

# Tributes to Two Irreverent Women Writers; Thapars of New Delhi; and a Rath from Bangkok

It is time we paid our tributes to two very special authors — both women — of South Asia, whose somewhat irreverent books have created waves in their countries. Both critically acclaimed at home and abroad, the two publications, certainly one of them, prove that writing a good, honest and down-to-earth book is not necessarily the prerogative of a professional author.

The non-professional author, in this case, is Tehmina Durrani whose best introduction is, according to one reviewer, she is "the seventh but divorced wife" of Pakistani politician, Mustapha Khar. The book by Durrani, titled, "My Feudal Lord", provides an account of her short married life with this zeminder of Sindh, spent partly in Karachi and partly in London. With candour but not without anger and sadness, she talks about torture, humiliation, occasional beatings, forced confinement and total lack of freedom suffered by her in the hands of her husband who, it seems, pursued his shady political ambitions just as vigorously and relentlessly as his amorous games.

"My Feudal Lord" is, in effect, an indictment of what goes on underneath the superficially modern society in a Third World country like Pakistan, where the denials of basic human rights have left landless farmers — and their women — in a state of subjugation. The book by Durrani tells us nothing about life in the villages of Sindh, but it demolishes the myth that you have all the freedoms you want and all the opportunities in life you deserve if you can move up into the high society and marry someone like Mustapha Khar.

As a book that deals with problems faced by one individual woman in a tradition-bound Muslim society, "My Feudal Lord" belongs to a little-known genre of Third World writing enriched by women authors

from Tunisia, Egypt, Senegal and Kenya, among others. In one book after another, they have continued their crusade, not without some success, against all forms of harassment and exploitation of women in Afro-Arab societies, ranging from a rampant practice of polygamy to forced marriages, from the dehumanising — almost barbaric — system of circumcision of teenage girls to covert sale of women to prostitution, under the pretext of fake marriages.

Well, Miss Tehmina Durrani, whether or not your book will be on everyone's bookshelf — I do hope, it is — you have just joined an exclusive and highly prestigious club of women writers of the Third World.

"All These Years", an instant best-seller in India by Raj Thapar has little in common with Durrani's "My Feudal Lord", except it is also autobiographical and irreverent; and above all, is an expose of life that goes on in the New Delhi society. The sad thing about the book that it is a posthumous publication that has been brought out by Thapar's daughter, Malvika Singh, nearly four years after the death of the writer.

"All These Years" is not a book in the conventional sense of the term; it is a collection of pages from Thapar's diary, full of devastating views and impressions of known and unknown dignitaries she and her husband, Romesh met at their own dinner parties and at other social functions. Those who earned their places in "All These Years" included Indra Gandhi with whom they were

friends in the inner circle until 1975 when the late Prime Minister declared emergency, a move that turned the entire liberal press of India, including the "Seminar" that Romesh edited with superb skill, into the opposite side.

"All These Years" is full of anecdotes, the most quoted one being about Mrs. Indra Gandhi. After portraying the

nally made Mrs Gandhi stop the tirade against the servant.

If Thapar's book has created waves in New Delhi, it is because a lot of people who have been basking in superficial glory and eminence have been ruthlessly cut to size, with their hypocrisy, double-talks and scant regard for values and principles laid bare for millions of readers in the "Indian

Magazine" and "India Today" which have started publishing extracts from the publication.

The publishing world of Dhaka is crying out for a book like "All These Years" that would, slowly but surely, raise the curtain on what goes on in the so-called high society of the Bangladesh capital, a book that exposes the hypocrisy, lies, double-talk, back-biting and shameless slandering indulged in by well-heeled men and women, the high society where no one talks about books and music, art and cul-

ture and, instead, ridicules and runs down whatever good is done by those who may not quite belong to the party. Let us hope that we do not have to wait for a Malvika Singh of Dhaka to discover a diary in the cupboard of her dead mother. That will be waiting too long for what often looks like a society in crisis.

We made short speeches and the "Editor of the Year" looked visibly touched that we had come all the way from another part of Asia — a Bangladeshi, a Korean newspaper owner and a Singaporean Chinese journal-

ist — to honour a fighter for press freedom. Raj was also there at the function, treating us with warmth and affection.

