

Some Gems from a Thousand Year Old Bangla Poetry

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever" so wrote John Keats, the hot favourite among Romantic poets, when he immortalized the Grecian Urn. The same can be said of the ancient Bengali verses known as the Carya Poems which share the similar bonds of mysticism as the Baul songs from which the great Rabindranath Tagore derived some inspiration. These poems were accompanied by music and sung with a particular raga which reminds the Western orientated somewhat of the ballad form, though the former is much shorter. They also share some common subjects for they often speak of love, war and the daily pursuits of life. However, the Carya poems are much more mystical in nature and a lot of pleasure in reading them comes from the purposely ambivalent character and double meanings of their imagery. Thus, one can peruse the same poem a few times and discover different levels of interpretation depending on one's mood or passage in life.

Originally the poems were written on palm leaves in old Bengali, but thanks to the dedicated scholarship of Hasna Moudud, an English translation has recently been published. Not only is the publication a visually aesthetic treat, as the reproductions of old terracotta panels remind us of past glories, but according to the author, her translation is "for the first time, entirely based on the primary source and a microfilm of the original manuscript".

The appreciation of this genre of Bengali literature is somewhat esoteric (and may not be everyone's cup of tea) for they are deliberately shrouded in secrecy — as intended by the Carya authors who were among the "siddhas" (saints) initiated by Lord Buddha himself. These 84 siddhas are venerated in the Buddhist faith and most of them came from Bengal. Popular folk lore has it that they lived between the 8th and 12th centuries during the Pala dynasty.

The author, in her introduction, gives an erudite history of the Bengali language from the early days of the Pala kings right down to the present. Along the way, we also get a concise view of the history, social structure and various conquests by the Mauryas, the Pala kings, the Senas, the Turks and successors right down to the British. Foreign domination was followed by integration and inter marriages with the Bengalis. Having such a rich and colourful past, it is easy to understand why the Bengali language is so complex and its grammar so intricate.

What must have been a landmark in the history of Bengali literature took place in 1907 with the discovery of the palm-leaf manuscript of Caryagiti by Bengali Buddhist poets. Indian scholar, Haraprashad Sastri found it in the Royal Archives of Nepal and it is said to be the oldest example of Bengali poetry.

Although the language in these poems are couched in images which may sometimes appear baffling to the uninitiated, Hasna Moudud has thoughtfully provided some guidelines to facilitate their understanding. She has also given brief sketches of the poets' lives. Her translation into English allows the Westerner educated a rare opportunity to have a glimpse of the cultural wealth of old Bengal. Although the songs belong to ancient times, they are still sung in Nepal and Bhutan, with dances performed to their music.

Reproduced with kind permission are a few of the poems and the reviewer's modestly proffered interpretations.

