

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

Khagrachari: A Town Busy Staging the Theatre of the Absurd

by Sabir Mustafa, back from Khagrachari

It is a breathtaking sight. As the bus goes over the 1,874 ft. Alutla hills, the vast valley below basks in the winter sunshine. A collection of small villages and paddy fields, inter-connected by a network of newly-built roads comes into view as the bus roars down the hill. And swerves around corners. And hurtles over narrow, rickety culverts.

The bus rumbles over the Chengi Bridge and comes to a sudden halt, still a kilometre away from its destination. Passengers get off and line-up on the dusty sidewalk, ready to be searched.

It is the rule, and the police are there to enforce the rule. Here, guilt is presumed, and innocence still to be proven.

A policeman goes through the bus, looking at, prodding, squeezing baggages on the racks and on the floor. Outside, another uniformed man in high boots sizes-up the passengers, most of whom are Bengalees.

A young tribal boy, possibly a college student, is picked out from the crowd and asked to open his small bag. Nothing dangerous or seditious is found, and innocence is proven, but the suspicion lingers on, until another day, another check-post.

During its two-hour journey through the hills, the bus is stopped three times, and each time it is this same tribal boy who is searched. The boy remains expressionless. These hills are, after all, the land of his birth and those of his ancestors.

The last check over, the bus rumbles on through another sentry gate. On top of a low hill overlooking the bridge, the barrel of an automatic rifle pokes out from a thatched-roof hut, and the trooper inside keeps a watch on the road.

Welcome to Khagrachari town, and enjoy the Theatre of the Absurd.

No tourist is however encouraged to take a seat at this particular theater. Back at the entrance to the district 62km to the south, a huge, rusty old sign warns foreigners not to enter Khagrachari Hill District without getting prior permission of the Ministry of Home Affairs, due to "security reasons".

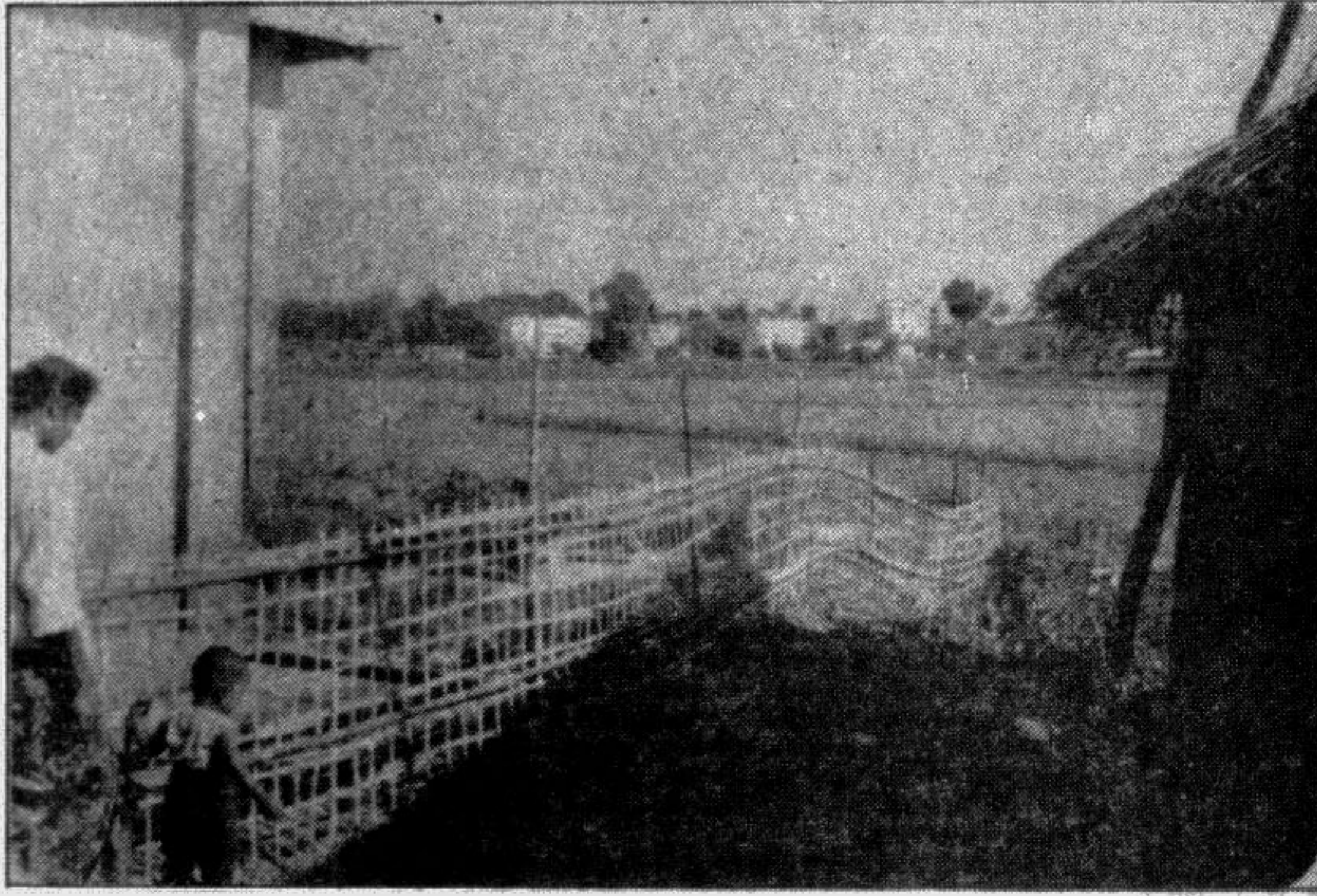
The severely weather-bitten look of the large metal sign-board indicates these "security reasons" have existed here for many seasons. This is a "special district", officials say, this is an "insurgent area". Those are the justifications for everything that follows.

