

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## They Serve to Survive

by Rahat Fahmida

WHO are they? Where do they come from? What is their background? One is quite full of interrogations as the microbus halts in front of the redone housing area of the Harijans in Mymensingh.

The alien looking people with a dialect which is rather a cross between Hindi and Bengali have been living in this Harijan Pali for many decades. Driving down about 140 km from Dhaka, in the mid-morning of a scorching summer day — one tends to feel a little nauseating while entering the locality over a stinking polluted sanitary canal, which runs adjacently and ends perhaps quite abruptly where it should not.

An air of festivity could be sensed as the car parked in the Harijan Pali. This is what the place has been called from the time recorded. The Pali houses 135 Harijan families, which have, on an average, five members each. As one stepped down from the car and inquired, the festive occasion turned out to be their 'Sitala-puja'. This is a puja performed through the ages specially as a precaution from measles. Though it was learnt that with access to necessary precautionary measures, the residents of Harijan Pali do not now face the one time deadly diseases as diarrhoea, typhoid, measles and others.

A lot of red hibiscus could be seen all around to mark the festivity. Everyone, specially the women in their bright saris and bindis were busily toiling and froing. They rarely had the time to answer queries. But nevertheless, the arrival of the urbanites popped out their eyes with inquisitiveness even if it was only for a few minutes. Some came rushing with complaints and others stared from a distance.

Most of the women were a bit hesitant to speak. But Bina with her two year old daughter, was standing in front of her friend's house, staring and blinking because of the sun

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Harijan Pali, Mymensingh: Inmates happy with houses.

rays. In her mid-30s, of a moderately healthy and slim stature, she is the mother of two children. She said, it was only about 10-15 days that her family has been allotted a decent room to stay. Since this UNICEF funded Slum Improvement Project started in Harijan Pali two years back, with the municipal corporation as the executive and assistance of Local Government Engineering Bureau (LGEB) — Bina was allotted a very small room. Due to lack of space she had to send her elder son who is about seven years old, to her mother's house in Chandpur. Her husband works as a cleaner, earlier known as sweeper, for the Mymensingh Agricultural University.

Bina did not keep in darkness about their previous living conditions, which she admitted was so unhealthy and filthy that no one dared to pass by that area, just even two years back. She is not discontented with her present, improved condition, but wants equal treatment and opportunities for all. This project has given them the facility of savings and credit group membership, of which she is a member. Bina's group has about 10 members, and she has slowly saved up about 350 Taka. Along with this, the project has health, sanitation and what they said physical development programmes that include — electricity, drain, tube well and functional liter-

acy. The Food for Hungry International is funding a primary school for the Harijan children, where till now the main attendants are the sons of the families. The daughters are made to stay in to do



Visitors talking to teachers of Harijan Pali School.

household jobs, not for conservative reasons, but for practical convenience, as most of their mothers work outdoors as cleaners.

Many housewives like Bina, grow vegetables on the few yards of land they have right in front of their neatly done one-room houses. But sadly enough, as was learnt from them, it is hard on their part to sell these in the market. The only reason, the vegetables were grown by the Harijans.

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The backgrounds of these Harijans being the same, their clans are most likely to be scattered in other parts of Bangladesh too. The ancestors of these Harijans were brought in Allahabad, India and brought into Mymensingh municipality by the then ruling Britishers, way back in 1870 — especially for their ancestral trade which is sweeping.

Caste represents a freezing of the principles upon which class is based: unequal distribution of goods and power, formation of social groups, each with its own life style; and differential patterns of relation between caste groups.

Castes are ranked in a hierarchical order. A person is born into a caste and can rarely escape from it; usually the person must marry within the caste, and the offspring will remain in it. Castes usually have traditionally prescribed occupations. Behaviour toward members of other castes is rigidly prescribed. In this sub-continent, for instance, a 'higher' caste usually refuses to drink water or eat food handed by anyone belonging to a lower caste; to do so would be 'polluting' and would acknowledge an 'undeserved' equality for the handler.

In this part of the world, the web of caste forms a richly

## Indigenous Voices Grow Louder Around the World

by Jill Forrester

Indigenous people in Canada are becoming both more aware of their traditional spiritual past and of their political clout. Although still lobbying for official recognition in their own country, Gemini News Service reports they are finding strength in their connections with indigenous people in other countries.



