

# Phnom Penh and Pyongyang - The Tale of Two Cities

Two socialist countries, situated at two ends of the Asia-Pacific region, have been trying to come to terms with their future. When they succeed in reaching their respective goals, the change will produce tremendous impact on the whole region.

The two countries are North Korea, a rigidly authoritarian state, which has been making one move after another to reaffirm its interest in reunification with the larger free-wheeling capitalist South Korea. The other country, located right at the end of the Southeast Asian arc, is Cambodia which, after some 15 years of occupation, civil war and endless killing, is moving steadily towards a peaceful UN-supervised election and a democratic future, provided the agreement just reached at a conference in Thailand holds.

Politics apart, no two countries evoke such strong and somewhat different impressions as North Korea and Cambodia among people, like this writer, who have visited them at one time or another.

In the case of North Korea, the dominating impression remains one of a mixture of amusement and bewilderment, an impression produced by a look at the authoritarian system and of its affect on the everyday life of its people. But this impression is also one of sadness as one becomes conscious of the deprivation of its 23 million people during the past 42 years in all different fields of human activities, from social and political to economic and cultural.

When it comes to Cambodia, one views the succession of tragedies suffered by this country of ancient culture with anguish, often wondering what is there in the fate of a nation that makes its people go through such suffering, for so long, the kind of questions that we often ask about our own country - Bangladesh.

If disasters suffered by our two countries - Bangladesh and Cambodia - often evoke similar questions, notwithstanding vast differences in the nature of tragedies we have

experienced, we also become conscious of the fact that there are strong similarities between our two peoples, when we first visit Phnompenh, the capital of Cambodia, as I did in the middle of 1965.

We leave it to historians to explain how Hindu and Buddhist cultures from this region spread to parts of Indonesia and Thailand and then to some areas in the former Indo-China region, especially Laos and Cambodia, and thus provided an enduring element in the cultural and religious tapestries of these countries.

US General Lon Nol seized power, forcing Prince Sihanouk to flee the country.

In the mid-sixties, flying into Phnompenh from a congested and somewhat chaotic Jakarta, as I did, was like entering another world. The most immediate impression was one of the slow pace of life, with tree-lined wide avenues, the pagodas and the river providing the background. Here, one either walked or moved around in a rickshaw, no matter how urgent the appointment one was obliged to keep. One had to fit in with the slow pace of life,

origin" has increased manifold during the past decade. That's another story - the political one.

In 1964, few seemed to worry too much about what lay ahead of Cambodia, partly because even the educated and politically-enlightened people tended to rely on Prince Sihanouk to sort things out as he thought best. Besides, in a country where free political debate was frowned upon by the authorities - meaning Prince Sihanouk - it seemed pointless to speculate on the fate of a country that was caught in the crossfire between Washington and Hanoi. "The Side Show", the tragedy of Cambodia for which Henry Kissinger is roundly and convincingly blamed by the author, William Showcross, was at least a decade away from reaching its publisher. Showcross was probably then only a cub reporter.

So, in 1964, the restaurants and cafes were full, the market places crowded, the floating nightclub on the river jammed with couples dancing to the slow Khmer music until past midnight and the movie houses showed Indian movies - we hear, they still do - to cheering audiences.

Whatever might have been his concern over the fate of the country, Prince Sihanouk carried on with his gracious and somewhat flamboyant life style just as he liked. He made movies, under his own direction, full of romantic songs and dances, with his wife, children and he himself acting in various roles; staged epic plays in his palace in Phnompenh; and entertained Jackie Kennedy, among others of the international jet set, at Angkor Wat, despite the fact that Phnompenh had broken off diplomatic relations with Washington.

Politically, Cambodia had already entered the twilight zone. The darkness that fell on

the country was only a few years away. And so was the merciless killing of millions of people for whom a new dawn became elusive again and again, under the rule of the Khmer Rouge and then under the Vietnamese-backed administration of Hang Samrin.