Less than half a mile into Khagrachari district up the hilly road, the first military observation post comes into view.

A cone-shaped bamboo hut with a thatched roof, shaped like a Vietnamese farmer's hat, with a solitary Ansar armed with a .303 rifle standing inside. There is not a single tree standing within hundreds of yards of the post.

The scene is repeated every few hundred yards, with sentry posts on either side of the road. Every now and then, larger camps come into view, either along the road or on hill-tops just beyond.

Large huts, small huts, bases with pucca buildings; Ansars, BDR, Army; trucks, jeeps, ambulances. The only thing missing around these



BDR quarters amid the rural charm.

Khagrachari town may well have been a flashback from any of those Hollywood productions of Wild West stories. A town dominated by settlers, surrounded by not-too-amused natives and platoons of mechanised cavalry posted all around to keep out the "bandits".

It is a little misleading to call this place a town, since it is not more than a collection of villages. Virtually all the new, pucca buildings are there to house government agencies, like the BDR quarters across the paddy field from the Swanirvar Bazaar on the edge of the municipal area.

At a small, dusty library furnished with rickety benches named Huang Boi-O Ba at Swanirvar, a handful of young tribals sit. The books they have are precious to them. This library was closed down by the military for six months once. Another time, the army objected to the collection of the books which included life stories of such Bengalee revolutionaries like Surja Sen, Pritilata Wadeddar etc. Marx, Lenin, Che Guevara were also there, in addition to the usual novels and books on tribal history and culture.

