

# MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

THEY were moving like shadows through half-lit corridors and the darker lawns. We slowed down the car and watched the depressing scene for a while, feeling both sad and angry, and then drove on.

We were passing by Jalan Ampang a couple of weeks ago, in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, taking a quick look at what was going on at the High Commission of Bangladesh, a modest but well-located building that, that from time to time, serves as the sanctuary of stranded Bangladeshi illegal workers.

Years ago, in the late eighties, I used to see similar scenes at the High Commission, usually during the day, with lean and exhausted-looking Bengalee workers, some with college degrees, sitting in the shades of trees, waiting impatiently for their problems which often varied from person to person to be sorted out. Two successive High Commissioners we knew then, Farooq Sobhan and Anwar Hossain, did much to help these unfortunate victims of unscrupulous employment agents and bureaucratic bunglings, with little success.

Now, some five years later, we saw the same scene again. Somehow, it seemed more depressing than ever against the backdrop of new high-rise buildings which have come up all along the Ampang Road, with the contrast between the affluence in the environment and the pathetic scene at the High Commission looking sharper than before.

An hour later, during dinner, a high official of our mission in Kuala Lumpur, related the slow progress achieved so far in tackling the problem which, in effect, meant getting our so-called illegal workers registered and employed in jobs they can handle, not urbanised college graduates in rubber plantations, with all the benefits enjoyed by local Malaysian labour. According to a local semi-official source, only a few hundred Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia, perhaps no more than 300, have earned this status in the past five years. Unfortunately, due to the refusal of the Malaysian immigration to let me stay in Kuala Lumpur for a reasonable number of days — more about this later — I had little time to double-check on the figure.

However, even during my short stay in Kuala Lumpur, we found out enough about what our unwanted illegal job-seekers go through in getting into Malaysia and what they go through in getting out of the country. Since transit visas for Thailand are relatively easily available for Bangladeshis, these workers usually choose Dhaka-Bangkok air route and then head for southern Thailand which borders Malaysia. By then, thousands of takas have changed

hands in Dhaka, between the gullible job-seekers and the so-called employment agents, as passport fees, "discounted" air tickets and "commissions" for immigration and visas. It is said that for days, they walk through forests in southern Thailand to enter Malaysia and deal with border immigration officials in the way they are advised to do, this time, by local employment agents. More money changes hands. Thus, they enter one of the states of Malaysia, even if they do not go as far as Kuala Lumpur, and, sooner or later, are caught as illegal workers.

The group of Bangladeshi workers we saw at the High Commission had all kinds of problems. Some were waiting to be registered; some were hiding from the police; and some just wanted to go back home. The last category posed the additional problem of being without any funds to buy air tickets. The High Commission has no contingency provision to meet this kind of emergency. However, it was good to know that one Bangladeshi-owned travel agent has set up a fund, by charging a small commission on each regular Biman ticket, which it uses for helping out with some desperate cases. So, all is not lost.

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THE Government of Malaysia had its reasons to get tough, almost unreasonably tough, to deal with the situation a couple of months ago, by introducing a set of visa restrictions almost unheard of in a Commonwealth country. The move had prompted this paper to write an editorial titled, "Unwelcome in Malaysia." Little did I know that I would have the experience of seeing the working of these restrictions in my own case until I got the invitation from a Kuala Lumpur-based regional media organisation, AIDCOM, to attend a seminar in the Malaysian capital in the first week last month.

The Malaysian High Commission in Dhaka, the AIDCOM and the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur worked on my visa application from three different ends. After about ten days since the submission of all the documents, my passport was stamped for my visit to a country that I had thought of as almost my second home for long eight years in the last decade.

Well, quite an achievement! The achievement was marred when my passport was presented to the airport immigration at the Kuala Lumpur airport by an official of the Bangladesh High Commission who had come to receive us. Although the Malaysian Foreign Ministry had authorised my stay in Kuala Lumpur for two weeks, just what I had asked for, and the visa as stamped on my passport gave me permission to stay in Malaysia for three months after my entry, the suspicious-looking man at the counter said briskly, "You can stay here for one week." The official from our High Commission argued and then pleaded for a two-week stay, mentioning the possibility that I would be seeing some government leaders for interviews and eventually doing some writing on Malaysia. "Well," the man at the counter said as if making a major concession, "Mr Ali can take his passport to the Immigration Department and try for an extension." That was something Mr Ali had no intention of doing under any circumstances.

