

Historic March

March 20, 1971

Mujahidul Islam Selim Recalls Days of High Spirit

'We Knew What Had to be Done'

By Sabir Mustafa

THE decision by General Yahya Khan, Pakistan's military dictator, to postpone the opening session of the newly-elected National Assembly on March 1, 1971, took many by surprise. But those keeping a close watch on the developments unfolding in the political arena were apprehending just such a move on the part of the country's military rulers.

"In February 1971 we understood that a political crisis was about to precipitate fast, and the question of independence could come to the fore of the agenda", Mujahidul Islam Selim, a member of the central committee of the Bangladesh Communist Party, told the Daily Star.

Selim, as the general secretary of the then East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU) at the time, came to the forefront of the struggle that followed.

"We called a special meeting of the central committee of EPSU to amend the manifesto of the party. In our declaration, we categorically demanded the right to self-determination, including the right to secede", Selim recalled, adding that, as far as he knew, that was the first time that independence had been demanded in a documented form.

In the evening of Feb. 21, EPSU held a meeting at the central Shaheed Minar, where the declaration of the central committee was reiterated.

The meeting declared that if Yahya did not accept the verdict of the people and ensure advancement of democracy in greater Pakistan by handing over power to the majority party, then EPSU would ensure the advancement of democracy in East Pakistan by declaring it independent.

Yahya's betrayal on March 1, therefore, did not catch EPSU off-guard, Selim said.

"We were prepared politically for our reaction to Yahya's move. We had no hesitation", he said, "we had the vision

that things would then move towards a struggle for independence".

At the time, EPSU was nearly as strong as the Chhatra League among the student community, particularly in Dhaka University. The party's cadres, well-known in those days for their discipline and dedication, brought out processions and began to mobilise the public.

"We were also aware that the movement was most likely to turn into an armed struggle. So preparation for guerrilla warfare became the major, concrete part of our programme in March, 1971", Selim recalled.

Following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech of March 7, The Students Union started organising daily meetings at the Shaheed Minar to read out the next day's programme and give instructions for the public.

There were some fears that Sheikh Mujib might have to compromise on the stance he took in the historic speech but, Selim said, EPSU never took those fears seriously.

"Things were being decided by the people", he said.

The twin tasks being carried out by EPSU cadres then involved mobilising the public, wherever it had any influence, in favour of the non-cooperation movement launched by Mujib on the one hand, and preparing the ground for the launching of the armed struggle on the other.

"We started preparing psychologically and politically for the armed struggle", Selim, who won a stunning victory in the 1972 election for the post of Vice President of Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU), said.

From March 10 onwards, EPSU began to raise special volunteer brigades from among its cadres. Twenty such brigades were organised, which drilled and paraded on the



Mujahidul Islam Selim

university ground every morning.

The brigades' arms were few, but they managed to "liberate" many dummy .303 rifles from the University Officers Training Corps (UOTC) office on the campus, and used them to train and acclimatise themselves with the idea of handling weapons.

Not only dummies, there were real weapons training too. Small groups of EPSU cadres began to make daily trips to the banks of the Sitalakhya near Demra to train with small arms such as rifles and pistols using live ammunition.

There were no professional instructors or any ex-military person to train them. Those who knew how to handle small arms like hunting guns, members of the shooting clubs etc. acted as the trainers.

"But our spirit was high, and there was a great deal of romanticism attached to what we were doing", Selim remembered fondly.

The brigades brought out a big parade, with young men and women volunteers carrying dummy rifles, and marched through the streets of Dhaka later in March, send-

ing a sense of elation running through the people watching.

Meanwhile, the armed groups began experimenting with manufacture of explosives. A special detachment was entrusted with this task, Selim said.

"One of the members of that team, Nizamuddin Azad, son of Kamruddin Ahmed, later died in battle in Comilla in November", Selim said.

Throughout this period, the Communist Party, which worked from underground at the time, was heavily involved, being the guiding force behind EPSU. Selim remembered the late Comrade Mohammad Farhad as an inspiration during those days of struggle.

The Students Union drew up plans to resist the movement of the army from the Cantonment by selecting strategic points in the city for erection of barricades and obstacles. Rudimentary techniques of anti-tank warfare were discussed, such as digging of trenches and the most effective use of Molotov Cocktails.