Now, with all the warring factions coming together in a new Supreme Council under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk who, at long last, returns to Phnompenh, there are talks of yet another dawn. Will it be a real dawn or a false one? Who knows? People say that Cambodians we used to meet in Phnompenh in the

future. It is the same prayer that echoes in the hearts of all those who loved Cambodia during the years of its glory and who shed tears for it during its suffering.

I do not know if anyone visiting North Korea ever fell in love with its capital, Pyongyang. I did not. It is not a nice thing to say, but not I had been treated so carefully - not necessarily graciously - by my hosts, during all my five trips to a country which was once called, "the country gone underground".

room as in 1982. The quality of food had somewhat improved, but the rules about the seating arrangement and placing the order for your next had remained unchanged.

With broad avenues and parks, dotted by impressive buildings, Pyongyang should be a great place for jogging. But that's not practical. Every time you are out of your hotel, you are accompanied by your interpreter who is wearing a suit and a tie, the official outfit. Dressed like that, he won't enjoy running! With traffic rather thin, it should also be fun driving around the capital. I did it a couple of times with

me to a sports meet, organised for the conference we had come to attend, and insisted on my taking part in the tug-of-war. He went into a kind of panic when I refused. Then, he offered me a temptation: a Korean vase as a prize for my participation. I still refused. Then, virtually in tears, he persuaded another visitor to join the game in my place. For the rest of the day, we did not talk, both of us boiling in anger. Then, next day, he confided to me that he had been reprimanded over his lapse, whatever it meant.

In 1987, my interpreter was a young woman who never imposed a programme on me. She talked well and enquired after my family. When she came to the airport to see me off, she offered to take me to visit her family next time I was in Pyongyang - yes, next time. My interpreter in 1982 would never have extended such an invitation - even for the next time.

With both the interpreters and a few other North Koreans we got to know well - as well as possible in an authoritarian state - we often touched on the question of the reunification of the two Koreas.

This is one of the few issues on which my acquaintances in Pyongyang talked with obvious emotion that broke through the shell of their carefully-guarded manners. They talked about tens of thousands of divided families and spoke with feeling about "our one country, one people."

In 1982, a discussion on reunification of the divided country often made North Koreans talk, with a touch of missionary zeal, about saving the South from the US occupation, helping "our oppressed brothers and sisters" to get rid of the "capitalist clique."

By 1987, the language had slightly changed. The references to the alleged US occupation of South Korea were fewer than before. The usual vituperative language directed against the Seoul regime had given way to critical but not wholly negative statements.

The mood inside North Korea has continued to change over the years since I paid my fifth - and last - visit to Pyongyang. In the two capitals of the divided country, there now appears a genuine interest in reunification, an interest that has prompted the South Korean President Roh Tae Woo predict that the world may well be seeing "one single Korean republic emerge on the map of Asia before the end of the century."

The changes which have altered the face of Europe are, slowly but steadily, coming to Asia.

