

Remembering Aravindan

Vidyarthi Chatterjee writes from Calcutta

Two years ago on March 15, G Aravindan, the Malayali auteur, passed away suddenly, leaving a void in Kerala cinema that will be difficult to fill. He was 55 and had been a film-maker for less than two decades; and yet the serious film-lover across the length and breadth of the country counted the director's passing away as a personal loss.

Aravindan, a self-taught film-maker, was highly individualistic in style and expression yet never too far away from the concerns and conditions of the common man, the little man. In fact, it was with an extremely popular comic strip called *The Small Man* and *The Big World* that Aravindan, who was originally a cartoonist, began his public career as an artist.

Aravindan was a creative freak in the sense that he never attended film school nor had he served the customary apprenticeship under anyone. All that he had by way of qualification to be a film-maker were sharp, sympathetic eyes that took in the minutest detail of human conduct or Nature's moods; an ear trained in both Carnatic and Hindustani music; the imagination of the poet married to the temperament of a wayside minstrel; and the intellectual curiosity to experiment with every input that goes into the making of a film.

Varied in subject and style, many of his fictional features, beginning with *Uttarayanam* (Throne of Capricorn, 1974) and ending with *Vastuhaara* (The Dispossessed, 1990), are leavened by a documentary flavour, indicating his involvement in not just telling a story but introducing a commentary on social realities.

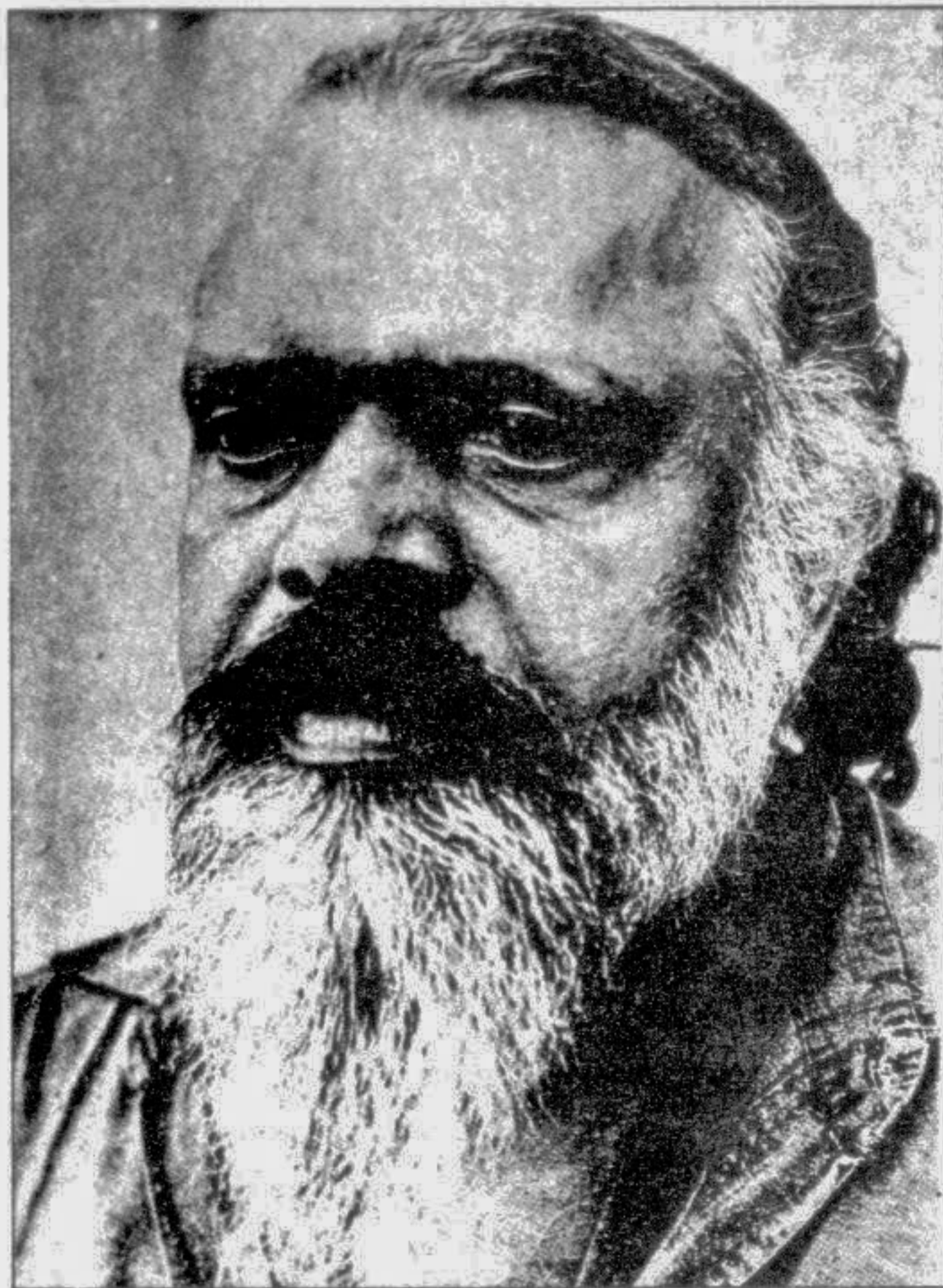
In marked contrast, his documentaries, which one would have normally expected to be critiques of the human condition in modern India, relate more to the arts and well-known practitioners of the arts and even to a mystical philosopher (Jiddu Krishnamurthy). All this points to a restless esoteric spirit, a seeker after the higher realms of truth and beauty without divorcing himself from the here and now. Not that he succeeded in everything that he attempted in fictional features or in documentaries or in fusions thereof (who does?), but the thing to note was his spirit of free enquiry which often drove him to tread difficult terrain.

