

## From Some New Theories about the L A Carnage to Happy Memories about My Buddhist Friends in Bangkok

**M**ORE than two decades ago, an American newspaper editor we met during a media seminar in Cairo — in fact, we shared a suite in a downtown hotel — talked to me a lot about what he called the "hidden Third World" in the United States, in which a growing number, millions and millions, of disadvantaged people faced problems common in most developing countries. As he put it, these people were fighting a losing battle against poor housing conditions, lack of educational facilities, inadequate social services and racial-cum-gender inequalities. And he predicted, the situation was getting worse.

He was a white American, editor of a now-defunct daily of New York. So, we assumed, he did not suffer from what is often described, sometimes unfairly, as the racial hang-up of a black. But he was a member of the controversial Unification Church of Rev. Sun Moon, with some set religious and social ideas. Yet, many of us took his views seriously.

As time goes on, these views make more sense, especially against the backdrop of what just happened in Los Angeles.

Now, we learn from the US media that a book, titled, "The Third-Worldization of America" is being written by a noted expert, Edward N. Luttwak of

Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. Let us hope that book will come out soon and become a recommended reading for a

cross-section of our people, including those who want to get away from the Third World "to do anything in the United States."

Of course, until the book is out, we would not know if it refers to the so-called "invasion" of the United States by immigrants from the Third World or to the deterioration in the quality of life in many US cities to the level of a developing country. Maybe Luttwak will establish a linkage between the two and suggest that one leads to the other.

**A**FTER every upheaval, like the recent one in Los Angeles, US pundits start wondering what had gone wrong with the system and then offer their explanations, often by reviving some old theories.

At least two leading western papers, the *New York Times* and the *London Times*, have used commentaries by Edward Luttwak and Peter Stothard respectively, focussing on the role of what both writers call the "underclass" during the carnage in the strife-torn city.

The underclass? So, the term used occasionally in serious economic journals in the past two decades has now entered the language of daily journalism. But it still remains a somewhat intriguing expression.

To paraphrase an explanation by Luttwak, the underclass is that section of unskilled workers who do such traditional jobs as labourers, janitors, maids, waiters, gardeners and so on. These low-wage jobs, despite small prospects of advancement, offer some kind of a sustaining economic power to the underclass.

Both the commentators argue, in different languages, that over the years the underclass — mostly black but many whites — have been pushed out of their traditional low-paid jobs by more educated workers and immigrants. Here, it is worth quoting Luttwak, "Squeezed between the two, the underclass has been losing its few breadwinners, and it is not the riots that are surprising but rather the semblance of

tranquility in most places, most of the time."

Thus, the members of the underclass in Los Angeles posed what the *Times* of London said in the headline of its analysis, "The challenge of the looters", while *The New York Times* grimly predicted, "No End to the Downward Squeeze."

Mind you, this can also happen here or in any developing country.

Our underclass, unskilled workers doing low-paid jobs as messengers, janitors and maids, will soon face competition from young matriculates and people with some college education. Then, what will the people who are squeezed out of their traditional occupations do for a living? Make your guess.

**L**ET'S turn to something brighter, something more cheerful. The celebration of Buddha Purnima here last week brought to my mind many happy memories of my association and, in some cases, friendship with Buddhist colleagues and acquaintances in Bangkok in the late sixties.

I used to pass by a couple of 'wats' (the English translation would be temples, but a wat means a great deal more than just a place of worship) on my way from my residence to my office in the morning. If there was something to spare, I would get off the car, take a walk through the courtyard and

enjoy a few minutes of total serenity whose impact would often last for hours. There were always some young Buddhist students from Chittagong studying in Bangkok under Thai scholarships and staying in one of these wats. For me, it was both a duty and a pleasure to visit them from time to time to enquire after their well-being.

They always seemed rather lonely and homesick. Just the company of another Bengalee made them feel better. So they said.