After our Korean President had left for Seoul, my wife and I stayed on for a few days and got to know the Thapars a bit

the country. The magazine had an unimpressive lay-out and poor advertising support. I felt worried about its future, but Romesh who already had a chequered career took it all in his stride.

At my request, Romesh wrote a short piece for one of our PFA publications, titled, "Sons and Scoundrels", obviously a variation on D H Lawrence's novel, "Sons and Lovers", about offsprings of prominent Indian leaders like Indra Gandhi, Jagjivan Ram and Morarji Desai. It was an angry piece, quite libellous, and we were unable to place it anywhere. I doubt if Romesh was angry with me; probably a bit disappointed. He was a forgiving type. He died a few months after his wife, Raj passed away.

Thapars took us to their luxurious home and gave us a good dinner. Raj played her role as a hostess with charm and friendliness, never giving me the impression that she was upset with anything we said and did. In 1962, a dinner visit by a Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger ended in "an unmitigated fiasco" since the American "failed to touch his Indian dinner", as mentioned in the diary of Raj Thapar. So, we did not perhaps make even a footnote in "All These Years". What a pity!

Thapars were certainly a family of free thinkers, never shy of calling a spade a spade and taking the consequences in their bold measured stride.

In the seventies, another Thapar was enjoying the intellectual limelight. She was Romilla, the sister of Romesh.

A historian by occupation, she had just written a book which offered a fresh evaluation of many of our historical figures, especially of Emperor Aurangzeb who was treated with sympathy and insight. Like the diary by her sister-in-law published some 15 years later, the book by Romilla Thapar created a stir in New Delhi's academic world.

Perhaps, it was a mild stir compared to the outcry that a section of the Calcutta press raised, probably three decades ago, when a friend of mine, Anitabha Chowdhury of Sylhet (not to be confused with the writer of the same name of PFA fame) wrote a piece arguing a case that the "Mahabharata" was, in effect, a Tibetan epic, and not a Hindu one. He explained his theory in great details during our long walks when we met in 1978 for the first time, of all places, in Tehran. Incidentally, we two conversed in our Sylheti dialect with great gusto. I am pleased to note that, thanks to Finance Minister Saffur Rahman and my dear friend, Suranjit Sengupta, the dialect is on the way of finding its rightful place at the Jatiya Sangsad.

THE observance of Rathajatra in Dhaka evoked in me memories of my childhood when we would stand at the roadside to watch the Rath pass by. I remembered the short poem by poet Tagore but sadly enough, could not recite it in full. Then, looking through my modest collection of pieces of decorations I had acquired in Bangkok more than two decades ago, I located what I think is a Thai Rath. Here is a photograph. I hope, I am not confusing it with some other religious, Hindu or Buddhist, symbol. Let my readers judge.



better. I enjoyed reading the back issues of "Seminar" which had an usual format, each issue being devoted to one single subject, with contributions received from top intellectuals in

## MY WORLD

S. M. ALI

transformation of the Pandit Nehru's shy unsure daughter into a "diabolic" woman who "wanted to kick all men around for the one failure of her marriage". Thapar describes a dinner party at Mrs Gandhi's home when a servant began pouring soup for a guest.

"Indira suddenly yelled from across the room: Don't you know I am the Prime Minister? You have to serve me first of all, before everyone else." Finally, it was a mildly quizzical look from Romesh, sitting across the table, that fi-

ly made Mrs Gandhi stop the tirade against the servant.

