

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Tagore in China

POET LEFT BEHIND A LEGACY OF FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE

Nasrin Sobhan
Writes from Beijing

action- Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

The poet even spent his birthday in China and wrote, *Once I went to China Those whom I had not met Put the mark of friendship on my forehead Calling me their own....*

Three months after Tagore's return to India, his admirers in Shanghai set up the Asiatic Association, which they acknowledged to be inspired by Tagore's vision of

Niketan teaching at the Vishva Bharati University, while continuing his own work. Xu Beihong made sketches of students at the University, drew painted in oils, and also made some portraits of Tagore in different media. In the introduction to the exhibition of the works of Xu Beihong which was held in India during this period, Tagore wrote:

"Beautiful speech is common to all mankind in spite of its diversified enunciation. By means of his rhythmic lines and colours, the Chinese art master Xu Beihong provides us with our forgotten scenes of

Tagore's own art work, numbering more than 2000 pieces, was inspected by Xu Beihong together with Nanda Lal Bose the Dean of the Art Department at the University.

Out of these 2000, they selected about 300 of the finest works, of which more than seventy were later published by the University.

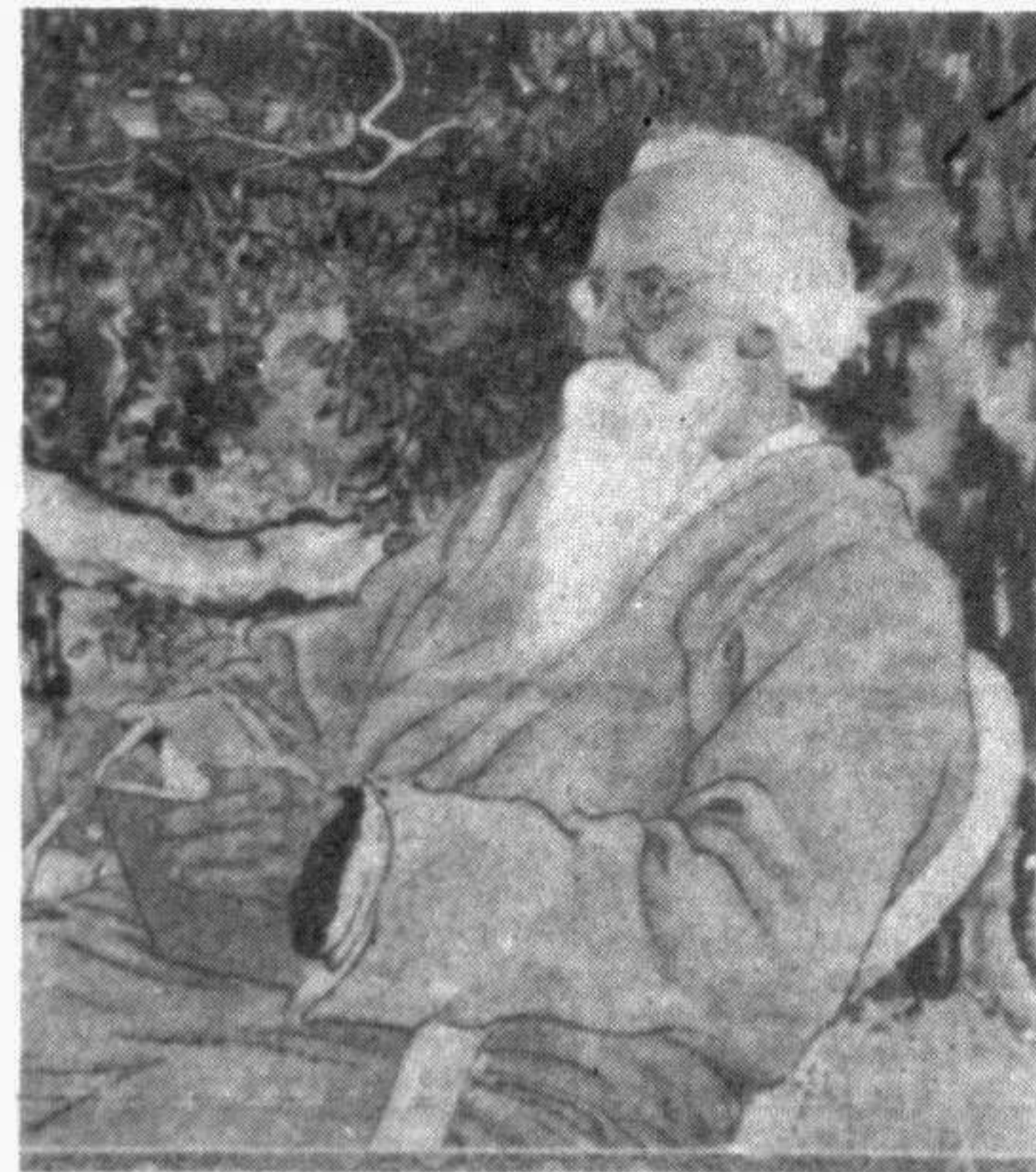
Tagore passed away not long after. One of the last poems he ever composed was written for a Chinese delegation which visited Shanti Niketan in 1941. Written in Bengali, here is an English version by Kalidas Nag:

