

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

DHAKA : 2000 A.D. AND BEYOND A Future Urban Black Hole or a Livable World City?

THE population of major urban centres in many developing countries are virtually exploding. This is more critical in some of the more heavily populated countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mexico etc... With the current growth rates continuing, some of the major urban centres in these and similar countries could double every 10 to 15 years.

The population of Bangladesh at liberation (1971) was approximately 75 million. The urban population was approximately 7% of the total. Today the estimate for the total population is anywhere between 110 and 115 million. An increase of 35 to 40 million (50% growth) in barely 20 years. The Urban Population is estimated between 12% and 15% of the total. This means that while the total population is growing between 2.5% to 2.8% the urban population is growing at a much faster rate. What will the year 2000 AD bring for the country? 140 million people? 150 million? Even at 2.5 overall rate of growth the population could stand over 150 million and growing how many of this will crowd into the urban areas like Dhaka? This, in a small country of barely 55,000 square miles, of which a significant are is taken over by crisscrossing large rivers.

The population of Dhaka, the new national capital and the principal urban centre in 1971 was approximately 1.7 million in the metropolitan area. Today the metropolitan region is virtually merged with Narayanganj to the south Savar to the north-west and Tongi to the north. The combined population is 6 million. The urban growth rate is estimated close to 6.5% per annum (a combination of urban birth rate,

2.5% allowed and rural to urban migration rate of 4.0%). At this rapid uninterrupted rate the population of Dhaka could double every ten years. The population of Dhaka theoretically would be over 11 million in 2000 AD and over 20 million in 2010 AD. Even a much more moderate overall growth rate of 4.5% (1.5% birth rate and 3.0% rural migration) presents 9 million in the year 2000 AD and 14 million in 2010 AD. While the second figures are very optimistic, they would still present major issues and problems.

Could these scenarios be true? Look at Mexico City (population 18 million). Look at Sao Paulo (population 15 million). Keep watching Cairo, Jakarta, Bombay and a number of major third world cities. In fact the number of major urban centres in the world having 5 million or more population will grow from 35 in 1985 to over 95 by 2025 AD. While in the developed countries it will only change from 11 in 1985 to 13 during the same period. By far the bulk of growth will therefore come from the rapidly growing third world cities. However, what happens to a city and its environment when it grows from 2 million to 6 million in 20 years, and may be to 18 million in another 20 years? Some we know, others are only matters of conjecture. Urban planners, economists or demographers can hardly predict the scenarios with certainty or absolute accuracy. Because there is no

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city in the 20-25 million range to day. But we already have some ideas. The picture does not look very good to say the least. A few cities of the world are beginning to find out what it is to plan, administer, live, grow and die in cities having more than 15 million people (Mexico City, Sao Paulo etc). Even with enormously more resources invested or planned than Bangladesh can ever af-