"Some of the plans we had seem quite absurd now, like the idea of pouring boiling water or powdered chilly on troops from roof-tops", Selim recalled with a slight grin, "but it was all part of the spirit and romance of the movement".

By the afternoon of March 25, the EPSU leadership, like many others, realised that something serious was going to happen. In order to be ready for reaction, the party decided that the regular evening meeting at the Shaheed Minar scheduled for the next day had to be brought forward to the morning.

When news of troop movement in the streets came through, Selim contacted Farhad, and suggested that their plan to resist the army in the street be put into effect. Farhad agreed.

A meeting then took place

in the Hattirpool house, with members of EPSU, Chhatra League and others including artist Quamrul Hassan being present.

Teams of young men were sent out to targeted city points and to collect kerosene and petrol to make Molotov Cocktails. But it wasn't going to be that easy, as they found out.

"By the time we started making our moves, we realised that it was really like to confront a well-armed regular army", Selim said. "Our preparations were more of a romantic nature, but it had its own values, particularly in mobilising public opinion".

The preparations also made the students and public psychologically hardened for the long struggle ahead. From then on, it was all about making contacts and waiting for instructions.

The failure to resist the army effectively did not dishearten the cadres, Mujahidul Islam Selim said.

"We never despaired, we knew what had to be done".

Media Flashback

Compiled by Ekram Kabir, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Dipak Kumar Karmakar

March 23 Holiday Saboteurs Warned

SHAIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN on Saturday appealed to the people to carry forward their movement in a peaceful and disciplined manner.

In a statement issued in Dhaka he said that the programme of action announced on March 14 would continue subject to all directives and clarifications already issued and may be issued from time to time. March 23 shall be observed as a holiday throughout Bangladesh.

Sheikh Mujib said, "The people's movement has mobilised every man, women and

child in every village and in every town and city behind the demands of Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh have won the hearts and minds of freedom loving people all over the world. Bangladesh presents to the world the inspiring example of a determined and united people marching forward resolutely towards their goal.

"Congratulate people in all walks of life — the peasants in the fields, the workers in the factories and those in banks, in offices and the ports and Government service — who have worked tirelessly to sustain the economy within the framework of our directives. The students', workers' and office employees organisations



are to be specially congratulated and for their vigilance they have exercised in enforcing these directives. Our people have proved that they can run their own affairs in an exemplary manner."

Mujib added, "The people are determined to make every sacrifice in order to live as the free citizens of a free country. Our movement must, therefore, continue till the goal of emancipation is realised — I warn the saboteurs against mischievous provocations. Our people must observe rigorous discipline in every sphere of economic activity so that the essential needs of the people can continue to be met."

"The programme of action announced on the 14th March, 1971 shall continue, subject to all directives and clarifications which have been issued and which may be issued from time to time 23rd March shall be observed as a holiday throughout Bangladesh." — *Pakistan Observer*, March 21, 1971.