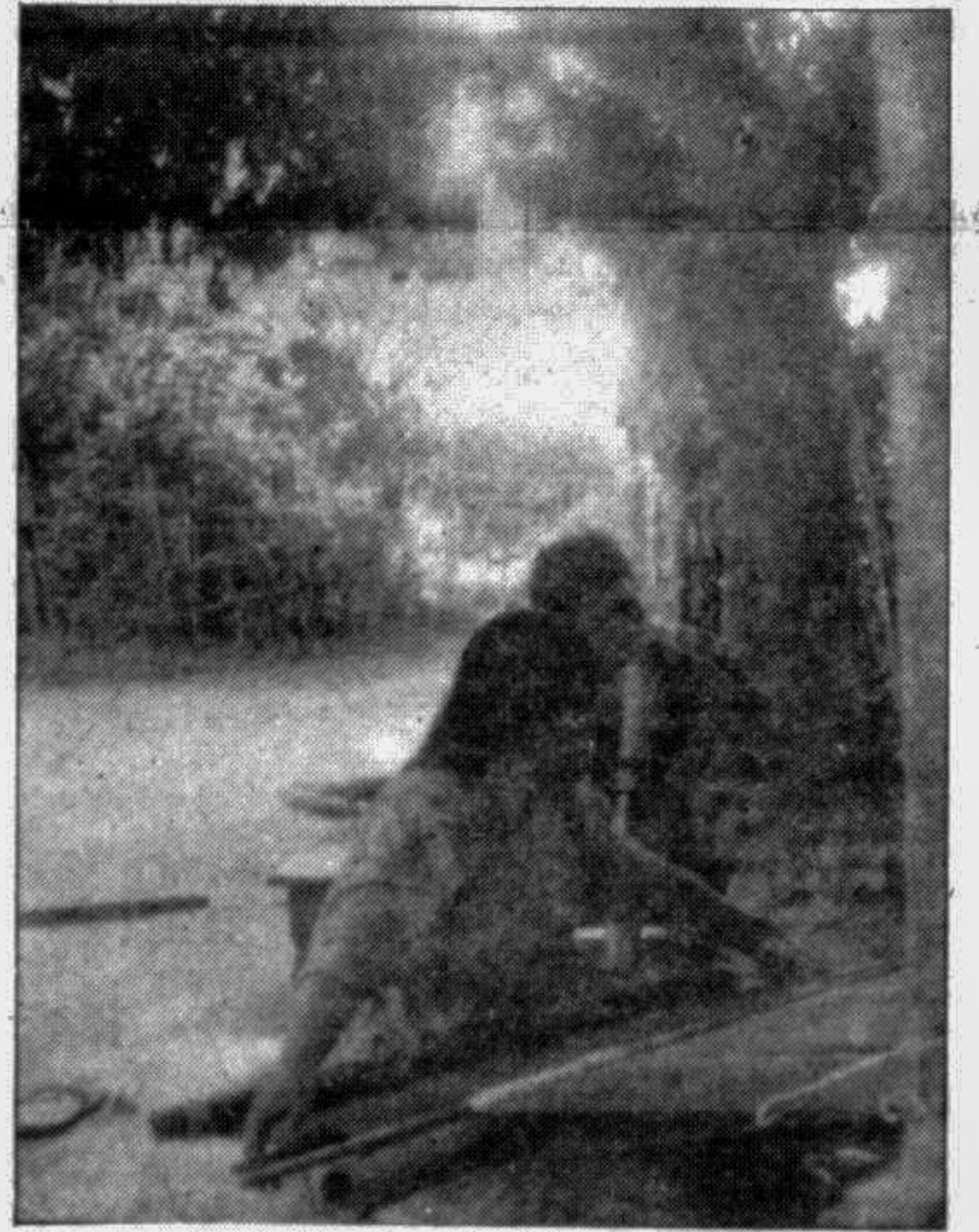
The army wanted the students to get rid of the "subversive" books, and even promised to pay for their replacements. Library organisers agreed, on one condition: army officers from the local zonal headquarters would have to be present at the book-burning and be photographed. The army, wisely, backed out.

Across the road from Huang Boi-O Ba, a small tea-stall, owned by a Bengalee like all others, a group of students talk about the problems, rather than the prospect of this hill

later heard that somebody had spread a rumour that the PCP were all Shanti Bahini and they were gathering to attack Bengalees. The students seem baffled as they talk.

The visitor too is baffled. At

the usual arches adorning the long front balcony. With paddy fields and thatched huts all around it, the building is supposed to represent "development". It looks more like a castle in the air.



Away from the check-posts and politics, tribal life goes on.

precisely 4pm, the BDR gate on the road a hundred yard from the tea shop is closed. All other exits from and entrances to Khagrachari municipal area are closed down simultaneously. No one can get

It is the Khagrachari Local Government Council (LGC) offices, a place which most tribals avoid with religious aversion. The watchful guard at the gate is probably wasting his time, as the place looks bereft of visitors inside or curious on-lookers outside.

