

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Trouble in Paradise

from S Bari in Geneva

THE streets really are vacuumed every morning. The vineyards lie thick with grapes this autumn. Snug villas nestle along the lakeside. For 700 years Switzerland has carefully built itself into an economic fortress of prosperity and untouched security. Snowy mountains and financial heaven, cleanliness and peace; not a ripple disturbs the smooth surface of public Switzerland. As is inevitable in history, the less fortunate are knocking on the door.

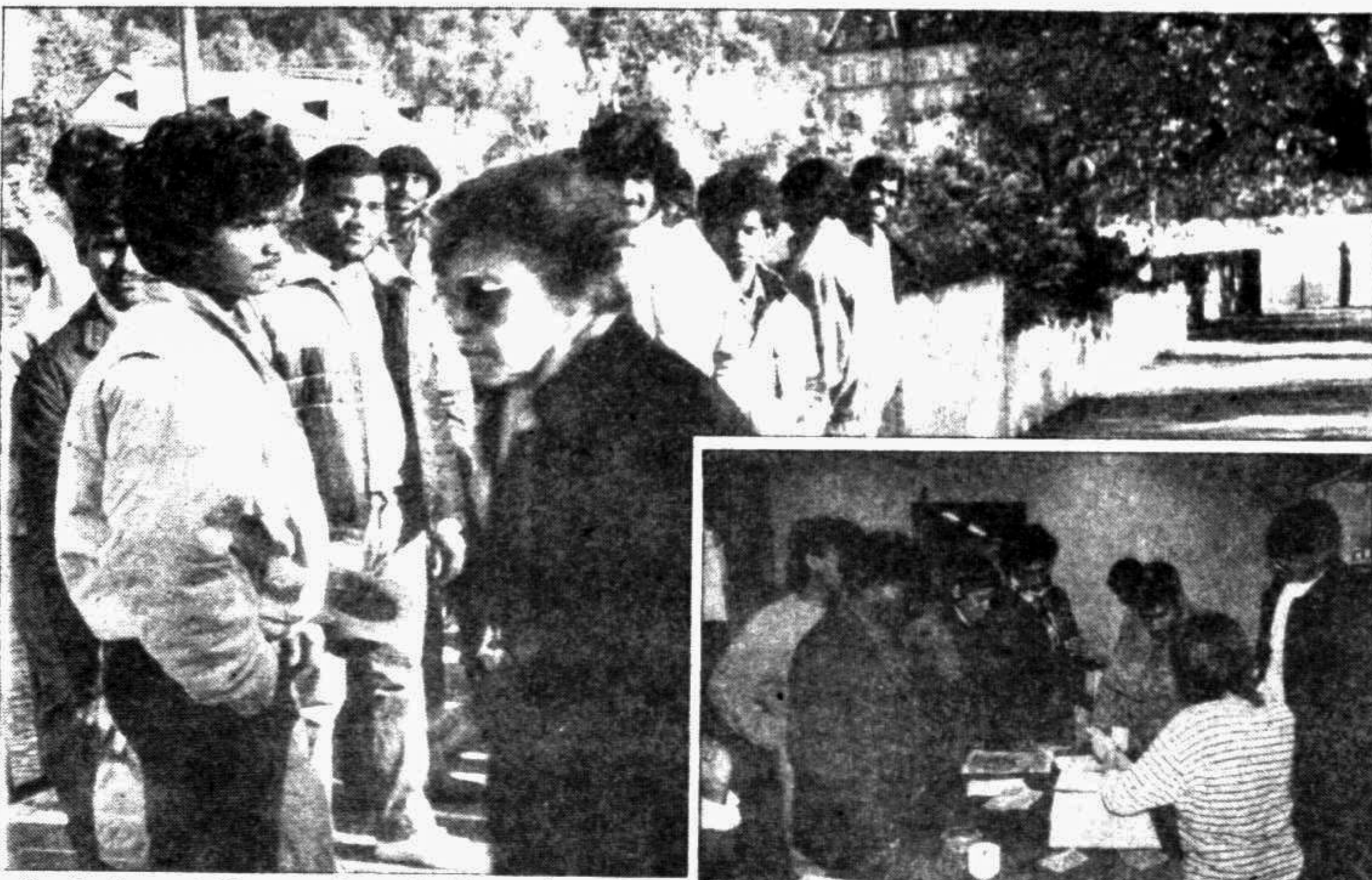
But big waves are in the making in Paradise. An ugly word, Racism, is forcing its way to the forefront. In the past two years, some 20 physical attacks on foreigners have the nation shaking its head and muttering.

