

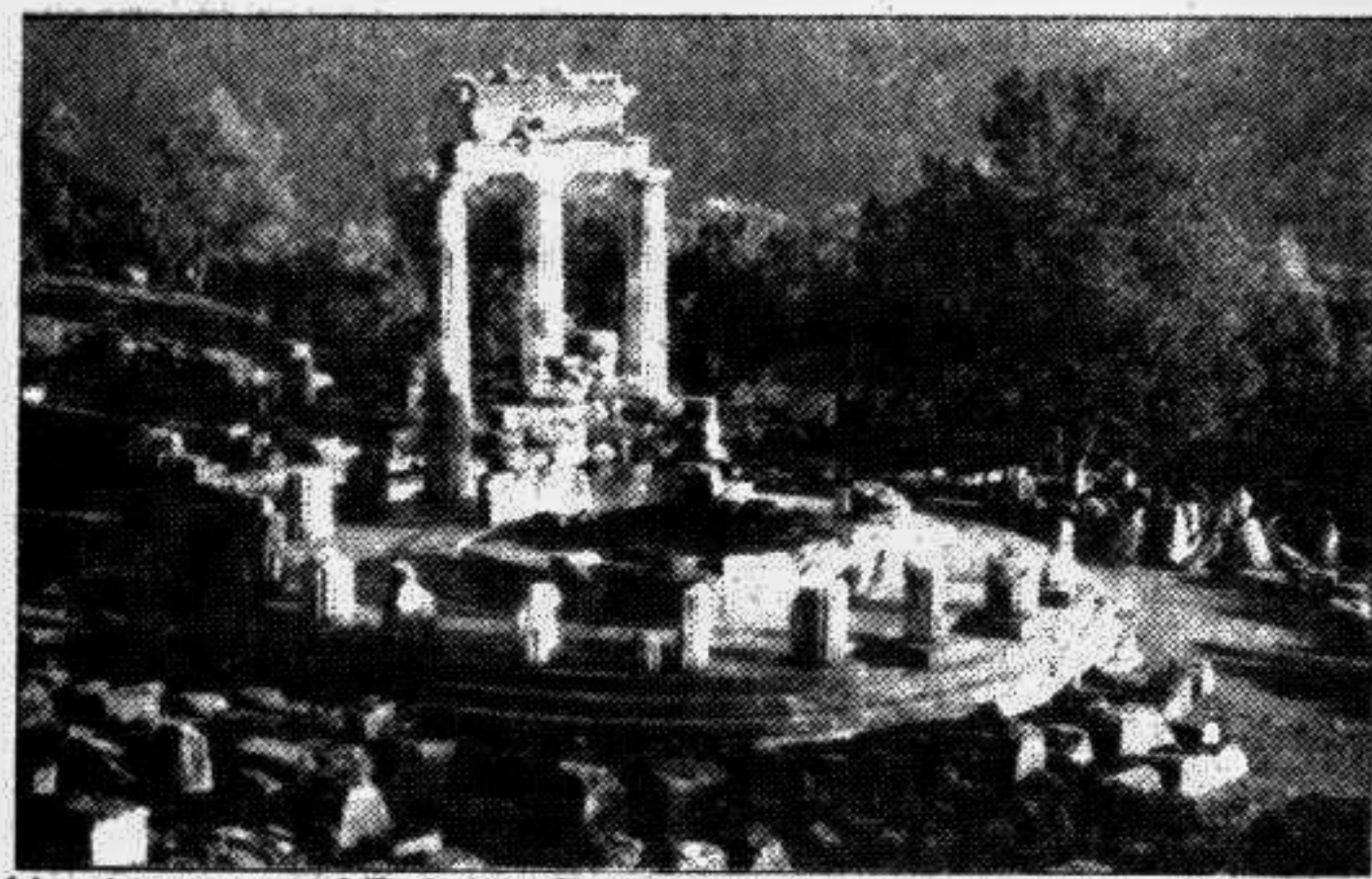
The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

At the beginning of the city was the flood. We customarily think of man as being the mammal that concentrates in throngs of millions in many places of this earth. But this is a quite recent development. For thousands of centuries man lost himself in the expanse of the land. It was the masses of animal herds, rather than groups of men, that dominated the earth.

