

# MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

WITH the Pahela Baishak just round the corner, the air is full of music, mostly of songs by Tagore. A British critic once said that the six seasons of Bengal were invented — some would say, more appropriately, discovered — by the great Bengali poet only to add to his writings. Another view is that subtle differences between one season and another can be understood only by a genius of the stature of Tagore.

It is a pity that I have not listened to a good discussion on Rabindranath Tagore for a long, long time, not the kind of discussion that would go around me, then a student in a Calcutta college, with distinguished authors and critics talking in low voices, in-between long pauses, often putting on a record on an old-fashioned gramophone. Did the late Abu Sayeed Ayyub really have the largest collection, running into hundreds, of Tagore songs in Calcutta, as one of his closest friends, none other than Uncle Mujtaba Ali once claimed? Who knows?

If audio cassettes have replaced gramophone records, listening has made way for endless chatters, at least in Dhaka and probably also in Calcutta. It is incredible that we have so much more to say than to listen.

Luckily, music has survived. In some ways, I may be luckier than many of my friends in having some interesting additions to my personal modest collection of music cassettes in recent weeks.

My favourite is one of music by the Turkish poet, Yunus Emre whose immortal lyric has survived seven and a half century. A selection of Emre's poetry, translated into Bangla, was published last year by the Bangla Academy. We had a review of it in this column.

Now comes the cassette, which contains Emre's songs in English, French and Turkish — superb music that reminds one partly of Arabic and partly of Greek.

For me, it is a kind of farewell gift from the outgoing Turkish Ambassador Ahmet H. Ermisoglu who, with his wife, Beyhan, have done a splendid job in building social and cultural bridges between their country and Bangladesh. The couple is now on its way to Kuala Lumpur where Ermisoglu will be the new Turkish envoy to Malaysia. Well, if Ahmet and Beyhan feel that they are stuck with this region, all I can say is, it is a good part of Asia to be in. There is no doubt about it.

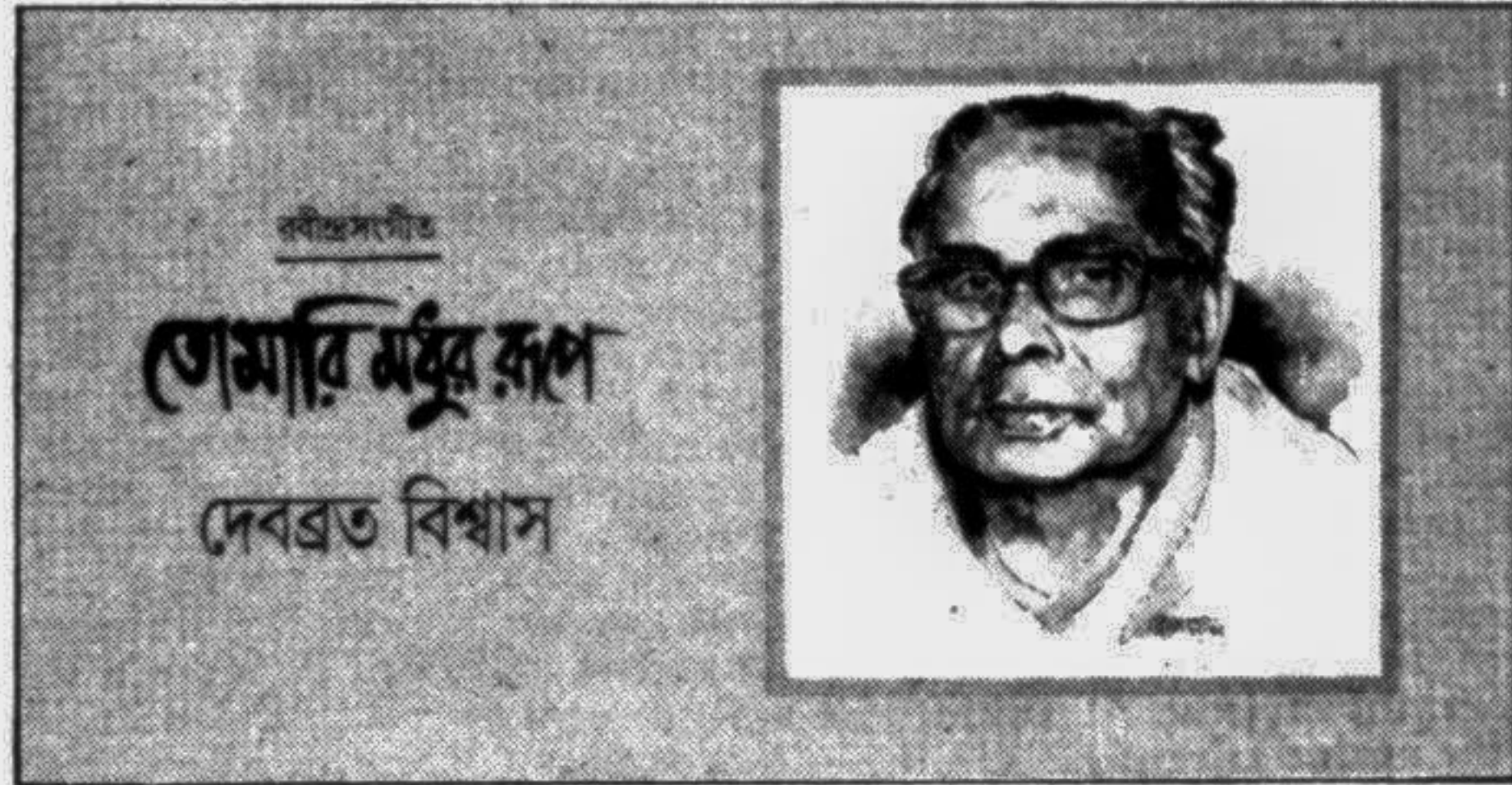
Among my favourite additions, a close second — in some ways, nearer to my heart than the music of Emre — is a selection of four cassettes, all Rabindra



