

# A Nostalgic Trip to Calcutta; Changes in West Bengal's Creative Field; and You Pay a Tax for the Luxury of Visiting India

**A** NOSTALGIC journey is usually a sad one. The roads that one once knew so well suddenly look narrow and hopelessly congested; the houses and familiar buildings appear rundown, badly in need of repairs; and faces of friends you meet after a long time look old, almost unrecognisable.

Making a trip to Calcutta last week, after some 17 years, I kept the inevitable sadness at the back of my mind and tried my best, somewhat in vain, to feel a certain excitement on returning to my favourite city, whether one calls it the "City of Joy" or an area of despair. The drive from the airport to a downtown hotel being a fairly long one, there was also time to rationalise. After all, this great city is as much a victim of reckless urbanisation as Dhaka, Lagos or Cairo. All these cities — and others — had received warning signals of what lay ahead in their future well in time. They were all there in the files of various corporations, collecting dust, but very little happened in reality. Herein lies the tragedy of Calcutta, the tragedy for some 10 million people who live in this metropolis and its suburb, the tragedy for some 10 million people who live in this metropolis and its suburb, the tragedy for tens of thousands who survive in mud huts lining both sides of the airport road — for miles. Has the 15-year rule of West Bengal by a Left Front government made any difference to the impoverished slum population? I am told, under any other administration, it would have been worse. This is of course a common explanation heard in any developing country to justify the failure in any field.

I recalled my last drive from the airport to the city. That was in 1974. I had shared the taxi — just another decades-old Ambassador — with two New Zealand journalists who were part of our five-member team to see some projects funded by the Asian Development Bank. During the ride, both were totally speechless. When we had arrived at the hotel, I had felt a little worried and had asked, "Are you two alright?" One had just mumbled, "So many people!" Well, during that one-hour drive, they might have seen perhaps more than half, if not the whole, of the 2.5 million population of New Zealand. This was what we might say a most telling example of culture shock.

This time, my travelling companion — my Singaporean wife — felt more shaken by the reckless driving of the taxi — yes, an Ambassador — through the virtually unlit Airport Road than by people. Having come to the conclusion which she mentioned to me much later that the driver was probably drunk, she sat on the edge of the seat, nervous and speechless, covering most of her face with

her scarf against smoke and dust. It is hard to say which would win in a competition for reckless driving, an overcrowded bus in Bangladesh honking its way from Dhaka to Tongi or a Calcutta taxi carrying some nervous foreigners who are on a first visit to this great metropolis. Oddly enough, as a friend puts it, there are much fewer road accidents in Calcutta than we have on the highways connecting Dhaka with the neighbouring towns. May be this is what encourages taxi drivers in the West Bengal capital to be more and more reckless on the mistaken — and dangerous —

very much within the reach of a typical middle class family.

In the process, Calcutta has become far more cosmopolitan and outward-looking than it was a decade ago, so say my local friends, accepting new trends in its stride. But there are also casualties. If the number of modern art galleries is on the increase — in one Bangladeshi painter Bulbon Osman is currently having a successful solo exhibition — few people talk about new trends in the theatre movement, as we did in the fifties or even in sixties when Utpal Dutta was one of a few pio-

neers in the field or about new Bengali movies. Cynics would say that there is a king of a vacuum in West Bengal's creative field, while friends of Bangladesh would speak admiringly about the stage plays in Dhaka for setting new trends, without even having a modern well-equipped theatre complex yet.

I spent hours looking at pavement bookshops where English-language publications — books, journals and newspaper — outnumber Bengali ones. Judging by what I saw at one such shop at Chworonghee, there is a growing sustained interest in contemporary regional and international problems handled by well-known academicians in well-produced books. Writing in journalistic style which they have obviously acquired with some efforts, these experts offer a tough competition to average columnists in newspapers. Not surprisingly, a regular column by a former Finance Minister of West Bengal, Ashoke Mitra, titled "Cutting Corners" that appears in *The Telegraph*, is just as readable and incisive as anything I have read from any established newspaper writer. Mitra has now put together a selection of his column in a book which is selling well.

Some of these publications should find their way to our bookshops in Dhaka. What's more, our own English-language books by local experts on contemporary problems in Bangladesh should be available in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi. However, as one friend who has studied this issue closely said that unfortunately too many of our publications in this category are based on heavy research studies or are just collection of essays by different experts. They may be useful for some university libraries, but they cannot catch the attention of average educated reader who feels more comfortable with contemporary journalists style than with academic jargon-ridden writing.

**W**HILE settling the bill at our hotel in Calcutta, I noted, to my bewilderment, that we had been charged a sum of \$48 as "Luxury Tax".