It was quite an occasion for us when one of these novices was ordained as a monk. Under the leadership of the then Pakistani Ambassador to Thailand, the late Prabhat Mukul Chowdhury — a superb human being — who hailed from Chittagong and died of heart attack during his tenure in Bangkok, many of us went to the ceremony, with gifts for the young monk, and spent an hour or so in a solemn atmosphere.

It was a much less solemn atmosphere — in fact, it was rather a jovial one — when our newspaper invited a group of senior Thai monks to attend the installation of our newly-bought Goss Web press and, believe it or not, to bless the printing plant. With folded hands, all of us, including our British Managing Director, German production engineer and several western colleagues, joined the prayer, first listening to the chanting and then watching the head monk put some white dots on each of the four units of the plant.

The press performed well, without giving us the slightest trouble. The production engineer attributed this success to the German technical know-how, the British Managing Director to this own meticulous supervision of everything that went on in the office, my sceptical western colleagues to sheer good luck and myself to the hour-long Buddhist prayer and to the dots in white paint which were still there when I left that newspaper and Bangkok for Singapore a few years later.

**I**N some ways, "Panditer Paglami" has much in common with "Laughing Together", a collection of stories, translated into English from various Asian languages, including Bangla, mainly for children, published some years ago by the Tokyo-based Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO.

Like "Laughing Together", the book under review will bring delight not only to children but also to adults.

While there are some individuals who have a natural curiosity for all things mathematical and scientific, there are also a few of us who develop hives at the very mention of terms such as "law of relativity" or "quantum physics". If you are in the unfortunate latter group, chances are that at least one of your offsprings will have your "science phobic" gene. But this needn't be the case with the ingenuity of writers like Salma Chowdhury. Her book "Panditer Paglami" is the perfect way to 'trick' youngsters into reading all about scientific concepts. Written in the simplest Bangla with plenty of wit and fantasy, this book is sure to delight as it intrigues.

The book is divided into six stories each dealing with some sort of scientific phenomenon. The first one, for example projects Archimedes' principle of the buoyancy. Vivid descriptions of characters and events make up for what the illustrations lack. The description of Archimedes running stark naked to the king's court yelling "Eureka! Eureka!" is enough to keep the young reader in splits while creating an interest in physics.

In "Kettil Karshaji" the author brings in the progress of man although Darwinism is not mentioned. She traces back the invention of the wheel that marks the beginning of the machine age; to changing "eating habits of cavemen. While this may seem a trifle far-fetched, the idea of adaptation and interdependence certainly comes through. The invention of metal pipes and cylinders is described in funny little

**Continued from Page 9** are some Americans who back IRA activists to create violence in Belfast, as outside assistance had powered into the hands of Shantibahini to kill innocent people here. I for myself want to see a definite solution to the crisis in Northern Ireland, even if by united the two parts of Ireland together.

To achieve a peaceful settlement on the issue the democratic views of the people of Northern Ireland must of course be taken into consideration by the British government.

**DS:** As a human rights activists do you have a strong feeling against the growth of armaments in the modern world? You know there is this new theory that, let us reduce the areas of consumption and cut short defence expenditure and use it in development works. How do you feel about it?

**LDE:** I totally agree with you and I think it imposes heavy responsibility on those who supply arms and those who buy arms. The problems take shape from both the two sides.

The relatively developed western countries including China produce huge arms inspired by many of the less developed countries who are eager to buy them. Some governments are spending massive proportion of their budget on defence and not on education and health and human betterment, but upon maintaining huge armies which protect dictatorship and often protect people who are making big money out of business. There is a too closer a link between arms trade and protection of business interest.

I believe in a world where we want to see at the end of the Cold War, a greater measure of peace, everyone should be alert that we do not use such high proportion of our resources for armaments. The decade has not really created any opportunity where we can drastically reduce the expenditure and production of arms.