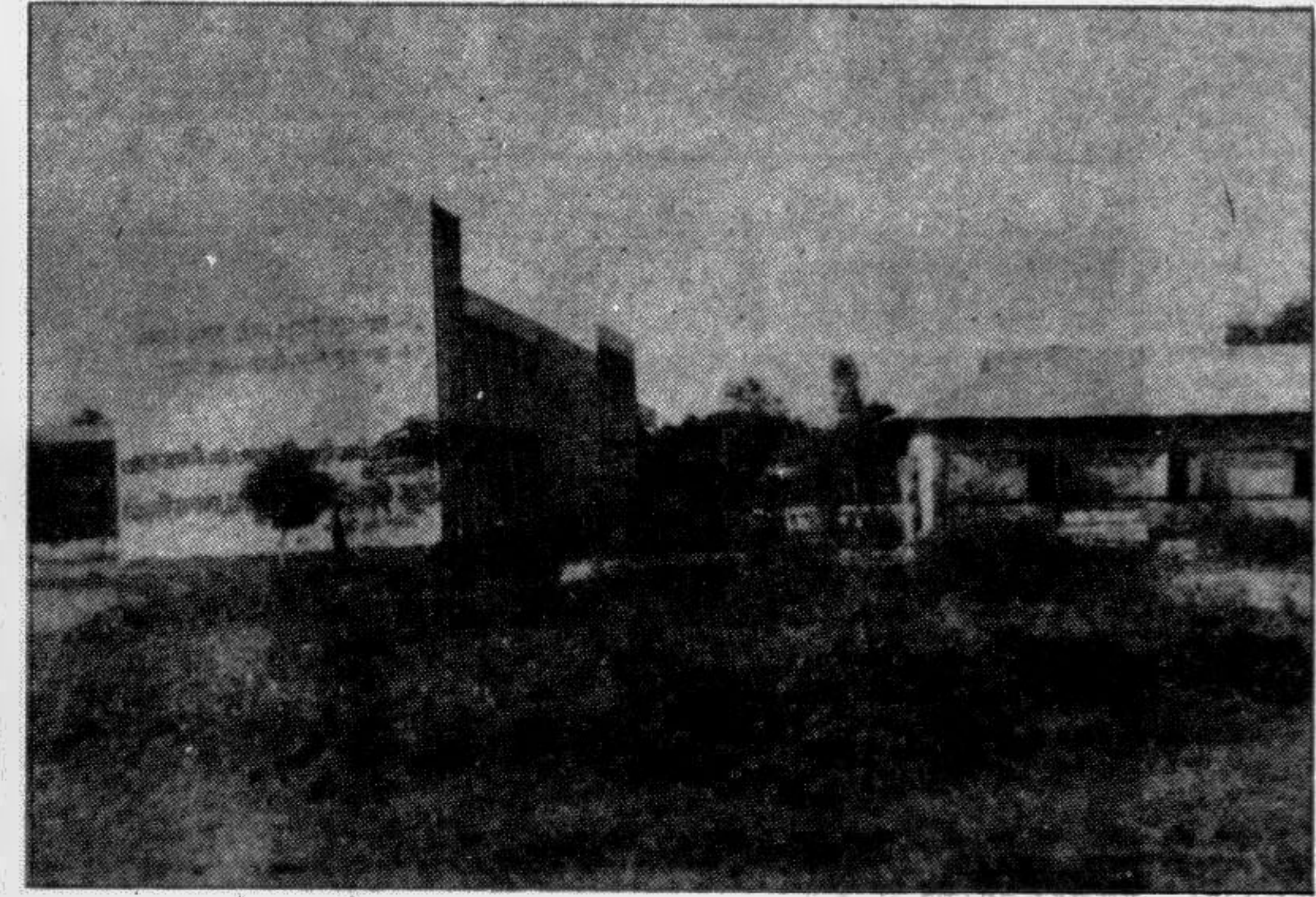
One cannot help looking around expecting to see cowboys riding in herds as one moves around the town centre. Like most Bangladeshi towns, Khagrachari's market place is a thriving one, with a main market whose ramshackle shops and narrow, crowded alleys gives the impression of high economic activity. But impressions can be very deceptive.