"What is this tax for?" I asked the cashier. "Does it go to the government or to the hotel?" "To the government, Mr Ali," he replied promptly.

"What is this for anyway?" I asked again. "This is for the luxury for being in India," he replied in a dead serious voice, as if closing the subject.

As we were in hurry to get to the airport, I asked no more questions. Instead, we got into waiting taxi — another Ambassador — and drove to Dum Dum in real luxury!

## MY WORLD

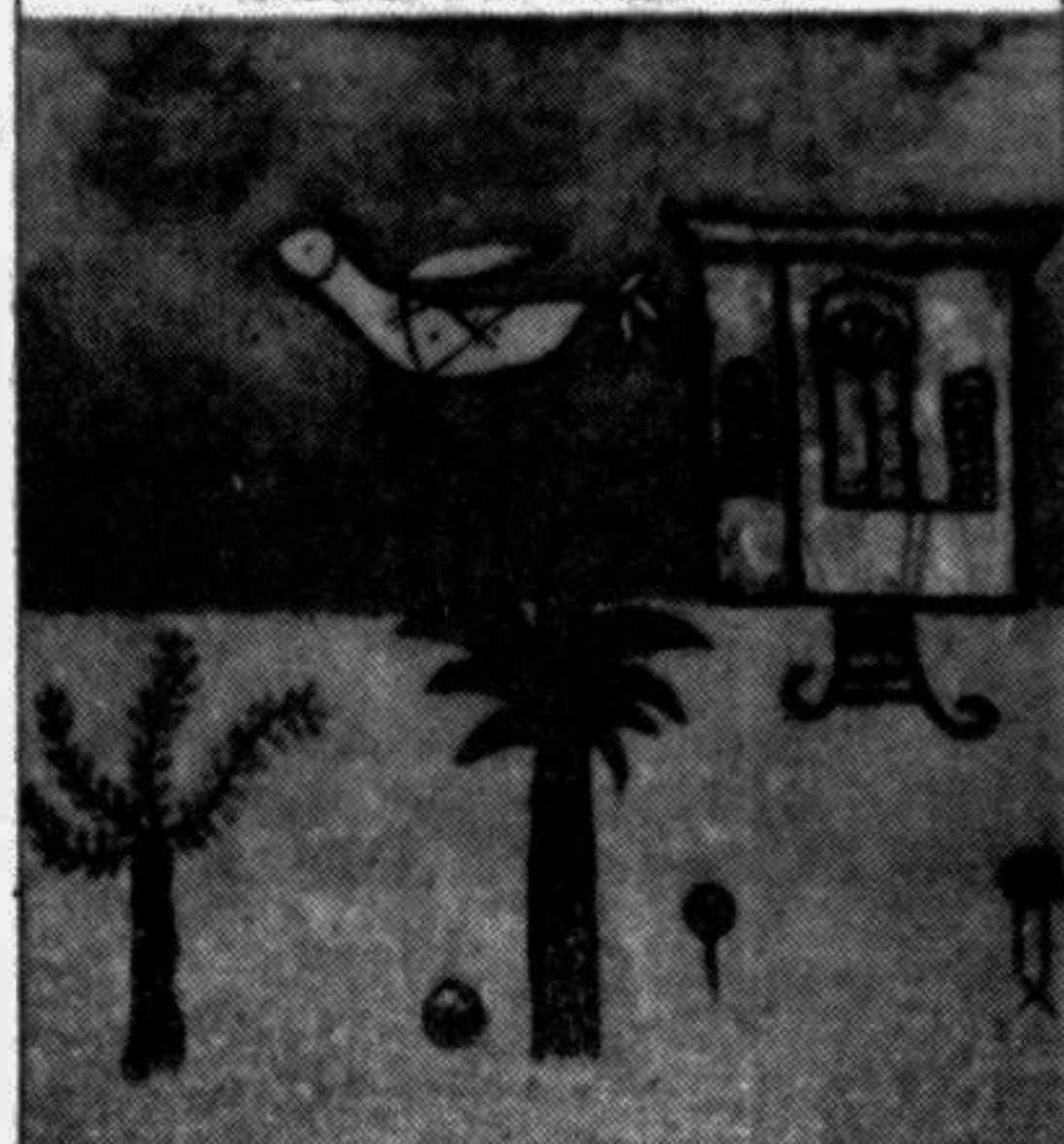
S. M. Ali

assumption that they are not endangering the lives of their passengers — or their own.