Another focus is that the difference or gap between the rich and the poor has only multiplied in the past few years and it is still increasing at an alarming rate. The least developed countries are only repaying debts and it seems like their money is pouring into the hands of the developed donors more than they receive from them. It is monstrous and I think that the powerful countries of the world should face up to this fact and come to the aid of the lesser developed countries. I put forward this case at the conference in Rio. Of course, I do not have any considerable power as I only represent a few non-governmental organisations like World Federation of United Nations Association and the British United Nations Association. So I firmly agree with you and think that the poorer or less developed countries of the world should not be lured to purchase arms at

## Fun with Science : Fables for Children



**PANDITER PAGLAMI:** A collection of juvenile stories in Bangla by Salma Chowdhury. Published by the Bangla Academy, Dhaka. Price: Taka 25.

Reviewed by Aasha Mehreen Amin

With Thicke Prithivi M. Chowdhury describes how the world was born as a result of collisions and reactions between heavenly bodies comparing it to boiling milk. Questions like how were the days of the week formed and how to prove the existence of air are answered with amusing examples and easy experiments.

The last story deals with genetics and DNA. It is the difference in genes, she explains, that makes some people prefer sweet food while others go for salty things.

With a natural talent for story telling the author takes the reader all around the world from Italy to China introducing names such as Da Vinci, Raphael and Attover. The book cleverly supplies just enough information to create interest while taking care not to be too heavy in facts.

## BOOKS

## A Stunning New Look at Bangladesh

by S. Bari

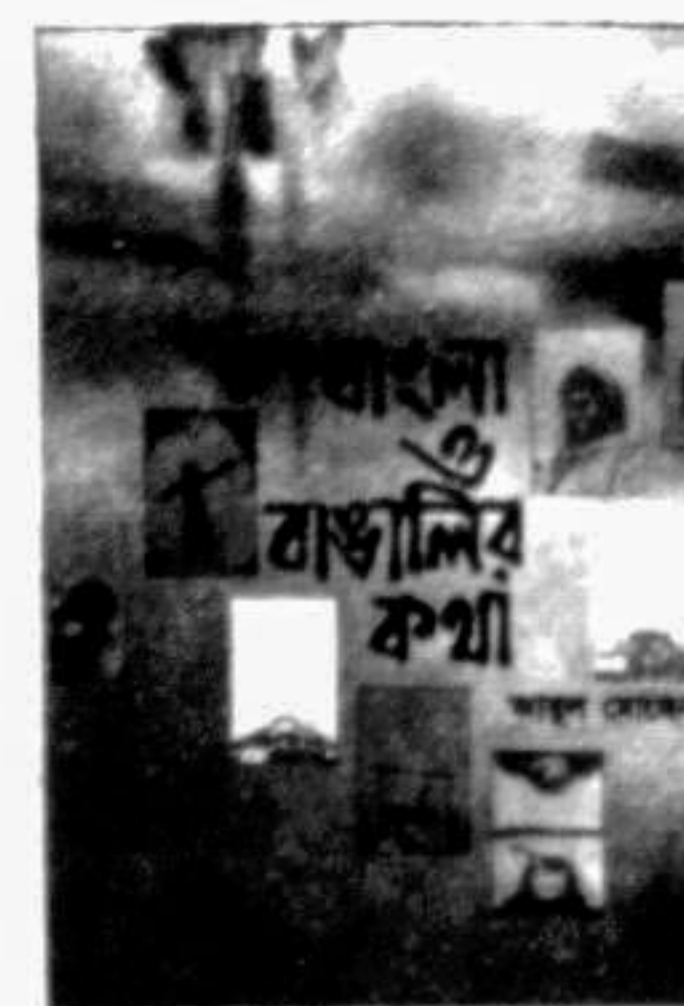
**T**OURIST shops in Dhaka and the bookshelves of Bengalis abroad have or some years years been filled with large glossy "Meet Bangladesh" — type books. Smiling village belles and nakhikantha, tigers and paddy fields are the stuff of which such glorified tourist brochures are made. A worthwhile new coffee-table book on Bangladesh has finally appeared on the market. For those who would like to flip through a well-planned, factually-rich portrait of Bangladesh, *Bangla o Bangaleer Katha* is the volume to reach for the next time you hit the bookshops.