We flew out of Kuala Lumpur dutifully just at the end of my one-week approved stay, cancelling a few appointments and giving up my chances of seeking interviews with a few government leaders. However, I could not resist the temptation of describing what I politely termed as an "unfortunate incident" to an old acquaintance at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He was shocked, especially because he had been working (unsuccessfully) hard to arrange an interview for me with Prime Minister Dr Mahathir

Mohammad, perhaps even preparing replies to questions I had submitted for the Malaysian leader.

"In this country," my acquaintance said, "the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office and the Immigration Department do not always work in harmony." The left hand does not always know what the right hand is doing, he added.

Then, ending our short telephone conversation, he said, as if thinking aloud, "It may well be the same in your country."

Yes, you can say that again, my friend.

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LIKE many of my readers I am always mystified and sometimes fascinated by the depth of ignorance about my nationality, country and sometimes religion and race (how absurd!) shown even by some luxury hotels we have stayed in different parts of the world. After all these years and perhaps a million miles logged in my non-existent travel book, I have learnt to take this kind of ignorance in my stride.

However, when I looked at the computerised bill, I thought that the brand new 30-storey luxury hotel where we stayed in Kuala Lumpur had indeed gone a bit too far. A part of the bill was certainly worth saving for this column.

I had earned a doctorate, thus fulfilling my childhood dream; the address of *The Daily Star* had been put under the name of the organisation which had invited me to Kuala Lumpur; and last but not the least, the identity of Bangladesh had been merged into that of India.

Would you trust a hotel that makes three mistakes in the preparation of a single bill for a client? But we did and felt no particular regret on any other score. Somehow or other, one's level of tolerance always rises, almost phenomenally, when you are in a capital in Southeast Asia, especially Kuala Lumpur.

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## DOWN THE MEMORY LANE A Trip to Remember

ALTHOUGH I had been duly certified as a specialist in pathology and clinical pathology by the American Board of Pathology, the then Surgeon General of East Pakistan, Col TD Ahmed had somehow gathered that I also had a background in Virology. Within months of my rejoining, in May 1957, the Department of Pathology, Dhaka Medical College, as a Senior Demonstrator of Pathology, I had been informally asked if I would wish to avail of a WHO Fellowship in "Polio Diagnostic Techniques" a course at the Centre for Disease Control at Atlanta, Georgia, USA. I had rejected rather unfavourably and had expressed my intention of settling down to work at Dhaka, since I had returned home from the United States after an absence of almost five years on extraordinary leave without pay. However, Col TD Ahmed mentioned that the Chief Minister of East Pakistan, Ataur Rahman Khan, had issued strict instructions that no Fellowship should be surrendered. Nominations must be made. He was having difficulty in finding someone with experience of work in Virology, who could be spared for this training offered by WHO. He insisted on nominating me and I was asked in due course to fill in the application forms.

When I was actually awarded the Fellowship, I was asked to stop by for at least one day at Alexandria, Egypt for briefing at the regional Office of the World Health Organization for the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO). My travel arrangements were made accordingly. I was able to call on Colonel Jafar, the then Director General of Health Services of Pakistan, at Karachi and advised him of my impending absence from Pakistan for three months. I requested him to keep the post of Assistant Professor of Pathology, Dow Medical College open for me, just in case I had been selected by the Central Public Services Commission, who had already interviewed me at Dhaka. Colonel Jafar readily agreed to do so, and in fact volunteered the information that I had indeed been selected, and the appointment would follow. He suggested that I should have no worry on that account and wished that I take full advantage of the Fellowship. I had heard of Colonel Jafar as a tough administrator. It seemed to me that he must have mellowed quite a bit with the times.