Outgoing Turkish Ambassador Ahmet Ermisoglu: Building cultural bridges with Bangladesh.

Sahgeet, by none other than Devabrata Biswas, an Eid gift from K. Raghunath, the Indian High Commissioner.

Here is a chance for me to make a confession, notwithstanding its consequences. Having been away from Bangladesh for decades, I could not immediately place Biswas. I pleaded my ignorance to a colleague who warned me, in all seriousness, that I should keep this dismal fact of not having heard about this noted singer to myself. I had faced an identical situation in the early-eighties in Kathmandu. One



An ideal Eid gift for music lovers: Tagore songs by Devabrata Biswas.

morning, I found the lobby of the hotel where I was staying swarming with people, with men, women and teenagers lining up the road. I was curious about the identity of the personality who had attracted such attention.

I asked an eager-looking teenager, "Who is coming?" "Amitabha Bachchan," he replied with all the reverence that his voice could command.

My next question, "Who is Amitabha Bachchan?" The teenager looked at me with a mixture of disbelief and contempt and walked away.

My regret is, we do not put in much efforts to use music as an unifying force in bringing different cultures together. However, a few examples we know are certainly worth talking about.

The Tokyo-based Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO has put together a set of cassettes of what is called the "favourite melodies of Asia and the Pacific," a mixture of vocal and instrumental music, from such countries as Afghanistan, Australia, Malaysia, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and, how nice, Bangladesh. They are part of the Asian-Pacific Music Materials Programme. We got the set of



Mustafa Zaman Abbasi: A cassette of his own songs presented to me by Mustafa Zaman Abbasi who needs no introduction, except that he is also my cousin-in-law.

the cassettes several years ago. It seemed like a good project for schools in the region, but I am not sure about the status of what was an innovative programme.

The Centre in Tokyo has several other programmes, all designed to help school-going children to understand the Asia-Pacific region. But do educational institutions go out and buy these materials for their use and thus help the Centre meet part of its mounting cost of production and overhead expenses? The answer is probably in the negative. What a pity!