Published by Jattoy Sahityo Prokashana, *Bangla* is a slim hardbound book that spans the ethnic roots of Bengalis and other racial groups in the country, the geology, pre- and early history, the dynastic kingdoms, Islamization, British rule and the Swadeshi movement, the Language Movement and Independence, and culture and music; and still somehow manages to remain

easy to read. Writer and researcher Abdul Momen performs this magic trick with the help of his sparing use of text and eye-catching simple graphics and illustrations.

The sleek final product is the result of nine months of research by Momen, who sifted through specialist material like a true student. Momen was inspired by a Bengali living in the US, who commented that there were no books which gave a comprehensive overview of Bangladesh in layman's language, especially of ancient history. This expert found he had difficulty telling his children about their country of origin. *Bangla* should take care of that.

The best thing about the book is its matter-of-fact approach to the ethnic and religious roots of Bengalis. Most coffee-table publications seem to mention Hinduism and the arrival of Islam in passing, as if suddenly a nation of Muslims appeared. Are we so unsure of our Muslimness that we cannot



face the fact that our forebears were low-caste Hindus who converted, or locals who intermarried with incoming Muslims? Like it or not, we are not Arabs or even Persians; and what we are is a nation that was by and large converted. Before we try and trace our ancestors back to Mecca, let us remember that the Arabs were converts too. There is no stigma to that. Instead of this

Panditer Paglami successfully comes out with the underlying message that science can be a lot of fun.

An omission in the publication is an introduction of the writer. Now, sources at the Bangla Academy tell us, Salma Chowdhury is an established educationist, a versatile writer for newspapers and journals and a social worker of distinction. Her work among women inmates in the Dhaka Central Jail has earned the praise of social organisations, both foreign and local, based in Dhaka. Ms Chowdhury has, hopefully, more books in mind. One of them should deal with her pioneering work in the social field.

Panditer Paglami is well-printed, well-produced, with an attractive cover design by Shukratuzzaman.

believe, we are always busy trying to prove how we were never, ever (God forbid!) a predominantly Hindu nation, who slowly assimilated Islam. The author and the board of editors of *Bangla* (Salahuddin Ahmed, Wahidul Haq, Anisuzzaman, Jamil Chowdhury and Mofidul Haq) have the intelligence to call a spade a spade and present an ethnic history untainted by religious hypocrisy. The chapter on the coming of Islam is one of the best in the book.

This is the first time in the annals of Bengali publication that a book contains such effective layout and looks. *Bangla o Bangaleer Katha* is a reader-friendly book; even on a subject such as history, which we have managed so far to write with ever-increasing stuffiness and (worse) political bias. The only thing that remains is for an English-language version to hit the stands. If more books like this appeared, and if only publishers had the funds to give them full-colour treatment, we would have fewer ignoramuses around, both in our political circles and among the rest of us.

## World Facing Greater Challenges

the cost of their other basic needs.

**DS:** You have visited the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Do you think that the bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar is going to workout?

**LDE:** It still remains more of a choice or option for Myanmar. It will work out if they want it to workout. Myanmar authorities first have to make sure that the environment for repatriation of the refugees is safe for them. It also has to be confirmed by the UN personnel who will monitor the situation prevailing in Myanmar. Without some action from Myanmar it is difficult to believe that the agreement just as it now stands can work. Because people should be allowed to live in their own countries in freedom. But

Myanmar has to do enough to impress these refugees that they will live in security and peace there and not continued oppression. And Bangladesh in that way also will not have to be burdened with refugees from other countries.

So anyone who would want it to work would surely have to create conditions.

**DS:** Lord Ennals, do you think that Bangladesh should have played tougher with Myanmar in this issue to force them to allow United Nation monitoring and observance from all over the world?

**LDE:** No, I honestly think that they did (Bangladesh leaders) their best. I have spoken to many high foreign office personnel here and am convinced that there couldn't have been a better approach.