Photo: James Jordan

EDWIN BURNSTICK

Indigenous voices join forces

ACCORDING to legends of the indigenous people of the Americas, the meeting of the eagle and the condor would be a turning point in history. "They have met now," says Edwin Burnstick, a part-Cree and part-Stoney Indian from western Canada.

They are the sacred birds of North America and South America, and the legend symbolises the meeting of the two continent's indigenous peoples.

Burnstick's first meeting with South America's Indians was at a United Nations conference in 1977. Since then, he has been visiting indigenous people around the world, sharing spiritual practices and experiences. He is also one of the growing number of indigenous people lobbying internationally for recognition as citizens of distinct nations within their countries.

The United Nations, organizer of this June's Earth Summit in Brazil, has been the most recent focus of campaigning. Nearly 150 indigenous people from around the world came to New York for the final round of preparatory Summit talks, but they came away with no formal say in the process.

Between 5,000-6,000 indigenous people will meet in Rio for INDIO '92, a cultural celebration alongside the Earth Summit. It is part of a campaign marking "500 Years of Resistance" since Columbus's arrival in the Americas.

Indigenous people, Burnstick argues, have a major role to play in the world's shift to environmental awareness. Spiritual leaders in his community knew 20 years ago that something was going wrong with the protective layer in the sky — they saw that trees were dying from the top down. Scientists are now anxiously monitoring the disappearance of the earth's ozone layer, which protect the earth from the sun's harmful rays, as it is destroyed by pollution.

Although often ignored by the government leaders he hopes to influence most, Burnstick says the non-indigenous people he meets on his travels are usually curious to know more about him.

"Do you still live in tepees?" they ask, referring to the traditional tents made from wooden poles and animal skins. Indians live in modern houses, with electricity and televisions and drive cars like everyone else in Canada. Tepees are still used, however, in traditional spiritual ceremonies.

"Why did you scalp white people?" they ask. He explains that it was the whites who began the butchery — European

settlers gave out cash rewards for Indian scalps.

Burnstick, 50, lived on a reserve with his parents and grandparents until he was 10 years old, trapping animals for food. When he was 14 he was sent to a "white" boarding school, where he lived in a white family's home — part of government efforts to help Indian children learn to fit in with the rest of society. At the school, he was punished for speaking his native language and forbidden to mention his grandparents.

Usually, they ended up in the shabby sections of town with the other Indians. "A lot of us hung around 'Skid Row' because that's where our Indian people were, not because we wanted to get drunk or anything," says Burnstick.

High suicide, crime, violence and alcoholism are all symptoms of the deep malaise of indigenous people in Canada. Many non-natives see only this stereotypical image and know little of Indians' spirituality and history. They are often annoyed that Indians seem to live off government money and do not take control of their lives. Few, though, are willing to hire a native person.

Indigenous leaders are now asking forcefully for self-government and control over traditional lands. Their political voice has been growing steadily stronger since getting the vote in the Fifties, when regional and national indigenous organisations began to appear.

This April, in the latest round of constitutional negotiations, Canadian native people were promised the right to self-government. Although the task of defining such government still lies ahead, Constitutional Affairs Minister Joe Clark says progress includes some "quite fundamental agreements that would have been almost unthinkable a year ago."

This concession came after one of the country's few native

members of government killed a major constitutional deal in 1990. Designed to unify Canada's widely-spread 26 million people, it had made no mention of indigenous rights. That same summer, awareness of indigenous presence shot up when Mohawk Indians armed themselves and blocked roads to protest against the planned use of a traditional burial ground for a gold course.

Their protests over the Quebec government's construction of a series of hydroelectric dams on indigenous lands in the far north have won the support of environmentalists in the United States. Thousands of caribou have drowned on already flooded migratory routes, and if the project continues as planned, it will flood further hunting and fishing lands.

Burnstick is encouraged by the growing interest he feels from non-native Canadians in indigenous concerns, but there is still a gulf of misunderstanding between natives and non-natives.

The naivete of non-natives towards indigenous people is, however, something some Indians are quickly learning to take advantage of. There are those who have not taken the time to rediscover their traditions and are using their native identity to get money out of the system.

Although he grew up with the traditional ways of his grandparents — something many Indian have not enjoyed — it was not until the early Seventies that Burnstick took an active interest in living by and relearning his traditional spiritual practices.