Another project that interests me is the Asian Popular Song Contest, organised perhaps once in two years, by the Kuala Lumpur-based Asian Broadcasting Union (ABU). I once sat through a long furious discussion among ABU experts about the definition of "pop music". What is taken for granted as "pop music" in some western-oriented countries like Australia, New Zealand and even Japan is not accepted as such in South Asia. Hence, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have remained somewhat indifferent to this contest. I wonder if there has been a change in the scenario.

Another innovative, indeed a challenging, bilateral project concerned North Korea and what we should now call the former Soviet Union.

In the company of some local friends, I was having some coffee at a small restaurant in Pyongyang several years ago. It was there I heard the music first. It was incredibly captivating. I knew, some of the songs, all vocal, were in Korean, but rather western-oriented. But I could not recognise several other songs.

The cassette contained Russian and Korean songs, alternating with one another, almost blending together and yet keeping their separate identities. I got a copy of this unusual cassette and brought it to Kuala Lumpur where we then lived, and played it again and again, for years, just as I did with a cassette of his own songs presented to me by Mustafa Zaman Abbasi who needs no introduction, except that he is also my cousin-in-law.

There is indeed so much one can do to use music, like any form of art, to bring nations together. We cannot help wondering if we should not think of such an idea for SAARC, say, the production of a set of audio materials depicting music, vocal and instrumental, from all the seven member countries.

## "Vision of Oceania" an art from the End of the Earth

Tahiti, Samoa, Papua, Easter island, Raratonga and the Marquesas caused whole generations of lovers of the unknown and the distant, exploration and discovery to dream. The cultural and artistic wealth of these ten thousand islands, scattered over the Pacific Ocean, is still often only known by specialists and scholars.

by Pascale Teinac

THE Dapper museum, opened in Paris in 1986 and whose vocation is to make the artistic heritage of pre-colonial Africa better known and to preserve it, made a tremendous leap to present an exhibition, "Vision of Oceania", on the art of these islands, situated on the opposite side of the world from the Black Continent.

This step was noticed as, for all of its work on primitive arts, the museum was recently awarded the special prize of the Jury of the Great Ptolemy Award for exhibitions, which, every year, crowns the best exhibition.

A little geography is not misplaced to help the reader to grasp Oceania. The 10,000 South Sea islands form three large groups: Micronesia (with the Carolines and the Hermit Islands), Polynesia (with New Zealand, the archipelagoes from Samoa to Tahiti, Easter Island and Hawaii) and Melanesia (which includes New Guinea, the Bismarck archipelago from New Ireland to New Britain, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia).

Affinities and differences in the cultures of Oceania have led to a number of controversies among specialists. There is no doubt, however, that the South Sea Islanders are sculp-

strikingly realistic with their open eyes, half-open mouths, smooth faces which are of a single hue or decorated with facial painting or incrustated shells.

These skulls could be those of relatives or ancestors, which have been carefully preserved, or the victims of "head-hunters". The skulls are moulded over so as to reproduce the features of the deceased as faithfully as possible. Sometimes, the completely bare skull serves as a head for a sculpture.

The Tiki is more familiar and more pleasant. It is named after a legendary being born of the primordial couple, Atea the man and Atanua the woman. Tiki is also the name that has been conveniently given to all the anthropomorphic sculptures in the Marquesas. The constant features of these wooden sculptures from the Marquesas are a round face, a flat nose and a broad mouth. But the Tiki is also a character who is widespread in all Polynesian mythologies just as much in New Zealand as in Tahiti, New Zealanders wear it as a pendant, for instance the superb green Tiki, made of jade, dancing about, with his big round eyes.

### The "Talking Wood" and "Rib Men" of Easter Island

Easter Island, whose stone giants have given rise to so many controversies and theories, has many other mysteries. Among these is the "talking wood", which are tablets containing inscriptions called "rongorongo", that nobody has ever been able to decipher.

