

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## People and Places

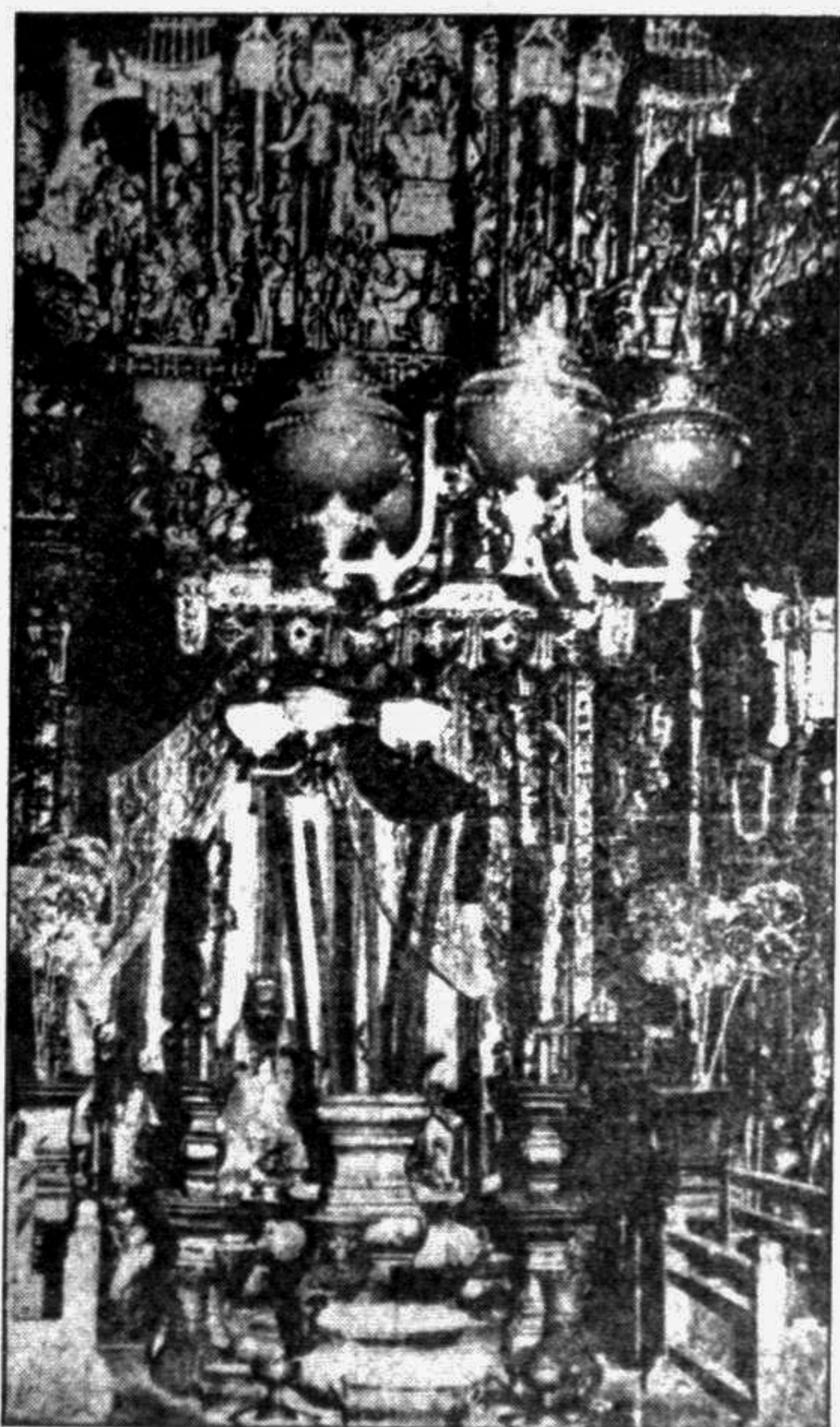
### Is Calcutta's China Town Vanishing?

by Samir Dasgupta

**C**ALCUTTA'S fabulous China town, with its colourful little shops dotting a maze of narrow lanes, and restaurants belching the delectable aroma of chop-suey, is fast becoming a thing of the past. The smugglers of Dr. Sun Yat Sen Street apparently have left for Hong Kong or other lucrative pastures, while the magicians at the Blackburne Lane can no longer be seen. The incense of joss-sticks still hover on Phears Lane where once the world's oldest profession thrived. But the nearby dingy shops have long lost their bizarre splendour marked by wares ranging from exquisite statuettes of Confucius and carved ivory chopsticks to pickled snails and strings of piquant Chinese sausages.