Unlike all other district towns, the businesses here, from rickshaws to furniture shops to restaurants, are owned, virtually 100 per cent, by non-locals. Bengalee settlers, very few of whom have been here for more than 15 or 20 years, have come from Rangpur, Chandpur, Comilla, Noakhali etc.

There are now 125,640 Bengalees in the district, out of a total population of 329,923.

Abdul Aziz, 26, came to Khagrachari three years ago, following in the footsteps of his parents who came in the late 1970s under a government-sponsored migration. Aziz is lucky. Although he lives in a cluster village set up by the army near the town with his parents, he has a job peddling rickshaw. He has to return to his village by 4pm and stay there till 10 the next morning.

There are may be four or five hundred families in our village and most of them have

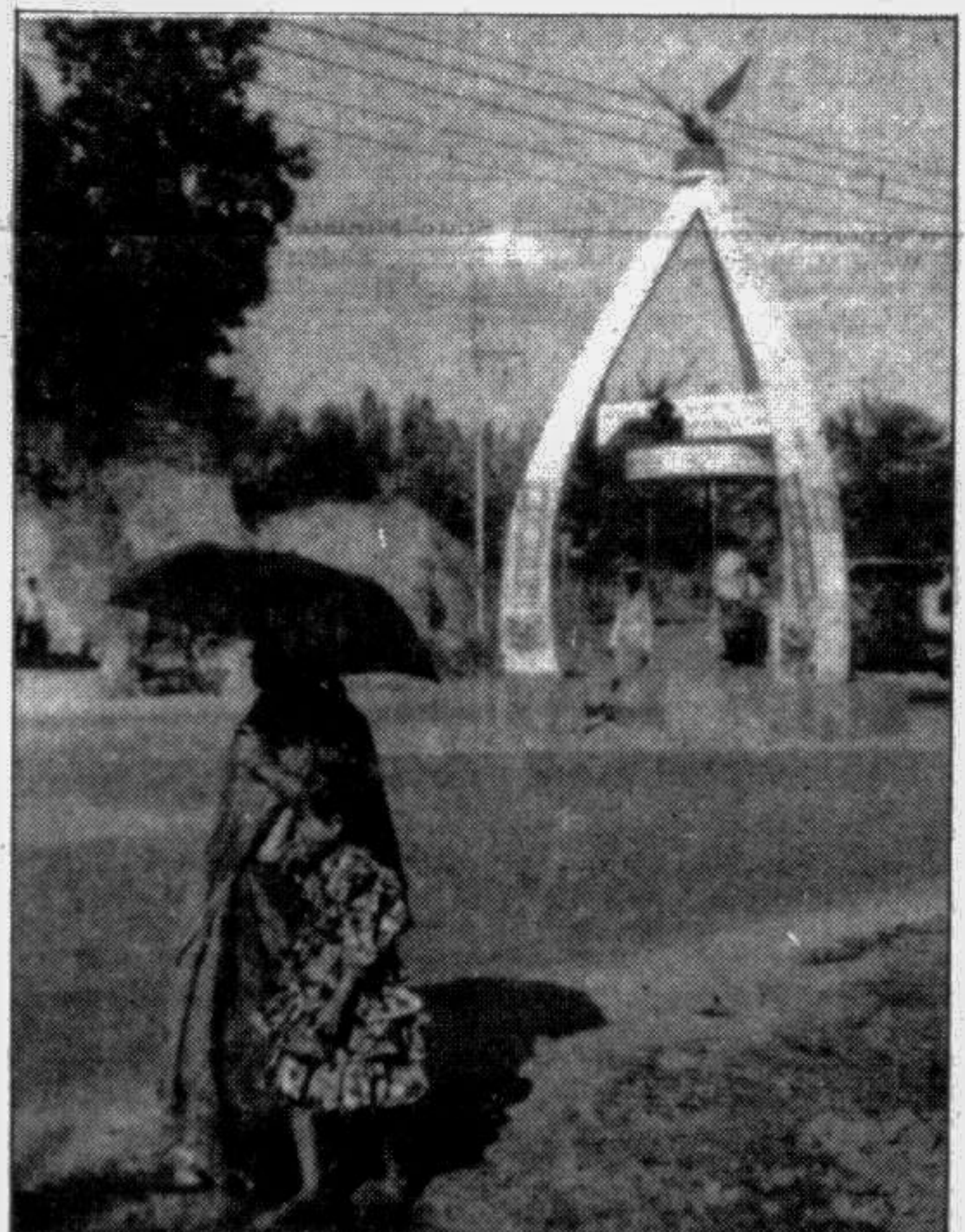


Protest and Pacification: Khagrachari Govt College (left) and students hostel 'Shanti Niketan' (right) built by the Army.

no work. Many of them were promised five acres of land by the government before they came, but they haven't got anything", he says.

The villagers are often detailed by the army to do work

man rights monitor and leader of the Pahari Gono Parishad. In addition, the 1989 government ban on lumbering, reiterated in 1991, is pushing tribal people to the brink of starvation, he says.



Traffic police waits for traffic, the dove waits for peace.

in the military camps or on the road. They survive mainly on the ration dished out by the army. It's a tough life, Aziz says, but most of them do not have anything to go back to in their home districts.

For the 198,635 tribals, or Paharis as they call themselves, life is tougher still, and getting worse by the day.

Thousands have been shifted by the army from their ancestral homes and patches of land, and taken to cluster villages. "They are little more than concentration camps", says one student.

This is an insurgent area, officials would tell you in response. The money for the rations for the villagers come from the army's special fund, and the district's civil administrators claim to know nothing about it.

Tribals have to get permission from the nearby army camp before they can leave their "protected" villages in the morning to go to their fields and work. That could mean starting at 11am, when all other farmers across Bangladesh start their day at five. Here, they also have to get back before four and hand in their implements at the camp.

Officials would tell you it is for their protection, rather like the cluster village programme run by the Americans in Vietnam in the late 1960s. But tribals have little doubt that the villages are meant to keep tribals confined in small areas. Under surveillance, under control, and away from contact with the Shanti Bahini guerrillas.