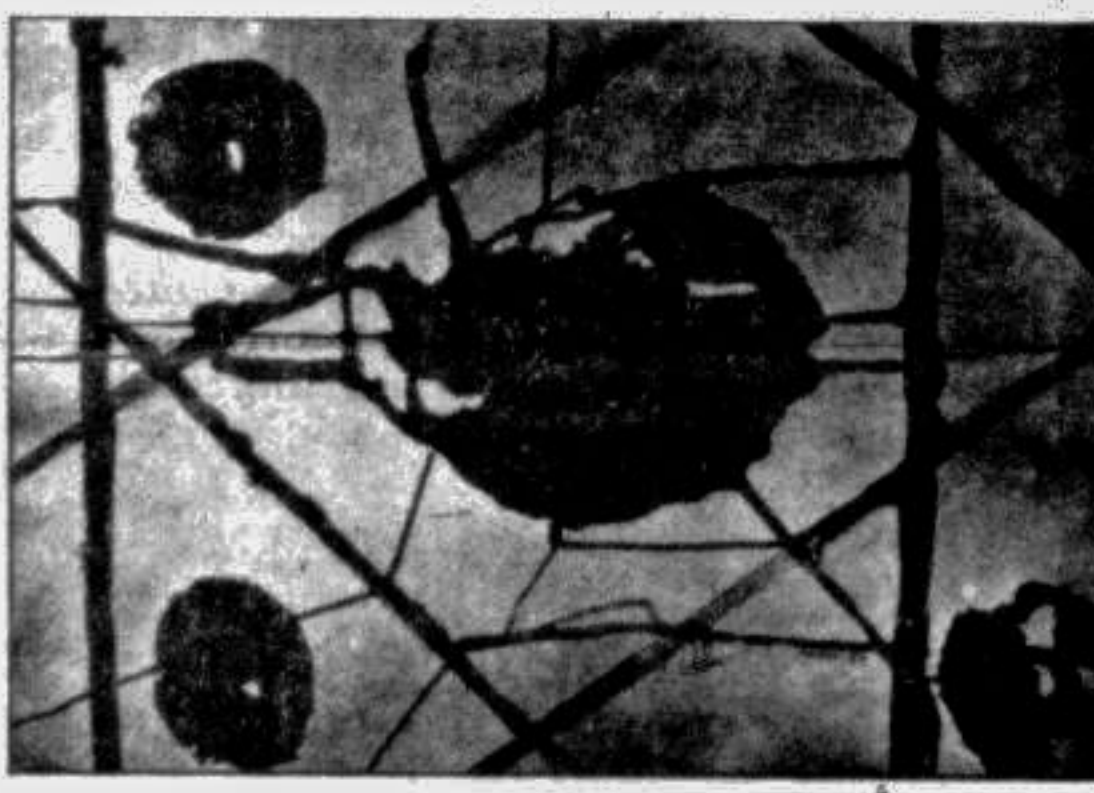
THE exhibition of Bulbon Osman's paintings in water colour, pastel and oil media at Calcutta's Center Art Gallery was a major event in India's cultural capital during November. The exhibition not only enabled the art enthusiasts of Calcutta to see at first hand the work of a dedicated artist from Bangladesh, his predilections, joys and sorrows, but symbolised, once again, the emotional bridge spanning two human settlements that are divided by the same language. Bulbon Osman, currently on the faculty of the Institute of Fine Art at Dhaka, has been busy painting since about 1987 and has already had a number of solo exhibitions to his credit. Happily for Calcuttans, the recent exhibition was retrospective in nature, presenting a rich variety of creations and thus revealing the images, motifs, symbols, dreams and nightmares that occupy the mind of the creator who, after all, is not a visitor from another planet. What made the artist's many friends in this city particularly happy is that Osman was immensely delighted by the response of the visitors to the gallery, including, in particular, the local art critics.

Bulbon Osman's Paintings Shown in Calcutta

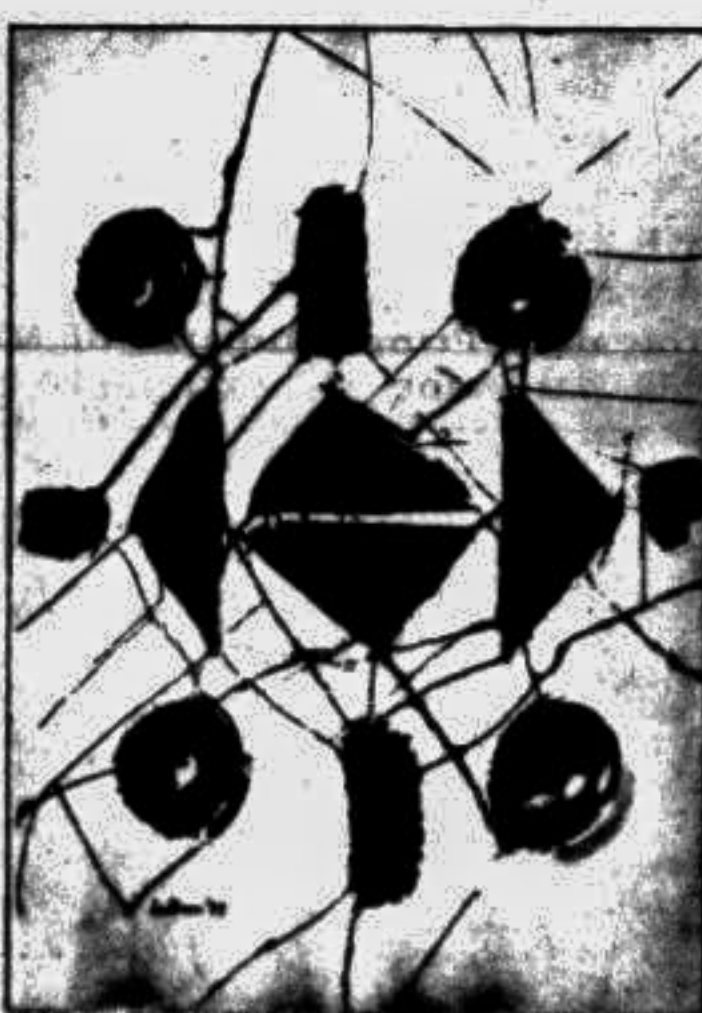
by Samir Dasgupta



The Festival



The Duck and the Eggs



The Kite and the Sky

By contrast, Bulbon Osman's endeavour has been limited to what may be described as artistically valid arrangements of the chosen motifs and symbols, mostly associated with auspicious occasions. It remains debatable whether the timelessness of Bengali culture or tradition is clearly reflected in this kind of honest but mechanical conceived configurations on canvas. One is also tempted to ask: "Isn't the oil medium fundamentally in conflict with a tradition that once thrived exclusively on vegetable dyes and earth colours?"