**DS:** One question which we really should have asked before, because it relates to the matter of the indigenous people, we were wondering if human rights activists are also similarly concerned over the rights of minorities over the world, who are not indigenous but who may just be minorities in terms of number?

**LDE:** You see, the rights of indigenous people is one question and the rights of minorities is another. Most states contain within their boundaries minorities. People of minority languages, races, cultures and religions almost exist in every country. The rights of these people have to be respected as much as the rights of indigenous people.

To differentiate the two I would say most minorities have friends elsewhere, but the indigenous people are pretty

deprived, poor and friendless. But their rights are as important to be protected as the rights of the indigenous people.

**DS:** Would you agree that not enough has been done about that?

**LDE:** At present human rights organisations face a bigger challenge of protecting the rights of minorities and indigenous people as the world is dividing into small islets and a vast country like the Soviet Union break up into small minority groups. Yugoslavia is another case where the rights of minorities must be protected. So we are facing more challenges now. But at the same time we feel that we are better equipped than ever before in protecting the rights of minorities and indigenous people worldwide.

**DS:** Thank you Lord Ennals, for your time.

## The Wheels of Prayer

by Arjuna

**C**AN one step up the pace of prayer?

Yes, if you are in a Tibetan colony in the hills of Mussoorie in the Northern State of Uttar Pradesh or in the cold snow-bound districts of Ladakh in the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

Tourists who visit Ladakh are struck by the colourful prayer wheels, although they are not as common as they were many years ago. Most Ladakhis then could be seen turning a prayer wheel even while walking on the road or bargaining in the bazar.

Prayer wheels can be seen all over the entire area dominated by the lama sect of Buddhism in the Himalayas from Ladakh in the west to Bhutan in the east and in Tibet.

The wheels come in various sizes. Small wheels can be carried everywhere and the larger ones come in big sizes fixed on stands. Passers-by can rotate the wheels.

Buddhist priests say the prayer wheel, called Mani-Chaos-Kho, is an ingenious device to multiply prayers. It seems no other monk, Protestant or Catholic, ever thought of it. Hindu temples have no place for prayer wheels. On the other hand, they have prayer beads as the Arabs have. In some countries, they are known as worry beads. Christians call them rosaries.

But in the Himalayas, a one-foot or larger cylinder containing rolls of written prayer and charms, does all the praying, revolving round a shaft carried in hand or secured in a wall.

The prayer wheels impressed the imagination of Western scholars so much so that they seriously thought of adopting it themselves.

This device is so ingenious as to induce a hope that it might be adopted in Roman