This is having a terrible impact on their economic life, says Shaikhin Chakma, a hu-

man rights monitor and leader of the Pahari Gono Parishad. In addition, the 1989 government ban on lumbering, reiterated in 1991, is pushing tribal people to the brink of starvation, he says.

On cluster villages, he has nothing to say. This is a security-related matter and within the jurisdiction of the army, he points out.

Instead, he is more interested in talking about the 209 development projects that have been implemented in the district, in addition to the nearly four crore taka spent by the LGC in the past three years.

Roads have been built, 165km paved and 190km unpaved; 356 primary schools, nearly all of them by the government; 166 madrasahs; three government colleges; five hospitals, 10 health centres.

"The Chaka tribe alone has a literacy rate of 56 per cent in this district, whereas the rate is around five among Bengalees", Mohammad, a gentle and amiable man, probably in his mid-40s, says. The average literacy rate in the district is 20 per cent, official figures say.

Interestingly, although Buddhists make up a majority in the district, there are 156 temples, as against 235 mosques for Muslims who form around 45 per cent of the population.

Monuments to the development efforts are there to see for all. A large, expensive-looking judge-courthouse is being built near the DC's office. Yet, this is a district which, according to Yaar Mohammad,

has such a low rate of crime that there are only 216 cases pending in the court at present.

Two huge structures, one with a dove of peace and another with a Shapla sculpture, adorn what must have been planned to become town centres.

These are traffic islands, and at a time, two policemen do traffic duty, sometimes with groups of armed Ansars just hanging around. They may well hang around, because the traffic cops do not seem to have much in the way of traffic to control.

The bureaucracy is quite bulging, as this 650,000-acre district, with high ground accounting for a massive 418,214 acre of it, is groaning under three types of administration: the army, the DC's office and the LGC, in that order.

Whatever the tribals may think of all these of rule-makers and command-givers crowding their lands, one group is certainly making the best of it.

Abdul Quddus, 28, of Feni used to run a restaurant. Couple years ago, he joined a furniture shop and hit the jackpot. Lumbering is banned, but the timber is coming in all the same, and the furniture trade is a roaring one.