It is the only example of writing known in Oceania. Only about thirty of these hieroglyphic tablets still exist today, as the missionaries who came to the island ordered their destruction between 1864 and 1868. Vincent Bonnaire, the great specialist in Oceanian art and author of the book accompanying the exhibition, explains that 790 distinct signs have been recorded, which excludes the possibility of their representing characters of an alphabet. They are probably a kind of ideogram used by the islanders to narrate ancient epics.

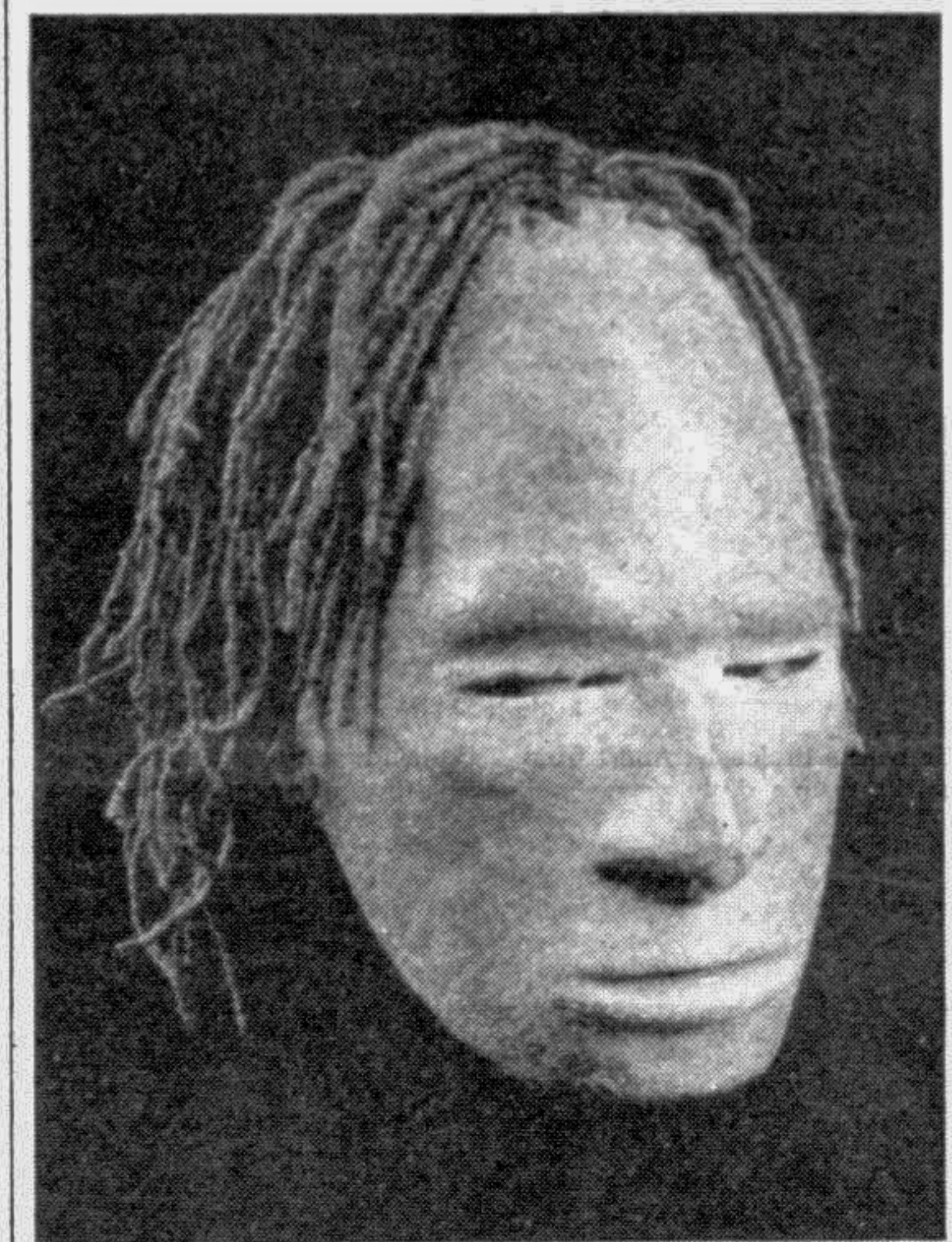
Another strange feature of Easter Island is the "Moai Kavakava", "rib men". These are hunched figures in carved wood, emaciated to the point of becoming skeletonlike with their ribs protruding. These were worn as pendants during ritual ceremonies.