Much of Calcutta's old China town has been swept away with the rubble of yesterday, at the same time when the population of some 20,000 inhabiting the area have lately dwindled to less than 3,000, the exodus having been particularly rapid in the wake of the 1962 India-China war. Meanwhile, many of the old buildings have fallen under the hammer blows of the Calcutta Improvement Trust which has shown a greater zeal in providing a face-lift to the area than in preserving the exotic, albeit squalid, quarter. Why, one wonders, Calcuttians could not save its China town when such western cities as San Francisco, Vancouver and New York still have their fairly populous China towns throbbing with activities and cultural vigour? More, a visitor to San Francisco is somehow given to know that his trip to the city would be sadly incomplete without a date with the Chinese quarter. By contrast, conducted tours through Calcutta are not known to include a visit to the famous Sea Ip Temple, which now stands dwarfed among skyscrapers. The temple still looks glorious with its jade-green tiled roof, crowned by delicate porcelain fishes. And, alas, the once famous eatery, Nanking, which served such delicacies as shark's fin soup, silkworm grubs and Peking Duck, has lately been forced to pull down its shutters having lost its old clientele. At other, smaller, restaurants the usual sight is one of a few old slitted men sitting in a roulette den behind swing-doors, perhaps musing over a game of dice or mah-jong.

About the beginning of 1973 there were around 15,000 Chinese in India, some 12,500 of whom lived in Calcutta. Soon after the 1962 India-China war about 8,000 of these Chinese families were deported to Deoli Camp in Rajasthan and subsequently sent back to mainland China, the majority of the menfolk being sailors. In more recent years the Chinese in India have been permitted to continue unhindered in their trades, while more than a thousand people of Chinese origin are likely to have been granted Indian nationality. The rest are required to possess certificates of identity. There may still be a handful of mainland China passport-holders, but they are not permitted to have any official link with that country. With the gradual disappearance of an influential group (Communist sympathisers) in Calcutta's China town who used to run the Choong Kok School on Bow Bazar Street, the institution was forced to close down around the middle of 1972. In fact, even before the 1962 war broke out, skirmishes used to take place frequently in the Chinese quarter between the pro-Peking group and the pro-Taiwan group. The former was then more powerful; but in the aftermath of the war the other group managed to gain an upper hand in the



Interior view of a Chinese temple in Calcutta's China town.

battle of wits. Today, K C Yap, president of the pro-Taiwan Chinese Overseas Association which claims to represent 80 per cent of the Chinese community in India, owns a large leather business in South Tangra (in eastern Calcutta). The old man, who likes to show visitors his photographs with Nehru and Indira Gandhi, says his community suffers no discrimination from the Indian Government, adding that "the State Trading Corporation of India allows us to compete on equal terms with any other Indian firm for the export market." But this may Mr. Yap's style of diplomacy. It would be wrong to imagine that Chinese inhabitants of Calcutta are absolutely at home in this place of their domicile. There are restrictions on their movements in that the residents of the Metropolitan District cannot enter the adjacent 24-Parganas without prior official permission.

All this has given rise to a sense of alienation in the local Chinese mind at the same time when even many young men and women still do not wish to migrate. Born and brought up in Calcutta, these youngsters love Rosogollas and Phuchkas, enjoy cooking Indian food at home, through the cinema houses showing Hindi films, and will happily queue up overnight for an IFA Shield football match ticket. The Chinese community of Calcutta contributed close to a lakh rupees to the Government of India's defence fund and helped the Bangladesh liberation movement by supplying winter clothing for the Mukti Bahini. Chinese children sing the Indian National Anthem and are learning Bengali and Hindi

alongside Chinese and English. Yet, says Y S Tham, a leading member of the community, "the Government of India have asked members of my community to get passports from Communist China. We refused because we are Indians. The Government of India now issues us quarterly permits. Besides, neither the British nor the Indian Government has said anything clearly about the nature of citizenship of those born here between 15 August, 1947 and 25 January, 1950."