In the ancient day, History was not loquacious with news and even renown was silent, like our morn, bustling with torrential life! They the travellers of yore plunged into paths threatened by death to distribute the soulful food of ambrosia to non-Kinsmen of distant lands. All those, who left their bones in desert sand Whose last relics were swept away by the sea, they were never frustrated by unachieved labour; they were fused into the Great Life, transcending the body which nourishes the Eternal Man with strength invisible. Their compassion touches my soul in the rays of morn and I salute them all!

Rabindranath Tagore exemplified the finest aspects of Bengali character and culture.

With a versatile natural talent for writing, painting and composing, he combined a quality of compassion, a finely-tuned social conscience and a greatness of heart which manifested itself in a ceaseless preoccupation with moral issues, and the fate of oppressed people, especially the colonised peoples of Asia and Africa. Throughout his life Tagore concerned himself with the problem of human suffering, and it is as much for his fine qualities as a human being as for his artistic achievements that he is remembered.

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Portrait of Tagore, painted by Chinese artist Xu Beihong.

friendship and unity between Asian nations, a reaction partly to the anti-Asian legislation of 1921 in the United States, and the excesses of the colonial powers in Asia.

As a natural result of Tagore's continuing interest in Chinese culture and art a Chinese hall was opened in Shanti Niketan in 1937. On this occasion, Tagore said:

"This is a great day for me, a day long looked for."

In 1940 the noted Chinese artist Xu Beihong visited India at the invitation of Rabindranath Tagore, and passed the better part of a year in Shanti

antiquity without impairing the local flavour and peculiar style acquired through his own experience.

I welcome this exhibition, and I have fully enjoyed his paintings, from which I believe our art lovers will draw rich inspiration. Since the worth of superb works of art should be proved by themselves, too many words of recommendation on my art are superfluous. Let me therefore raise the curtain of talk to usher our visitors to a rare feast."

RABINDRANATH Tagore occupies a very special place not only in the hearts and minds of Bengali speaking people but in all people who respected in Tagore not only the fine artist and writer, but the man of principle, who spoke out ceaselessly against exploitation, oppression, aggression and war.

The people of China have reason to remember Tagore with special affection. The poet took an interest in China from an early age, probably after hearing his father Debendranath Tagore talk about his own visit there in 1875, following which he wrote a series of articles on Taoism and Buddhism. Throughout Tagore's life this interest was manifested both in his respect for Chinese art and culture and in a deep concern for the welfare of the Chinese people.

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After his first visit to Britain in 1881, Tagore wrote an essay called "Maraner Byabasa" about the opium trade that was devastating the lives of the Chinese people. He protested vehemently too at the new Japanese militaristic mentality and the subsequent aggression against the Chinese mainland. He wrote to Yone Noguchi, a Japanese poet who defended the Japanese invasion of China:

"In launching the ravaging war on Chinese humanity, with all the deadly methods learnt from the West, Japan is infringing every moral principle on which civilisation is based... China is unconquerable, her civilisation is displaying marvellous resources; the desperate loyalty of her peoples, united as never before, is creating a new age for that land."