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## Welcome to Chittagong

by Tawfiq Aziz Khan

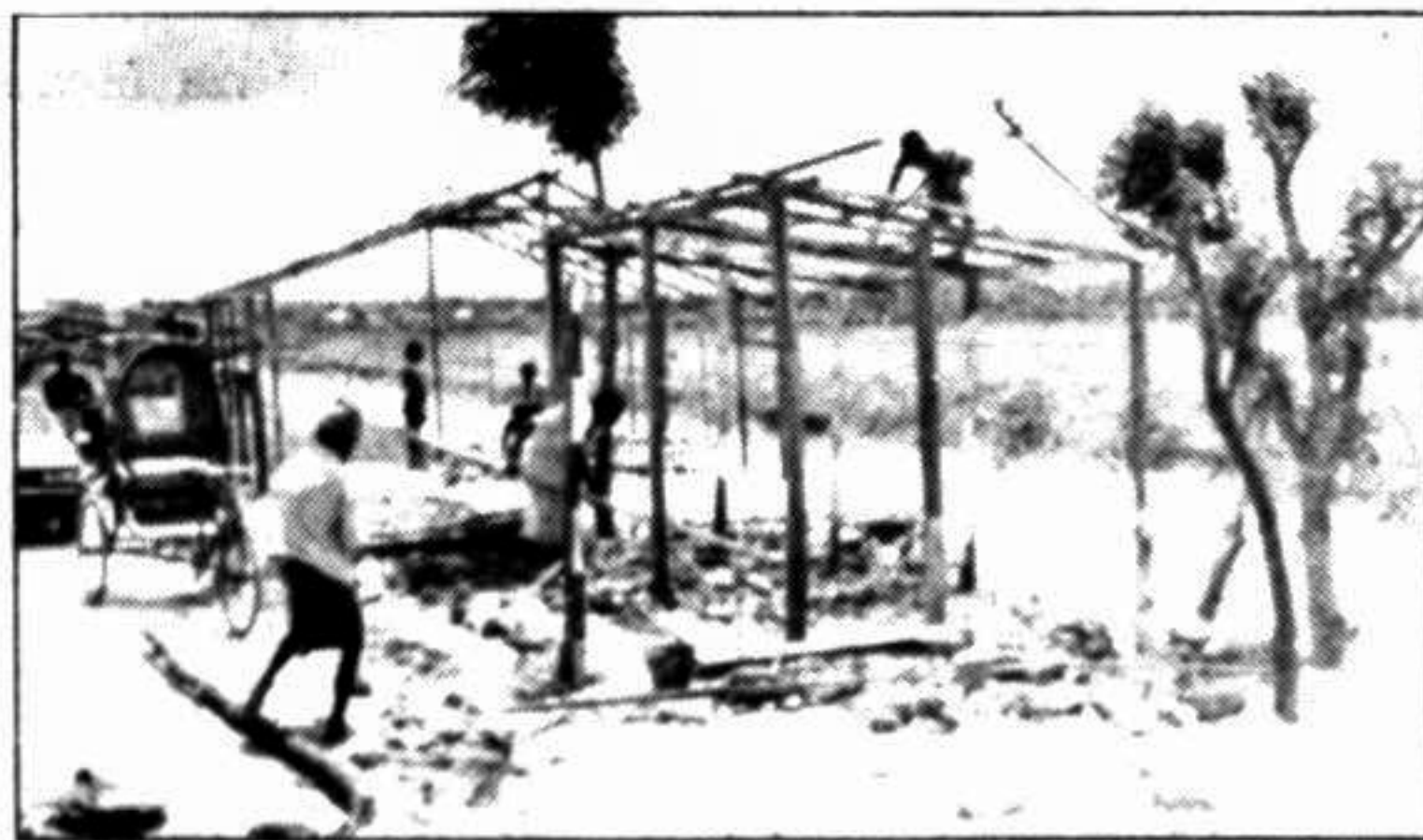
Riddled with insurmountable problems and yet to get over the shock of the century's worst cyclone and tidal surge, a badly battered Chittagong still beckons you — with open arms.

THE night train was running late. Around 7 in the morning it pulled up at an unscheduled stop. The rays of the morning sun peeped through the broken window sill ushering in the daybreak into the shuttered compartment. My co-travellers were all asleep. I could sleep no longer, got up and pushed up the window to ascertain our location. The place is called Barabkunda, once famous for the DDT factory. The sight was familiar with only one glaring exception. The tall coconut trees, that remind everyone about the characteristics of Chittagong, were pale and yellow. The branches bent on the eastern side as if in a 'Ruku', praying to God for their survival. The strong cyclonic wind swept them from the bay, battered them for hours together but they managed to survive.