I stayed with my sister at Karachi at their Kutchari Road residence, quite close to the Taj Hotel probably for 2-3 nights, before I had taken the Swiss Air flight to Cairo. Earlier that evening I had tea with my niece Anwari and her husband, Khairul Kabir, who was holding a Public Relation Officer's job with the Pakistan Election Commission. They were then residing in a bungalow at the Intelligence School Officers Quarters.

It was 3 or 4 am in the morning, when the plane landed at the Heliopolis airport for Cairo. The Airlines bus carried me to the Heliopolis Palace Hotel near the airport. I was picked up around 7 am for the short flight to Alexandria, where I reported to the

Fellowships Officer, Dr Eberwein around 9.30. He was a bit plump and shortish with some balding over the scalp. He received me cordially and briefed me about the administrative aspects of my Fellowship. He also mentioned that Dr Taba, the Regional Director of WHO for the Eastern Mediterranean Region had wished to see me. I had no idea of how important a person Dr Taba was, and I was not in the least nervous about meeting him. Of course, I became quite impressed with the frills of his office: the throne-like tall chair, covered with red velvet, and the arms and back rest with golden lacquer paint. He was seated across a huge table. The office was spacious and tastefully decorated with beautiful paintings and Victorian furnishings.

Dr Taba received me gracefully. We shook hands and I took a seat across the table. There was no one else in the room. I was quite at ease with this man, who was destined to serve five terms as the Regional Director of EMRO, an elective office. After exchange of pleasantries, he had asked me bluntly if I would return to Pakistan on completion of my Fellowship. I wondered if he knew that I had returned home after a protracted period of studies in the United States of America, not so long ago. I also recalled I had signed an

undertaking that I would return home and serve the country for three years. Although I was not happy that my status and academic rank at Dhaka were inappropriate for the Postgraduate qualifications I had earned, I had never for a moment harboured any thought of forsaking my country. Had I any such intent, why would I have returned at my own expense to Dhaka with my wife and our son, born in the USA. I therefore had no hesitation in telling Dr Taba quite categorically, "Of course, I will return to Pakistan."

This answer probably prompted Dr Taba to make another unusual query, "Is Colonel Jafar attending the Regional Committee Meeting at Baghdad?" It seemed odd that I should be asked such a question, although at that time I had not the faintest idea of the tour significance of the Regional Committee in the WHO structure. I responded to the effect that I did have a chance to see Colonel Jafar at Karachi, but he had not discussed this matter with me. I believe my answer did not surprise Dr Taba, since he had not pursued the matter any further.

After exchanging a few more courtesies I took leave of Dr Taba and returned to the Fellowships officer, Dr Eberwein talked to me for a while and suggested I take a look at the catacombs before returning to Cairo late that afternoon. The catacombs are ancient places of burial under the ground. Each preserved dead has a bunk for itself. There were several levels of these bunkers, spread over a fairly large area. My taxi then took me to a palace with extensive beautifully laid out grounds, beside the water front. I was shown the point where King Faruq was forced

to board a sea-going vessel and despatched on exile, on instructions of the Revolutionary Council headed by General Naguib.

Egyptian Airlines flight brought me back to Cairo early in the evening. After resting for a while in my hotel room, I came out for dinner. My father-in-law had handed me a letter for his former colleague in the East Pakistan Civil Service, Mr Masood, who was then posted as Counsellor at the Pakistan Embassy in Cairo. I was trying to find his phone number, so I could ask him, how I could deliver his letter. The thick Cairo phone directory did not provide me with a clue. I gathered enough courage to ring up the Pakistan Ambassador's residence in an effort to obtain Mr Masood's phone number. I succeeded in this but when I rang him, I gathered he was out for the evening.

I retired early. Next morning when I came out to the reception desk after breakfast, it was close to 10.00 am. The Receptionist mentioned that there was a message from the Pakistan Embassy to the effect that His Excellency the Ambassador wished that I call on him. Not being familiar with my way around Cairo, I availed of the services of a guide. The distance to the Embassy from the hotel was quite considerable, so the use of a taxi was out of the question. I believe I used both bus and tram with at least two changes. By the time I reached the Pakistan Embassy it was close to noon.