The Bull and the Bird

High Commissioner in Calcutta, Mr. Syed Noor Hossain, who inaugurated the exhibition, broke the news that the Deputy High Commission would soon have a gallery on its own premises, which would house a large variety of contemporary paintings and sculptures from Bangladesh. This certainly is a cheering message in that a permanent gallery of such objects of art will build yet another bridge of understanding between the two Bengals. Hopefully, a part of the proposed gallery will be earmarked for round-the-year exhibitions by Bangladeshi artists.

A small set of drawing-like brush-and-ink compositions, quite clearly raising images of the liberation war, have earned applause from the more discriminating among the critics and artists in Calcutta. The starkness of these compositions are simply arresting and it tells the story far more vividly than many a full-blown painting on the subject by other artists may have done. The artist's repertoire gives the impression that, subsequently, he has gone through

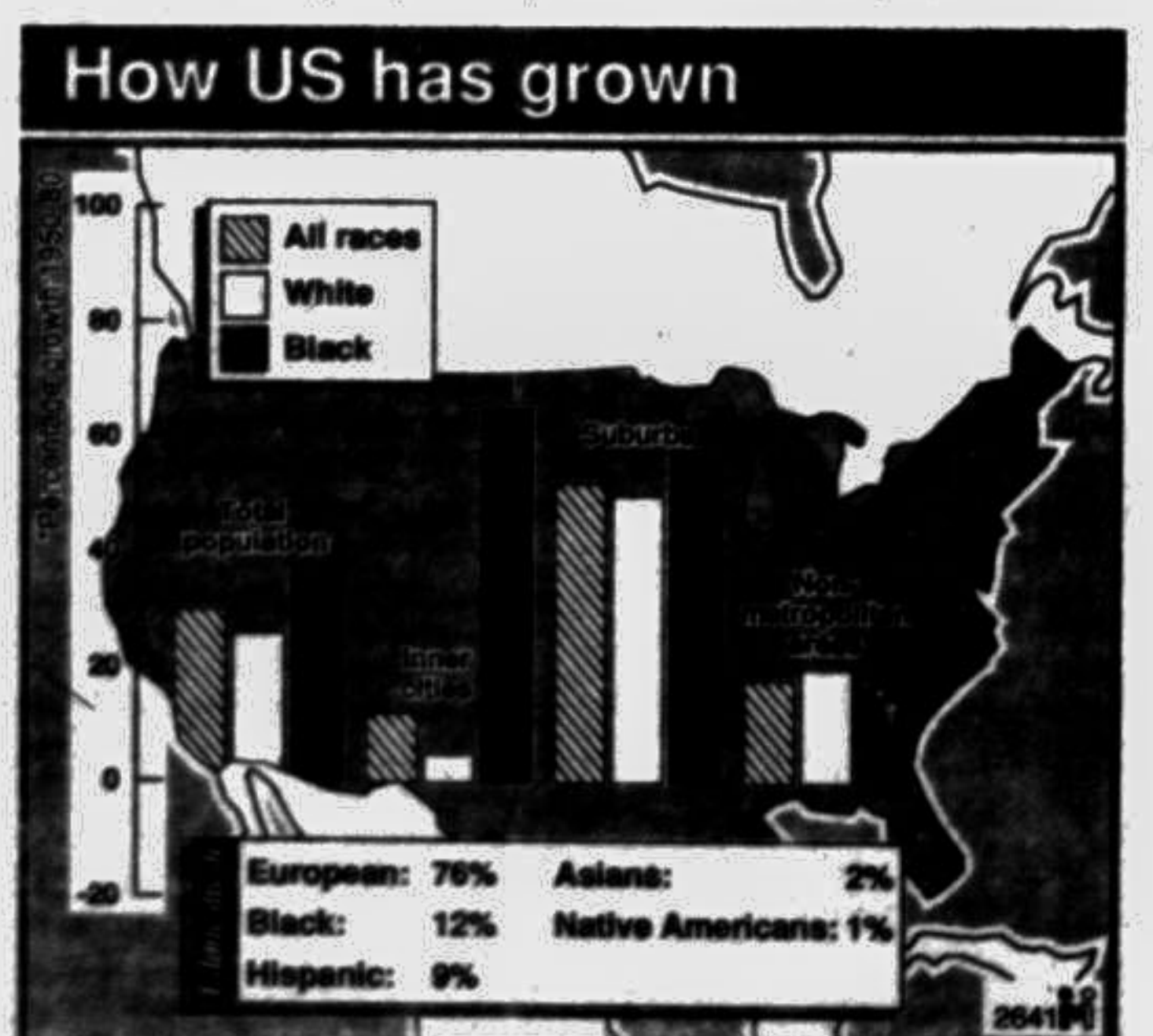
spells of decorative and 'colourful' compositional work — dealing with subjects that have a happier exterior. Are these spells indicative of a flight of the artist's imagination from the nightmarish past? One wonders. Of particular interest were a few works done in oil. These are the artist's most recent explorations in the realm of motifs and symbols. The search appears to have taken him to the slowly fading world of archetypal forms which symbolised the familiar milieu of Bengalis even before the