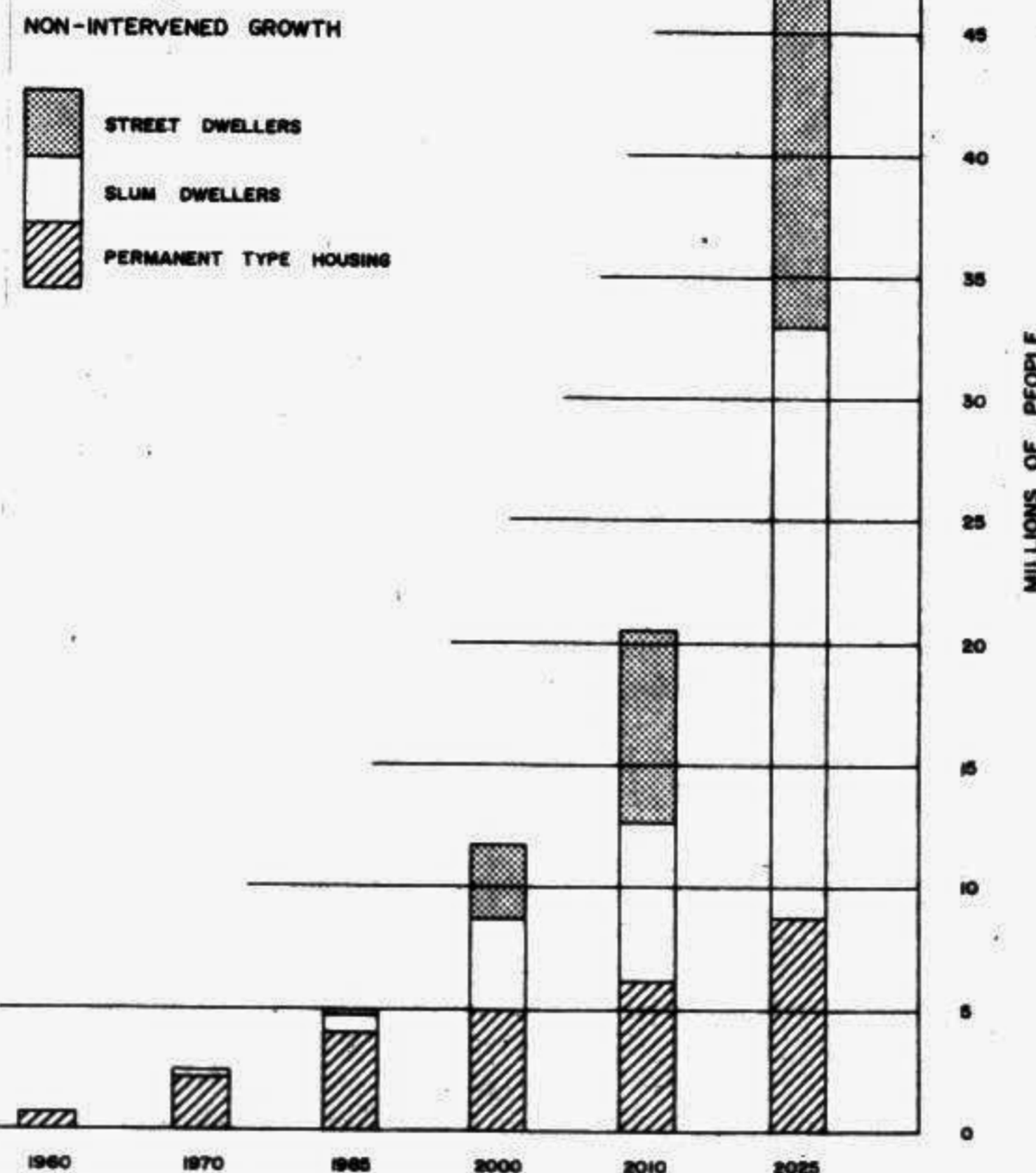
by Tanwir Nawaz

ford, these urban megalopolis are becoming almost impossible to administer, operate and provide for. Do we in Bangladesh realize where we are heading? What are our options? How can we cope with the emerging situations? What policy, planning and implemental directions should we be following?

What implications will a population of 10 million plus by 2000 AD and possibly 25 to 30 million by 2025 AD have, on a rapidly growing massive urban centre like Dhaka?

Can this urban population growth and physical urban expansions be moderated by

DHAKA, BANGLADESH
PROJECTED POPULATION GROWTH AND IMPACT ON HOUSING QUALITY
CALCULATED ON 6.5%/ANNUM
(2.0% BIRTH RATE PLUS 4.5% IMMIGRATION)



some intervention, direction planning or investment?

What kind of planning, policies and resource commitments may moderate the impact of the emerging situation?

We have ignored this long enough. We can only ignore it any further only at our future peril.

The growth of Dhaka as a rapidly expanding centre of population following the liberation has been noted in the introduction. In 1950, Dhaka had a base population of 250,000 approximately. It was spread over an area 30 sq. miles. By 1961, the population of the municipal area had risen to 561,000, while the city had spread to 56 sq. miles in area. At that point, Dhaka as a metropolitan areas was still distinctly separate from the nearby Narayanganj to the south and there was hardly any development to the north.

However, by 1971 the population had grown rapidly to over a million and half. New urban areas had started to grow in the north-west in the form of Savar. In the north and north-east new upper class residential subdivisions of Gulshan,

Banani, Uttara, Badda etc. had started to emerge. Further to the north, the industrial town of Tongi was beginning to emerge some 25 miles from the downtown centre of the previously newly developed Motijheel Commercial Area.

By late 1980's, the far flung and previously separated urban areas such as commercial and mercantile Savar, Narayanganj and industrial Tongi had started to merge with the main urban body. I estimate it to be about 250 sp. miles today. Already a number of phenomenon had started to emerge.