While *Uttarayanam* did not work miracles for Aravindan in the way that, let us say, *Pather Panchali* did for Ray or, in a lesser but nonetheless convincing way, *Ankur* did for Shyam Benegal, it certainly indicated the emergence of an artist who deserved to be taken seriously.

But the curiosity of the film acerbic was truly aroused by his second film, *Kanchana Sita* (Golden Sita, 1977), based on a play drawn from a portion of the Ramayana. The film, a highly stylized interpretation of a part of the epic, was loved by some, panned by others. A pained Aravindan is on record thus about the mixed reception the film got: "I faced a lot of criticism which said that I had made the epic obscure. Others said I was anti-religion and blasphemous. Some of this criticism hurt as it came from writers and film-makers I respected. I can never expect to be an atheist though I cannot also believe in a god sitting in heaven... I believe in supernatural powers, in the mystical — these phenomena are very real."

From *Kanchana Sita* to *Thamp* (The Circus Tent, 1978), about once-successful circus artists fallen on poor times and life under the big top, it is a quantum jump in subject, style, technique, treatment, in practically every aspect of the medium.

Thamp, regarded by many as Aravindan's best work without minimising the importance of several other films by him, uses haunting black-and-white images to flesh out a series of



episodes that make a statement on individual/group fun and failure in a stark, non-realist fashion. This much-loved film, which both saddens and elevates, has rightly passed into the folklore of the so-called New Indian Cinema; and is frequently used to describe a period in the history of that movement when its looks were healthier and spirit was nobler, revealing a sensitivity and an urge to take on challenges that has all but departed. Personally speaking, this is my favourite Aravindan film: full of mysterious shadows and magical situations; a work of music, mime and grime; showing up the lies behind the glamour and tinsel of the big top; caressing the pains and revealing the perfections of the art and the profession; lament-

ing the little tragedies and celebrating the little triumphs of the artists. Apart from the reflections of human nature in its varied avatars, the film is also about a trade, an art form, an industry with which the maverick Malayali is synonymous. Every second circus artiste or circus manager in the country is still from Kerala. So, in a very real sense, Aravindan was fashioning universal symbols and motifs out of local, homespun material.

Kummatty (The Bogey Man, 1979), *Esthappan* (Stephen, 1980) and *Pokkuvayil* (Twilight, 1981) followed in quick succession, vastly differing from each other in structure and substance yet united by what may be described as the stream of Aravindan's conscious-unconscious. In other words, a unique sensibility that takes time and patience to grow on one; but once grown, it is difficult to forget or escape.