Great changes do not happen in a day. From the first machine of the Frenchman Papin to the high-powered steam engine of the Englishman Watt almost one hundred years elapsed. From the first attempts to grow a plant to the first wheat fields swaying in the breeze more than five thousand years must have passed.

Agriculture soon descended into the four great river valleys where it prepared the way for the earliest great cultures of mankind — first to the Euphrates and Tigris in the territory of today's Iraq, then to the Nile in Egypt and to Indus in today's Pakistan, and later into the valley of the Hwang Ho in China.

These river valleys have something in common — flooding. Once a year, or more frequently, the great water-courses rise over their banks, irrigating large areas of parched land and depositing millions of tons of fertile silt. This is the soil which, without any fertilization, again and again produces rich crops of wheat and rice.



Ancient city of Delphi, Greece

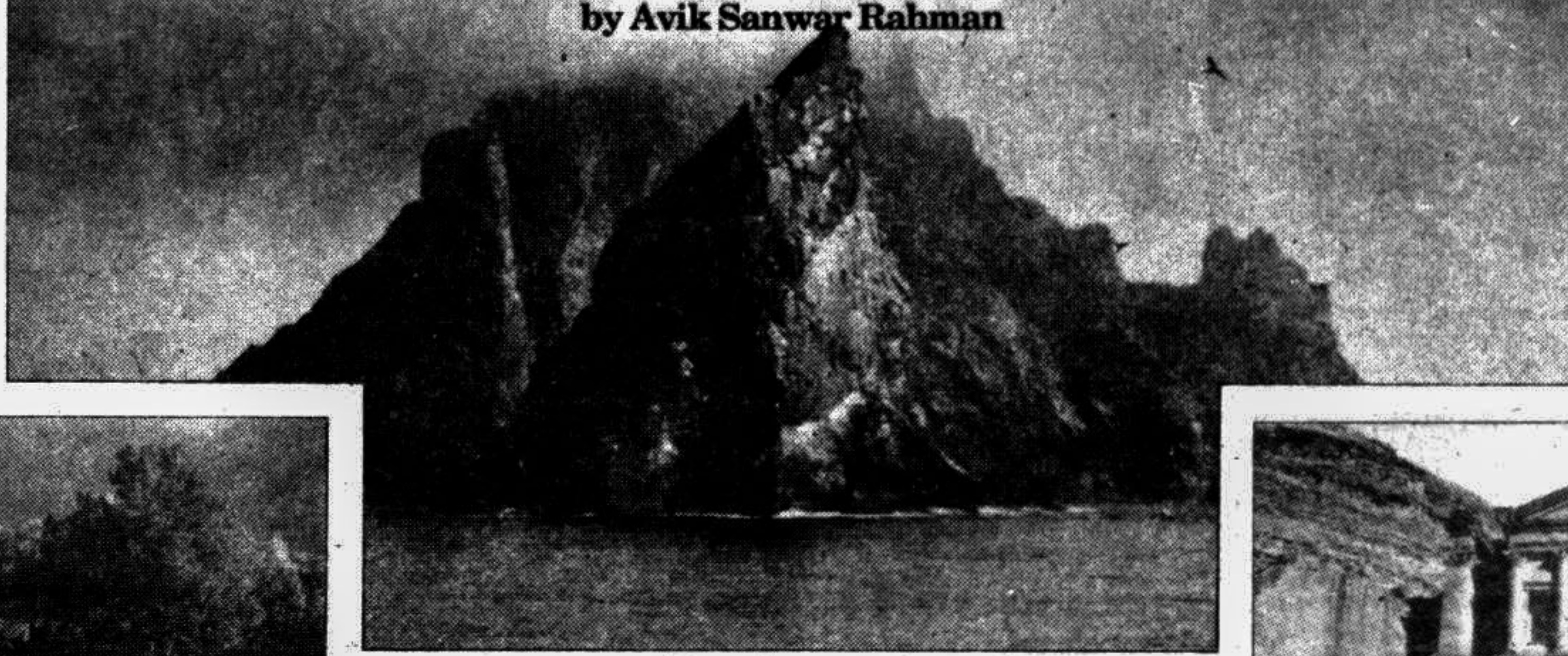
Through these floodings, and through their inventiveness in exploiting them, our ancestors on the banks of the Euphrates, the Nile, and the Indus achieved a stage of affluence and culture almost 7,000 years ago. Not till, 3,000 years later did southern Europe reach a comparable stage, while primitive tribes that exist in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia even in our time still depend on hunting and gathering, or are wandering from pasture to pasture with their herds — people without cities.