Only after meeting indigenous people from other parts of the world did he realise that Indian traditional values are not just a way for Indians to regain pride in themselves, but something the industrialised world desperately needs as well.

JILL FORRESTER is a Canadian freelance journalist.

## The Memory of the German Nation

The Federal Archives in Koblenz now have the records in Potsdam at their disposal

by Eberhard Nitschke

KOBLENZ — The "Memory of the Nation", the Bundesarchiv — the Federal Republic of Germany's official archives — will be 40 years old in the coming weeks. There will be special cause to celebrate this anniversary. As a result of the reunification of Germany, documents of incalculable value are now housed once more under one roof — at least institutionally. Potsdam, the site of the old Reich Archives, which were only set up in 1991 — with a length of 70,000 metres of records which survived World War II — became the state archives of the ex-GDR, almost completely inaccessible to the West. For its own archives, the Federal Republic erected a new building in Koblenz some years ago. It is equipped according to the latest state-of-the-art for both the conservation and use of documents.

Lacking any proper basis, the institute in Koblenz commenced operations, with just a few staff, on 3 July 1952. With the greatest effort, records, which had been transferred to the safety of mines and other such places during World War II, were tracked down — provided they were in the west-

ern part of Germany. To the present day, the only records in safekeeping in Koblenz from the old German Reich, which was dissolved under Napoleon in 1806, are those of the Reich Supreme Court. This former state (The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation) had its central office in Vienna so that the bulk of the written records are now housed in the Austrian State Archives.