In 1924 the poet went to China at the invitation of two Chinese intellectuals, the Hon. Liang Chi Chao and Professor Hu Shih. They were the organizers of the Lecture Association of Beijing who in-

ited such thinkers as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell to lecture. While in China Tagore toured seven cities including Beijing, Nanking, Hangzhou and Shanghai, where he delivered a series of lectures at universities and cultural organizations. He received some invitations he could not find the time to honour, such as one from Dr. Sun Yat Sen to come to Canton. "Talks in China" was a collection of some of the extempore lectures that Tagore delivered during course of his visit.

In Shanghai where the mood of revolution was more apparent than elsewhere in China, Tagore was greeted by the Chinese poet Hsu Chi Mo and Dean S. Y. Chiu of the National Institute of Self-Government, and also by Dr. Carsun Chang, who later visited India and wrote a book, published in 1956, called China and Gandhian India.

In Beijing, Tagore was received by the ex-Emperor Pu Yi in the Imperial Palace and also met the Chinese philosopher Liang-su-ming.

Everywhere in China the desire for change, and a new mood of revolution was in the air. Tagore, a great patriot and nationalist himself was very sensitive to such undercurrents in the students, teachers and intellectuals that he met. Indeed in 1905 during of the anti-British movement in Bengal he had written in one of the poems of Gitanjali: *Where the mind is without fear and the head held high Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; Where words come out from the depths of truth; Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; Where the mind is led by thee into everwidening thought and*

action-

CONCLUDING THE SERIES ON THREE OUTSTANDING EDITORS OF SOUTH ASIA

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a Poet who Shaped a Great Newspaper

IT was a charming message that I was being asked to bring all the way from Moscow to Karachi.

"Please tell Faiz," said the young Russian woman, the writer-editor of a popular literary journal, "that of all the poets in the world, I love him most."

With three other local friends, all young writers, who had joined me for morning coffee in the hotel restaurant, escaping from bitterly cold November wind blowing outside listening in, I responded to the request with gentle laugh and a nod. By then, I had learnt that young Russians did not blush easily, but after giving me the message for my former editor, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, in her broken English, this one looked a little embarrassed and almost blushed.

It was my last day in Moscow in the winter of 1964, bringing to an end a 15-day assignment which, even if it did not teach me much about the Soviet Union, had given me some kind of a feel of the Russian thinking at a crucial time of the country's history. It was the start of the Brezhnev era, with Aleksai Kosygin picked as the pliable Premier.

The end of the Khrushchev rule which had brought a touch of liberalisation to the Soviet Union but had once also pushed the world to the brink of a nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis had left the Moscow intelligentsia — or rather a few Russian friends I knew — in a state of confusion. My acquaintances, especially journalists, generally kept their thoughts to themselves, without appearing to be particularly sorry over the fall of Nikita Khrushchev or excessively excited at the entry of Leonid Brezhnev on the stage. Since I had just spent two months in China and written several complimentary pieces on Peking's growing ties with South Asia, their main interest was in convincing me, then a Pakistani journalist, that the Soviet Union was as good a friend of Asia as China and, what was more important, during the Brezhnev-Kosygin period — no one called it an era yet — Moscow would be more even-handed in Indo-Pakistan disputes than it was under Khrushchev. This projection turned out to be at least partly true. A year later, at the Soviet city of Tashkent, Premier Kosygin brought Ayub Khan