Even after 75 days of the calamity they have not yet returned to their normal graceful stance. Remnants of the holocaust lay scattered, dotted with shining tin sheds proclaiming rebuilt homestead. I do not know how many lost their lives in these hamlets but those who have survived the doomsday are back to their normal chores of life silently suffering the loss of their beloved ones. People are resilient because there is no other way. Life is like that.

The powerful diesel locomotive, hauling 21 carriages heralded its onward journey with a loud whistle. The train lurched into motion. As it gathered momentum, more pitiable sights unfolded themselves. Large factory, huge godowns, small hearth and homes carried the scars of the devastations. In some cases the wounds were still bare and open.

Chittagong Railway station, to be exact, a terminal, had not changed in 40 years since I first stepped down on the platform one July morning in 1951. On the contrary, it has



Reconstruction is on. Photos by the author.

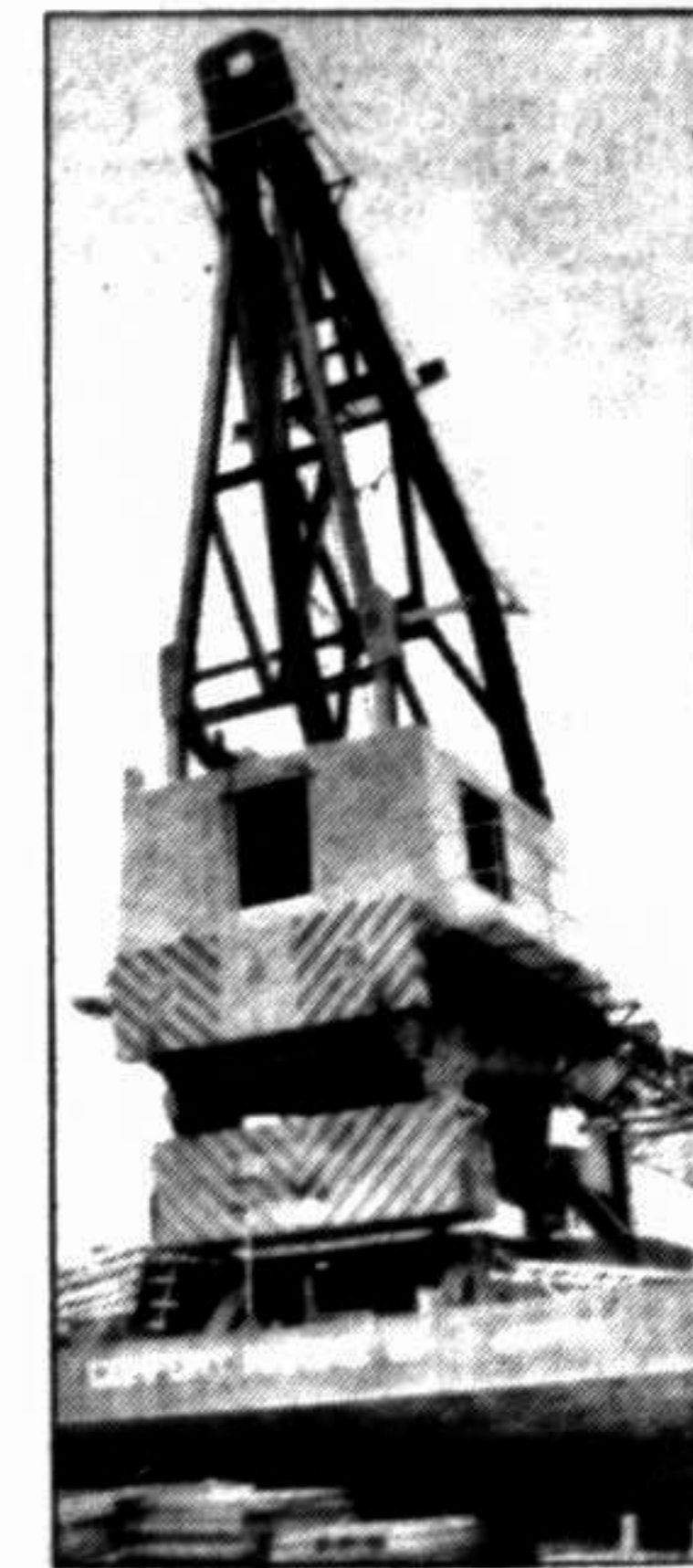
become more filthy and boisterous, crowded and noisy. The entire station gives an impression of poverty and sickness and a sudden feeling of gloom pervades one's mind.