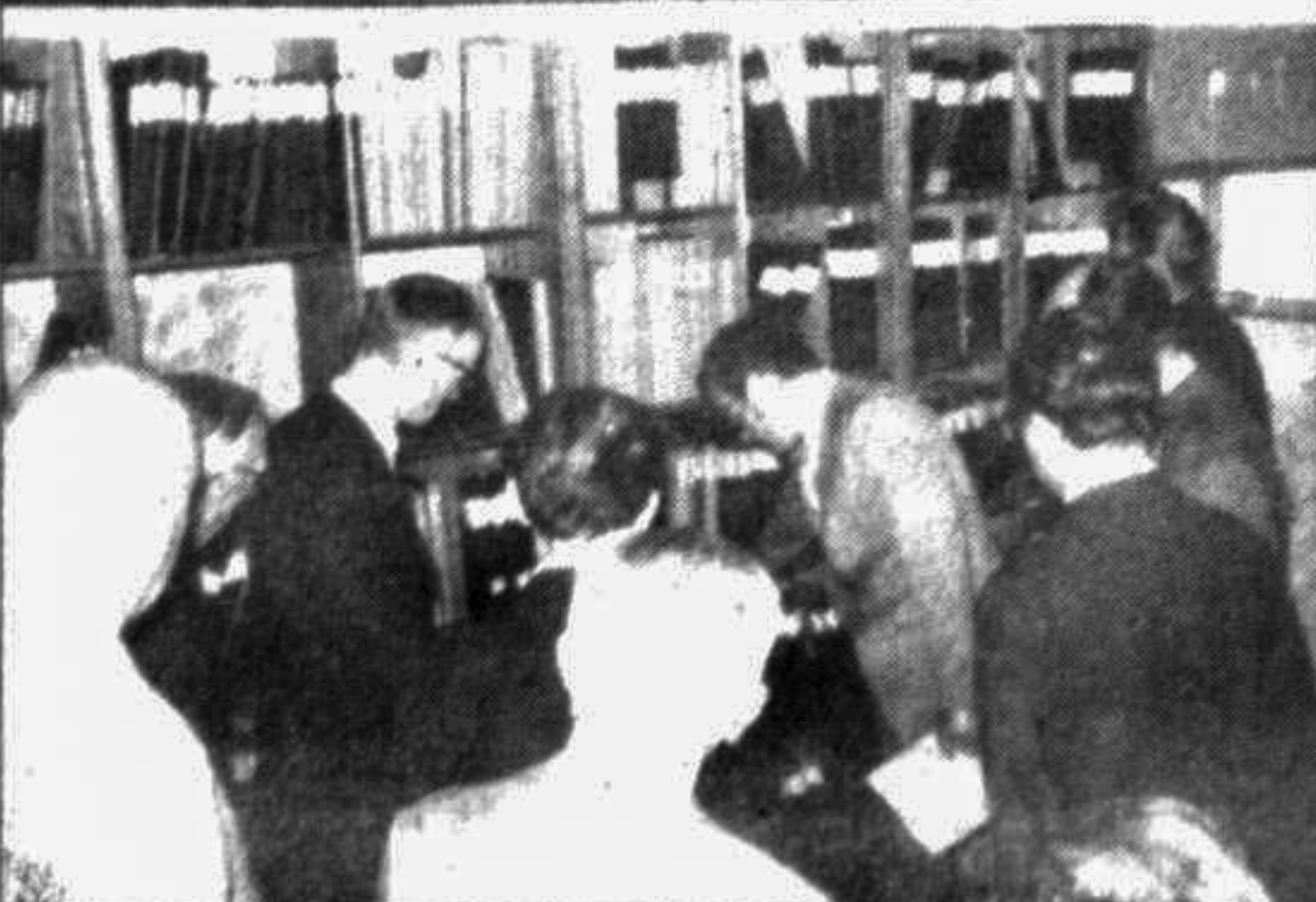
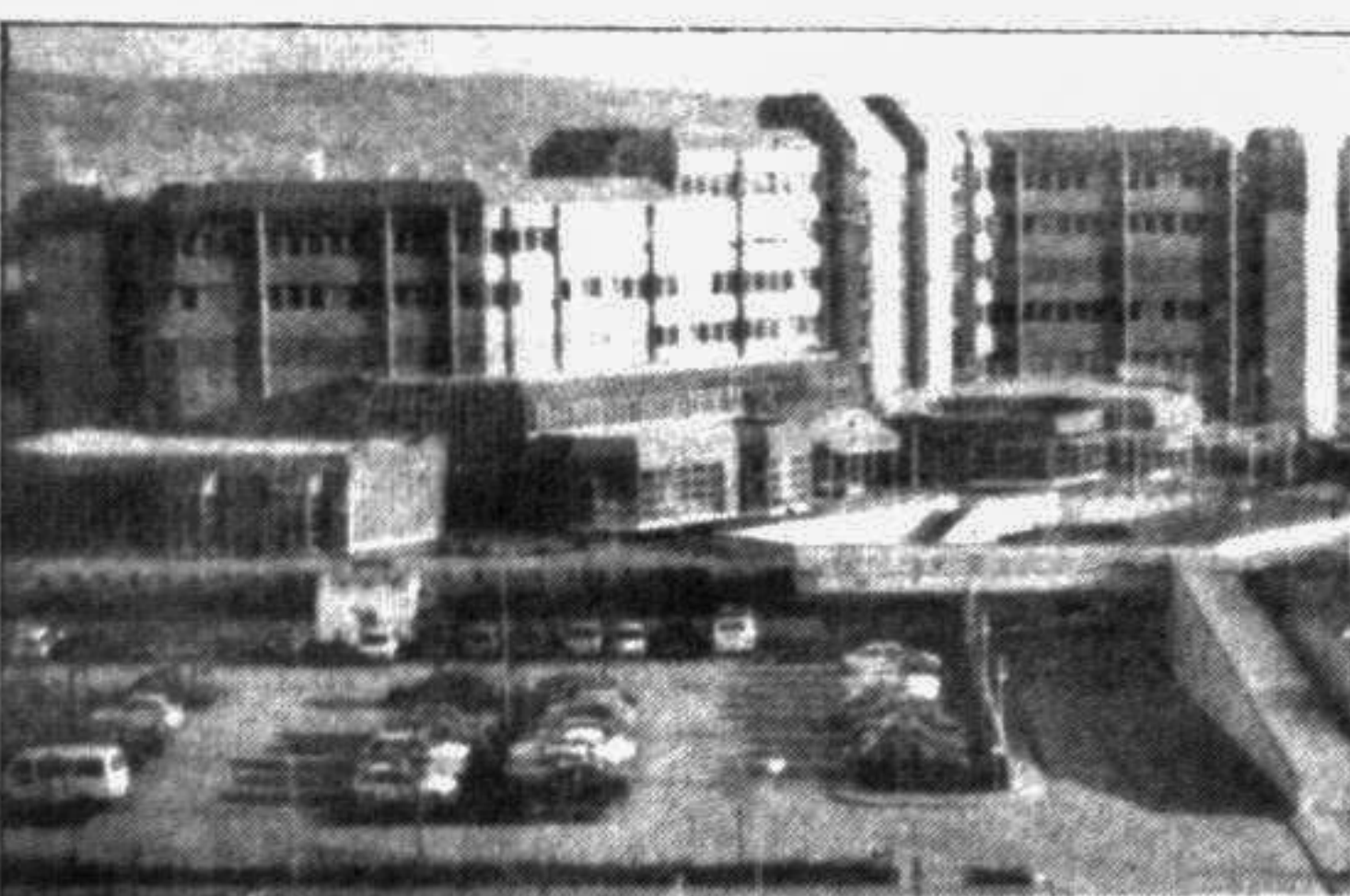
Almost everything from all the epochs prior to 1918 was incomplete in Koblenz. The Federal Archives were deliberately set up with a specific area of responsibility in mind, i.e. mainly modern times. Thus, although there are many documents from the German people's unification and freedom movements between 1815 and 1866, records of the 1848/49 National Assembly and the short-lived Reich ministries at that time, Koblenz's responsibility, in the narrower sense, begins with the establishment of the German Reich (Empire) in 1918, continues on to the end of the Kaiserreich (Imperial Germany) in 1918, covers the Weimer Republic period (1919-1933), the era of the Nazi regime to 1945, and finally the creation of the four