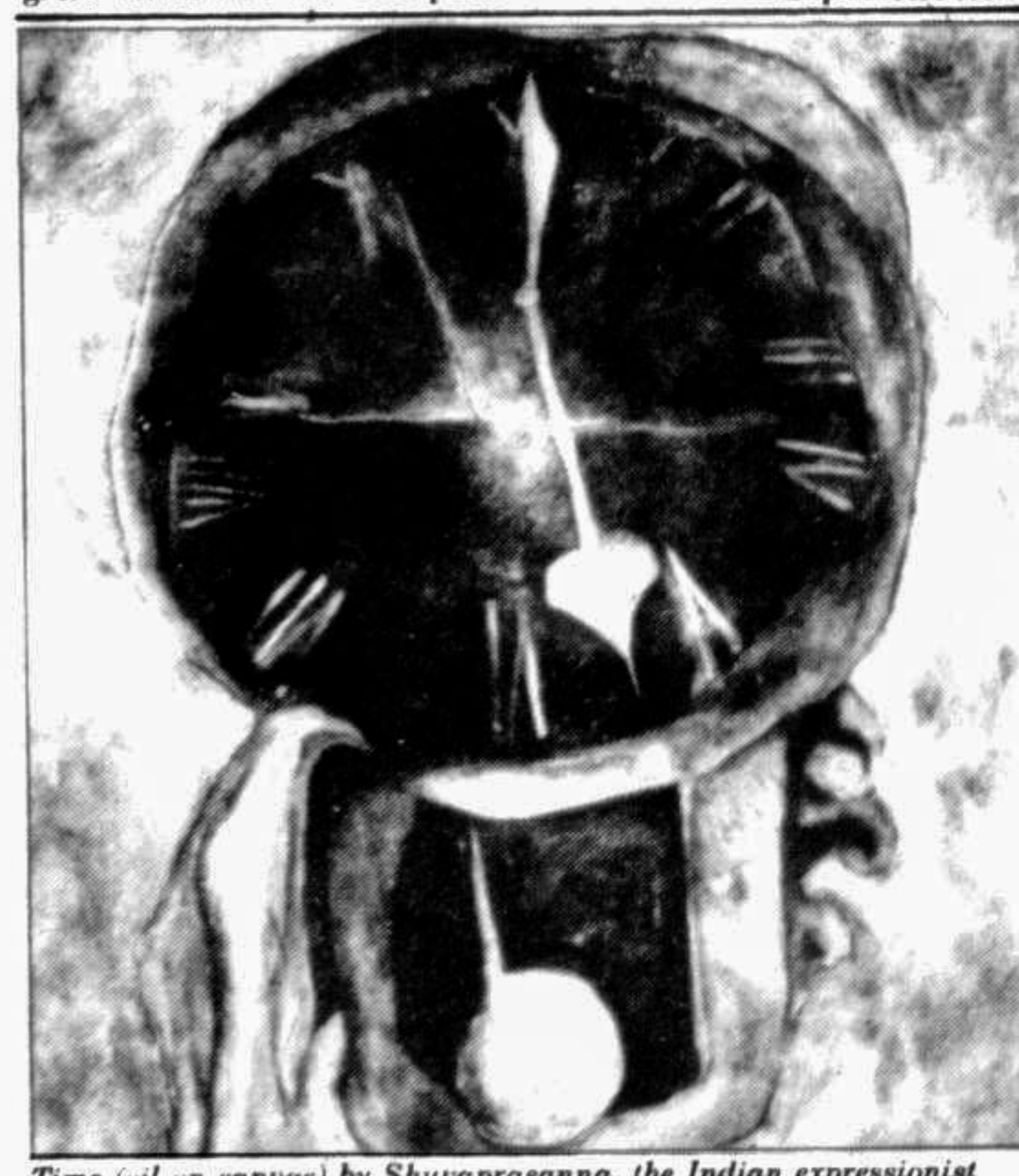
Catholic countries where the time now spent in telling beads and reciting paternosters and Ave Marias might be more profitably employed in worldly matters, while the beads were told and prayers were repeated by machinery," wrote Alexander Cunningham, known as the father of Indian archaeology.

The earliest mention of prayer wheels is by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien in 400 AD who says it in the hands of the Ladakhi lamas. Though its origin cannot be traced with certainty, one's imagination may wander two-and-a-half millennia back when Buddha preached his first great sermon in the deer park

near Varanasi and set in motion the wheel of law which then came to be represented on numerous Buddhist monuments.

To the non-believer, a prayer wheel seems to turn on the whims of the wind or the force of the waterfall. "But to those devoted to meditation and the cultivation of a higher life, the mere sound of running water, the rustle of the leaves as the wind plays through them, the movement of the clouds in the skies and the manifold life and activity of the creatures of the jungle, are so many hymns of praise to the great harmonious law enunciated by the life of Buddha," writes J. Griffiths in *Ajanta*.

— *Depthnews Asia*



Time (oil on canvas) by Shucaprasanna, the Indian expressionist

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

My elder brother's widow, who's 45, wants to marry a boy of 20. I'm ready to die of same. It's already a scandal. My own relatives are going about town, calling her the vilest of names. Her children, especially her daughters who have yet to get married, are up in arms against her.