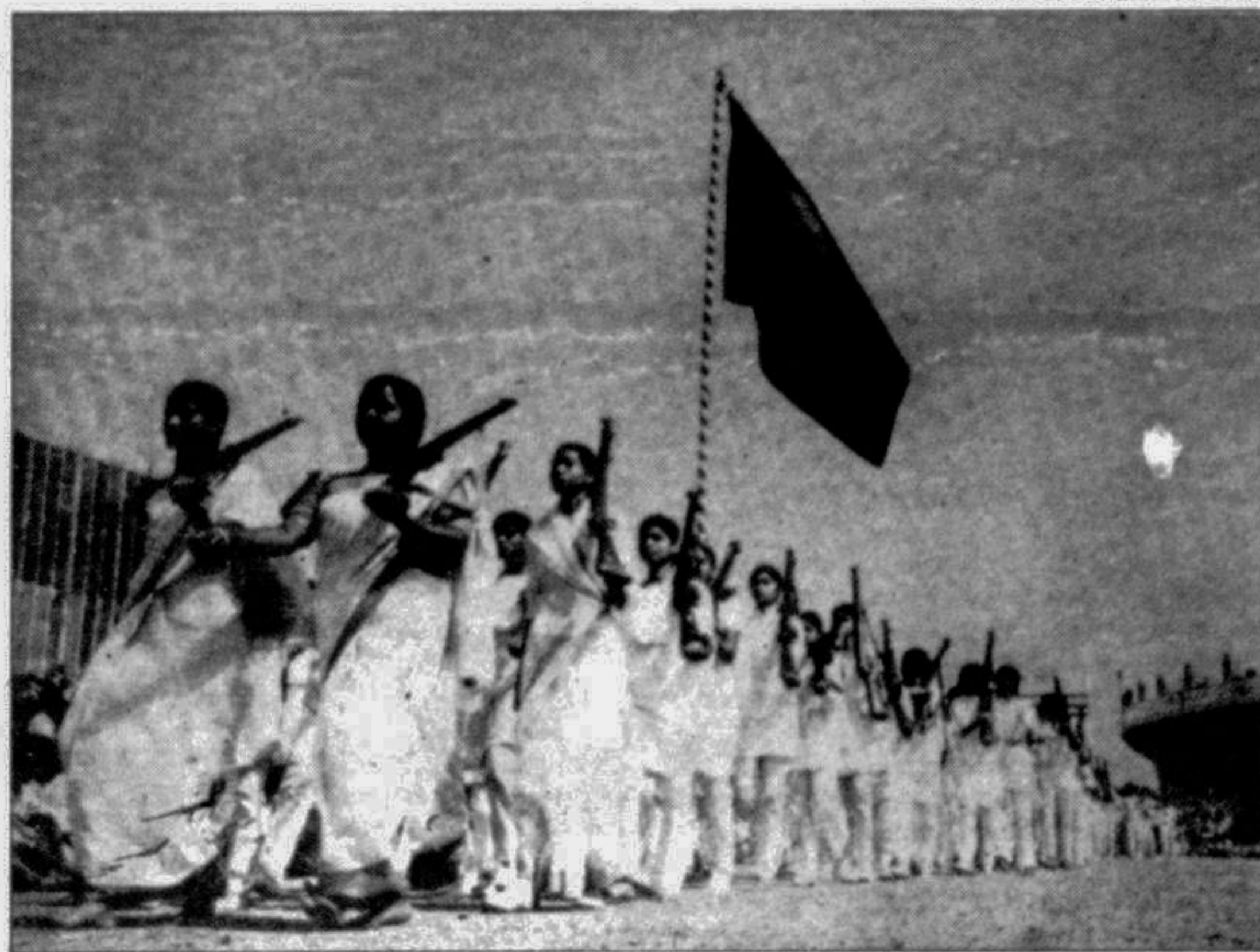
Rangpur

RANGPUR, March 20 : Mr. Matlur Rahman MNA-elect and President Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry said here recently that the people of Bangladesh were determined to fight to the last and to make any sacrifice to achieve their goal of emancipation and realise their right to live as a free citizen of a free country, reports PPI.

He was addressing a public meeting organised by the district Awami League at the Public Library Maidan here to pay tributes to the martyrs of the current movement. Messrs Azizur Rahman and others spoke.

Mr Rahman called upon the students and political parties to stand against the disruptive elements who, he said, were out to foil the gains achieved by the people by their supreme sacrifice.

— *The Pakistan Observer* March 21, 1971



Flying the Bangladesh flag and carrying dummy rifles, Volunteer Brigades of the EPSU parading past Dhaka Stadium.

Magazine

Special Oscar for Satyajit Ray

Oscar, the most coveted award in the world filmdom, has been conferred on Satyajit Ray, one of the most celebrated personalities in the realm, when he is in hospital with chest ailments. We wish the septuagenarian genius early recovery and more productive years.

ONE would have thought that Satyajit Ray, now in his 70th year, would not react to the news of yet another award or honour conferred on him. Over the past three decades and more, Ray has received too many honours, at home and abroad. Yet this last one, an honorary Oscar from Hollywood, apart from being the most unexpected so far, must have brought a different kind of joy to the master. Hollywood, to be sure, has never gone so far out of its way to honour any other film personality entirely unconnected with it, and that too for the corpus of Ray's lifetime of works. The director himself admits that as a film maker he could think of no greater recognition.

The unexpected thing about the award is that most of Ray's films have not yet been screened in the US and that no more than 25 per cent of American filmgoers have viewed his films in 16mm prints shown on campuses. The Oscar, therefore, has come not only as a tribute to Ray, but has also raised the stature of Indian cinema in the eyes of entire Hollywood.