Zones of Occupation and, from 1949 onwards, the Federal Republic of Germany, with a precision hitherto unknown.

The Federal Archives in Koblenz, for instance, have provided intermediate archives for Bonn and its federal ministries. 43 kilometers of files from the former federal capital only — but removed to a safe distance from the shredders available to civil servants who otherwise all too readily make use of them. If the need arises, files can be returned to the offices of the original suppliers for a few days — against signature. This facility is made use of 14,000 times a year. Only archivists are empowered to destroy documents. They travel from Koblenz to examine up to 100 files per person per day.

There was not even a suggestion of such meticulous precision in Potsdam — which has now been affiliated to the Federal Archives. And, indeed, some 50% of the documents which survived World War II (the bulk were lost in a British air raid on Potsdam on 14 April 1945) were kept under lock and key — rather than preserved.

As is now known, the Communist state of the GDR had good reasons for doing this. The SS files at the head-



The Federal Republic of Germany's Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives), in Koblenz-on-Rhine, is a multi-structured building (above). Having a look round the records on the occasion of an international conference (below). Photo: INP/Bundesarchiv

quarters of the Nazi Reich Security Office, for example, which are classified "Top Secret", contain explosive material about events in the German Communist Party in the 1920s and 1930s which cast suspicion on many a person who had been built up into a hero in the ex-GDR. Here, too, the records are filed on the murder of two Berlin policemen on 9 August 1931. This case is worthy of mention since, Erich Mielke, the boss of the ex-GDR State Security Service (Stasi), has now been charged in 1992 with the murder of the two law officers.

Today, anyone can study any existing record in the reading room at the Potsdam Archives — something utterly unthinkable a short while back. Thus far, western research could only dream of these docu-

ments which, despite all the losses, are quite considerable in number. The processing of these "treasures" will be a long job. Neither is it merely a case of such showpieces as the German Declaration of War in 1914, signed "We, Wilhelm, German Kaiser by the Grace of God, King of Prussia," or the Capitulation Document signed by the Supreme Command of the German Wehrmacht (Armed Forces) in 1945, or "Hitler's Diaries" which, however, were compiled by Martin Bormann, head of the party chancellery. The latter relate in a bone-dry fashion what the "Führer" did everyday. Here, it is a matter of everything that German history has bequeathed posterity.

The Federal Archives are also the depository and custodian of millions of photos. It

collects and conserves posters. A film archive, located in Fortress Ehrenbreitstein overlooking Koblenz is also affiliated to it. The Federal Archives also collects sound transcriptions, chiefly those which were not intended for broadcasting purposes. And the Military Archives in Freiburg constitute a large part of their work. Almost forgotten is the fact that the Reich Archives of 1919 began in Berlin in the office of the "General Staff, Senior Quartermaster's Section for War History" by changing name-plate on the door. Up to that time, it had not proved possible to create unified archives responsible for the written records of the supreme Reich authorities: particularism, disagreement and Prussian one-upmanship stood in the way. (IN-Press)