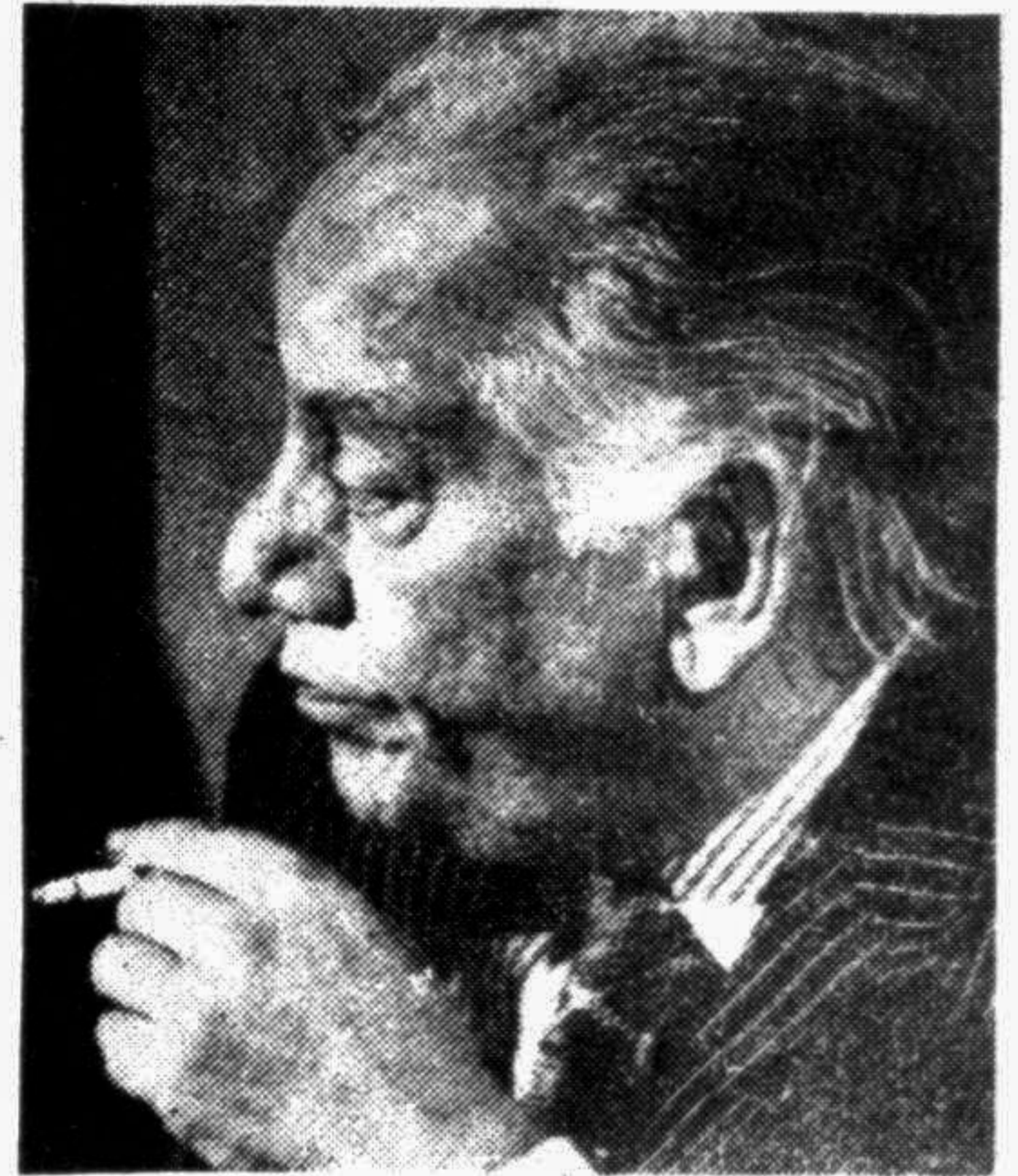
and Lal Bahadur Shastri together and mediated the end of the second Indo-Pakistan war. There were also gentle hints that in case my paper the Dawn decided to post me in Moscow as a correspondent, I

it before him on my return to Karachi.

For me, it was all rather grim in Moscow. The winter was harsh, the difficulties in getting around and establishing the right contacts turned

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Faiz Ahmed Faiz

More than three decades ago, Faiz put into effect guidelines for good journalism which we are still trying to establish in Bangladesh against many odds.

would get a government flat in a good locality and buy my foodstuff, not to mention a generous supply of vodka and wine at the subsidised price.