Cloistered, wary of outsiders, self-absorbed; yes. But violently racist? The Swiss are

bind the state to individually assessing each case. The formalities take months, sometimes years. In the meantime, Swiss authorities provide pocket-money, food, lodging, and the chance of employment. Few nations have such extensive humanitarian provisions.

As a result of the lengthy procedure, asylum-seekers have a lot of time to kill. "They just sit around, they're lazy," complains a municipal worker, reflecting a typical reaction. If they manage to get jobs on the unskilled market, they are resented for taking away employment from citizens. "For the refugees, it's a no-win situation," comments Pascal Pascherel, a journalist.

For France, England, or the USA, the scenario is well-known. But for Switzerland, the problem is new and some-



Continuity and Change: Large backlogs of pending asylum seekers.

chine blankets much of the unwelcome truth, homelessness is becoming too visible to hide. Drugs are debilitating a large portion of the younger generation. The population is aging; another factor in the

rise of intolerance. The retired and soon-to-retire generations are to be a huge economic burden on an ill-prepared youth. Prices are up, the economy is down. For the first time in history, Swiss banks are lay-

ing off employees they can no longer afford to pay. Looming over this emerging recession is the spectre of United Europe. A strong economic bloc will surround Switzerland, which relies for

more than three quarters of its trading income on neighbouring European nations. After several years of jiffing and butting, the tiny mountain nation is going to ask for EC membership.

The dark-skinned, alien asylum-seeker is easily blamed for the symptoms of economic malaise. The extensive screening guaranteed by Swiss law to the incomers is considered by many to be cumbersome. "France deals with a hundred times as many immigrants as we do, but they have a simpler process. We must trim down this monstrous apparatus," says Philippe Bender, a legislator who has been very outspoken on the issue. The process costs the Swiss taxpayer millions, money that 64 per cent of the people think would be better spent on the unemployed or the handicapped.