The railway that once exuded a feeling of romance and adventure has lost its charm altogether. The steam engines with their bulging bodies and emission of smoke and soot were once, more charismatic than their modern counterparts. Or, may be man has become more mechanical than their creation — the machines.

The roads leading to the hotel at Agrabad were a pitiable sight. The carpeting has worn out giving birth to thousands of potholes rendering them unfit for any kind of vehicular traffic. The roads at Agrabad, the important commercial district of the country, are even worse. On my way to Patenga my guide and I found the highway in a deplorable condition. Many respectable citizens complained that many of the fairly good roads are tended regularly for no good reason but the ones that required immediate attention go unattended. Much has been written over the last few years but the situation has not improved. I am sure the Chittagong City Corporation is fully aware of this vexatious and will do its best to redress

the genuine grievances of the citizens. After all, the taxpayers have a right to the basic amenities.

It was a heartrending sight at Patenga, a pride of Chittagong. The entire area was in a shambles. Once a beautiful sea beach hunted by



A crane being salvaged at the sea port.

the locals and nonlocal tourists alike was forlorn. The long and mighty embankment has been crushed to smithereens. The small tea and gift shops that spotted the area and hummed with activities are no longer there.

Even the posh restaurant of the BPC has been razed to the grounds. The floating crane that had been swept ashore on the main road from the Karnaphuli still blocks the way of the travellers. Efforts are there to refloat it in the river where it should belong.

But life goes on. Slowly people are engaging themselves in reconstruction. Few small restaurants and gift shops are doing good business, others are rebuilding. People are gradually trying to stand on their feet. Children, oblivious of the urgency of the time and gravity of the situation engaged themselves in revelry in the sea during high tide, because 'their's was the undisturbed soul which was perfect eloquence', as Francis Bacon would like to put it.

On the way to Patenga we crossed a tent city. No, it was not the safe haven for the Kurdish refugees. The white tents sheltered the devastated and the homeless. Perched on a patch of land by the road the tents, from a distance, reminded me of the camps of armies of the kings before a war as we have read in history.

But there was a slight difference. The tents of the kings housed the well-fed, healthy and armed warriors but here in these tents huddled together the hapless, defenceless, undernourished but brave warriors of the soil whose whole life is spent on the futile exercise of meeting two ends together.

But all is not so bleak and colourless. The giant trees around the Railway headquarters which were rendered naked by the gusty winds are once again covered with green foliage making their sight pleasant to the human eyes reminding us that nature can be as bountiful as it can be devastating, as merciful as can be cruel.

Despite all these odds working against them more often than naught, the people of Chittagong are warm, hospitable and perceptive. Proud of their heritage they extend their open arms to you: come to Chittagong—welcome to Chittagong.

Tawfiq Aziz Khan is the Managing Editor of The Daily Star.

PHI Phi Island, Thailand — in a village of rundown corrugated metal shacks thrust between two plush international resorts, a tribe of Moken (sea gypsies) struggles to survive in this popular tourist destination in southern Thailand.

The Moken are a group of boat-dwelling tribes which originally came from the Malay Peninsula and make a living hunting crabs, shells and bird's nests for Chinese merchants.

But with the Thai tourism boom on this quiet island in the Andaman Sea, the Moken have found themselves jobs as dishwashers and tour boat captains for Thai resort owners.

The gypsies say they prefer this to their previous seaborne existence, but anthropologists claim the gypsies are losing touch with many of the valuable traditions that bind them to the sea and their communities.

The Moken were the original inhabitants of the sandy white beaches of these islands and have been known to send a barrage of spears flying toward any unknown vessel that sailed

## Sea Gypsies No More

Thailand's boat-dwelling sea gypsies have been beached by the tourism boom. They are losing touch with traditions that bind them to the sea and their communities. Philip Smucker of IPS reports.

too near their shore.

There are at least 3,000 Moken sea gypsies now living in the islands that dot the Andaman Sea between Thailand and Burma.