The offer could not have been more tenting for a young journalist — but more loaded. As expected, my editor, Altaf Hossain rejected the idea with an angry outburst against "these Russies" when I placed

out to be more challenging than I had expected and I failed to get one single good political interview with even a mid-level Russian leader. I went to the October Anniversary parade at the Red Square and saw some new missiles which, as a western correspondent told me with the permission to put it in my report, the Soviets had never shown before. I also sat through the four-hour address by Leonid Brezhnev delivered at the big auditorium at the Kremlin, watching, among other things, the immobile face of Premier Chou En-lai who sat on the dias with all the leading personalities of the communist world, who, by now, must be either dead or ousted from power. Much to the surprise of all, the Chinese leader had come for the anniversary as a gesture to the new Russian leaders who had overthrown Nikita Khrushchev, the arch enemy of China. If Premier Chou was also looking for an opening to break the deadlock in the Sino-Soviet relations, he had to return to Peking a disappointed man. Leonid Brezhnev had entered the stage with a bang, determined to strengthen the Soviet hold over the Eastern Europe and to extend Moscow's influence over Asia, in fact, to the doorstep of China, through a much-publicised but abortive Asian Collective Security Pact.

It took me some time to understand what was going on. Eventually, the display of power and glory by the new Soviet leadership left me cold, indifferent and even a little sad.

Now, in this scenario, where does Faiz Ahmed Faiz come in?

Let me explain. My 15-day visit to Moscow had three redeeming features, in the following order: First, despite a difference in our age and outlook, I got along very well with the then Pakistani Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Iqbal Athar, who, a highly cultured, well-read but a lonely man, gave me much of his precious time in briefing me on the Soviet Union. Above all, after all these years, how can I forget our visit together to the Bolshai Theatre to see

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A Glimpse into Buddhist Heritage in Bangladesh

B UDDHISM moulded a rich culture and civilisation in Bangladesh which today is part of our national heritage.

Buddhism here is believed to be as old as Buddhism itself. The Buddha while preaching the new gospel is said to have visited this region in the easternmost part of the Sub-Continent not far from Nepal or Northern India where the religion originated more than 2500 years ago. Bangladesh came under the influence of Buddhism in the Third Century B.C. Prevalence of Buddhism during this period, particularly in the northern part of Bangladesh, is proved by inscriptions found at Sanchi of Bhopal and at Nagarjuna of South India mentioning 'Banga' as a flourishing centre of Buddhism. During the reign of Emperor Ashoka Buddhist influence further expanded here.

A glowing account of Buddhism in Bangladesh is available from the travel accounts of Chinese travelers like Fa Hien, Hsien Tsang and It Sing. Fa Hien visited Bangladesh in the Fifth Century A.D. and stayed here for two years. In his accounts he mentioned as having seen Buddhism in flourishing condition. The most famous of Chinese pilgrims, Hsien Tsang in his travel diary mentioned as having visited 20 monasteries in Pundravardhana (northern Bangladesh) and 30 monasteries in Samatata (Eastern Bengal) in the Seventh Century. He found religious and cultural activities in full swing with most monasteries inhabited by monks of both Theravada and Mahayana

sects. The Seventh Century in ancient Bangladesh was marked by total social anarchy, lawlessness and internecine feuds among sections of people. This period for nearly 100 years is described as 'Matayanyaya' meaning that big fishes ate small fishes implying oppression of the weak by the strong. Under the circumstances, the people elected a local chieftain named Gopal as their King in Eighth Century to bring about order and justice in the society. Gopala, the founder of the Pala Dynasty, was a Buddhist.

With the beginning of Pala Dynasty in Eighth Century Buddhism emerged as the dominant religion of the masses and exercised profound influence on the social, cultural and intellectual development of the people. Nearly 400 years of the Pala rule witnessed the birth of a new civilisation in ancient Bangladesh.