The first is the story of an itinerant old man with a bagful of joyous tricks and his friendship with an assortment of children; the second is about a wandering soul who means different things to different people — to some a prophet and philosopher, to others a loafer and a fool; and, as to the third, it is about a sensitive college student, an inmate of a mental asylum, and the episodes in his life which are both his pain and his pleasure, more painful perhaps, making for hallucina-

lands for no fault of theirs.... The 1947 post-partition exodus of people from East to West Bengal forms a prologue and the 1971 exodus from Bangladesh to West Bengal an epilogue to the story.

Using documentary footage liberally, Aravindan chose three different locales — Bengal, Kerala and the Andamans — to narrate his story in the backdrop of the refugee problem caused by the games politicians have played since 1947 and even earlier. While, thematically, here is a film of inordinate importance, it seems to be of uneven artistic quality. Whereas the Kerala sequences haunt, charm, disturb and elevate the viewer with their free play of backward and forward movements in time, space and emotions, there are extended moments when a sense of ennui descends on the same viewer as the story unfolds in Calcutta. It is again towards the end that the film picks up in what may be described as elemental intensity. Here, Aravindan is able to convey by means of a few deft visual strokes, a sadness so sad that no words can express. The images of departing women ululating and blowing on conch-shells as tears run down their cheeks could have been captured with such heart-rending pathos only by an artist of Aravindan's class and conviction. There are snatches of such mastery, but the pity is that the snatches do not quite add up to a comprehensive whole.

In the final analysis, perhaps *Vastuhaara* will be remembered more for what it says rather than how on some extremely important issues of our times: the proverbial endless journey of the archetypal refugee for a patch of one's own called home; the acrimonious differences among linguistic groups (or religious or ethnic groups, for that matter) which dissolve or, at any rate, ought to dissolve under common pressures of struggling for survival; of choosing between compromise and a better life on one hand, and dignity and marginal existence on the other.

In more specific terms, *Vastuhaara* chose to speak for and explain the plight of not just the Bengali refugee but also, say, the Gulf returnee to India or the peoples of what was once known as Yugoslavia and, by further extension, of all refugees on the face of the earth. Aravindan's humanism, his sense of silent calm even under pressure, his empathy with the loner and the underdog, each of these rare attributes is abundantly there in every frame of his parting film.

With Aravindan's death, New Indian Cinema, or whatever is still left of its original self, lost one of its few 'originals'. And, like all originals, he was able to sculpt a small but steadfast audience, a family of viewers fiercely loyal to his kind of cinema that blended the best elements of two diverse yet united philosophies, mysticism and materialism. Equally important, he was able to fashion a *gharana* (if one may be permitted to use the expression in relation to cinema) of his own, consisting of younger kinsmen imbued with his notions of what was worth pursuing in direction, camera, sound, editing, et al: a group of talented people whom he enthused and inspired to creativity by his own example. It is debatable whether the likes of Shaji or Sunny Thomas (there must be others about whom we have no knowledge yet) would have risen the way they have, to add fresh dimensions to Malayalam cinema of our time, but for the constant support and guidance they received from Aravindan.

Verily has it been said that the true artist lives and works not just for himself but makes sure that those coming after him or those working alongside him get the break they deserve; simultaneously, enriching himself by his association with his peers.

A Book of Songs with Flashes of Feeling

BOOK REVIEW

Gaan Elo More Monay — a book of songs by Zebunnissa Jamal Pp 96 Price Tk 50

Reviewed by Waheedul Haque

ZEBUNNISA Jamal, the soft and sedate person, far removed from looking someone with a lot of daring, indeed never had been wanting in that stuff. Even before passing out from her school tucked in some North Bengal backyard, she corresponded with Tagore. Rather late in life, in 1966 to be precise, the fortyish Zebunnissa embarked on writing lyrics for her daughter and sister to sing. She never looked back. She is, despite not being a professional songwriter, a most prized lyricist among the composers of tunes and the singers themselves.