Although a large number of the Chinese of Calcutta have left for such faraway places like Canada, the US, Hong Kong and Australia, especially after the government banned their recruitment as sailors, those who have stayed back have continued to provide the denizens with such varied services as carpentry, dentistry, hairdressing, dry-cleaning and catering. Also, within an area of about two square miles around today's Bentinck Street there are more than 300 shoe-shops. The *Chinas Journal of India*, a four-page daily printed in Mandarin from Calcutta, does not enjoy the large circulation it once did. But, devoting half a page to advertisements of the latest celluloid extravaganzas from Bombay and carrying birth, death and marriage notices along with general newscasts, the daily helps to "keep the community together."

The majority of the Chinese in Calcutta are Buddhists. There are a few hundred Christians and a few dozen Muslims, while a handful professes to have no religion. Most of these people thus pursue their religion at the nine Buddhist temples run by them. Others go to the two Catholic churches in the area and a few small temples devoted to various Chinese gods. But, no matter what the religious denomination of a Chinese is, ancestor worship is an integral part of Chinese life. Most Chinese temples have a god of wealth. The temple on Meredith Street is a spot where the Chinese assemble to worship Kuang Ti, a legendary hero who lived in China some 1,800 years ago. The ceiling of this hundred-year-old temple is festooned with antique Chinese lanterns. Marriages and other ceremonies are arranged on the temple's premises. The Chinese in Calcutta have been

known to worship the Hindu goddess Kali as well — a sure proof that there had been considerable cross-cultural assimilation at some point of time. The "China Kali" used to guard the Blackburn Lane entrance to China town, but since the thirties this symbol of assimilation began to fall in disrepair. The bigger temples are ornate and gilded, often decorated with beautiful gold-leaf and camphor-wood carvings and embroidered Golden Dragon motifs hanging from the ceiling. Chinese festivals are all connected with the moon. On these occasions lanterns are hung outside of the houses and people visit their friends. Rice cakes are exchanged among friends during the Dragon festival, and sugar dumplings and spring cakes for the Chinese New Year (January-February). The venue of the big New Year celebration has lately shifted to South Tangra where massive paper dragons and lions are carried in processions amidst the bursting of firecrackers.

The Chinese community in Calcutta lives a cocooned life.



A typical shoe factory in Calcutta's China town.

One seldom hears of an Indian having a Chinese for a close friend; but the blame must be shared by the majority com-

munity. Marriages between the two communities still remain a very uncommon thing. A proof of the timelessness of Chinese culture may be seen in the fact that even in the small Chinese world in Calcutta the individuals engaged in the different professions still follow the typical pattern of activities carried out by the forefathers in their respective provinces in the original homeland. The progeny of those who belonged to some provinces of Shanghai are overwhelmingly engaged in the laundry business, while those belonging to families that lived originally in the Canton provinces are still found engaged in the carpentry trade.

Shoe traders in Calcutta have descended from families that once belonged to the Hu Mei Hsien district in China and constitute about 25 per cent of Calcutta's Chinese population. But will the tradition survive? Will tradition stand up to the mighty onslaught of 'progress' and modernism? Will the community hold out together forever? There are indications to the contrary. More and more Chinese in this city are adopting Western religion, clothes, tastes and ways of life.

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## The Chopstick Community in Dhaka

by Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

**E**VEN today, the run of the mill people in our country take any man with Caucasian features to be an Englishman, or as they fondly use the terms 'bilati shaheb' and 'mem shaheb'. Again someone with a Mongoloid trait is invariably distinguished as a Chinese, even if he or she is a citizen of Mongolia, Tajikistan, Thailand or a member of the Khasia tribe. Any other foreigner would usually be stared at and command at least a second look even in a busy Dhaka street. But no passerby would take an interest in looking twice at the too familiar face of a Chinese. This is probably what happens when one lives for many years in a foreign land and becomes accustomed to the eyes of the natives.

It was during the 1930's that the Chinese started to make their shy appearances into this land. But the exodus occurred during and after the Second World War. Probably it was the post world war depression that led the Chinese people to try their fortune some place other than their homeland and seek a better living. They have been in Calcutta long before they came to Dhaka. Mostly those who found their lives difficult in a too competitive Calcutta, flocked into Dhaka. Today, it is the second and third generations of these migrated people who are living in this country.