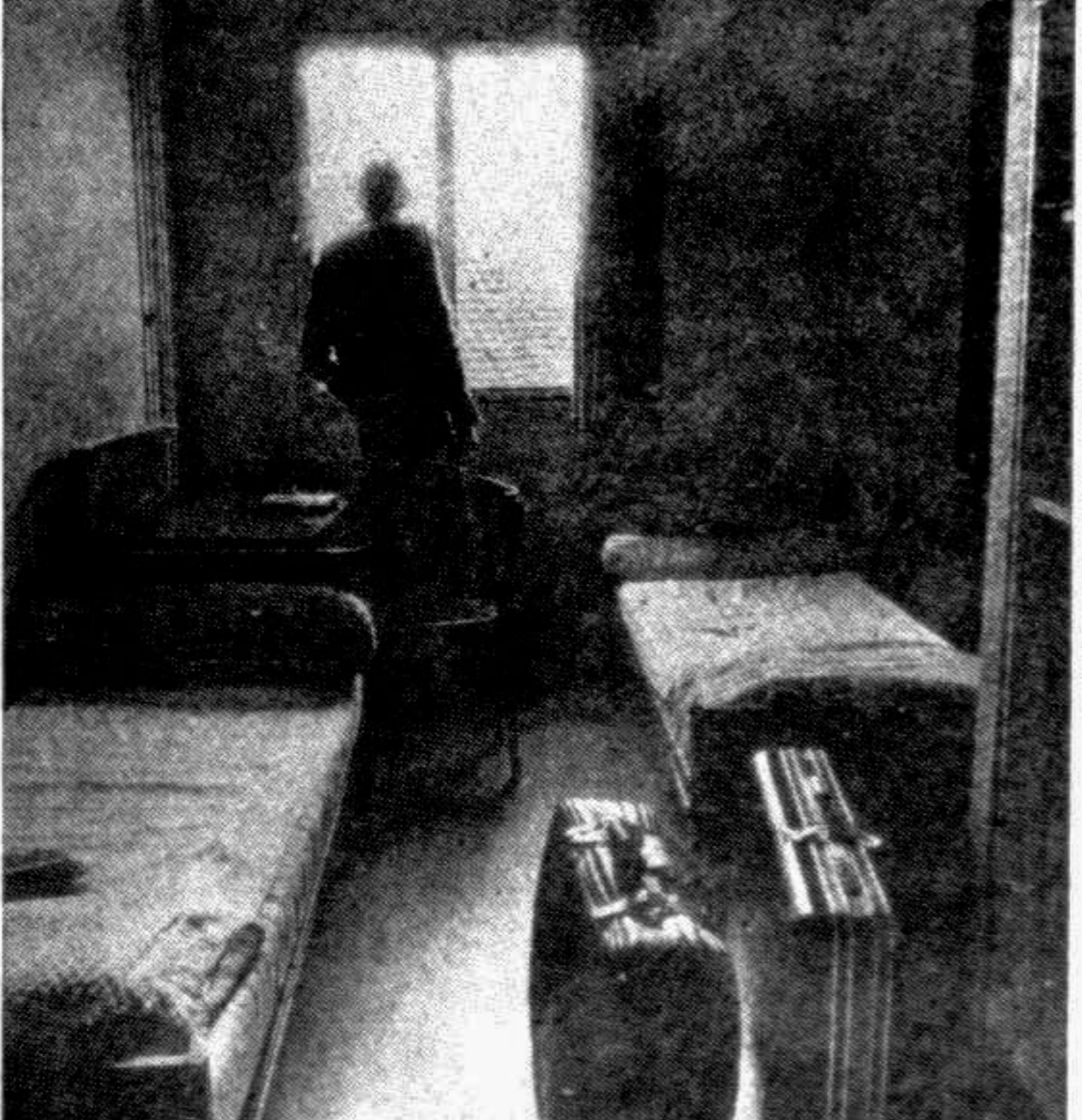
However, according to the Department of Justice and Police, changing the process would be a violation of the human rights of the potential refugees. More importantly, Switzerland "does not want to be first country to renege on the Geneva Convention on asylum," says a spokesman. The fact that the USA is doing just that leaves the Swiss unfazed.

The asylum-seekers are competing for jobs with the least-favoured section of the population, unskilled labourers. This competition fuels racial prejudice. As some asylum-seekers are fakes, generalizations are easy to make. "You also have to remember that these people

have come through very hazardous routes to get here. They are tough, clever, and courageous. They don't go about hang-dog. They're not humble and begging, which is how we would like them to be," says a church-worker in a shelter.

Self-confidence does not go down well with the locals. Shivering refugees in shelters are easier to deal with than men and women who "mix," who begin to act "like us." When the government decided to relocate newly-accepted refugees to the tiny town of Olivone, the citizens opened a petition. In a few days, two-thirds of the 2000 townspeople had signed against the move. It is clear that the government intends to go ahead; it is equally clear that racist violence will soon erupt in Olivone.

What Switzerland needs is quotas such as those of France and the USA. A heartening sign for anti-racism groups in the country is that 58 per cent of people polled did not want selection or quotas to be based on racial or geographical criteria. For progressives in the government, that is indication that the humanitarian traditions of their nation still provide cause to celebrate Switzerland's 701st birthday this year. Switzerland will have to find a way to spend its money more efficiently while not jeopardising the human rights of the people wanting in at the door. Its reputation and peace of mind are at stake.



Waiting for months or years.

surprised at themselves. "It's always been beneath the surface, it just needed a larger and more visible number of immigrants to spark it off," says Pierre-Herve Frelechoz, a student of public administration.

The increasing flow of would-be refugees, Kurdish, Tamil, North African, are lodged in government shelters till their refugee status can be determined. The shelters are the target of most attacks. In one incident, angry citizens set fire to a shelter, killing four people, including two children. Stabbings are reported with increasing frequency. Restaurants are putting up signs: "We no longer serve Tamils."

Asylum-seekers are attracted by more than Swiss prosperity. The country's laws and the international conventions to which it is a party both

what different. The outsider has traditionally been an object of suspicion. Penetrating social barriers is discouraged. The army of United Nations and other diplomatic officials posted in Geneva live in segregated splendour from the local populace. "It's difficult to make Swiss friends," is an oft-heard complaint.