In Melanesia, the art of masks is highly developed, whereas the Polynesians did not make any, neither did the Micronesians, apart from on Mortlock in the central Carolines where big, flat, wooden masks are found, with white faces, generally sporting a short beard and a strange bun on the left side.

The masks of Papua-New Guinea are particularly remarkable with their very long noses. On statues these same long noses can be found turned into beaks or trunks which unfurl and reach one end of the sculpture.

Throughout Oceania, items from everyday life, such as fly-whisks, spatulas, posts of houses, still pedals, clubs, neck-rests, foot-rests, mouth-pieces of flutes, and war-charms worn around the neck, are all pretences for carving and the styles and characters vary according to the ethnic group.

But the most astonishing object presented in Paris is, not doubt, a stone pestle from the Highlands region in Papua-New Guinea. It is astonishingly modern in the pure shape of its body which is both a bird and a phallus. Only a few rare objects of this kind have been found. The only one which it has been possible to date with some certainty goes back to 1500 B.C.



Moulded clay skull from Papua-New Guinea as presented in Dapper Museum in Paris.

tors, that the Ocean holds an essential position in their beliefs, their mythology and their artistic activities and that the world of the dead, of ancestors and of the hereafter is omnipresent in their works.

### Moulded Heads and

### Legendary Tikis

This aspect of their culture sometimes takes on a terrifying form, as in the practice, which is very widespread in Melanesia, of moulded heads, particularly in Papua-New Guinea, in New-Ireland and in New-Britain. They are all

## Refractions

by Arifa Awan

Could I've had a different life  
Been some-one else, I wonder  
As I see faces in windows of  
the busy bazaars;  
Who would I rather have been?  
(It's the "menial solitaire" that I play  
Whilst waiting for mundane things to go on)  
Did I miss opportunities to follow  
other dreams?  
(Could I have been some one famous?)  
But as I sit sorting out drawers  
Of mis-matched socks and Cast Awan toys  
I know in the ultimate I would want to be  
What I am to-pay; A woman loved  
And loving in the guise of a mother!

## JATRA — a Living Tradition

Continued from page 9

entertainment again. I do not remember to have witnessed many other actors of this quality and command in Europe or America.

A question often raised by ardent folk theatre lovers is whether it would be fruitful and advisable to enact changes in the production of a Jatra Pala. Personally I tend to agree with the pro-change lobby. Art forms always assimilate from different sources of the society. Experimentation normally enriches and gives more vitality. The addition of 'brass ensemble' which took place during the British regime is one example of assimilation. The trumpet and the coronet are not local musical instruments, but they are indisputably a part of the Jatra assemblage. Though a lot of care needs to be taken to avoid cheap and unnecessary impositions. We must strive to keep the myth-form. We have to create a 'fable' out of social and political material otherwise it will become a modern social play of the Mahila Samity format. We must definitely maintain the 'alienated', conventional and picturesque style of acting. The charm of folk drama is its make-believe, fairy-talish and larger-than-life atmosphere.

We should preserve the arena style of production and do away with as much of the sets, lights and other gadgets. But we must be cautioned not to go for a total rejection of technological means. The beauty of a production will depend in finding skilful balance between the old world atmosphere and the contemporary awareness. Jatra must remain Jatra, otherwise it will become a modern aberration. In a present day Kabuki show one might see a lot of technical excellence, like use of laser light, stereophonic background music etc. I could not believe my eyes when I saw a sequence of a huge waterfall (like Niagara) cascading with terrific speed and several characters are fighting.