The city was spreading far and wide into previously untouched rural and prime agricultural lands.

The expanded and newly created urban areas while initially separate from the main urban (city) areas at the core, was beginning to merge in the form of unauthorised commercial linkages.

Transportation and commuting has begun to emerge as issues.

Service infrastructures such water, sewer, storm drainage, electricity etc were being stretched thin. It has reached a stage where the various urban issues have begun to compound one another. Moreover, all of the urban expansion land came from encroached and annexed rural lands. Much of these were low lying lands which have also been filled with consequent severe drainage and flood water stagnation prob-

lems as was demonstrated by the recent floods.

As buildable and habitable urban lands became scarce and the lands values skyrocketed, in addition to encroaching on the surrounding low lying and rural lands most of the existing open spaces including low lying lands and open drainage canals (such as the Dholai Khal in the old city) was being filled up. This was not simply only an intensification of the existing land use but a drastic change in the existing ecological make up. The DIT has been greatly responsible for the annexation and filling up the surrounding low lying rural lands. This was to create upper class single family very low density residential subdivisions. (What a waste of valuable land! The effective densities varied from 4 units per acre to 10 units per acre (gross). The DIT missed a golden opportunity to do something creative and build between 50 to 80 units per acre, if they were at all required to annex these rural lands. If that was 5000 acres of land, at 50 units per acre, that could have provided enough space for 250,000 units and housed at least an additional 1,500,000 people without further annexations. To house the same number of people at 10 units per acre would require 25000 acres of annexed land.)

With the population of Dhaka (both from birth rate and rural / urban migration) continuing to grow unabated, the pressure for more and more urban expansion and internal land use intensification will continue in the foreseeable future. Further, we will see the polarity of land use problems as large unauthorised areas of slums in the inner city and high rise middle income (See following page)

THIS column has been in a state of suspended animation for two weeks, gathering dust among other unpublished materials, the reason being the lack of space in the Weekend Magazine. In place of 'My World', we did have some excellent pieces to put in, like the 'Conversation' with Prof. Nurul Islam who, by virtue of his excellent credentials, certainly deserved a full-page treatment. Maybe I should put it in another way: We could not have done justice to his wide-ranging views without devoting a page to our unstructured discussion. His qualifications were only of secondary importance.

Then, last Friday, we went looking for trees in our disappearing forests, with our colleague Waheedul Haq acting as our guide. After that, we joined our guest columnist Zillur Rahman Siddiqui in paying our tributes to poet Begum Sufia Kamal on her 80th birthday.

How could my own modest weekly offering compete for space against such stuff?

Since the Star's mail box did not exactly overflow with queries about the fate of my column, I should accept the depressing fact that it was not exactly missed by a select group of my readers who, according to an opinion poll, number about a dozen. It is nice to know that most of these regular readers are my colleagues, such as the Editor of the Magazine Section, a couple computer operators, a proof reader - occasionally his boss, the head of the section, who goes through the piece as a special favour to me - and the paste-up man who puts it on the page. The nicest one among my regular readers is a young sub-editor, who, every Saturday, whispers to me, "I liked your column yesterday."

Then, a couple of weeks ago when we noticed that the Observer had started reprinting the column by its late editor Abdus Salam, years after his death, my sub-editor friend told me reassuringly, "One day, we will be happy to do the same with your column." I felt touched and complimented my young colleague, still on probation, on the range of his future planning for the paper.

If the column was not missed, it was certainly misunderstood. This was the case with my humorous observation made in a recent piece that the two Trust newspapers should be given away to the two major political parties, BNP and AL. Journalists and press workers in one of the two papers held a meeting to criticise me for making such derogatory remarks and then put together a report for the front page. Two days later, the paper put in my clarification that my remark was made only in lighter vein, again on

Thoughts on Press Freedom and About a Dhaka Weekly that Died Without a Bang

the front page. Now, I am waiting to read somewhere, maybe in another paper, that it was all pre-arranged - my tongue-in-cheek suggestion, the criticism from a Trust paper and my clarification - to give me a bit of publicity.

Far from being pleased that I am being taken so seriously, and that too by the media, even when I say something in a light vein, I am just wondering if the Star should ever take the risk of publishing a humor column. Perhaps it should do so one day, maybe years from now, when my column is also reprinted. I must remember to check on this with my young sub-editor friend.