The long period of nearly 600 years encompassing the Pala rule succeeded by other Buddhist dynasties such as Chandra, Khadga and Deva in different regions now forming Bangladesh is described as the golden period in ancient history. This was the period when Buddhism was wiped out from other parts of the Sub-Continent.

Big monasteries like Vikramshila, Somapuri, Agrapuri, Kanakastupa, Jogaddala, Odantapuri etc developed as centres of learning on Buddhism as well as secular arts and sciences.

The most significant of these monasteries was Somapuri Vihar whose massive ruins

had been unearthed at Paharpur of Rajshahi district. Unique in ancient temple architecture, this Mahavihara developed during Pala Dynasty from the Eighth to Eleventh Centuries and is described as the biggest monument south of the Himalayas. The architecture of this Vihara has influenced the style of monasteries in Southeast Asia. The monumental Borobudhur Temple in Java (Indonesia) and massive Buddhist Vihar Omkar Wat in Kampuchea are said to have been modelled after this Vihar.

Mainamati in the Comilla district constitutes the ruins of

Koruna Barua

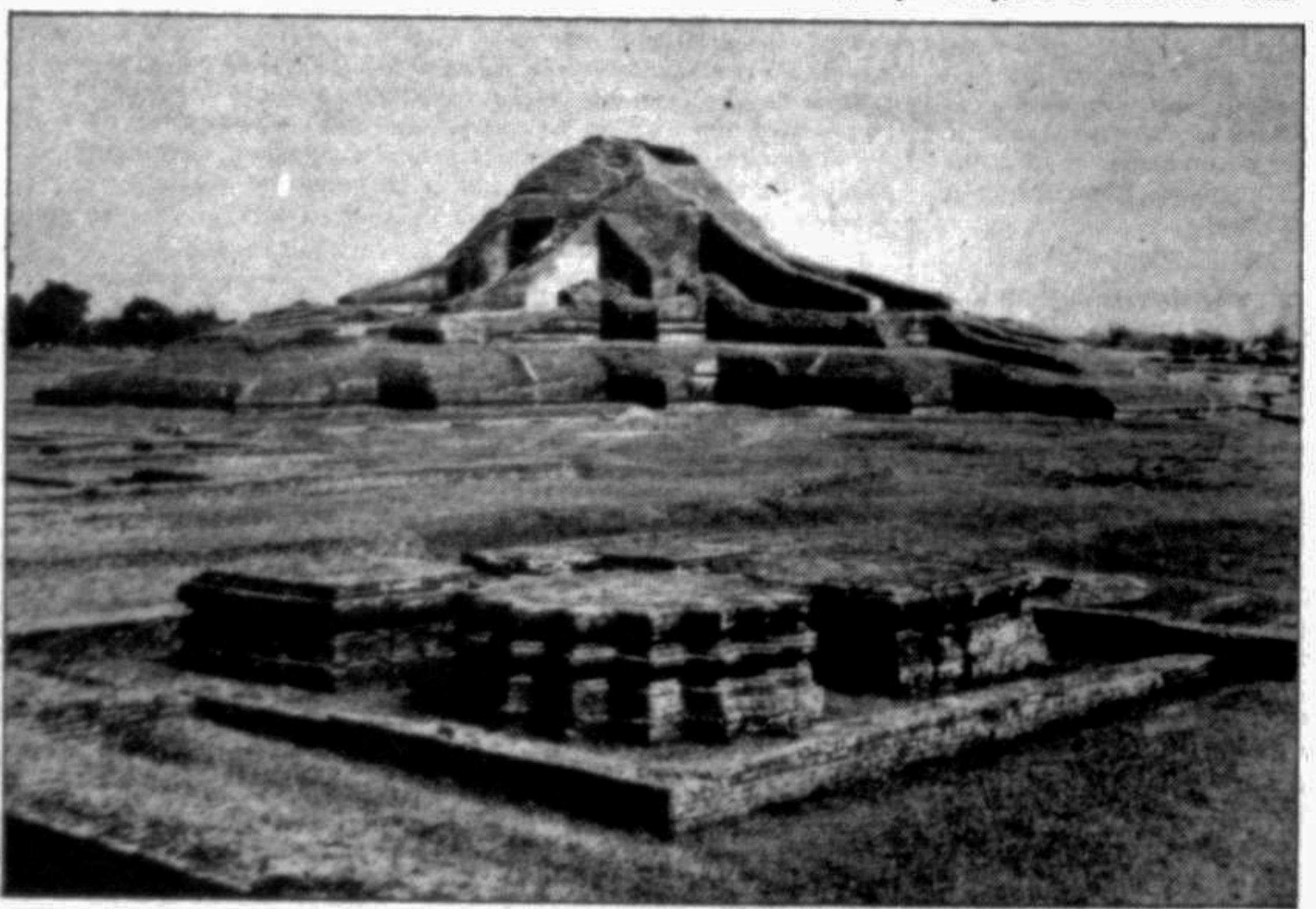
the historic Kanakastupa Vihar witnessed by Hsien Tsang. The ruins scattered along the 11-mile long range of Matnamati-Lalmal hills speak of a flourishing Buddhist civilisation.