**T**HANKS to the comforts and amenities provided by the hotel and much consideration shown to us by local and Bangladeshi friends, we eventually settled down to a routine, finding enough time to discover Calcutta as it is today instead of mourning over the loss of the city that I knew as a young college student.

The process of change is really on, not in a particularly spectacular fashion as it would be in such affluent capitals as Bangkok, Singapore or Kuala Lumpur but in a slow perceptible manner — here, I am quoting from observation of our local friends — touching the lives of common people. The underground Metro has proved an undoubted success, but it does not cover enough of the city to reduce congestion on over-crowded streets, especially during office hours. Trams are being phased out, just as well for a few broken down jam-packed ones we see still running are pathetic reminders of superb-looking gleaming extremely comfortable carriages we used to ride, sometimes just to spend a leisurely afternoon in good company, in the forties and fifties. Shops are well-stocked and restaurants along the Park Street, neatly furnished and modern in decor, serve Indian, continental and Chinese cuisine, complete with wine lists. One need not belong to the high income group to sample good food in a fairly fashionable restaurant and sip a glass of India-made wine. Such delights appear to be

### CALCUTTA THE NOSTALGIA PAINTING EXHIBITION BY BULBON OSMAN



The front cover of the catalogue of the painting exhibition by Bangladeshi artist, Bulbon Osman. A review of the show will appear later in the *Weekend Magazine* of this paper.

## Secret of Enamels

by Pascale Teinac

Light, fire and transparency are the key-words for a modern-day alchemist and magician who has rediscovered the secret of enamels of the past and who follows the tradition of the master glassworkers of medieval cathedrals.

**R**AYMOND Mirande has brought unhoped for joy to all those who gazed, enraptured, at the splendour of Byzantine, Venetian or Limoges enamels and, with a touch of nostalgia, thought that such marvels would never be created again. Raymond Mirande's enamels, real metal pictures glowing with colour and light, can be hung on the wall, placed on a table or stroked with one's fingertips, and his stained-glass windows are not only intended to brighten up churches, but

also to bring a message of light into private homes or public establishments.

In fact, nothing predestined this poet and student of literature, born in Bordeaux in south-west France in 1932 to, revive this art of fire and transparency, unless it was the sight of a decorated centrepiece on a Limoges enamelled ring "of a red that I can still see glowing today", says Mirande.

This decorative centre resulted in a turning point in his life. A few months later,



## Dhaka's Changing Skyline: Symbols of Modernity or Deterioration?

by Iftekhar Ahmed

**U**PWARD, skyward they rise. Reaching up with constant sprouting, these geometric tentacles of brick and concrete, these ivory towers are newcomers to this beloved metropolis of ours. Yet these "Johnny-come-lately" surely know how to make their presence felt. Dwarfing all their immediate surroundings they rise with unflinching energy, uncompromisingly standing aloof from other familiar-built forms.

The prodigious construction of high-rise building is a relatively recent phenomenon in Dhaka, probably reaching its present peak during the last five years or so. But the roots of this development were formed at earlier periods: for the sake of conciseness, the early roots can be traced back to the immediate post-colonial period. The then newly instituted government of East Pakistan undertook several development programmes at that time, mainly spurred by the intention to industrialize (and modernize) trades and counselled by the then popular "growth economist" ideologies. Much of this development efforts was concentrated in the primate city — Dhaka — largely due to personal and political interests of the ruling elite. Hence Dhaka "grew" rapidly. So rapidly, indeed, that in less than four decades the range of the transformation was from a redolent, woody, riverfront town to this present urban conglomeration.

In the 50s, the early influx of rural migrants and Dhaka's rapid growth led the administration to construct four-storey "flats" in various parts of the city. These were not part of any integrated urban planning process, but were localized along pedestrian or low-traffic transportation nodes, which have since bloated up with congestion from the volume of unforeseen vehicular traffic. Of course, the low-income groups were completely excluded from this new housing provision, even though they were among the originally intended target groups. The flats were within affordable range of income and influence of lower-middle class groups, predominantly government clerical employees. This set the trend. While the need for affordable low-income housing has been largely ignored, a new development — high-density housing for higher-income urban groups — has come into existence.

This pattern has evolved in many other cities of the less developed countries, although at different rates of growth, yet mostly during a similar post-colonial time-span. Bombay is a



The crowding skyscrapers: can they push the slums away? Sketch by: Jeremy Trayner

classic example of this pattern. Initially, high-rise apartments were affordable to some lower-income groups, as they were then being mostly rent out, even though the real poor could never dream of competing for such housing. However, over the years, to increase their profit margin, the private developers mainly began to sell apartments and the supply of rentals has rapidly dwindled.