But unless one is a Tagore himself or at least one of the four other immortals of Bengali music — songs are of necessity a passing thing. Even while a song is in good season, enjoying halcyon days so to say, no one cares about who wrote its words and laid down its sentiment. There is literally a treasury of very popular songs written by her and we never suspected that it was Zebunnissa.

There is a reason for that. Lyrics, mostly, do not come up to any respectable literary standard. Shakespeare wrote songs and there's no reason to introduce Tagore, Nazrul, Atulprasad, D L Roy and Rajani Kanta as contrary examples, for the rule stands in spite of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. One is fully within one's rights to ask if the lyricist remains a faceless nonentity for lack of excellence, is it musical excellence that makes of the performers and those that set the words to music

literal minters of money? Not so really. There are, of course, many cases of tunes falling the words, and the centre-stage holder, namely, the performer falling both.

Now a sixty-plus Zebunnissa has come up with an edition of her songs — *Gaan Elo More Monay*. I do not remember having seen the most prolific — and not without touches of quality either — song writers like Pronab Roy, Gouriprasanna Majumdar or rather late in the day Pulak Bandopadhyay doing that. It is possible that the masters Ajoy Bhattacharya and Shailen Chakravorty could very well have published collections of their songs. But I have yet to have the luck of coming across them. Imagine this happening in the land of Tagore and Nazrul et al. Zebunnissa does us a positive service by bringing out a selection of her songs which indeed revives a glorious tradition of the Bengalees. From the contemporaries Ramnidhi Gupta (Nidhu Babu) and Ramprasad Sen to Girish Ghosh to our trio of Comilla geniuses Monomohun Dutta, Labochandra Pal and Aftabuddin Khan — theirs are all published songs. And they live till today patently for their creation's quality as songs. But



the role played by the texts being available in print was not insignificant either.

Theirs were, not to speak of the five suns burning bright the days of Bengali songs and lyrics, eminently publishable material considered as pieces of poetry. We take our hats off to recognise that of the 138 songs contained in *Gaan Elo More Monay*, a fair number passes the test of poetry. It is possible that their melodies would almost wholly be lost — for that is what at the root of consumer and sale oriented

music — but these pieces can very well live.

The genre of songs commonly known as Modern Bengali Songs has a way of imposing upon the lyricists a kind of format — musical as well as textual. That prevents very many numbers from becoming truly great songs and at the same time good poetry. If such a format would only have been unknown to Zebunnissa Jamal and had she stuck to the high ideals represented by Tagore and Atulprasad, we could, I am sure, get a book of the longevity of a true classic.

Yet, I am grateful to Mrs Jamal for the many maxim-like dazlers strewn all through her songs and flashes of true feeling — not just words laced together to conjure up a lugubrious frame of mind — that sound so sincere. Perhaps it is better that in *Gaan Elo More Monay* we have only the words and not the tunes for the latter could have screened us off from the true talent of Zebunnissa Jamal. We have remarkably successful poets but song-writers of the calibre of what Shamsur Rahman or Al-Mahmud is as a poet — are pathetically absent, may be because the lyricist only fulfils a need of the music industry rather than expressing his or her personality for no other inspiration than the pleasure of creation and a quest for truth. Let Zebunnissa Jamal's book of songs greatly add to the recognition of the songwriter's worth as a poet. It will help us all to remember that the celebrated Palgrave's Golden Treasury is of songs.

Nausicaa, the Ocean has Landed!

Continued from page 9

out-stare crabs and lobsters — nose to claw! A suspended 'diamond' containing a school of tuna allows a pause for contemplation. As visitors sit beneath the unusual aquarium, they can be hypnotised by the swirling movements of the school, while mirrors and lighting create the effect of being caught with them in a net.

The dangers of the sea are graphically shown in a set which reconstructs a trawler. Standing on the deck or up on the bridge, an audio visual show takes the audience on a fishing expedition complete with raging sea, howling wind and the constant clanging of machinery.

After learning about the management of sea-farming for lobsters and mussels, new aquaculture techniques, fishing and off-shore rigs, as well as the conservation steps needed to continue drawing from this resource, visitors can actively participate in the debate by playing the role of fishmonger, ship-owner, politician or consumer via high-tech interactive video.