I was ushered into a medium-sized room, which seemed more like a small conference hall rather than an office. Mr Masood greeted me saying, "Dr Zaman, the Ambassador was sorry he had to leave to keep a prior appointment. He wanted us to meet you." There were four Embassy officers seated around an oblong table. I recognised only one of them, Mr Syud Ahmed, whom I had met at the Pakistan Student's Convention at Madison, Wisconsin in the summer of 1955.

Although I had seen Mr Syud Ahmed on only a few occasions since, I had remembered him and was happy to meet him again. I handed over the letter to Mr Masood, who enquired about the welfare of my father-in-law. I was, however, at a loss to understand why the Pakistan Ambassador had instructed four officers of the Mission to meet and talk to me. Since when had I become that important! Despite my good training for almost five years in University medical centres in the United States of America and the certifications of the American Speciality Board in Pathology, there was no vacancy for me in an appropriate academic rank in East Pakistan. I had been compelled to seek a suitable position at Karachi.

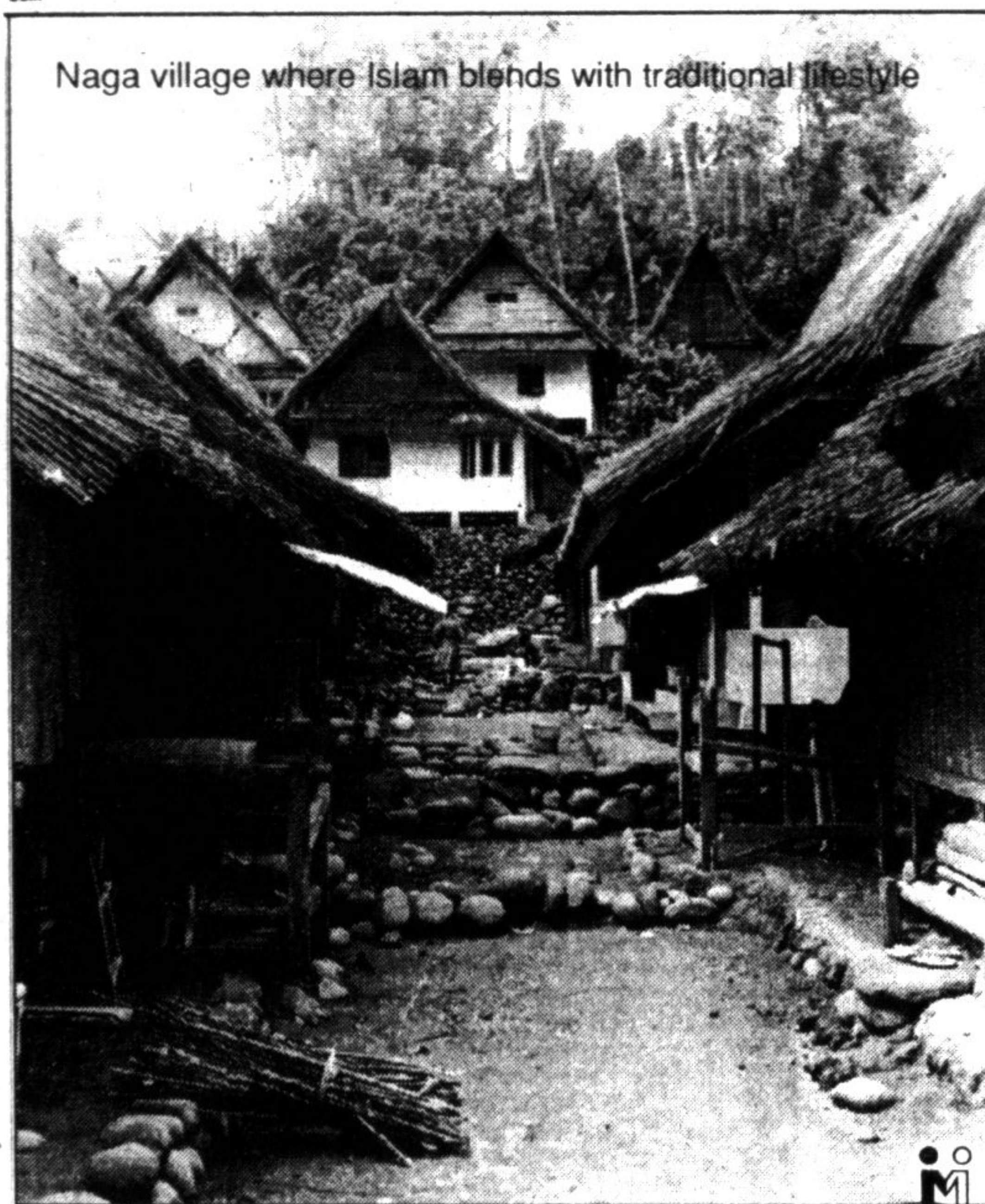
The officials kept asking me all kinds of questions: What type of work I had been doing at Dhaka; how many days I had spent at Karachi; for how long was my Fellowship planned and what kind of activity would that involve. My Syud Ahmed had met my wife and had known that we had been blessed with a son, a year before we had returned home to Dhaka. He had enquired about their welfare and where they