The migrated Chinese usually indulged in trade here. Their first and popular occupation was footwear business. The cluster of footwear shops owned and operated by them at Mitford Road, once used to fulfil the need of shoes of the denizens. But gradually as the trade became less paying with time, they switched over to other lucrative business like dry-cleaning or laundry, beauty parlours and restaurants that provides exclusive Chinese cuisine.

The footwear trade at Mitford is now extinct and a part of the past heritage of Dhaka. But the laundry and restaurant trade is very much in. There are dry-cleaning shops and restaurants as old as forty to fifty years in Dhaka. But, perhaps, now-a-days it is

the restaurant business through which the Chinese people have made themselves known to the Bangladeshis. This business is only on the increase. Of the few hundred Chinese restaurants in the country, perhaps, only forty to fifty are owned and managed by Chinese people. The rest are left with local owners who have found this business lucrative too. But they surely find it difficult to outleague their Chinese counterparts in a business which they know too well to be defeated.

True, that in Dhaka the Chinese do not have their distinct habitat, as they have clustered into one single area in Calcutta, San Francisco, New York and Vancouver, and formed small China towns. In Dhaka there are about two hundred Chinese, including children who live in different areas of the city.

"I feel more of a Bangladeshi than a Chinese," says Joseph Lee, a converted Christian in his late forties, who owns and operates a restaurant, a beauty parlour and a laundry at Gausia Market. Lee's father came to Calcutta as early as 1936 and later, in 1942, migrated to Dhaka and started footwear business at Mitford. Lee was born and brought up in this soil. He was educated at St. Gregory High School in Dhaka. His children are also being educated in this country. When asked to define his culture Lee said that they followed a mixed culture. At home they practice their own and outside they follow Bengalee culture mainly by responding and interacting with the local people, who according to him, are 'very friendly'. Lee denies that the current generation of Chinese expatriates in Bangladesh suffer from an identity crisis. On the contrary he believes that theirs is a more refined mixed Sino-Bangalee culture. "I am a proud citizen of Bangladesh. I exercise my franchise rights and am a taxpayer of this country," says Lee in pure Bangla, who originated from Canton and speaks Hakkan dialect at home.

When out of curiosity he was asked if the foods served in the Chinese restaurants were really Chinese, he smiled and said, "It is Chinese, but we also have to suit the local tastes. What are usually sold here are actually oriental food

of different variations. We do not always eat such rich food at home, these are special delicacies."

Lee, as a citizen of Bangladesh never in his life felt neglected and denies having been subjected to any kind of discrimination for being a minority. He only wishes that the law and order situation in the country would improve. Lee and his family visits China once in a few years. Yet he regrets for not having an association of the Chinese expatriates in Bangladesh which could bring their community together. "We have to maintain liaison on our own accord, through different social and cultural interactions," concludes Joseph Lee with a friendly smile again.

Another expatriate, a son to the real proprietor of a Chinese restaurant, however, vehemently objected to any kind of media publicity and refused to bring himself out of the cocoon, as typical minority members often do, when asked for an interview. At last fully confident about anonymity he offered a brief dialogue. He refused to reveal his father's name for peculiar reasons and said that his parents came to Dhaka in the wake of the fifties, and established this restaurant business, at the same Bijoynagar area. They too came from Canton and speak a Hakkan dialect at home. This 'Chinese youth was born, brought up and educated in Bangladesh. When asked if Bangalee culture has influenced him, he said, "Not that much. We have more or less managed to maintain our own culture and heritage. I do not see myself as a Sino-Bangladeshi citizen." He confessed having a regular connection with the birth place of his forefathers. "We go there almost every year. So we have never lost our Chinese identity," says the youth who never let us know his name, for he feared or perhaps disliked a media coverage.

Whether one finds himself in a Sino-Bangladeshi cultural trait or not, the Chinese expatriates in Bangladesh, specially at Dhaka, feel more or less comfortable with, mostly, their exclusive restaurant trade.



Comfortable in Dhaka



"LITTLE MISS MUFFET" IN MANDARIN? A kindergarten class at the Pei Mey School. The teacher, Miss Tseng Hue Mei, is now Mrs Chakravarty. She spent some time with her in-laws in Santiniketan, learned to speak Bengali and acquired a passion for "machcher jhol."