The underwater journey through Nausicaa ends in the



The sea—an emotion: Spectators are fascinated by appearance of sharks....

ring of the enormous panoramic aquarium, surrounded by sharks which circle just inches from where you stand.

After coming out of Nausicaa with such a chilling experience one finds himself totally intoxicated with and completely thrown into an imaginary world!

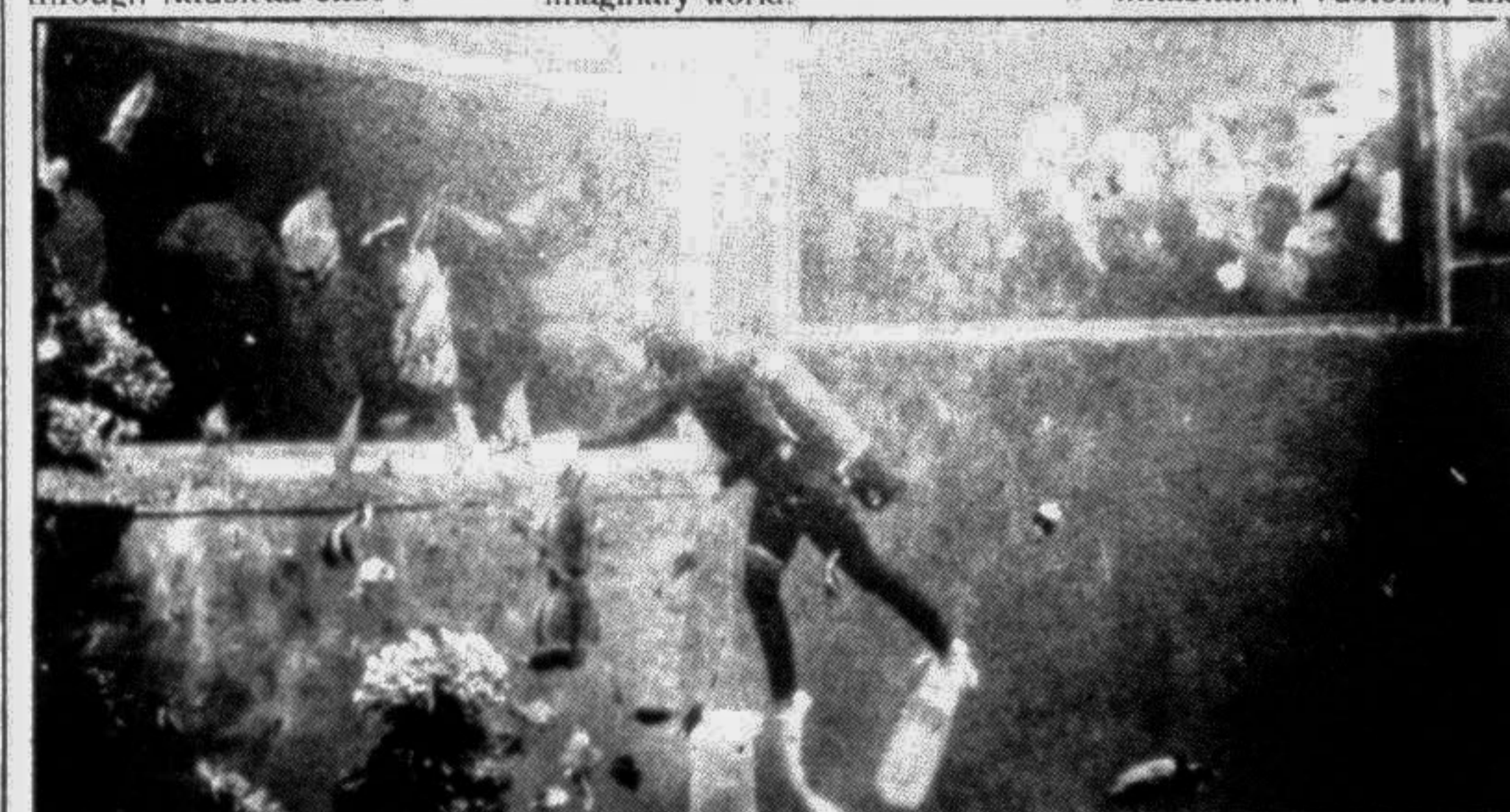
This journey reveals the true face of the sea, which tells us that the sea is something different from what we roughly estimate of. Meadows of floating plankton are the first link of the food chain which leads on to the grim inhabitants of a sunken wreck. Like those on the earth surface, the sea has its inhabitants, customs, and