## MY WORLD

S. M. ALI

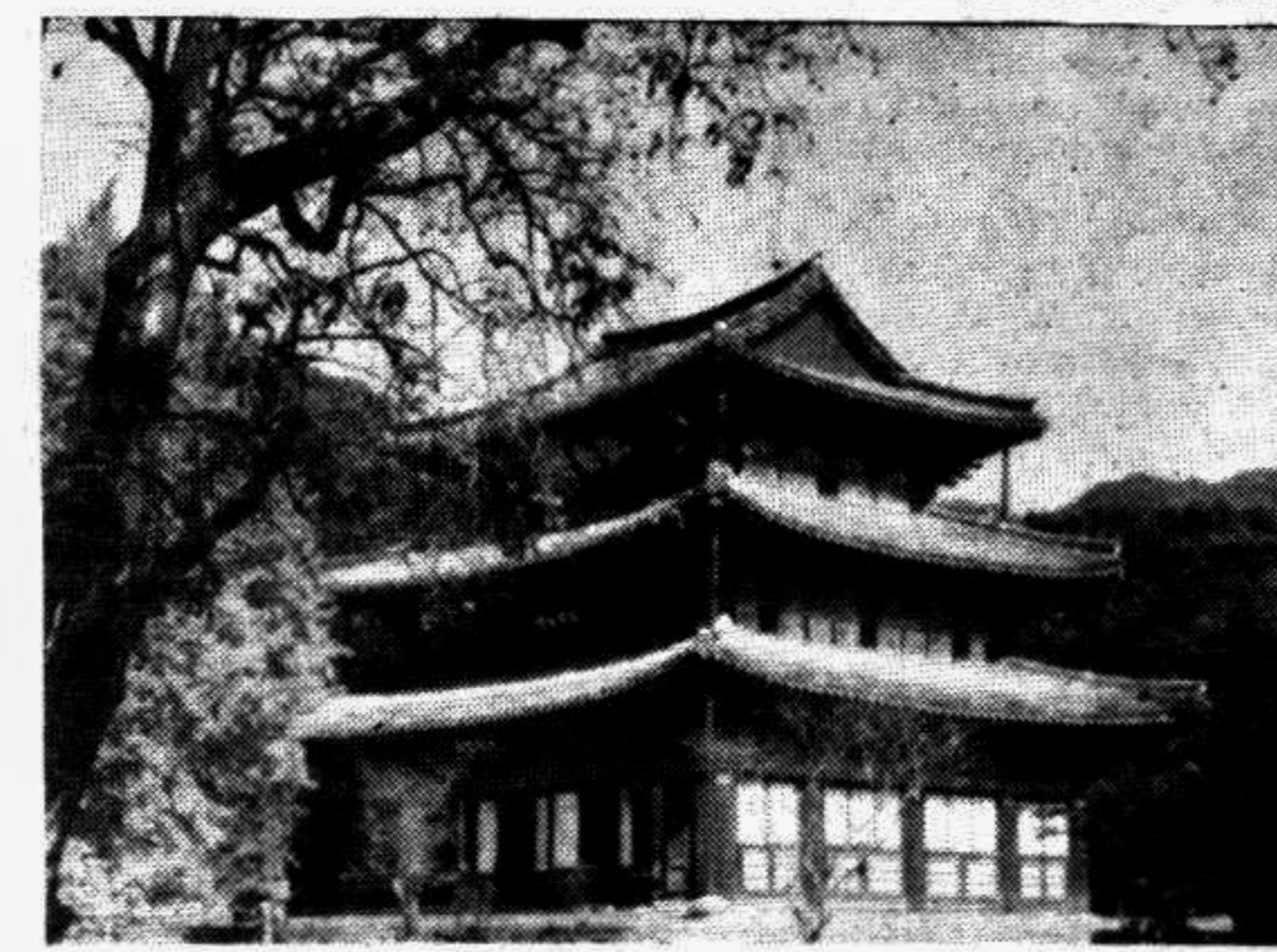
In 1964, it was still a relatively peaceful Cambodia that welcomed you with open arms, with gracious warm hospitality.

I say 'relatively peaceful', because the US-backed South Vietnamese planes had already started violating the Cambodian territory in bombing raids on Viet Cong concentrations. A year later, the Cambodian ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk who had been valiantly but vainly trying to maintain his country's neutrality broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. Then, five years later, the pro-

the key to the temperament of the majority dark-skinned Khmer people, the long-lost cousins of South Asians. Not surprisingly, the more fair-complexioned Cambodians of Chinese and Vietnamese origin, then constituting only ten per cent of the population, controlled trade and commerce and exercised covert influence on the government and the structure of the Communist Party. The Vietnamese troops may have now left Cambodia, but one can be sure that the population of "Cambodians of Vietnamese



Prince Norodom Sihanouk : End of an exile.