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## The Javanese Village Lost in Time

Stephen Carr writes from Naga, Indonesia

People in Kampung Naga village in West Java live a traditional lifestyle. Its 319 inhabitants blend Islamic teachings with their traditional ways. Central to Naga beliefs is worship of an ancestor named Singaparana. A Gemini News Service correspondent visited the village where time seems to have stood still.



Naga village where Islam blends with traditional lifestyle

CURIOS visitors wishing to learn about the customs of the people of Kampung Naga, Indonesia, will go home disappointed if they visit on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Saturday. On those days local people take part in ceremonies and refrain from speaking about their customs, even amongst themselves.

The overbearing importance of the ceremonies is highlighted by what happens if other religious ceremonies, like the Islamic feast Eid ul-Fitr — the end of the Ramadan fasting month — fall on one of these days. Then they are simply postponed.

Central to Naga beliefs is worship of an ancestor named Singaparana. He is revered for having created the village out of nothing and is the focus of major rituals. Offerings are brought to his grave, located on a hill one kilometre from Naga, six times a year.

The village has a population of 319. Its 15 houses are crammed companionably together. While fields are subject to ownership, no such rules exist in the vicinity of the houses.

While most historians agree that Naga customs originate with a pre-Islamic culture, its exact origins are unknown. One theory holds that the village was founded in the late 17th Century by a deserter from an army in central Java sent to attack the Dutch East India Company fortifications in Batavia (now Jakarta). Credence is lent to the theory by two other villages in West Java, Puló and Cikelet, which have customs similar to Naga's.

An important part of the Naga's history was tragically lost in 1956, when militants from the Muslim movement Darul Islam burnt the village to the ground. An ancient Sanskrit document recounting the history of the village burnt along with it. Inscribed on a brass plate, the original document was removed by the Dutch colonial government and the Naga left with only a paper copy. Perhaps in an attic somewhere in Holland lies the key to the mystery resting with it. Villagers are now Muslim. Their traditional rituals and ceremonies blend with Islamic ones. Naga's ceremonial life is overseen by a male elder who receives his appointment by means of a revelatory dream.

Other qualifications for the post are that he must be married, over 35, articulate, a good leader and related to the previous incumbent. Before a new elder takes office, his suitability and the authenticity of the dream message are debated and tested by a special council.

ping their ancestor involve much ceremonial. A drum is struck and followed by a speech from the village elder who leads the men of the village to the river. The elder meditates and asks the river spirits permission to enter it. Then the elder and two dignitaries, who carry incense and betel nut, walk to the Singaparana's grave. They re-assemble with the men at the mosque. Women of the village bring cones of boiled rice and other rice-based delicacies. A feast marks the end of the ceremony.