He agrees the timber they get are illegal, but who are the buyers for all these smart and relatively cheap pieces of furniture made from illegal wood?

"You have to have permission from the DC's office to take furniture out of Khagrachari, and the ordinary public never get that permission. It is always men from the army, BDR, police and government officials who buy our furniture", he says, as he sits in the half-darkness, pierced by candle-light, in his shop.

The once-busy road outside is dying, as the clock ticks towards 8pm and the electricity still has not returned. "Sometimes people from the Forestry department come around and threaten to seize our stuff", Quddus says, without elaborating on how the problem is usually overcome.

He buys his timber mainly from tribals, who risk a great deal by felling trees illegally. One has to survive, and the men who make the rules must have their cheap, teak furnitures, right Quddus? He couldn't agree more.

The development work goes on, building castles in the air, as the bond of friendship that once existed between Paharis and Bengalees lie in tatters.

"We get on fine with Bengalees who came here on their own and settled on a piece of land or set up a business. But when the government started bringing hundreds of thousands together after 1975, and started to settle them anywhere and everywhere, we could not accept that", says a student, as he greets three Bengalee farmers harvesting paddy near the fire station.

Those Bengalees, as it turns out, came to Khagrachari "long time ago, during Pakistan times". Such exchanges of greetings are becoming rarer by the day in the town where every business signboard reminds people of where the owners belong. Comilla

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A new generation of tribal kids. omnipresent camps are trees. In many places, forlorn stems protrude from the earth, telling the world of their existence once upon a time.

A mile into the district, the first military convoy is sighted. Four trucks and an ambulance, winding their way gently up the slopes. First of many. Apart from highly-infrequent passenger buses, green vehicles with mounted machine guns seem the only traffic on these roads.



Least beautiful, this Khagrachari goat!

district. But they do not show too much of a keenness to pass options.

"I don't want to say anything. Why don't you just look around and see, then you'll know what this place is all about", says Kajori Marma, district president of the Pahari Chhatra Parishad.

They talk about the Oct. 13 incident in Dighinala, where a PCP rally was attacked by Bengalee settlers and an old man was killed. The students

out of the town nor get in, until 10am next morning. The road leading north through the Swanirvar area leads towards Panchari thana and, the students say, that area is even more heavily guarded than the one leading into Khagrachari town from Chittagong.

There is a peculiar structure standing on the road connecting Swanirvar with the town centre. A huge, two-block modern building, with

Video — the Great Pacifier

THE DEPUTY Commissioner seemed a little baffled by the comment. Video halls? What video halls? He said such halls were not in his jurisdiction.

Even though public screening of video films is illegal, such halls are found all over Khagrachari town, and very much in public too.