The previous recipients of the honorary Oscar award are Greta Garbo (1955), Cary Grant (1969), Charlie Chaplin (1972), James Stewart (1984), Akira Kurosawa (1989) and Sophia Loren (1991). A mixed fare evidently, but with an obvious American bias. The only Asian to receive the honour before Ray was Kurosawa, who, however, has had close links with Hollywood. Ray thus happens to be the first Oscar recipient who has had nothing to do with Hollywood, except his innumerable negotiations in the sixties, with someone in Hollywood for making "The Alien" as a joint venture.

For Ray himself, the honour

comes significantly from the land of fantasies of his early youth. He has often mentioned in his writings and speeches that it was Hollywood movies of the time that provided inspiration during his formative

by Samir Dasgupta

years. His heroes included directors like Billy Wilder, John Ford, Frank Capra and William Wyler — directors on whom Ray waxes eloquently in



his books on films.

Even if Ray's works have not been shown around the US to the extent they deserved to be so done, American admiration for the Indian director has been steadily on the rise. Nearly a couple of months ago, about 70 dignitaries of the film world who made a representation to the Oscar Committee, recommended that the honorary Oscar go this time to the septuagenarian Satyajit Ray. The signatories included Kurosawa, Francis Ford Coppola,

Spielberg, Lucas, Paul Newman and Ismail Merchant. It is also to be noted that Hollywood has had one of the most enduring influences on Ray's mind and style. Alfred Hitchcock has been a favourite of Ray, as has been Fred Astaire, the dancing actor. Not that Ray has expressed unqualified admiration for Hollywood films, but does admit that he has learnt much from American cinema. It can certainly be said that the Oscar comes from the very institution which played a vital

role in the formative years of Ray's career.

The formidable list of honours received by Ray over the years includes the Golden Lion, the Golden Bear, other prestigious awards associated with film festivals held in Cannes, Venice and Berlin since the fifties, an honorary D Litt from Oxford University, the Magsaysay Award, Padma Bibhusan, a D Litt from the Royal College of Arts, the Star of Yugoslavia, Soviet Land Nehru Award, and the highest

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inside this complex are the Kalachakra temple built by Jigme Namgyal, and the Guru Padmasambhava temple. There are four large prayer wheels at the entrance to the complex.

The Kurjey Lhakhang, perhaps one of the largest temple complexes in Bhutan, is extremely sacred. There are three large temple buildings, and three chortens, all ringed like a pearl string by a wall of over a hundred small stone chortens.

The first temple is built around the rock on which Guru Padmasambhava is believed to have meditated. Constructed in the 17th century by a Tongsa Penlop, the temple has a carving of the Guru and statues of the Past, Present and Future Buddhas. The second, a cave temple, is very sacred as it is believed that the Guru left his body imprint on one of the rocks in the cave. This temple was built in the early 1900's by the first King of Bhutan when he was still the Tongsa Penlop. A huge statue of Padmasambhava bars the entrance to the cave. There are one thousand statues of the Guru and statues of other tantric Buddhist deities inside the temple. The third and the newest temple, started in 1983 on commission from the Queen Mother, and consecrated last year, has a two floors high statues of Yeshe Gampo, the Protective deity of Bhutan. There are beautiful wall-paintings with characters from Buddhism and a statue of the Present Buddha on the ground floor. All the previous Kings of Bhutan have been cremated inside the Kurjey Lhakhang

French award — Commander of the Legion of Honour — which French President Francois Mitterand personally conferred on Ray in Calcutta. In a beautiful citation read out by Mitterand, Ray was described as a true successor of the great Ribindranath.

It would not be wrong to conclude that although many Americans have not had the opportunity to see Ray's films, the admiration he has gradually evoked in the West is such that the honorary Oscar comes to the Indian director in good time and as a matter of course. Indians, who looked upon themselves as underdogs in the film world, feel Indian cinema now ranks high along with Satyajit Ray's recently won Oscar.

Central Bhutan

complex, and a chorten dedicated to them stand at one side, with a newer chorten built by the Queen Mother in memory of her late husband.