Pyongyang : Dotted by impressive buildings and broad avenues.

mid-sixties are no longer the same. They have changed into a hardened lot - cold, cynical and suspicious - and are now more proficient in the use of guns than in their traditional musical instruments. Despite the help extended to the country by a number of UN agencies, they look upon the international community with anger for not trying hard enough to save Cambodia from one genocide after another. As a journalist who just visited Phnompenh said the other day, this anger will not go away all that quickly, perhaps not in this generation.

How will an old and tired Norodom Sihanouk lead his people now? It would not matter very much if he can no longer stage epic plays in his palace theatre, make movies or entertain an ageing Jackie Onassis at Angkor Wat. But it will make a difference for his people if he can stand on the palace balcony, as he so often did in the mid-sixties, fold his hands and join in a prayer for

I mention the number of visits, because with every visit, I searched for changes. I did find some variations - or what one might call relaxation of authoritarian control - but not much.

For instance, during my very first visit in 1982, I found that my place in the dining room was permanently fixed - I would not have been served if I sat anywhere else, say, with some friends - and that I was required to tell the waiter what I would eat at the next meal. In other words, as you finished with your lunch, you looked at the menu and select your dishes for the dinner. Here, protests were in vain. If it is awkward to think of another meal in your full stomach, then better not have a full meal, so went the advice, of a friend.

During my last visit to Pyongyang in 1987, when I stayed at newly-built five-star hotel, in a well-furnished two-room suite, I followed the same routine in the dining

friends from the UN agencies - the only time when I was not accompanied by my interpreter - and realised that the three lanes on main roads were earmarked for three different types of vehicles. An extreme one - left or right, I forget - was for official vehicles, usually Mercedes or Volvos - and one next to it was for cars carrying foreign guests and UN personnel. The third one was for others - which was relatively empty. After all, how many North Korean citizens owned cars?

This is what I noticed in 1982. The traffic rules were still the same in 1987.

Yet, to say that there were no changes in life in Pyongyang between 1982 and 1987 would be wrong. In 1982, my interpreter who was my constant companion was an intense, nervous and, in many ways, a difficult young man. He did things, supposedly for my "convenience" but obviously under instructions, which drove me mad. Once he took

## A Tribute Long Overdue

Tawfiq Aziz Khan

It was 1957. I was trying to concentrate on old man Santiago's odyssey into the sea in search of a catch that would sustain him for the coming days, with a pillow tucked in comfortably under my empty stomach as I found myself in almost similar conditions one late morning in January.

Suddenly, on the distant horizon appeared a slim figure of a man riding a bicycle - his feet barely touching the pedals. As the rider approached the door to my thatched room of Iqbal Hall, I recognized him. From my seat in the Barracks I had a clear view up to the Railroad crossing at Plassey. The rider dismounted, rested the two-wheeler against a Shalballi post in front of my room, unclipped his trousers at the ankles which would otherwise get soiled by the oil and grease of the chain and broke into a genial smile that exhibited a pair of well-set white teeth. His eyes sparkling as ever, pulled up a chair and sat by my side.

Mir Maqsood-us Salheen was an artiste, a dreamer. But fate had led him into the bizarre world of figures in the Commerce Faculty of Dhaka University. He was supposed to be working for his Master's degree like any other good boy obeying the commands of his teacher-father who would someday feel proud of his eldest son achieving the highest degree from the university and settled in the society and a quiet family life.

But it was not to be. Salheen Bhai left his books behind, gathered all his energy and talents, dexterously worked at realising his dreams - establishing a National Theatre and becoming a professional actor. Within himself he had always felt the compulsion to create something which would, even though in a small manner, satisfy his indomitable urge for the aesthetics which had an all pervading influence on his whole being.

I first saw him in the role of the Zeminder in 'Dui Purush', staged at the S. M. Hall auditorium by the students of the Hall in 1955. Except for the regional influence of Mymensingh once in a while in his speech delivery, he was exceptionally brilliant. I had the good fortune to have seen the movie in which the imitable Ahindra Choudhury did the same character. Salheen Bhai did not have the experience nor the imposing figure of Ahindra Choudhury as an actor but God had bestowed him a deep, rich voice the resonance of which made up for the lapses in his pronunciation.