I've tried to reason with her. But she seems to have taken leave of her senses altogether. I've told her that she'll be shunned by society, she'll be miserable. She's absolutely determined to go ahead with the marriage, and has even fixed the date on 1st July. This boy studies painting, and is fond of silk puriyablis and Chinese food. This wretch has his eye on her property, and wants to take it easy for the rest of his life. Why else would he be interested in her?

Shouldn't I stop this marriage? I'm the Chacha, and de facto head of the family. I and her sons, hold the purse-strings, and control her income. We run the family business. She has been very good to me in the last 27 years or so, and I don't want to hurt her unnecessarily. But I have to be ruthless with her, for her own good.

Please give me a prompt, detailed and decisive answer — something definite to go by. If your usual column has space problems, please answer in another column. You and your paper, owe this much to your readers, don't you think?

Anonymous, Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Dear Anonymous,

You are in a very difficult situation because your decision will affect the lives of other people. The embarrassment, social ostracism etc. the family will face is all true but you will have to remember that your "Bhabhi" is an adult and you just cannot treat her as an infantile, dependent person who has to be punished for wanting to take an adult decision. Remember, this is her life and she has the right to lead to the way she wants to. Even if her decision proves to be a mistake she should be allowed to make it. I know you will not agree with my answer but believe me, there is no other advice that I can give. If you are so sure of the bad intention of the person, then all you can do is try to persuade her to think about it before making the final decision. As for punishment by hurting her financially, it will be counter productive and will only strengthen her resolve. You have to show her that you care, only when there is a feeling of trust will she be willing to listen to you.

Dear Mita,

I do regularly go through your column and have high respect for your answers being pragmatic and constructive. I, therefore, intend to seek your advice regarding a problem which is very much different from the ones you usually confront. As a matter of fact, one of my acquaintance is in trouble. Let me put it in a nutshell as under:

My acquaintance is a Christian widow living in old Dhaka.

One of her cousins was allowed to live in her house. Recently he has filed a civil suit on a plea that the house was bought by my acquaintance's father in his own name only with her uncle's money. Now, the papers show that my acquaintance's uncle died in 1944 and the house was bought in 1951. Her cousin is almost 50 years old and his (cousin's) mother is still alive, they had never before claimed as above until 1988.

Having no documentary evidence or any other proof of ownership, the claimant is now resorting to framing false criminal cases against my acquaintance's family. Some unidentified persons, even some policemen are advising my acquaintance to agree to a 'mohalla' sitting (local sitting) and get rid of the problem by allowing some land to the cousin.

A group of local 'mastans' have been supporting the cousin and some are advising my acquaintance to sell the house. Interestingly, the innocent people do not find any help from the law enforcing agencies too. Instead, often the policemen too help the criminals by harassing the innocents.

In such situation, I solicit your advice on behalf of my acquaintance.

Khan, Farashgaurj

Dear Mr Khan,

Since your friend's cousin has no documentary evidence against her, he will never be able to take the property away from her. If she does not trust the local policeman, then she should go to some high officials and lodge a case against these people charging them with harassment. Agreeing to a 'mohalla' sitting will not solve anything. What she needs is the help of some influential person. She can go to various organizations for help such as the Ain Shalish Kendro, Human Rights group etc. and seek help. Remember, just as there are dishonest and unscrupulous people in the society, there are also many law abiding, honest citizens who will surely come out to help your acquaintance.

Dear Mita,

I have fallen in love with somebody recently, but found out too late that she is engaged to somebody else and wants to marry him. We have reached a stage, where our relationship is between love and very close friends, which has a very thin dividing line. It is a very painful relationship for me, for I cannot get closer to her or leave her. Please advise urgently. We are of the same age.

Anonymous, Gulshan

Dear Anonymous,

I don't know how old you are but it is common for young people to discover that the relationship they thought was just of friendship has turned to love. This can be mutual but is often one sided as in your case. If she is really engaged and wants to marry someone else, then you should respect her wishes and wish her luck.