Traditional "Melting Pot" Challenged at US Campuses

UNIVERSITIES in the United States have become the main flashpoint in a passionate debate over "multiculturalism". At some of the nation's best-known schools, curricula are being radically revised in accordance with demands by non-white scholars and students. They argue that the traditional "Eurocentric" focus of history and the arts is no longer appropriate in an increasingly diverse society. Many students in the US, beginning as early as age 10, are thus being taught the achievements of non-Western cultures and the experiences of Americans of African, Asian and Hispanic descent. Feminists have also entered the fray, establishing departments of women's studies and calling for textbook revisions that acknowledge women's accomplishments. But opponents of this multicultural approach warn that the country's social fabric is in danger of being torn to pieces as each ethnic group celebrates its distinctiveness. They say young people who become immersed in the study of their specific heritage are not being properly prepared for the realities of US society. Some academics also complain about the alleged falsification of history by practitioners of "Afrocentrism" and similar pedagogues, which aim to exalt the ancient cultures of what is today described as the Third World.

The controversy over multiculturalism is centred in universities largely because of the recent prominence of the 1960s generation of scholars. Left-wing activists of all colours are now in positions where they can strongly influence academic policy. These "tenured radicals" have succeeded in many cases in institutionalising their personal commitment to racial and sexual equality. The battle over multicultural education can in fact be seen as a continuation of the generational war that erupted in the US more than 20 years ago. Facing the middle-aged radicals across today's campus barricades are white male professors, now nearing retirement. This older group of conservatives generally claims to be upholding classical standards of education. But at least some of them are clearly nostalgic for the time when the US academics — and society as a whole — seemed much more homogeneous. Nell Irvin Painter, a black female professor of history at Princeton University, recently defended multiculturalism by writing in the New York Times: "I recall the time when virtually no people of colour or white women taught at the great research universities, many of whose undergraduates were exclusively male."

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington. The complexion of the US population is changing. By the year 2010, according to census figures, nearly a quarter of Americans will be black or Hispanic, while new immigrants continue to alter the make-up of cities like New York and Los Angeles. These demographic changes are sparking a debate over the notion of the American "melting pot", and its ability to provide an adequate picture of the country's past, present and future.



Many universities, partly as a result of national "affirmative action" policies, now have large numbers of students of Third World ancestry. The first-year class at the University of California's prestigious Berkeley branch is 25 per cent Asian-American, 33 per cent European-American, 20 per cent Latino, eight per cent African-American, and

two per cent Native American. Given this range of racial backgrounds, say the multiculturalists, it makes no sense to speak of Plato, Shakespeare and Thomas Jefferson as luminaries of "our civilisation". The US as a whole, especially its major cities, has indeed become breathtakingly diverse in the past few decades. One neighbourhood in Philadelphia, for instance, is now populated largely by people from Laos. California, whose 30 million inhabitants make it the most populous state in the nation, will soon have a majority of non-white residents. And in New York City, the single largest group of immigrants at a US citizenship ceremony last year was from Guyana. Not surprisingly, New York has been in the forefront of efforts to develop a multicultural curriculum for state school systems. History, among other subjects, began to be revised in New York more than a decade ago. Long-established Eurocentric premises were substantially modified, with educational authorities requiring that students become acquainted with African, Asian and Latin American civilisations as well as with the Western tradition. As the multicultural movement gained additional momentum, New York's state-school syllabus was examined once again in the late 1980s. In the first sentence of a now frequently cited report, an official task force declared in 1989: "African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Puerto