Like his talents, his voice was also a gift of God which belied the impression that the man was hardly five and half feet tall and weighed less than his bike.

He was conscious of his physique but had no complex about it. He was aware of his rich voice but would constantly endeavour to improve it.

Salheen Bhai became the Cultural Secretary of the Dhaka

For about a month we had no respite. Usually the rehearsals started in the morning and went late into the night. Salheen Bhai was full of enthusiasm and all nerves. He directed one of the plays, acted in one but designed the sets, lights, costume and make-up of all four plays. Again the cultural workers were the galley slaves in the execution of his ideas. Salheen Bhai

compromise. The audience was always taken by surprise.

The sets he designed, the costumes he created, the lighting he introduced and the make-up he used 35 years ago bore the hallmark of an extraordinary creative genius that was Mir Salheen - perhaps born before his time.

All the success, all the refinement could not give him the satisfaction that he so fondly cherished, a desire to take his audience beyond the horizon of human experience. Little wonder that he should have been one of the first batch students at the Dhaka Arts Institute founded by Zainul Abedin before joining J. N. College as a student of commerce.

The success of the festival put us all very close and some of us were harbouring the incredulous idea of forming a drama group. Finally one evening in October 1956, Drama Circle, the first group theatre of Bangladesh was born. As members of Drama Circle we had performed in Dhaka, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Chittagong.

Till 1962 Salheen Bhai remained the sheet-anchor of the group and led us. Then he left for East-West Centre at Hawaii for higher studies in fine arts - the first Bengalee to be awarded the scholarship. There he met his American coed, got married and left for the mainland to settle.

It is strange how man proposes but God disposes! An artists devoted to the finer things in life, gave the best years in transcending the illusive world of the aesthetics finally ended up in an ordinary vocation. But he will survive in his eldest daughter Moona who is an actress in New York and whose only passion, like her father, is the theatre (Daily Star, 23 June 1991). His only son Jamal is studying Business in college and younger daughter Nafisa is a student of graphic arts and has a penchant for photography.

Mrs. Salheen is now busy working at her Masters in Literature after a long break in studies.

It is our misfortune that the genius of Maqsood-us Salheen could not blossom in full bloom. Destiny had something else in store for him. He died of a heart attack in New York on 5 October 1978 at the age of 49 - exactly 22 years after his first love, the Drama Circle, was born, with unfulfilled dreams in his heart.

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M. M. Saleheen: Unfulfilled dreams.

University Central Student's Union (DUCSU) in 1956-57. This was a good opportunity for him to expose his creative genius and translate some of his dreams into reality. In September 1956, DUCSU, spearheaded by Ekramul Huq (VP) and our late lamented friend Shah Ali Hossain (GS) and Salheen Bhai aided by a battery of dedicated cultural workers of the time, organised a week-long cultural festival that included seminars on drama, photographic exhibition and staging of four plays at the Curzon Hall. Kabayou by Bonophul, Paritash Bhalajitram by Pramath Nath Bisai, Manchitra by Anis Choudhury and Keu Kiasu Bolte Parena, an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's 'You Never Can Tell' by Munier Choudhury were on the card. These plays were rehearsed at the World University Service (WUS) office which was located in the main entrance to the Arts Building in those days.

himself would work overtime along with others with an ever-smiling face and occasionally share my single cot at the Iqbal Hall lest he was late for the rehearsal next morning coming from his home at Banglabazar. This was absolutely his show, we were merely his pawns. His sublime sense of the arts would take him to the realm of extraordinary ideas where only an artiste of his calibre could travel. He would strike new ideas and after toying with them for days and nights finally put them into reality. At times we were at our wit's end in complying with his imploring and felt flabbergasted in executing his innovations and experiments. He exuded an aura of hope and confidence among his workforce and was gifted with the quality to lead from the front. Every aspect of a play had to be different from the ordinary and mundane. Every production had to be novel. There was absolutely no