Now, Bombay being a large growth center, attracts many migrants, among them many are young or new professionals. Such groups cannot afford to buy apartments, they are only able to rent. Thus being excluded from the supply of genteel housing, they have to resort to informal housing, often in slums or slum-like areas; in fact this phenomenon has promoted certain interest groups to build slum housing to cater to the demand — the artificial demand created by uncontrolled real-estate activity. Ironically, the more the provision of high-rise apartments, all the more the formation of shanty towns. The scenario of young lawyers, engineers and even doctors, residing in slum-like housing, in the shade of tower blocks, has

become common in Bombay.

This same episode is being gradually enacted in Dhaka too, albeit at a lower rate than Bombay or Bangkok, yet alarmingly enough in its rapidity. In time, it will further widen the class hierarchies inherent in our society. While the developers and their agents reap profits from the "Nouveaux Rich", our city will perhaps be overtaken by uncontrolled growth, deterioration of the already crippled environment and further degradation of human life.

Much more attention needs to be directed towards these issues of social and environmental deterioration, especially on the part of Urban Planning and City Improvement agencies. In recent years, many development agencies are moving in the direction of Urban Resource management-oriented policies, instead of the former capital-intensive projects. Control and development of the informal sector, not only the public sector, may eventually allow the uncontrolled growth to take place within the parameters of an integrated urban planning process.

Much has been written about the social and psychological effects of high-rise build-

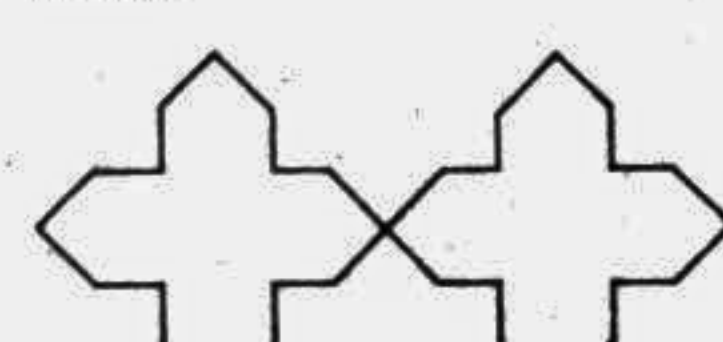
ings. This is not the place to dwell extensively upon these effects; the only conclusion I am inclined to draw at this point is that high-rises do not provide the adequate wholesome environment for children, but turn into isolated habitats for the old and handicapped. Distance from the ground and nature often has grave implications for human mental health.

In recent years in some countries, notably the Scandinavian ones, attempts are being undertaken to design high-rises in more human ways. The provision of high-level garden and park areas, upper level shopping and promenades are among the main features of the attempts. The basic idea is to create street-level human contacts and natural environments at the upper levels, to nullify the bleakness generated by a completely man-made product heaped in repetitious order. Street-level landscape elements, such as fountains, sculptures and trees, when skilfully laid out, may create pleasant environments which provide relief from the starkness. The necessary transition from the human scale to the monumental is allowed to occur through the utilization of such landscape elements. The design of openings — doors, windows, ventilators — as well as balconies, porches, sunshades — elements which lend continuity to the facade — are given special attention. The surface texture and color, light and shade zones, all contribute to the creation of the building as a whole. A thoughtful variation of these aspects of design, along with careful selection, matching, lay-out and landscaping, may introduce a degree of humaneness in these otherwise stark environments.

I would tend to suggest that there is an overall neglect of the need for such attention in our city. Such attention is often beyond the scope of the high-profit-oriented, low investment budget of the private developer. Thus, we are stranded with these parcels of shoddy, shabby blocks — low-grade finishing materials, awkward and inconvenient arrangements — quite box-like in their repetitions, much like overblown pigeonholes. Each apartment is the same, the lack of individuality and variation represented by the cold, monotonous facades of the buildings.

To some, these buildings symbolize modernity, grandeur, power and affluence. But as the eye moves down to the street level, a flurry of human activity, densely packed, comes into view: Rickshaws

scurrying and becoming entangled in jams, street-hawkers vying for space on the sidewalk, grounded and frustrated cars honking in fury, ramshackle bamboo and thatch structures, emaciated women sleeping with a mob of babies, beggars, scam-artists, prostitutes, mendicants, informal entrepreneurs, goats, street-dogs and cattle, puddles, garbage, ditches — all intermingling in resolute contrast to the barren towers. As the city gradually melts into the quagmire, chaos and clutter, the apartments enclose and protect their inhabitants within their sterile sanctity. Will the quagmire not froth and seethe in furious pain and eventually aspire to engulf everything around in its chaotic range of environmental annihilation?