Ricans/Latinos and Native Americans have all been victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterised the culture and institutions of the United States and the European-American world for centuries. The report went on to say that the state school curriculum showed evidence of "deep-seated pathologies of racial hatred." This was too much even for liberal academics, Arthur Schlesinger, a well-known historian and advisor to the late President John Kennedy, vehemently disagreed with the New York task force's findings and recommendations. Historically, Schlesinger contends, the strength of the US has resided precisely in its ability to forge a common national identity out of many different immigrant cultures. This achievement, he notes, is expressed in the country's motto: "E pluribus unum" (Out of many, one). But Schlesinger and similar-minded scholars say that not only is it false, but also detrimental to the learning of minority students to depict European-Americans as uniquely unjust. Still, it's hard to ignore the experiences of multiculturalists like Renato Rosaldo, a Mexican-American anthropologist teaching at Stanford University in California. He remembers, as a young student in the US Southwest, being spanked with a board because he had spoken Spanish on the grounds of his school. "When," he asks, "will we discover that diversity is a valuable resource?" —GEMINI NEWS

Komodo Dragons Join World Heritage List

A Special Correspondent writes from Jakarta

For millions of years, the giant dragons have lived on four Indonesian islands, their only known habitat today. The dragons and the islands join a unique list of protected world heritage that includes the Statue of Liberty, Da Vinci's 'Last Supper', the Taj Mahal and the pyramids.

THE Komodo dragons are the largest existing lizards on the planet. Their only habitat, the 219,322-hectare Komodo National Park in Indonesia, is the latest addition to the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The park, however, also shelters a number of feral domestic animals like horses, water buffaloes and dogs that prey upon the giant lizards and other wildlife.

The imprint of humanity's hand is also visible in uncontrolled burning of grasslands, illegal logging of forests and the practice of dynamite fishing that has degraded large areas of coral reef.

Protecting the wildlife of Komodo National Park is even more important as tourism to the park has increased. According to the Ministry of Forestry the number of tourists increased from less than 100 in 1980 to perhaps 15,000 in 1991.

Most tourists come to see the giant lizards which have inhabited the region for millions of years. Baiting stations have been established to observe the carnivorous reptile. With the inclusion of the national park in the World Heritage List, Indonesia and the international community are pledged to protect the area and ensure it remains intact for future generations. International aid is assured towards these objectives.

The Komodo dragons join a unique list which includes the Statue of Liberty and the Nepal Valley, England's Stonehenge, Goa's churches and convents, Canada's Dinosaur Park, Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' mural and Egypt's pyramids.

Also included in the World Heritage List are the historic sanctuary of Machu Picchu in Peru and the eternal city of Rome, the Galapagos Islands and the Grand Canyon, India's Taj Mahal and Agra Fort, Pakistan's Lahore Fort and Sahlimar Gardens and the ancient Sri Lankan cities of Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura.

The philosophy behind the "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage," adopted by UNESCO in 1972, is simple: there are some parts of the world's natural and cultural heritage which are so unique and scientifically important to the worlds as a whole that their conservation and protection for future generations is not only a matter of concern for individual nations but for the international community as well.

The Convention draws up a World Heritage List of sites and monuments considered of such exceptional interest and universal value that protecting them is a concern for all mankind.

The Komodo dragons certainly deserve to be a world heritage. To be on the list, a natural wonder must be an example of a state of evolution on earth, or be representative of a biological evolution, or contain the natural habitats of endangered animals, or present a scene of exceptional beauty or a spectacular view of large concentrations of animals.

Komodo has a history of protection that dates back to the middle to the 19th century. Then, the areas ruler, the Sultan of Bima, outlawed the killing of the Komodo dragon.

—Depthnews Asia

On Rinca island there are feral horses and water buffaloes, deer and pig. The islands also have fine mangroves and corals rich in marine life. Mound-building birds nest on southern Rinca and Komodo islands. Dolphins, whales and sea turtles are often seen in the straits.

The Komodo National Park is unique because it also lies close to the so-called Wallacean line — the transition zone across a hypothetical boundary that abruptly separates Oriental and Australian animal groups. Many of the fish, bird and mammal groups, as well as some invertebrates, that are abundant on one side of the line do not exist at all, or are in very small numbers only, on the other side.

As a laboratory for studying (evolutionary) changes, Komodo National Park ranks highly among a few similar areas already recognised for their unique history, the Galapagos and Hawaiian archipelagos being the best examples," notes Jim Thorsell of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in his report on the site to the World Heritage Site.

A management plan for the region was drawn up in 1979 and in 1990 a new, comprehensive conservation law was passed to reinforce the park's legal base. Authorities would also like to broaden the tourist base to the park's other natural attractions.

Photographs by Trygve Bolstad

Jhika market, Manikganj

Photographs by Trygve Bolstad