The newsmagazine "L'Hebdo" calls it "the social apartheid on which Switzerland is based." For the thousands of refugees trying to make a home, prejudice is even stronger due to economic and linguistic obstacles. In addition, the number of asylum-seekers is increasing at a time when frustrations are mounting in the country.

Unemployment is more widespread than ever before. Though an all-seeing state ma-



The barometer of intolerance

A Great Way to Make Money

Murshed Latif is 24, according to the faded ink on his birth certificate. It tells us he was born in the village of Chandpur in Mymensingh. Murshed wears Reebok sneakers, and a flashy watch. The air in his room reeks of beer and expensive cigarettes. Murshed in Geneva as an asylum-seeker.

One night ten months ago, Murshed was handed a fake passport with an equally fake visa for Italy. On the Bangladesh flight to Rome, he joked and celebrated with two other young men. They were to enter Switzerland by land. The train left Rome and wound its way up the mountains with Murshed hiding in the luggage racks. He arrived in Geneva with the shirt on his back and applied for refugee status.

"They told me exactly what to do," he recounts, referring to the network of underground dealers in illegal immigration documents. "I would go to the police, they would arrest me for not having a visa or anything. Then I would tell them I had to stay here because I could not return to Dhaka." Murshed followed instructions remarkably well, even pretending he didn't speak English. "That makes it hard for them to interview you."

I attended Murshed's primary interview. Facts of life: mother's name, father's profession, number of siblings, income, reason for fear of persecution, all duly noted. Murshed said blandly, through the interpreter, that he belonged to the Communist party and had been framed by fellow villagers, loyal to another party, in a murder case. No questions were asked about the details.

Murshed was told he would have to get necessary documents to prove his schooling, his employment, the case against him. He said to me, grinning, "I have to take my time about all that, so they can't call me for another interview too soon." He took a good three months to get all the papers in.

In the meantime, he started work at the local MacDonald's, serving burgers, sweeping the floor, making 15 Swiss francs an hour. They give me 400 francs (about US \$250) a month for food. I eat at the shop or I buy rice and dal, so I save most of the money. Murshed explains. "They pay for the room. All I have to pay for is bus and things like that. So I got myself a great way to make money."

Some 200 other Bangladeshis, overwhelm-

ingly young men, live this life. A stroll down Geneva's tourist area, where the MacDonald's is located, is uncannily filled with calls of, "Eh, bhai." Some of these professional bench-lungers earn 7000 francs a month (about US \$5000).

Murshed's second interview is scheduled on a drizzly morning. Mournfully he recounts the false accusations, the imprisonment, the gangs, the persecution. There is very little proof, says the interviewer. Murshed mumbles about documents being hard to obtain in a country like Bangladesh. The interviewer mumbles something about the truth being hard to obtain. An observer of a refugee aid or human rights organization is present, required by Swiss law to make sure that the applicant is treated humanely and fairly.

Coffee break: Murshed smiles and assures me he doesn't really care about the outcome. "You see," he says, "they are going to take time to think about it. They don't want me to go back and die. If they decide I'm in danger, they'll let me stay on. Perfect: Any place is better than Bangladesh, but his is a lot better than the US. I hear in the US you have to work really hard and the pay is not so good. If they decide I'm lying, well, I'll be sent home. I'll go back and finish college. I've earned and saved so much money here it's definitely worth it."

I try and admonish Murshed about the terrible effect he and his kind are having on true refugees, but the break is over, and Murshed doesn't really care about refugees. The interviewer is obviously not convinced. "Have you anything to add?" she asks. Putting on his best helpless face, Murshed says, "If you send me back to Dhaka, you are sending me to certain death. Does your government want that responsibility?"

The file will go in Bern for a final decision. Murshed may be lucky and get in. He may be lucky and gain quite a few months while the matter is debated. Or he may simply make a packet of money and be sent on his way. "You have to admire their ingenuity," says a co-worker at MacDonald's. "They have a love of life, these guys. They're just out to make a profit, like everybody else in this world." Unfortunately, when the interviewer faces her next applicant, she will remember that, and she will get tougher. And maybe a genuine refugee will be sent back to death.

SILENT are the temples, courts, and colonnades; gone the rulers, priests, and sacrificial victims; gone the artisans and builders; gone those humbler folk whose unremitting toil alone made all this pomp and pageantry possible — back to Mother Earth, enshrouded by the living green of trees and hues of flowers.