## Echoes from the past

### OF MEN AND MATTERS

by Anisuzzaman

to a conference in Moscow to discuss with Lenin (1870-1924) and other Soviet leaders about the best method for inaugurating a revolution in India. The delegation included Bhupendranath Dutta (1880-1962), younger brother of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Agnes Smedley (? - 1950), who was married to Chatto for sometime, and Ghulam Ambia Khan Luhani. M N Roy (1887-1954) also joined the same conference with his group which included Abani Mukherjee (1891-1937) and Mohammad Ali. Roy had ar-

rived in Russia in 1920 with some reputation as a Marxist theoretician, joined the second congress of the Communist International (CI) in Moscow, differed with Lenin's thesis on the Indian question and succeeded in having the congress accept his supplementary thesis on the issue, and founded the Indian Communist Party in Tashkent in October 1920. The essential difference between their position was that while Lenin wanted all communist parties

to render assistance to the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement in India, Roy wanted the support to be exclusively extended to the communist movement in India which, in fact, was non-existent but which Roy hoped to build up himself. Finally it was resolved that "all communist parties must give active support to the revolutionary movements of liberation, the form of support to be determined by a study of existing conditions."

On arrival in Moscow the Berlin Group demonstrated their strong disapproval of M N Roy and opposed his supplementary thesis. Roy records in his *Memoirs* (1964) that Luhani, "a clever man and an accomplished speaker", drafted the document of the Berlin Group because "others could not prepare a well argued document". While Roy actively opposed Chatto and his colleagues because they were nationalist and not communists, some of them were allowed to see Lenin and Radek, the General Secretary

of the CI, and a commission comprising representatives of the German, British and Soviet Communist Parties was set up to hear their case. Luhani, according to Roy, "gave a very good performance" before the commission as the spokesman of his group. He demanded the dissolution of Roy's Communist Party which he termed as a bogus one and denounced Roy's comrade, Abani Mukherjee, as an agent-provocateur (several years later Mukherjee was executed by the Soviets on similar charge).

The Berlin Group was invited to participate in the third congress of the CI due to be held in Moscow shortly. Acting as the spokesman of the group, Luhani repeated his performance and also came out with the concrete suggestion that a party of workers and peasants should be organized

in India to spearhead the struggle for national liberation (this was actually done in 1926). Roy says that, at the end of the congress, however, he got in touch with Roy and, accepting his suggestion, stayed back in Moscow.

Luhani was thus drawn to communism and worked with Roy's group for sometime. During the spring of 1925 when Roy was expelled from France, his wife Evelyn was greatly assisted by a small group of Indians to carry out the work that included publication of the *Masses of India* from Paris. The leading figures of the group were Luhani and Mohammad Ali (killed by the Nazis during the occupation of France). Luhani also contributed regularly to the aforementioned organ of the Indian communists. It was

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**S**OME people play their role in history and then tend to pass into oblivion. It remains for those who are left behind to remember them and remind others of their achievements. S M Ali has admirably done this ("My World", *The Daily Star*, 21 and 28 August 1992) by calling upon the readers to come out with biographical accounts of men like Shahed Suhrawardy. Lohani, Sauntyendranath Tagore and S Wazed Ali. Having published a short note on Hasan Shahid (pronounced Shahed) Suhrawardy (*The Daily Star*, 25 August 1992), and having waited for others to respond, I now feel tempted to share with the readers the materials on the others that I have got in my possession.

The most shadowy figure of all these men happens to be

Ghulam Ambia Khan Luhani. Born at Sirajganj, he was the maternal uncle of the late Fatch Lohani and Fazle Lohani and of Husna Banu Khanum, the noted singer, and also a close relation of Kamal Lohani of the Press Institute of Bangladesh. It appears that he went to London in 1914 to study law and came into close contact with revolutionary Indian nationalists who had gathered in Germany, France, Sweden and elsewhere in Europe. He went to Paris in 1920, moved to Berlin in January 1921 and joined Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (1880-1943), younger brother of Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), and founder of the Indian Independence Committee in Berlin, better known as the Berlin Group. In May 1921 Chattopadhyaya, popularly called Chatto, led a delegation