earn a supplement by weaving mats and baskets or making bamboo musical instruments called angklung. Rice harvesting calls for ceremonies involving special clothing and offerings of leaves, rice and coconut. Rituals are observed, such as holding the breath for the first seven cuts, then blowing on the seventh bunch of stalks. An old man explained the seriousness of the affair: "Rice and humans are both creatures of God and they must respect each other. No joking is permitted during the rice cutting. Although modern objects are increasingly being used, Naga is still conservative about house construction. Plastic piping may take water to fish ponds lined with cement. But

nobody has dared use these materials inside houses. The black thatched dwellings all follow the same basic design and no new building is allowed in Naga. The position of every house has been the same as far back as anyone can remember. Houses do not have furniture, and woven floor mats take the place of tables and chairs. There is no electricity; oil and pressure lamps provide lighting. Even in the privacy of their own homes, the Naga abide by customs governing the layout of the interior. Naga's houses each have three main areas: front, middle and back, symbolising the upper, middle and nether worlds. Each home has a front porch, sleeping space,

living space, kitchen and rice barn. Customs regulate who may enter an area of Naga homes and what activities may take place. The front porch is mainly a male domain used for receiving guests; the sleeping space a sacrosanct area where children are forbidden to play. The kitchen and rice barns are female preserves.

Men may enter only briefly when, for instance, they fetch food. Men are also forbidden to speak in these areas. The largest area is the living space for both males and females where rituals take place.

According to Naga tradition, the birth dates of the wife and husband are also reflected on the layout of the home. The kitchen's location varies between eastern and western ends of the home, precise positioning determined by mystic calculations involving a wife's birthday.

Similarly, the location of two outer doors — at the kitchen and central room — depend on the husband's birthday.

## WRITE TO MITA

My column last week evoked quite a good response. Many young couples called to thank me for the advice. I also got some phone calls from angry spouses who complained that his/her spouse never does any of the things recommended by me. Anyway, given the popularity and the positive response, I have decided to continue on the same topic this week.

## Phases of Marriage

Marriage is a relationship that precedes from a romantic, intensive, infatuation stage to a problem solving extensive relationship. It goes through many phases and one can characterize the first phase in which reality recedes and fantasy dominates. This is the honeymoon stage in which the partner lives only for giving to the chosen one. The partner becomes overidealized far beyond whatever qualities in reality are possessed. This is the time when every thing is rosy beautiful. This is the heady days of romance, of deep intimacy, of divine happiness and blissful joy. This is when each partner is willing to give to the other without wanting anything in return; when couples pledge their loyalty, love and devotion to each other and are convinced that nothing in the world will ever change this feeling of euphoria. But alas, things do not turn out that way at all. Too often, the magic fades, the romance recedes and feeling of divine happiness is replaced by what is commonly known as "reality". With the demands of family living comes responsibilities and obligations. Romance and fun take a back seat as couples slowly begin to wake up to the fact that life is just not a bed of roses.

usually happens in many marriages is an extreme transformation from the honeymoon stage which is just fun and romance to the reality stage which is just responsibilities, obligations and seriousness. This sudden transformation leaves many couples feeling disillusioned with marriage. What is needed is a balance between what is considered heady romance and practical family living. Just think of it as a part of growing up. Human growth and development goes through certain developmental stages, well so does marriage. If each stage is completed satisfactorily then one is equipped to deal with the next stage. When couples are prepared for the inevitable responsibilities and changing situation that are a part of marriage, then there is less disillusionment. The following is a typical situation in the first stage of marriage:

- Rima: Lets go and see a movie today, and afterwards we can have a lunch at a restaurant.
- Rafiq: I am feeling tired, could we do it tomorrow?
- Rima: You are feeling tired? What is wrong, can I get you a cup of tea? No, we don't have to go if you are feeling too tired.
- Rafiq: No, I am not feeling that tired. Please lets go, in fact we haven't eaten out for such a long time.

This is the stage when both want to please the other, without thinking of fulfilling their own needs in a similar situation, the dialogue between couples in the second phase of marriage is very different. I would like to address it next week.

— Shaheen Anam