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,  
Your column is very useful for us. We can freely ask questions and seek your expert opinion. Thank you for starting the column. I want to bring to your knowledge a problem. Please help me with a solution. My wife and I are married two years. She is very lean and thin. She is pressing that we have a baby. But I dare not because of her ill health. I am afraid due to her poor health, she will find it difficult to go through the pains of pregnancy. Moreover, she is not in the habit of eating what she should. Consequently, the baby will not be born a healthy one. The doctor has asked her to eat and drink liquid as much as possible. Please give me your expert advice and save me from mental indecision. I shall be grateful for your advice.  
Imran Masud,  
Central Bashabo, Dhaka.

Dear Mr Masud,  
Your wife is an adult and should know better than to neglect her health. If you are planning to have a baby then she should definitely first improve her diet. Consult a doctor and ask him to make a diet chart then see that she follows it. Encourage her to read books on healthy pregnancies. You could also ask a friend or someone she trusts to talk to her. Her behaviour does not seem very logical so try to find the reason for her behaviour.  
Silyu, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,  
My two sons aged 7 and 9 give me lots of problems. They fight all day and disturb everyone. The school has closed and they have nothing to do. I spend the day trying to solve their fights. Sometimes I get very frustrated and angry and even hit them. My husband complains that there is no peace and quiet when he returns home. Please advise.  
Silyu, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Dear Parents,  
Parents have to take special measures to entertain their children during school holidays. This is not always very easy as there are very few existing facilities to entertain children of that age. However they can be induced to spend time constructively instead of fighting all the time. Their energies have to be channelled towards areas they are interested in. You will have to spend quality time and think of innovative ways to keep them occupied. If they have any hobbies help them develop those. Your husband should be your ally in this and rather than complain should help find solutions. Whatever you do don't let the children know that they are getting the better of you.  
Yasmeen, Gulshan, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,  
Nowadays we are forced to send our children abroad to study since the education system here has totally collapsed. This is a very sad state of affair because they are not matured enough to look after themselves at that age. Ultimately due to lack of opportunity here, these young people prefer to live in the West permanently. What can we do about this problem?  
Yasmeen, Gulshan, Dhaka.

Dear Yasmeen,  
Yes, this has become a sad reality where many parents have to send their children abroad. But our education system

has not collapsed totally as many are getting a good education and coming out successfully. However there is no doubt about the deteriorating situation in the higher education of our country. I disagree that due to lack of opportunities these young people are forced to stay in the West and never return. The values and ideals that you inculcate in your children is reflected in the way they choose to lead their lives. If they have some sense of responsibility towards their society many of them will surely come back.

Dear Mita,  
My husband always forgets my birthdays, our anniversaries etc. This used to be very painful in the beginning but later I learnt to accept it. Now he has even started to forget the children's birthdays. He says these things are not very important as long as he looks after the family. This is very frustrating for me and even the children have started to complain. How can I change him? Please advise.  
Saleha, Purana Paltan, Dhaka.

Dear Saleha,  
It is not always possible to change a person. What you can do is try to modify his behaviour, come to some kind of compromise and accept the rest. Discuss among yourselves and try to find the reason for his action. How does he rationalize it? One solution, if it does not hurt your ego too much is, remind him a day or two before the event. This might prevent a lot of pain, frustration and anger. He might gradually see the sentiment and significance of these days and even start remembering.  
Laila, Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,  
Long time ago I read in your column a letter from a woman who was depressed because she felt her life had been spent uselessly. I don't remember what advice you gave her but I also feel the same way. My children have grown up and my husband is too busy. So, what can I do I am 45 now.  
Laila, Mohammadpur, Dhaka.

Dear Laila,  
The advice I gave was that age 45 is not the end of one's life. If you ever had any ambitions, now is the time to fulfill them. Complete your studies if they were left unfinished due to marriage and children. There is no reason why you cannot do it. I personally know of women who at your age embarked on an entirely new career and succeeded. Just tell yourself that you can do it, it will do wonders for yourself esteem.  
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, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.