organisation. From anemone fish, the defender of the sea anemone, to the tidy shrimp, the sea houses friends and enemies. From the coral lagoon to the frozen depths, the sea has its climate and its geography. All becomes crystal clear by just a visit to this wonderful world of experience.

"Following the success of Nausicaa's launch in France we are now casting our nets further a field to get our message across to more visitors", said director Philippe Vallette.

He also said, "We think our unique and lively approach to giving visitors a complete underwater experience — without getting wet — will appeal to world tourists."

After visiting Nausicaa, and licking up its practical acquaintance, the way it has explicated the underwater secrecy, one tends to believe that — experience has no certain boundaries; as much as you will get into its depth, you will come out with unique experience of explosive feelings. At a certain point, where earth never ends although, it can be the beginning of getting something new.



Pass through an airtight into a tropical paradise and come nose to nose with the shell fish....

Mamun Mahmud

Continued from page 10 have so far made of our free world!

Not all has been lost yet. Can we not after all this time forgive and forget the many serious mistakes of the past and apply ourselves to building a happy and prosperous future for all of us? The opportunity does exist. Who amongst us does not have abiding faith in the intrinsic goodness and the genius of our people?

Allow democracy and the rule of law to take their own courses.

No doubt the process will, in course of time, bring forth a national transformation, worthy of the supreme sacrifices made by the countless valiant sons of the soil in 1971. Only then can the souls of Mamun Mahmud and countless others, lost in the conflagration of 1971, find eternal peace.

Personal Values.

Continued from page 10 no exaggeration of the fact that any true communication is personal. To make the communication effective or workable person-to-person relation has to be cherished. Whenever the interpersonal relation is lost within a society, that society loses value and significance.

With a view to keep-up and propagate personal values moral education should be discussed with increasing interest in all levels. Unless a deliberate moral education system is introduced conforming to the rules of right conduct cannot be ensured or developed. In fact, the prevailing condition in our society calls for the enforcement of conformity by the society upon its members, either by law or by attitudes. In good old days, people could rely upon the traditional socialization of each generation by the transmission of rela-

tively static value systems and patterns of behaviour which is no longer possible in our society because of its anti-traditional oriented attitudes.

As per Baconian suggestion, "Our education should be what we want in life". It presumably combined the material with the moral want. We should have moral education on compulsory basis to help eradicate social evils. Our educational institutions should play a vital role in producing civilized people who possess moral responsibility, altruism, independence and rationality in developed form. While teaching children how to live with books we should also teach them how to live with people, that is, how to become fit for life in companionship with others, help them to become citizens who will grace our society in the days to come. Besides we should know how children actually develop

morally. Only then can we help them to develop their personal potential as human being.

Moral education in educational institutions should be followed with a corresponding and simultaneous healthy atmosphere at home and in society in general. Only then the teaching can be expected to be fruitful. Because a child is primarily a product of the norms and conditions of the society at that time. We cannot and should not expect a child to grow aloof from the social conditions.

The very foundation of our values are shaken and forsaken. The standard of behaviours and actions are absent and our society has lost into decay. And we find no solace in it. The moral fabric of our society, except a small segment, is thoroughly corrupted. And this state of affairs only gives a very dark picture that looms large in the society. Any conscious person can only be disheartened.



CROSSROAD Sketch by Jeremy Trayner

You, in Plenty

by Samir Asaf

Would that the sun
Shine more brightly tomorrow
Than today,
Pardon I beg,
For I couldn't love you more.
Would that you only see
Yourself through my eyes
As I see you,
You would smile looking at yourself,
Falling in love.