Some floating helplessly, others struggling to get out of the torrent. Dexterous use of light and sound made the sequence a memorable one. Soon thereafter the scene changes to show a homestead in which the entire family is engaged in resolving their family quarrel. There is no trace of water on the stage. What technical excellence! But they had taken extraordinary care to maintain the Kabuki-ness of Kabuki.

In Bangladesh we must hold on to our age-old forms, refine the performance and use modern techniques in small doses commensurate with our financial resources. We must never forget the source and inspiration of Jatra which is the unspoilt masses of the countryside. Present day practitioners

are the proponents of a century old heritage. They are endeavouring to keep the art vibrant and pass it on to the next generation. In this pursuit a few are daring enough to go for some experimentation. They have an eye on the changing tastes of the public. The more we are becoming aware of contemporary drama the more we are looking at our traditional theatrical forms with greater respect. This is indeed a treasurehouse from which modern playwrights and directors can extract a lot. Traditional theatre in the hand of a modern theatre activist can become a boon, a source of inspiration and guidance for achieving new dimensions in



Acclaimed Chinese actress Li Yu Ying putting on her own make-up.

his production. There are about fifty important companies now in Bangladesh who are endeavouring to keep the business alive. A troupe of Jatra primarily borrows money from a money-lender by mortgaging landed property, etc, to carry out business during the limited winter 'season'. To add to the discomfort of these entrepreneurs the rate of interest is pretty high, the risk involved is chilling and the future somewhat uncertain.

The commercial draw of Jatra is in the villages and small towns. But we often hear of the distressing economic situation of some of the companies because of the harassment at the hands of local officials and mastans. The Government could perhaps provide adequate law and order protection in the village where Jatra takes place thus enabling a smooth performance and a happy return of finances. Unlike our modern group theatres, Jatra companies don't expect to receive grants either from Government, multinationals or wealthy patrons. The artists are usually whole-time engaged in the profession. They do not work in advertising companies or in commercial offices. We all know that due to lack of Government and social support, a number of cultural events have died in the recent

past. It had been a great loss. On the plea of "law and order" situation and to uphold the "morality" of the public, the government had at times banned performances of Jatra, 'gambling' and 'housie'. We must delink the last two activities from Jatra.

So far as the question of obscenity is concerned, I am sure, Jatra companies are becoming wiser to avoid suggestive dances and vulgarity. To them earning money and continuation of the company's reputation are more important factors. They also know that if a performance is disallowed by a Government order then the company will have to simply fold-up, rendering hundreds of

activities are being termed as cultural industry. If the going is good we may hold Asian Biennial Folk Theatre Festival in Dhaka. Government is already hosting an Asian Art Exhibition on a biennial basis, for which we get some subsidy from UNESCO. We may hope to get the same for Folk Theatre Festival. I feel we must be modest in our approach and a 15-day annual National Jatra Festival is the right thing for the present. We may stage the Asian Biennale say in 1998 or 1999 if the National Festival is rewarded with success.

In the field of performing arts, Jatra theatre demands specific attention. The government may provide open-air-stage on rental basis in two big towns as they provided during the Festival in Dhaka. The building of an open air stage does not need the construction of a theatre hall. To build a proscenium theatre one needs a lot of money, but a Jatra stage is made of simple materials. A rectangular open stage, a few hundred wooden chairs for the public to seat and a Shamyana (covering) on top to give protection. With what little investment one can nurture one's heritage and give so much of pleasure to so many thousands!

To make the performance more accessible to city dwellers the duration of the Jatra may be curtailed to three hours. The middle class families will be able to enjoy a show

lades. It will be a matter of pride for us to show tourists and foreign guests, at any evening, a glimpse of our unique folk traditions. A responsible and sagacious government owes it to the public. Let us not overplay the word obscenity in Jatra. I wonder how many of us can sit in a movie house with our family to enjoy a film, or even before the current TV film advertisement. We are already aware of the discomfort of watching MTV shows. I would like to remind that what the government decides today will have results later. Let us engage in building a proper Jatra atmosphere, a venue, for a commercial and artistic venture, without the association of gambling, mastans or 'housie', and above all interference from the local authorities. If we fail, this great living tradition will degenerate and be lost forever, which will be a great loss. And my question remains to be answered: a loss to whom?