My memory gets a jolt whenever someone brings up the subject of press freedom in this or in any other country, the latest case being the observance of the Black Day, commemorating the closure of all but four newspapers in Dhaka by the then government of Bangladesh in 1974.

It surprises me that four

in 1974, and testimonies of journalists who, in one way or another, paid a price for standing up for press freedom.

The study would fill in many gaps in our knowledge of the history of the media in this country, especially in the field of press freedom.

For instance, which publication in the then East Pakistan earned the dubious distinction of being the first victim of the government's assault on the press?

When the question was raised during an informal discussion with some journalists at the PIB a few months ago, the answer seemed unanimous. It must have been the then *Pakistan Observer* which, thanks to its courageous editorial on corruption among associates of the then Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin got closed down, probably in 1952, and remained shut for several months. But no one was quite sure of the dates.

I suggested that the answer

Among the publications I have worked for, the *East Bengal Times* still occupies a special place in my recollections. After all, it was this publication that gave me my first job as a journalist.

governments, first in the then East Pakistan and then in Bangladesh, so quickly lost their patience with the press, curbed its freedom and often succeeded in turning it into a docile institution. What is particularly sad is that so often this systematic exercise was carried out by national leaders who, when they were out in the cold, had gained most from support of the media. Why was it so? And, what's more important, how can we be sure that the pattern will not be repeated in future?

Here, my interest lies in seeing an authoritative research study on the history of our struggle for press freedom, from 1947 to 1990, undertaken by an organisation like the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB), perhaps in collaboration with the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ). A well-documented work would, I believe, contain such materials as the "offending" reports, articles and editorials which brought troubles for publications concerned, copies of executive orders, unless they were just verbal instructions, closing down newspapers, as

might be wrong. I named the *East Bengal Times*, a little known English-language weekly which, owned by an aristocratic Dhaka family that I remember only as the Guhas, used to come out from an old style palatial house in Wari. The building served as both the residence to the owners and the office of the weekly. The printing press, with rows and rows of wooden cases of hand-set types and a treadle machine, placed in a tin shed, was also in the same compound. It was quite a compact operation.

At the time of independence in August, 1947, the *East Bengal Times* was a fairly well-established weekly in a city which was yet to have its first daily newspaper. Despite some difficulties that the owners had in adjusting to the changed political realities in the country - the head of the family had already migrated to Calcutta, leaving behind his son and daughter-in-law to look after the properties and the publication - the *East Bengal Times* carried on, along an uncertain course, without being fully aware of the distrust it caused in the mind of

the Muslim League-dominated provincial administration.

Sadly enough, the weekly was on borrowed time. It seldom published critical pieces on the administration that, in matter of months, had virtually lost all its credibility with the people. However, an exception was a commentary the paper published on corruption - the subject that kept cropping up

for the media during the past 42 years - and immediately invited the wrath of the government of Khwaja Nazimuddin. The office of the publication was raided and ransacked. The man who paid a price was an exceptionally docile Hindu school teacher who had a part-time job in the publication. Since he admitted being the writer of the so-called offend-

ing article and took the full responsibility for its publication, without any authorisation of the editor and knowledge of the other member of the staff, the police had a relatively straightforward job in hand. They took the teacher into custody and closed down the publication - for good.

The two lucky ones who were spared by the police were the Editor Ms Kalyani Guha, the daughter-in-law of the family, and a young assistant editor - well, that's me.

I happened to be out of Dhaka, spending a vacation at Maulvi Bazar, during the police raid on the *East Bengal Times*. The school teacher cum journalist - I do not think, he cared to work for another publication again - had been released by the police when I returned to Dhaka after a couple of weeks. But the Guhas had left for Calcutta. Within a year or so, when we had the *Observer*, the *Morning News* and the *Azad* dominating the media scene of Dhaka, the *East Ben-*

English Department, Kalyani Guha had simply looked at the faded pages which carried my byline, without really reading any of my masterpieces, the whole exercise being only a formality for hiring me.

