucrats.



Buddhist temple at Cox's Bazaar: Distinct flavour and character.



Cox's Bazaar seafloor: Magic at twilight