But of a moonshine night, standing on the lofty terrace before the palace of the Indian kings, breezes whispering through the trees bring stirring tales of other days, other men, other deeds.

Civilization is the product of various races and cultures. Civilization is a vast thing. Many tribes, many races. Many cultures met here; sciences, technology sprang at the peak of course, related to time. Civilization acted like the light in the mist of the darkness. This is the hallmark of modern man. His ideas, his traditions, his valuations are shaped and sustained by influences coming from thousands of miles away as well as by those that are bred on his own doorstep. The people are not one blood apart from other bloods and the culture is not that of one people apart from all other people. The only uniqueness that a people or a culture can possess anymore is the particular combination of the elements it draws from sources common to many people and to many cultures.

India's history, Tagore insisted, was essentially a history of race reconciliation and the meeting of faiths. It was the miniature, and the process of unification is still not at an end. And for Bengal, the poet says, "The Bengalis had always remained outside the Aryan pale. They were subjected longest to Buddhist influences. In the vast India they were the

Love is the Law We Obey, Our Conscience Wins

by Avik Sanwar Rahman

first to accept the new and even now they retained the flexibility of spirit to accept and invent the new."

Tagore's remarks on Indian civilization and especially on Bengal was not an exaggeration of the history. From Asoka to the Palas, at least 1300 years of Buddhist rule marked Bengal as the forerunner of the South-East Asian civilization. As the Aryans were thought to be barbarians when they invaded India, so the Indian inhabitants beyond Aryandom fell under the same prejudice. But, gradually, as the skills of various aces, mainly Aryans and non-Aryans, emerged within a single civilization; as the racial discrimination decreased due to outbreeding; India once again saw an enlightened civilization through Ramayana and Mahabharata, as the Greek saw the Homeric Age.

Though Aryan civilization marked the neo-Indian era, it was too much religious. Whereas, Bengal seems more material and it revealed some of the pre-Aryan civilization of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. So, Bengal was the paradise for the infidels; a peace land of 'Banajata Sen', who saw the debris of religion and the outcries of the caste system within the Aryan civilization.

While Bengal civilization progressed by the various skills of different races, the Aryan civilization got the harshest blow from the

Messenger of Peace in India, Gautama Buddha, who was born in 556 B.C. and founded Buddhism. On the later evidence of Huen Tsang, who visited Samatit in 635 A.D. it seems that the stupa of Vasu Vihara near Pundranagara (recent Mahasthan) was constructed during Asoka's reign. He also wrote that Buddha preached in Pundranagara for three months. From the indirect evidence it may be surmised that Pundranagara was probably the oldest urban center in Bangladesh, and dates back to at least 6th century B.C. The domination of Buddhism at least from Asoka to Palas, shows that the pure Hinduism never found any way in Bengal.

In about 8th century A.D., a new, energetic and fresh force appeared in Bengal through sea. And, as Bengal always welcomed everything new, this time there was no exception. Hence, a new civilization may be better than old Buddhism, more material than any other religion, open and less orthodox and burdensome and weighted, came to Bengal and suited with its soft mud which never held any grandiose monument or temple.

In 1345 Bengal was visited by a famous Egyptian traveller Ibn-Batuta. He came to meet with the Muslim saint Shah Jalal, who settled in Sylhet. Sufism had developed within Islam at that period. The materialist Islam turned in to the idealist nature derived from

Hinduism and Buddhism (Yoga). The religious synthesis caused many peoples conversion in to Islam. For example, Jalaluddin Shah (reigned 1417-31), the son of raja Ganesh (a Hindu king). This is the nature of Bengal. Always non-communal. Whoever came to Bengal found himself mixed up with its mud and water. As Ibn Batuta himself remarks, "Dozokhopy Az Niamat" — the Blessed Hell. Even, when the seeds of destruction of the Mughals were fertilized by Aurangzeb's intolerance, we find an interesting character gave Bengal a thirteen years peace. The man was Murshid Quli Khan (1714-27); though he had an unimpeachable 'Pathan' name, he was the son of a Brahmin brought up as a Muslim. And the importance of Jagat Seth (Hindu banker) to Sirajuddaula (the last Nawab of Bengal) is well known.