Since the Guhas had apparently never hired a young man who was still in his teens as a journalist and were blissfully unaware of my potential, they decided to be on the safe side, from their perspective, when it came to the question of my salary. It was so low that Ms Guha could not utter the figure. She wrote it on a piece of paper, showed it to me and blushed. Then, it was my turn to blush, in a mixture of embarrassment and delight. With both of us blushing, it was a touching moment. Then, Kalyani Guha who was one of the exceedingly good-looking women I had seen in Dhaka in those days, stopped blushing and said in a reassuring voice, "It is really a pocket allowance." Instead of asking what was her idea of a pocket allowance, I nodded my immediate acceptance of the of-

piece deserved.

For an aspiring journalist like myself, there could not have been a better training ground than the *East Bengal Times*. Every week, the 12-page tabloid weekly was very much my handiwork. I wrote the major pieces and provided the headlines. I edited the articles from contributors and managed to get photographs to illustrate their pieces. I did the proof-reading and laid out the pages which were printed, two pages at a time, every Friday night.

After all these years, I find it a little difficult to believe that I was given such total freedom in editing the publication. I could carry out any number of journalistic experiments, including some bad ones, and introduce all kinds of imaginary bylines of non-existent writers for pieces that I wrote myself. I got most of my ideas from Calcutta publication and some from books on newspaper editing and layouts which I borrowed from the British Information Services. Thus, we got such ideas as 'The Week in Review', based on newswires we picked up from the Calcutta press, a 'Capital Diary', a page on the international scene and another on the university. Quite a bit that went into the publication every week was surprisingly professional, but there was much which was extremely amateurish.

This strange mix hardly bothered the Guhas or a few contributors I had lined up among my friends in the university. All these writers were my seniors and, in a matter of years and decades in some cases, they made their mark on the national scene. They included A.K. Naziruddin Ahmed who headed for banking and served the Bangladesh Bank as its Governor in the mid-seventies; Syed Najmuddin Hashim, a former Minister for Information and an ambassador and now one of the editors of the *Dialogue*; and Shaheed Shahidullah Kaiser who was killed by the Razakars during the liberation war.

The *East Bengal Times* was just not simply a training ground for an aspiring journalist but it had also won a place for itself among budding intellectuals of Dhaka University.

So, when (and if) we have a comprehensive history of the media of this country, with special reference to the struggle for press freedom, this little known weekly that came out from Wari should provide more than a footnote. It should be a full chapter.

There will also be other chapters about publications which no longer exist and about fighters for press freedom who have also disappeared from the scene. We will talk about a few of them in this column one of these days.

MY WORLD S. M. Ali



A view of Wari today, crowded and congested, which hardly looks like the home of the *East Bengal Times*, a weekly that died without a bang for writing on corruption.

It surprises me that our governments, first in the then East Pakistan and then in Bangladesh, so quickly lost their patience with the press, curbed its freedom and often succeeded in turning into a docile institution.

The *East Bengal Times* was nothing more than a faint memory for most of its former readers. After all, it had a small - we jokingly called it a select - circulation, an unimpressive advertising support and hardly an impact on the political scene of the province. It died without a bang, not even with a whimper.

Among the publications I have worked for, the *East Bengal Times* still occupies a special place in my recollections.

After all, it was this publication that gave me my first job as a journalist. It hired me, without any introduction, just by glancing through a set of clippings of a dozen or so of my articles which had been published by a Sylhet weekly. Incidentally, it was the same clippings which had earned me a seat in the Salmullah Muslim Hall and a place in the 'honours' class of English Language and Literature, despite my poor performance in the Intermediate Science examination. Like Dr Syed Moazzem Hossain, the then Provost of the Salmullah Hall, and Prof. A.O. Stock the Head of the

fer. As far as I knew, there was no other English-language weekly in Dhaka in those days where I could try for a job.

Whether Guhas suffered from a case of bad conscience over my salary or because they were basically decent people, they treated me very well indeed, almost like a member of the family. There were occasional free meals, endless cups of tea and snacks and an acceptance of the fact that I was the man in charge of the publication, which was really the case until the school teacher came along to share my work on the writing side and eventually to get the paper closed down.

It was a blessing that Kalyani Guha who had no journalistic experience and hardly any writing ability, remained in the background, thus leaving me alone with my work. Once in a while, she would send me a Charles Lamb type of essay, written in a sentimental vein, together with a little note asking for its publication. I would put it in, with reasonable promptness, on an inside page, but giving it just a bit of extra prominence than such a