With no known written culture, they do have a rich oral tradition. Moken have long tales of daring and courage at sea told from one generation to another.

They live on their boats and comb the depths of the sea for the products that they barter for food. Moken culture shuns the idea of accumulating wealth.

ships to sell their products.

Ironically, restrictive environmental laws meant to protect the coral reefs have changed the lifestyle of the Moken forcing them to work in the tourist industry, or perish.

"There is no more romance, but life is a little better," says Sawan Talet-luk (literally meaning 'Sawan of the Deep') of the Chaolya tribe who now works as a tour boat captain in one of the island resorts.

Sawan once dove at depths of over 70 metres to retrieve precious shells and other sea products that the Moken barter for rice and other minor forms of payment.

Three times before the age of 25, Sawan was stricken with the 'bends', a painful condition suffered by divers if they surface too quickly.

"I nearly died thrice and many other gypsies have died doing the same," said Sawan.

Before the gypsies began working the spectacular coral reefs in Thailand's southern coast exclusively for Chinese merchants, they fished for their own food.

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,  
In a letter few weeks ago you asked a woman not to be upset by the fact that her husband forgets her birthdays. Let me tell you that for a person who is used to having her birthdays celebrated this is very hard to accept. Remembering a loved one on special days has a lot of meaning and people should make an effort to remember it. It has been difficult for me to live with my husband's carelessness in this regard and I have never learnt to accept it.  
Sayeeda, Gulshan, Dhaka.

Dear Sayeeda,  
I too realize the significance of special days but one should not make it into such an issue that it causes tension and unhappiness for the whole family. Importance of birthdays and anniversaries depend on the kind of family a person comes from. Forgetting these dates does not necessarily mean he does not care. I ask you, as I did the other correspondent, to accept this reality and build on the other wonderful qualities your husband must be having.  
Zeenat, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,  
I have been married for 5 years and we still don't have a baby. This is causing lots of tension between us. My in-laws are also giving me a lot of problems. I have consulted many doctors but they cannot identify any problem. I am very unhappy and have become unsocial because most of my friends have babies and talk about their kids. What should I do, please advise.  
Zeenat, Dhaka.

Dear Zeenat,  
There are certain things beyond our control and we have to accept it. Just to make sure, have your husband take a complete physical examination. When you have completed all possible investigations then try to put it behind you and begin to appreciate the things that you are blessed with. Though having a baby is a wonderful experience it is not the only thing from which one can derive happiness. Rediscover the beauty of your relationship with your husband, friends, relatives etc. If you have a career, pursue it with vigour and dynamism. Add more dimensions to your life, take your mind off having a baby and who knows may be someday.....  
Dear Mita,  
Please advise me on a problem that my son is having. He is 12 and goes to a English Medium school. Three weeks ago he had a fight with a boy in the class and broke the other child's nose. It was an accident for which we are very sorry and have

punished our son. The school would have expelled him but for our request. Now our boy refuses to go to school and says everybody hates him and wants to change school. What can I do? You know how difficult it is to get admission in a new school. How can I make him return to school? Thanks,  
Rita, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Dear Rita,  
Your son is going through a difficult time due to the recent experience and also because he is 12. Changes are going on, both physical and psychological, which have a profound impact on how he relates and reacts to people. He needs a lot of encouragement and support from the family. Use gentle persuasion and remind him that life will not be easier in a new school. Talk to teachers and to the parents of the boy he fought with. He is feeling guilty and they might help him get out of it.

Dear Mita,  
My sister got a divorce last year after five years of unhappy marriage. She has a four year old daughter. Recently she has met a man who is interested in marrying her. My sister likes him but she is afraid that it might be bad for her daughter. What should she do? Are children unhappy when their mothers re-marry?  
Rahat, Kalabagan, Dhaka.

Dear Rahat,  
Children of previous marriage are not necessarily unhappy in a second marriage. It all depends on your sister and her future husband. The child might resent it in the beginning but if given love and security, will become attached to the new father. The belief that only natural parents can provide a secure and loving home for a child is a myth. It is said that loving adults are preferable to warring parents. Advise your sister to be very sure of her feelings before making a decision. Second marriages usually are successful.

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.



Tents erected by the US Task Force house the homeless.