### THE PRAYER I SAY THE EVERY OTHER DAY

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

Please, my dear Taskmaster, pull me wholly to where I belong Where in deep silence I may make my deep-breathed utterances

Where my feelings grow evermore strong Whilst my alter-ego's disparate gaze, forage and embrace most wistfully I long.

Yes, sir, I long for her opulent smile, The smile without any trace of guile. Yes, I cherish to be detained in her little prison, The little prison where in cordial detainment I can read my own profile. Sir, you call us all to your own grotesque colosseum. In great befuddlement, we rather are stuck in the marathon business of a

workaholic an idler. We fail to aspire to obviate the thrust-on mandate, fairness and decorum. Just bustling with trifle details, our time hums. Sir, the prayer I say the every other day is simply this one: Whereby I try to reach my un-spectacular world, my divine arbiter.

Please, my dear Taskmaster, pull me wholly to where I belong. Here, with a thousand others I try to touch your sampan.

my own Joan

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

Remember, I wrote to you several months ago when I had to break up with a boyfriend of 6 years who had suddenly felt the need to get married to appease society and his family. He has since been visiting me complaining of his new wife and how substandard she is. I have told him that I have always been a good friend to him and will continue to do so within limitations and provided no romantic ties are attached because I think he is a very weak person and thereby does not deserve the love and respect of a decent woman.

Well, the problem now is that since I have broken up with this man, I have tried to involve myself in several interests, go around and mix with other friends, but the bottom line is that I am extremely lonely. I am still young enough to want to enjoy life in a befitting manner. I still need the companionship of a decent good man. Unfortunately, in our country, there is no place where a brokenhearted female could go. We do not have a 'lonely hearts club' or any such organization that could help women like myself to get over a difficult period in their lives. I do want to remarry someday, but of course, I would be extremely cautious in my choice the next time. Please advise where do broken hearts go when they need the understanding company of a man?

L. L. Lalwata

Dear L. L.,

No, I am sorry, there is no 'lonely hearts club' that I could recommend you to. This is a very unfortunate fact of our society that women do not have the same options as men when they want to have a decent, understanding relationship with a man. A man can get married to the woman of his choice at any age, but for a woman the case is very different. Society disapproves of a middle aged woman wanting to have a relationship with a man, and it is only acceptable if she chooses to marry a man years older than her who either is a widower or is divorced. Under the circumstances, what advice can I give you? Try to build your own support group of like minded people who have similar problems. Also get involved in activities that are of interest to you. Don't let it get you down, fight it psychologically and mentally. Remember, you are not the only one in the world who is lonely and besides, it is better than being trapped in an unhappy relationship or marriage. Get on with your life and develop the qualities that you already have. Who knows, someday you might meet the right person.

Dear Mita,

You have nicely touched on the problem expressed by a woman who doesn't want her daughter to have children right away and does not want to be used as a full time baby sitter. You have been very neutral but Sultana of Eskaton seems to be displeased with your answer. I also agree with you that we have to learn to strike a balance between the western culture and our values. We should bear in mind that not everything of western culture is bad or harmful. It is shameful that Rashida Alam of Naya Palan has abused you as being too modern. I want to tell her that she may disagree with you, but has no right to abuse you. I am waiting for your reply.

Md Delowar Hossain,

Ex-student of English, University of Dhaka

Dear Delowar,

Forgive me, but I did not understand your question. What is it that you want to know? The lady in question, Ms Rashida Alam, merely disagreed with me, neither was she displeased nor did she abuse me. I encourage people to express their opinion and ask advice on family related problems.

Dear Mita,

Recently my husband has started travelling a lot. He is hardly at home for two weeks and this is creating tension among us. The children are also unhappy as they never see their father. My husband is a businessman and very successful. He said he has to travel if we are to maintain our present lifestyle. I used to agree with him before, but now I think it is not worth it. What will I do with so much money if there is no peace of mind? What advice can you give me, Mita?

Salma, Motiheel, Dhaka

Dear Salma,

Many wives of successful businessmen have written similar letters to me. I am sure this is not a recent problem, but you have ignored to address it when it first started. Perhaps the temptation for a comfortable lifestyle is difficult to resist and quite understandable so. Anyway, what is important is that you now realize that there is a problem and it is not too late to communicate this to your husband. Have a serious talk with him, tell him your concerns, make him realize what he is missing and what your children are missing. The solution is not very easy and nothing will happen overnight, the important thing is to make him realize too that this is not an ideal situation and the family should be composed of both the parents.