The history of Abel and Cain in the Bible revealed the fact that in the beginning of agriculture as well as of the city, then, is fratricide. Cain, the first tiller of the ground, was also the founder of the first city. God wanted the "murderer" to live because he was also the bringer of the new. As we follow our history, we may well feel that this murder was avenged without limit on the inhabitants of the city — the heirs of Cain.

Even through we do not know what Enoch, Cain's city, looked like, we may be reasonably certain that it was surrounded by walls. The Aryans against Indus, the Israelites against Jericho, the nomad's hatred of the city shows clearly that man's first walls were not simply the demarcation line of the city limits, a symbolic way of discouraging intruders; they signified the attempt to find complete security to safeguard the city for all time against assaults born of envy and hostility. The city, the settlement with a wall was its shell but its core was the temple, ruled by the priest-king in the name of the gods. This is the place, the temple, where the story of

The City: Luxury and Misery Go Hand in Hand

by Avik Sanwar Rahman

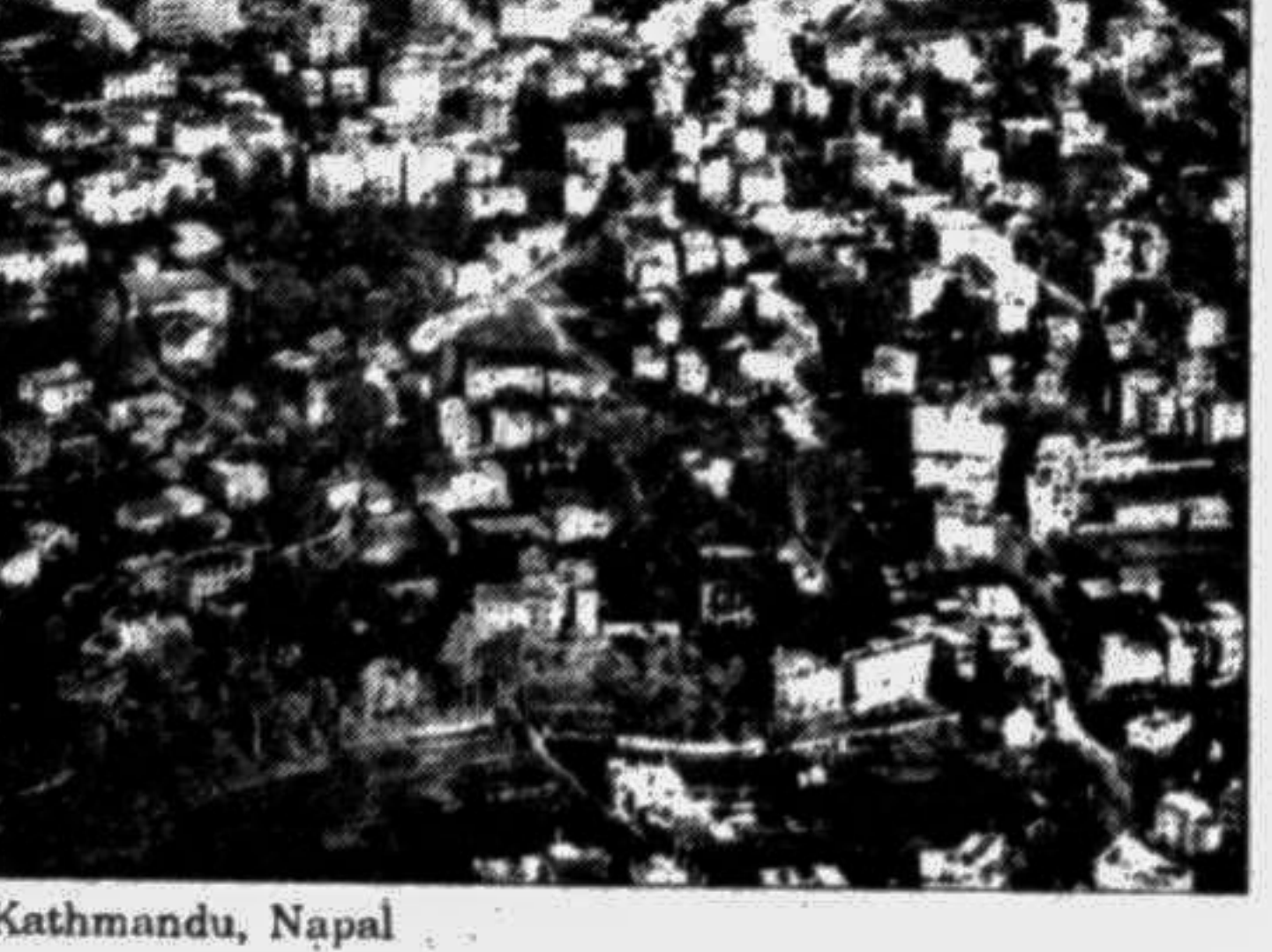


and of blood, and of extreme vanity: I am it, and there is no other. The city was in one sense a fanfare going out into the land and from thousands of throats came praise of the city life — 'We are the city people'.