The Konchogsum Lhakhang, built in the 8th century, on the other side of the river, has a large antique broken bell, believed to be Tibetan. In the courtyard, under a tree is a huge rock supposedly placed by the saint Pema Lingpa, a reincarnation of Guru Padmasambhava and a tertop ("discoverer of hidden treasures"). Pema Lingpa is also credited with constructing the Tamshing

Lhakhang in early 16th century. It has wall paintings dating from the year the temple was completed, perhaps the only ones of that time still intact. There is a statue of the Present Buddha whose face is said to have been sculptured by Pema Lingpa himself. Further east, along unpaved roads through the mountains we came through a narrow gorge to Member Tsho — "the flaming lake". It is said that Pema Lingpa had discovered the hidden religious treasures by plunging into the river at this point with a lighted lamp in his hand. When he came out, the lamp

was still burning, hence the name.

Along the way, we paid visits to some of the development and industrial projects in Bumthang. These projects have brought a certain degree of prosperity to the area. And we ended our trip to Bumthang with a visit to its dzong, Jakar, "the dzong of the white bird", is the seat of the district administration, but does not house any monastic community. Built in the late 17th century on a ridge overlooking the Chockhor Valley, the Jakar dzong is perhaps one of the largest in Bhutan. It is elongated in shape, quite an

unique feature in itself, and has a tall imposing central tower. The Ta Dzong, right next to the dzong, is in ruins.

Bhutan, the land of the Thundre-Drageon, is a treasure-house of precious Buddhist artifacts and time-honoured traditions. Coupled with the God-given natural beauty of the country, this really makes Bhutan a joy to visit — the Last Shangri-La. How long the country can defy the encroachment by mechanical development and keep itself as the last paradise on earth, only time will tell.

The writer is the wife of Syed Muazzem Ali, the Bangladesh Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bhutan.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I love a girl. She is 12 and studies in class VII. She and her family are our tenants. I will sit for my HSC examination this year. I have been in love with her for two years and have told her so when she was in class V. But she gave me no answer as yet. Her family may be transferred from here to Dhaka. What will I do then? I love her and cannot forget her.

A Hannan, Chittagong.

Dear Hannan,

You might not like my answer, but I have to tell you that the girl you love is merely a child who should not be disturbed with such serious an issue as love. In fact you too are a bit young for falling in love. This is the time for her to be light hearted and free from any complications. If you are so much in love with her then please wait for 5 to 6 years, when she is older and matured enough to give you a response.

Dear Mita,

After 10 yrs of a very happy married life my husband died suddenly of heart attack, leaving me and our two small children alone and helpless. He provided well for us and so we lived comfortably. This happened five years ago and the children are now 12 and 10. One year ago a man came into my life, he wants to marry me and look after us. I have tried to resist it for a long time specially because of the children, in-laws, relatives and friends. But recently I have started to weaken, the burden of looking after the family is too much and the loneliness is also sometimes unbearable. What should I do? I am very confused, please advise.

Anonymous, Chittagong

Dear Anonymous,

This is a difficult decision but one which only you can take. In our culture, widows are expected to suffer in silence, to show respect and loyalty to her husband. Fortunately, attitudes are changing and this oppression on women will go, leaving them to make a choice and lead a normal life after widowhood. If you have known this man for a year and he still

wants to marry you then my advice is to go ahead. Talk to the children about it. Their wish and opinion is important; ignore everyone else's criticism and gossip.

Dear Mita,

My daughter is more than one year old but is still on breast milk. She does not like the bottle at all and cries when I try to give it. What can be done, please advise.

Sultana, Dhaka.

Dear Sultana,

The process of transition from breast to bottle is called "weaning". Some babies do it very easily and others take longer. Please don't get alarmed, it will happen eventually. If your nervousness and impatience get transmitted to the baby it will further delay the process. How about solid food? Since, she is one plus, you can easily supplement her milk requirement with food such as eggs, meat and fish. Try to give juice or other drinks in the feeding bottle so that she gets used to the rubber nipples. Increase amount of powder milk very slowly and decrease the amount of breast milk.

Dear Mita,

My friend was in love with a girl who was also in love with him. Last year she went off for a visit to the United States. After returning she has changed completely. She does not seem interested in my friend any longer. What will he do now, he is madly in love with her?

Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Anonymous,

However painful it might be, one has to face reality. A person has a right to change her/his mind. When young people fall in love at this age, it is not always forever and neither your friend nor the girl are old or matured enough to make a lifetime commitment. Maybe she is not ready for it yet and should not be blamed. Please ask your friend to understand this is not the end of everything, and there is plenty of time ahead.