One of the greatest centres of Buddhism in the Sub-continent after the decline of Nalanda University in Bihar was Pandita Vihara located somewhere in Chittagong as the major establishment of the Tantric Mahayana School. Atish Dipankar Srijnana, an outstanding saint and philosopher and another scholar-monk,

Tilopa or Tilopad of Chittagong who had preached Buddhism in Bhutan studied in this Vihara.

During this period, Buddhist scholars and saints exercised their influence for beyond the frontier of Bangladesh. Acharya Shilabhadra of Samatata, Bengal was Vice-Chancellor of Nalanda University, the most famous centre of Buddhism in the Sub-Continent. Hsien Tsang studied Buddhism under this great monk-scholar in Nalanda in the Seventh Century.

A famous Buddhist saint-philosopher of that time was



The historic Paharpur Monastery in the Rajshahi district.

Acharya Santarakist who visited Tibet and stayed there till 702 A.D. for reformation of Buddhism. The most outstanding scholar-saint Atisha Dipankar Srijnana of Tenth-Eleventh Century visited Tibet at the invitation of the King and preached the compassionate teachings of Lord Buddha to mould a new religion in Tibet for 13 years until his death. He wrote more than 100 religious and philosophical books on Buddhism which are still preserved in ancient temples of Tibet.

The period of Buddhist rule in ancient Bangladesh was marked by remarkable development in architecture, arts and sculpture. Sculptors chiselled out images of Buddha, Bodhisattva and other deities in stone, bronze and other metals which are specimens of intricate style of workmanship. Terracotta pieces in the walls exemplify development of secular arts reflecting life, nature and social scenes of those days.

Two outstanding sculptors of the Pala age who had visualised and created the unique specimens of Buddha as well as Buddhist deities were Dhiman and his son Bitpal.

They pioneered a new style of paintings — first of its kind in the history of ancient Bangladesh which were discovered in the manuscripts surviving in Tibetan and Nepalese temples. They painted events of Buddha's life such as Siddhartha's birth in the garden of Lumbini, attainment of Buddha's Enlightenment, turning the wheel of the Dharma at Isipatana, Maha-

parinirvana at Kushinara, miracle at Sravasti, conquering Nalagiri at Rajagriha and offering of honey to the Buddha by monkey.

Bengali language owes its origin to the work of Buddhist monks from the crust of prevailing Prakrit and Apabhramsa language. In the year 1906, some ancient manuscripts lying buried in the monasteries of Nepal were discovered.

They were found to be lyrics and songs written in ancient form of the Bengali language by monks known as "Siddhacharyas". Sitting in the monasteries of ancient Bengal from 10th to 13th Centuries, they created a new language closer to the language spoken by the common folk which has come to be recognised as the first-ever germination of today's Bengali language. These poems known as "Buddha Gan O Doha" (Buddhist songs and lyrics) — the first ever in the history of Bengali literature were unique as lyrical verses expressing Buddhist thought as well as contemporary society and nature.

The decline and final disappearance of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh in the 12th-

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