Long and eventful was the road that led to the city of today, the city that is no longer a fortress; that has the temple as nucleus and the wall as bastion (which mark the very beginning of city development and determine all through city history); the heartless, limitless city started its journey during the nineteenth century under the 'clouds of the steam'. At that time the walls came down, and one began to

think that the temples were not needed: Today, the city — the seas of houses pouring over the old walls and making a mockery of the temples — assuredly is an effective and purposeful association of producers and consumers, and also a constantly growing 'beehive of people'.

With the change in technique of production the countenance of the city also changed. The industrial era created the central railway station a new concentration point of the city. But, specially, since the Second World War, this city center has lost some of its significance because of the automobile and the airplane. The



Kathmandu, Nepal

automobile makes it possible to live far away from the center of town, and by the same token, it strikes down city limits in all directions. The airport, unlike the railway station cannot be located in the middle of the city; the 'gateway to the world' has been moved to the city's periphery.

To be an Eagle and not a Tree, make the Earth turn into a City. From Dunedin (the most southerly city on earth) in New Zealand to the Arctic city Murmansk in the then Soviet Union, it's City everywhere. The features of all these cities, north or south, in cold climate or hot, begin to resemble each other more and more. In regard to structure and style, there are only negligible differences between any two of hundreds of large cities in our time. The skyscraper has conquered the cities of the twentieth century.