The Mughals were great builders, but Bengal severely restricted their genius. There is little stone at hand and the mighty rivers flood almost every other year. The luxuriant vegetation swallows up whatever is neglected only a few seasons. And while the meso-soleum provided a fusion of Hindu-Muslim tradition in the other parts of India, Bengal came up with a new idea but based upon a fundamental biological assumption that goes back to the earliest Vedas — that there is a homology between sound and reality

Sounds have spiritual significance. They can function not merely as metaphors. But as direct links with the sacred realm.

The highest cult of religious synthesis got its momentum in the 16th century in Bengal by Sri Caitanya. Al Basham, in his Encyclopaedia Britannica article, "History of Hinduism", states that "with its discouragement of ritualism, its strong ethical emphasis and its joyful expressive method of worship, the Caitanya movement affected the whole life of Bengal, and was not without influence in other parts of India." Indeed it was. And now, the world culture of modern popular music could be seen as the product of the Caitanya movement if we just look at its strong ethical emphasis, which taught us brotherhood and the love of man for man with an intensity of the slogan — "love is the only law we obey", and its joyful and expressive method of worship: the 'Kirtan' with dancing through the streets of the towns and villages. Within this Caitanya chanting one perhaps feels complete release from all the toils and worries of the world and is carried off in to a higher sphere. Hence, to the modern man, this dancing and singing has become a consolation.

This Bhakti or Caitanya devotion through love is the basic nature of the cultural development in Bengal. From village to city, from rural mass to the urban people from Lalou to Tagore, there are influenced of this Caitanya movement.

Nevertheless, this movement caused a terrible panic within the British government. And the 'Apple of Discord' came, as usual, from without. It was Warren Hastings' Divide and Rule policy that separates law for the Hindus and the Muslims based on the 'Manu

Samhita' and the 'Quran'. Hence, the British established 'Communalism' which was alien to the people of Bengal.

And in 1905, when the Swadeshi (the national liberation) movement became more vigorous and reached its peak, the British divided Bengal, through fanning religious discord between Hindus and Muslims, in to two independent provinces, well-known as Banga-Vanga. The British patronized a new political party, Muslim League, and the power of political economy started to work as they wished. The Gordian Knot was cut by the British government, and on August 15th 1947, the dominions of India and Pakistan came in to their inheritance. But someone laughed behind the scene!

Independence meant the partition of Bengal. Two-thirds of the province of Bengal and most of the Sylhet district of Assam became the province of East Bengal or East Pakistan within Pakistan. Within a year Bengali nationalism was agitated when Urdu was declared the only national language of Pakistan. Language movement in 1952 was, at first, uncomprehensible to the Pakistani

rulers, because of its uniqueness. Nowhere else the world had seen such a movement based on languages. But Bengal knew what she wanted. "Language is as old as consciousness." Language, like consciousness, is an awareness of the immediate sensible environment and of the connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is becoming self-conscious. Language movement provided Bengal a new love, like the sun rising over the mountain top.

Increasing economic disparity between East and West Pakistan led to the growth of the movement for autonomy. The role of Calcutta was taken over by Karachi, and hungry Bengal continued to provide food for the nourished Pakistan. This economic as well as racial discrimination and above all the spirit of non-communalism enhanced the movement for independence and when the Pakistan army attacked the civilian population on March 25th, 1971, the birth of a new nation was confirmed.

After the Liberation War, the cohort that was born on the dawn of the 16th

December, 1971, never suffered the psychological depression of the religious fanaticism. Even, despite his support or effort, HM Ershad failed to provoke it, when the anti-Ershad movement reached its peak in 1990.

But now again a 'dark cloud' has appeared in the sky of Bengal, though no bigger than a man's hand, and obviously has created some confusions. Golam Azam, Zamaat-e-Islami, Nirmul Committee, 'Gana Adalat', and so called 'Datta Babus' have gained the ground; far enough at least, to attract the headlines of our newspapers.

However, we must not be confused; we have a clear historical perspective. "Golam Azam-issue" was never and is not religious problem, this is a national problem. Those who are trying to create dispute, through fanning the religious ties, must know their destiny. And when no less a person than the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia, was asked by a CNN reporter about her feelings being a woman leader, how boldly, she said, "We are not fundamentalists." Our consciousness wins.