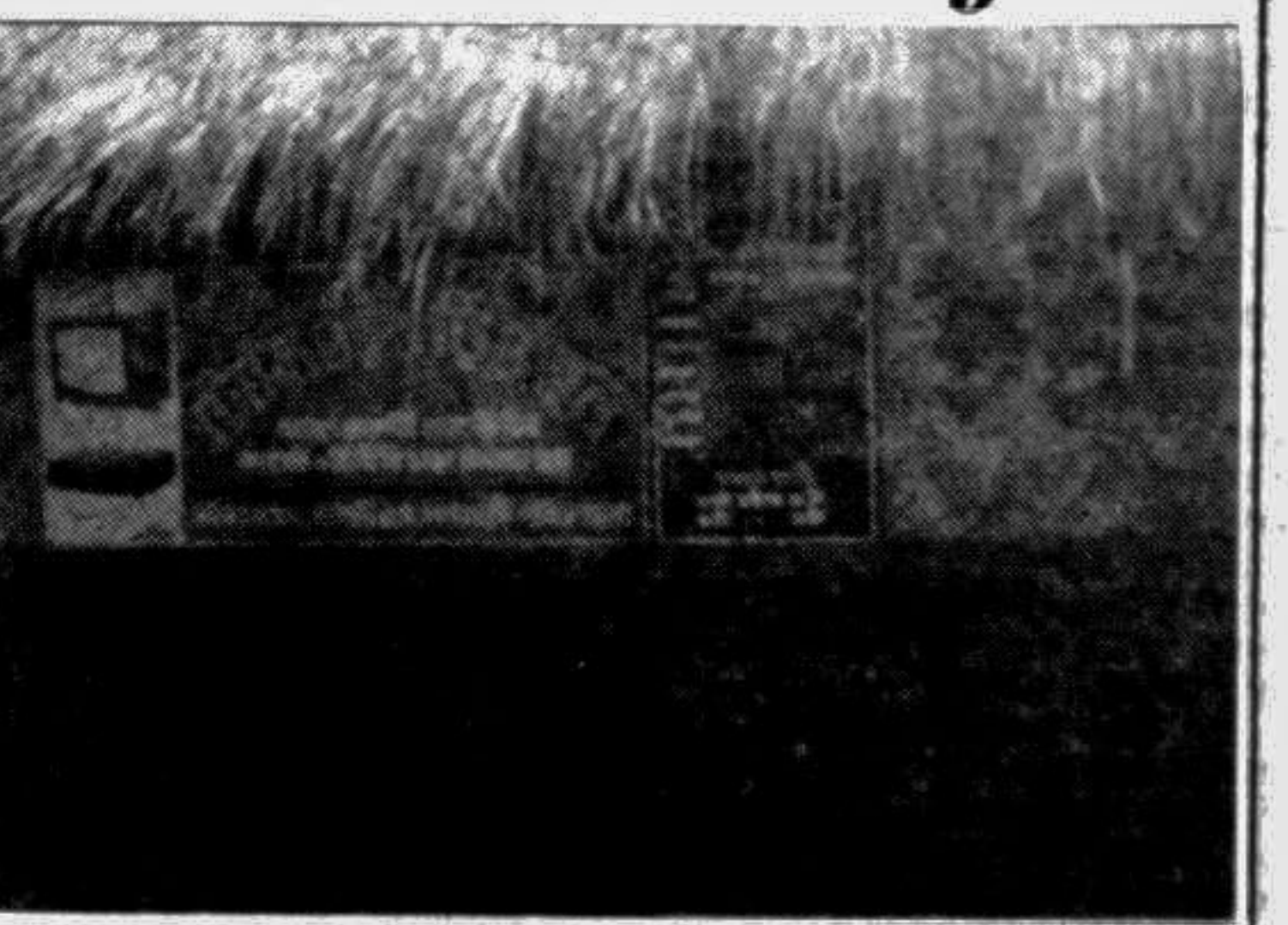
With names such as Chengi, Tokyo, Hill etc, these halls are housed in normal commercial premises as well as independent thatched-roofed huts.

Some of them have blackboards outside, announcing the week's schedule. Two shows per day, 3pm to 6pm, and 6pm to 9pm. The films are invariably Indian, mostly Hindi but also Bengali productions from Calcutta.

A 26-inch TV set sits high on a table, facing five or six rows of benches, enough to accommodate 50 to 60 people. At 10 takas per film per head, this is quite a lucrative business.

The DC knew nothing about it, possibly because the initiative for this business with dubious legal statutes came from the army.

"We went to the Zonal Commander and said we wanted to set-up a video hall, so that people would have something to do in the evenings, and the commander



A lucrative business, for those willing to cooperate. gave us permission", said a young Bengalee boy looking after the Chengi Video Hall near the town market.

The boy said the owner of the hall was a tribal man, and the hall was run by the local footballers' welfare association.

Interestingly, the army has allowed only tribals to open such halls. Tribal students say this is part of the army's Pacification Programme.

The army provides money to former Shanti Bahini men who have surrendered or other Paharis who cooperate with them. This is one way of paying them off", said one student.

There is however, another logic behind this unique venture.

With the gates of the town locked at 4pm, it is always wise to give the people something to amuse themselves with, least there be rumblings of unrest, born of boredom, inside the town.

There is only cinema hall in Khagrachari town, and that can hardly take care of the collective boredom, particularly in a place which has no other medium of entertainment.

Video halls, illegal or not, provides an outlet. —S.M.