The sharp differences are within the individual city, even sharper in the 'Black and White' countries as in Dhaka city. The gleaming white skyscrapers of Dhaka city and the near-by abode huts and wretched shacks have nothing in common. The vacant



Varanasi, India

skyscrapers of Mottijheel commercial area night and the dreamless sleep of the toiling masses on the footpath of on the street beyond the area of Baitul-Mukarram Mosque (The House of Allah) have nothing in common. The Nissan Patrol with its closed window on the sodium illuminating street and the sweating Rickshaw-Paddlers (the modern counterpart of the Egyptian Slaves — the Beast of Burden) have nothing in common. But still there is one thing in common, the Pompeii like Garden Villas of Dhanmondi, Banani, Gulshan, Baridhara with their Dish Antennas on the roof tops; the tenement apartment buildings of Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Bashabo, Paltan, Old Town with their forests stick antennas; the Slums (the so-



Ancient city of Petra, Jordan

called 'tin-can cities' built from the spoils of the consumers), they are everywhere; and the glittering display windows in the arcades where wealth, snobbery and advertising slogans abound; they are all within the Dhaka city, and even more the inhabitants are the City People.

'City air means freedom!' — this was a slogan that echoed through the Middle Ages and into modern times. All freedom goes back to the basic fact of being free from the country. It's the city dweller's great good fortune and at the same time the risk he runs to have the asphalt underfoot, which is guaranteed not to let any roots come through. Having become estranged from nature as much as from tradition, the city people no longer looks upon childless marriages, divorces, deterioration of family life, and prostitution as unwholesome. It is the most perverted outgrowth of the city dwellers' basic philosophy that everything can be bought. Money is a city invention; banking and world trade cannot be isolated from the city. The idea of natural science, namely, to turn the whole world into a mathematical formula... fills the day of so many people with weighing, reckoning, numerical definitions, and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative ones: wrote German sociologist George Simmel, in Philosophie des Geldes. 'Utility and not beauty' made the Empire State Building (b.1931, h.1250 ft and an airship landing must reach up another 222ft, with 102 stories) exceed the Eiffel Tower (b.1889, h.984ft) and finally bring the 'Tower of Babel' prize to New York. The seven Wonders are still the Wonders! Egypt, Iraq, China are still identified with Pyramid, Hanging Garden, and the Great Wall. The cities of

today could be viewed as the modern counterpart of the Mohenjodaro and Harappa.

With the concrete jungle and on the asphalt constantly driven by the clock, speeding motor car, onrushing traffic, loud-coloured poster and blinking neon lights, forever at the highest pitch of attention, the city people, dashes to his place of work. The always startling, ceaseless succession of impressions, the torrent of stimuli, and in the evening, radio music, TV movies, fashion shows — all these reduce to the level of an organism always on the lookout for newer, different, or in the end completely dulled and unable to be roused by anything. 'The Lonely Crowd' of David Riesman and his boredom lead to crime and drug addiction.

Modern city for the first time turns the age old conflict between Abel and Cain into the growing kinship of the city people to the nomads. Metropolitan people move frequently, be it from one house to another, from one city to another, and even to a different country. Travel as a mass enjoyment was invented in the city. The tourists, who stop in the camping places with their tents, stage in their own fashion the comedy called 'Back to Nature'. The peasant lives with nature; to think nature as 'beautiful' is the idea of city people. It generally does not lead to much more than an occasional trip to the country, one of the city dwellers' favourite parlor games.

All roads lead to the city. Government functions in the city. One feels a part of that power complex which is called city. In the city one feels protected from the forces of nature — a storm is something to watch from his window, or to read about in the newspapers. More money for less work — through speculation, commissions, fees and salaries; and the opportunity to spend the money in a most pleasurable way; all that is the attraction of the city.

For 'millenniums' destruction has been swinging its whip over the cities. Though the nomad's threat is no more, today atomic weapons are lying in wait. The city of today, tries to protect itself by walls overhead, since the enemy is now coming from above.