The author is an internationally acclaimed playwright. His plays have been translated in many languages and staged in different parts of the world. A row of seat at celebrated theatre Arena Stage of Washington DC has been named after him. His present assignment is delivering lectures at various academies and universities of Europe and America.



In the make-up room: Jatra performers doing their own make-ups; Late Amalendu Biswas is seen at the extreme end.

people jobless. Gifted artists will have no platform to show their skill, nor simple villagers will have a chance for cultural education and entertainment. No sensible person will agree that a Government is incapable of curbing the activities of a few extortionist 'mastans' and a handful of greedy officials. I am positive, any government worth the name has enough strength to contain the criminals. One must have the will to maintain discipline inside a Jatra pandal, and not to eliminate a cultural gem. Holding of Jatra festivals on an annual basis would give a great boost to our cultural industry. In modern parlance, such cultural ac-

without anxiety at an affordable ticket price which is not possible in the present social circumstances in many other entertainment centres. In the countryside or in towns where public demand and 'time-security' constraints are different, there the traditional timing should be followed. I would like to mention that Peter Brook's staging of 'Mahabharata', at Tramway Theatre in Glasgow, was of nine and half hours' duration. In the recent years in Germany, some plays are being staged having six hours' duration. Whole night tradition of witnessing plays is prevalent in many other parts of the world besides Bang-

## WRITE TO MITA

### Family Responsibilities

The Rana-Sayeed story is creating quite a stir, specially among young couples. People are having heated debates on whether Rana should go back to work or not.

Unfortunately, many say that she should not, because her husband does not want her to and that it's not worth the tension it will create. The more open minded among them say Rana could go back to work but not at this time when her baby is still so young. Very few support her outright and say if this is what she really wants, then her wish should be respected. Which brings us back to the question of who is responsible for the family and the children. Why should it always be the responsibility of the woman? Why is she the one who should always put her wishes aside and think of the family? Why is it that she is always expected to give up her career, no matter how successful her career is it usually has to take a back seat to that of her husband?

There was a time when the above worked very well. Family responsibilities and obligations were very clearly divided and shared. The father as the traditional wage earner, was the unquestioned head of the family. He provided all the material requirement of the family to the best of his ability. His role was very well defined. The woman was expected to stay at home and look after all the other needs of the family. Her role was also very well defined. Except for few exceptions, women were never expected to earn and contribute to the family income. Their sole responsibility was to bear children, keep the house in order and see to it that all the family members were well fed and well dressed.

That is not the case anymore. Women have gone far beyond their traditional role of being a mother and housekeeper. Because of equal rights to education and economic necessity

women now aspire for more. They want a family, children and a career. Men, however, have not made as much progress. Though most educated, modern men want their partners to be smart, modern and educated, yet they generally have a problem in accepting them as equals, and I mean really equal.

Though women in the West, through the feminist movement, have been able to achieve many of the basic rights, their situation in terms of sharing family responsibilities is just slightly better than ours. French women complain that when both spouses come back from work, the woman is the one who immediately ties the apron and starts cooking. It was reported in an ILO report that Japanese men do housework for only 15 minutes a day and the "couch potato" husband is a well known joke.

The rewards of sharing family responsibilities is many, both for the husband as well as the wife. It is through sharing that a truly democratic partnership emerges between couples. This relationship is based on mutual respect and seldom goes wrong.

In case readers are curious to know what happened to Rana and Sayeed: Rana did go back to work in spite of resistance from her husband. Their marriage went through a lot of turmoil but ultimately settled down. Sayeed saw the logic of what Rana was doing and reconciled to the fact that his wife was a career woman. Rana, on the other hand, tried her best to fulfil her responsibilities as a mother and wife. They gradually learnt to appreciate each other and the special qualities they both bring to the marriage. It needed a lot of conscious effort but the end was worth it.

— Shaheen Anam