World history is the City history. The city with highly developed culture was born in Babylonia. In Babylonia was assembled everything that constitutes attractiveness and the danger of giant cities. The city is the cradle of culture as well as of crime, the conflux of vitality and nervous energy, the focal point of power and the source of decline. Wall against wall, roof touching roof, the city's huddled buildings contain happiness and tears, arrogance and humiliation, luxury and misery.

Sooner or later our cities must invade the aboriginal forests and deserts. The future generations may no longer be able to decide whether they want to live in cities or not; there may be no other place to live but the city — 'another brick in the wall'.

ATTEMPTING to write anything about the land of my birth and belonging, I can't help recalling 'The Bengal Peasant Life' by Reverend Lal Behari Day. This is a book that sincerely records the throbs of rural Bangla of hundred years with all its traits and characteristics. The prejudice and faith, the rituals and festivals, the joys and emotions, the afflictions and grievances of a human habitation under social exploitation and deprivation through the ages — have all been voiced very authentically in his book. The continuity of those traits can easily be found in the rural life of our days, although with a bit of change that time has caused, here and there. Nevertheless, one may find pleasure in tracing the sources in this land of thousand years back. In fact, the characteristics of agro-based civilisation, which the rural Bangla represents, are because of the power of continuity and quality of endurance. Numerous monarchs came about and passed away. The mercantile authorities overpowered the royal authorities at times. The monarchs and merchants also joined hands at times only to push the country towards famine and havoc turning the villages into fields of fear, and the fields of crop into barren tracts. However, when the nature with her generous bounties had stepped in, her vast fields were again cov-

Rural Bengal — an Eternal Continuity

by Abdur Razzaque

Photos: Naibuddin Ahmed

ered with the dancing golden crops, and the swelling rivers impregnated with joys of life and love. Thus, the throbs of life were heard again in the human habitations so long dejected and sad. As such, the inhabitants of agro-based rural Bangla can obviously demand to be called the children of a land of eternal continuity. In his book, Rev. Day served us a colourful picture of this continuing life with the help of a folk-saying:

The brook of Magur fish
The warmth of a belle

Coupled with saying the name of Hart, the god.

The sons of this alluvial soil have a firm belief in religion, an indispensable remainder of an agro-based feudal social structure. Besides, they possess a heart that is sportive in love. And they do have a keen sense of enjoying the dainties. Bangladesh is, as though, a land of love — a land of meeting and parting of lovers. Wherever you cast your eyes, you can find an eagerness for union. There in the far off horizon, you can see the sky

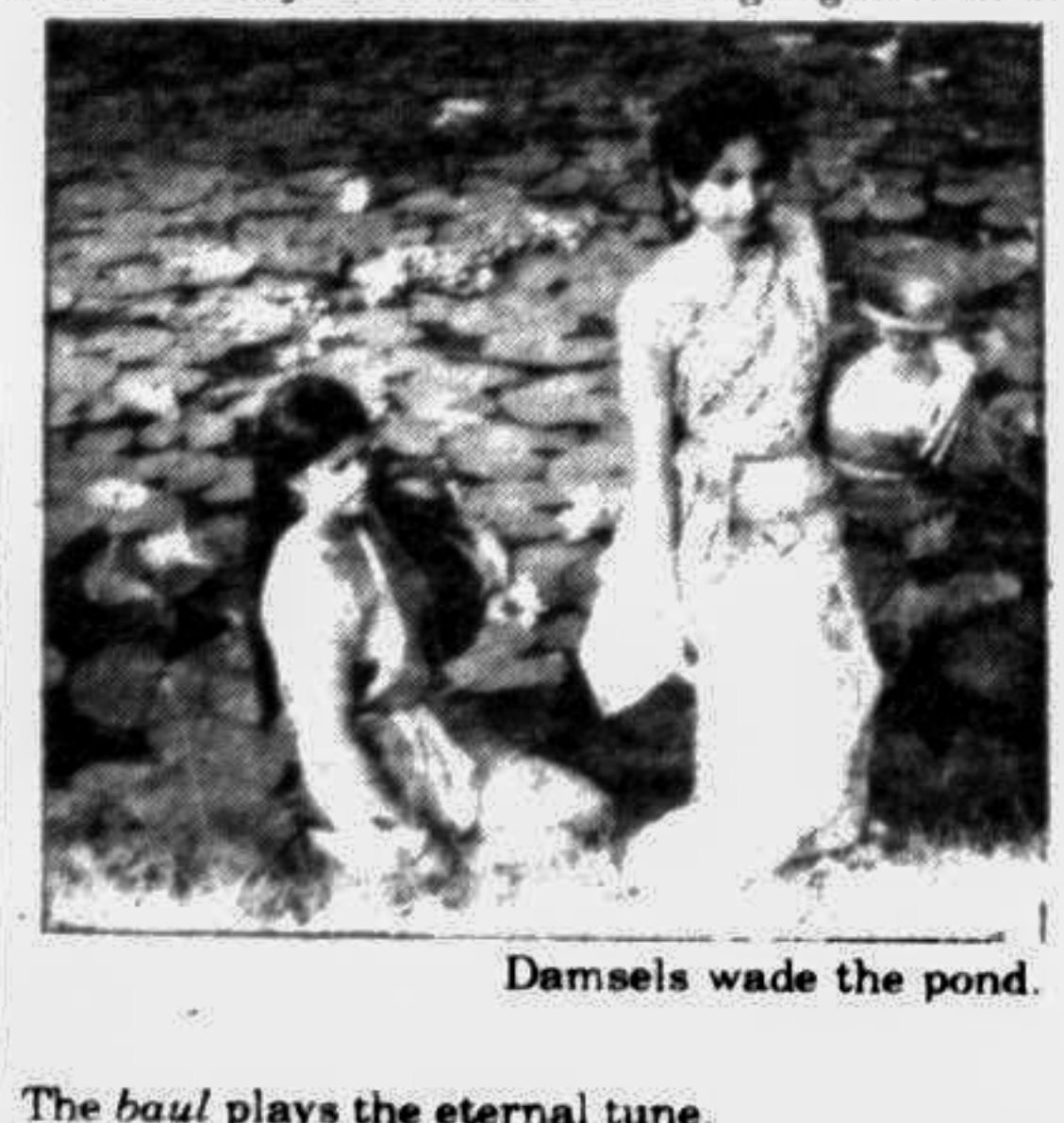
looming to unite with the earth. If you turn your eyes to the green meadows around, you find the soft creepers uniting with the leaves, and up there, the tree tops leaning over each other in cordial embrace. There flows the rippling river — now swelling at the touch of love, now emaciating at the lover's desertion. If you follow her, you will find two rivers uniting together in a

manner that it will be difficult to think of their separate entities. Thus, in this nerve-centre of the sub-continent, we find the Aryans, the non-Aryans, the Dravidians, the Chinese, the Shakas, the Huns, the Pathans and the Mughals mixing up to turn into a new body. As a matter of fact, the devotion of this soil has always been directed towards finding unity in diversity. The characteristic

of this soil is what tends to unite all men together. So the songs of humanity could be heard over the discrimination of races and nationalities. Bangladeshis can easily surmount the wall of narrowness and meanness and thus they are bright and great with their identity as Bangalee. No superstition can stand as impediment to their way of advancement. It is the sense of humanity that shapes the core of their faith. A sense of union that binds all men together is the religion of this land.

'Says Lalou, I fail to find any difference among the nationalities. The Muslim men are given 'Sunna' but what about their women? The Brahmins wear sacred threads: but how to identify their women?'

On the rivers and the plains of the country, the songs and music of love and union can be heard as such. Therefore, the young boys and girls of this habitation wear the dancing eyes. In this loving abode of



Damsels wade the pond.



Clouds greet the river, but the boats take on.



Melody of music pervades the air.

The baul plays the eternal tune.

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