

People and Places

Strange Berkeley Turns Wonderful to Recall

by Aasha Mehreen Amin back from USA

WHERE else would you find men going to class in the nude, gay and lesbian parades or Hare Krishnas inviting you for dinner and a meditation session? Where else but Berkeley, California. A favourite phrase in this wondrously strange city whenever one is in doubt is, 'Oh come on man, this is Berkeley.' This logo is so commonplace that it will not be long before you are using it yourself to show your superiority over a newcomer.

Known as the home of the most radical of universities (University of California at Berkeley), Berkeley still retains its historically revolutionary spirit.

To conservatives, Berkeley is a wild haven for hippies, junkies, gays and all sorts of radicals (a synonym for madmen) who have a 'ridiculous notion' as claiming that the 'Gulf War was a bad thing'.

To those on the more liberal side, and mix it you, there are plenty in southern California. Berkeley is the ultimate oasis for freedom of speech, thought and action — the 'peace for intellectual stimulation'.

There is no doubt that Berkeley is an exciting place. Nothing mundane ever happens here. People dress in a careless, understated way, have a far-away, intelligent expression and are frenziedly environment-conscious. They may be described as strange but their 'madness' is a clever madness that promises creativity and innovation.

This is especially true of Telegraph Avenue, one of the most well known roads in the city that reflects the essence of Berkeley. Located on the right of Sather Gate (the main entrance to the UC Berkeley campus), this is the street where the hippies, now middle-aged and worn-out, hang out, selling exotic jewelry, 'tie dye' T-shirts, glistening pottery, clay pipes and posters with controversial slogans. They come in the morning in their dilapidated vans, set up shop and then leave as soon as dusk sets in.

Graffiti on the walls, men with long hair, innumerable record shops and book stores all line this historical road.



The 'Flower Man' holding out his hand for a 'palm shake'

Madness or unconventionalism, whatever one wants to call it, is always there. You may be walking down Telegraph to the Post office when your South Asian sense of propriety will be flung to the winds, to see the 'naked man' who has earned international fame for his 'freedom of baring' acts, sit nonchalantly under a lamp-post, reading a book. With a knapsack as his only attire, he looks as complacent and self-assured as the 'king who lost his clothes'.

Then there is the 'flower man' who wears fake daisies in his braided hair and spends his days pushing a stolen shopping cart containing old clothes, an old lamp, plants and flowers. Agreeing to let his picture be taken for twenty five cents, although refusing his name, the flower man gives a peaceful smile and explains his curious way of life: 'Frustration, I guess, with life, disillusion with the world and the education system', said the former student of philosophy, asking for a 'palm' shake to see if his interviewer 'could be trusted'.

The statement is a faint echo of Berkeley's glorious and rebellious past as the birthplace of the Free Speech Movement in the early 60s. Further up through Sather Gate into Sproul Plaza one can almost hear the fervent cries of student demonstrators of the first sit-in in September 1964, and see them being dragged away by police or picketing silently, their faces resolute and unswayed by threats. At that time the issue had been over the ban of all publications that had political undertones. Now, after almost three decades, the campus stacks are full of political propaganda and sit-ins are still a common sight, though not as violent.

Cultural exchange, too, reaches its peak in Berkeley. The cafes are always jam-packed with the bold, the beautiful and the exotic. Snatches of Spanish, Swahili, Cantonese, Tongan or even Bengali can be heard passing by La Strada (Italian for 'the street'), a popular cafe on Durant Way, where the crowd is as international as at Heathrow Airport. Down the road is the International House which has



Selling exotic jewellery on Telegraph Avenue

its own cafe to boast of, where Arabs, Israelis, South Africans, Nigerians, Australians, Indians, inhabitants from all over the world, perhaps even outside it, talk of politics, plays and life, over endless cups of cappuccino and deliciously warm chocolate croissants.

Berkeley is also, of course, a great book haven with book stores at every corner. One of them that has become a historical site is Cody's bookstore. During the 60s movement, the store made its mark by selling all kinds of revolutionary and controversial books. Now it has become a popular haunt for filmstars as famous as Peter O'Tool, giving the store its subtle snob appeal.

There is, however, another side to this city. Unlike neighbouring San Francisco, Berkeley is not a rich city. Its streets and alleys are filled with the homeless as unwanted burdens of society. Women with scrawny looking children, men huddling in the corner amongst raggedy blankets or tramps on the UC campus benches looking vacant and apathetic — these are the common sights that give



Jewellery and other knick-knacks also on Telegraph

— photos by the author



Rally outside Sproul Hall, UC Berkeley. — photo by Ron Enfield, Berkeley Insider

Berkeley the 'shabby' look that the city's elite complain of so often. Some of these vagrants are remnants of the Hippie Age, with their long hair and tattooed arms. Others are rootless men and women who have travelled many miles to this city with its mild climate that permits them to live on the streets and where people are more tolerant of poverty. They wait endlessly with their little cans in front of them begging for 'small change' to the passerby who desperately tries to avoid eye contact.

Drugs, too, are plenty in liberal Berkeley. In some dormitories smoking pot is the only way to socialize. Walking down Shattuck Avenue one gets whiffs of something sweet which some call brown sugar. The glazed bloodshot eyes of the men where the smell comes from are painfully desperate and lonely, and tell tales of unemployment and frustration long before the recession set in.

Yet, in spite of the drugs (which you will hardly ever see in the day time), the poverty and ample share of crime, any student of the university will insist that Berkeley is the best 'happening place'. The university boasts several Nobel laureates whose special parking space never fails to evoke a ripple of excitement to the passerby. Breakthroughs in genetic engineering, nuclear physics etc are always taking place in the laboratories of this unassuming school. Seminars on gay rights, discrimination against 'women of colour', rallies protesting the closure of the ethnic studies department — these are common happenings.

The cultural scene could be as diverse as a Tchaikovsky recital or a 'Bharat Natyam' performance. Outside Sathergate the air is heavy with melodies from travelling musicians. Congos drum away in the distance while a Native American band may play beautiful notes on exotic flutes, mesmerizing its audience.

It is hard to say goodbye to Berkeley, perhaps one never does. The voices of friends from far away lands echo in one's soul with the realization that after Berkeley, life will never be the same.

VIEW FROM ABROAD

Bangladesh Steady in Tourism Outlook

by M N Hebbur

BERLIN: Bangladesh's objective of creating a lasting awareness of the country's touristic delights has found consistent expression in participation at tourism fairs abroad, especially in Germany where the annual International Tourism Exchange (ITB) held in Berlin facilitates a marvellous exposure to the currents of holiday travel and the competition that goes with it. Besides, the presence of travel professionals and policymakers from the world over at Berlin ensures that holiday destinations stand a good chance of receiving business interest through face-to-face negotiations. Bangladesh has been a regular participant at the ITB as reflected by its steadily soaring figures of tourist arrivals which in 1992 touched some 110,000. Tourism ranks as an important earner of foreign exchange for the Bangladesh economy.

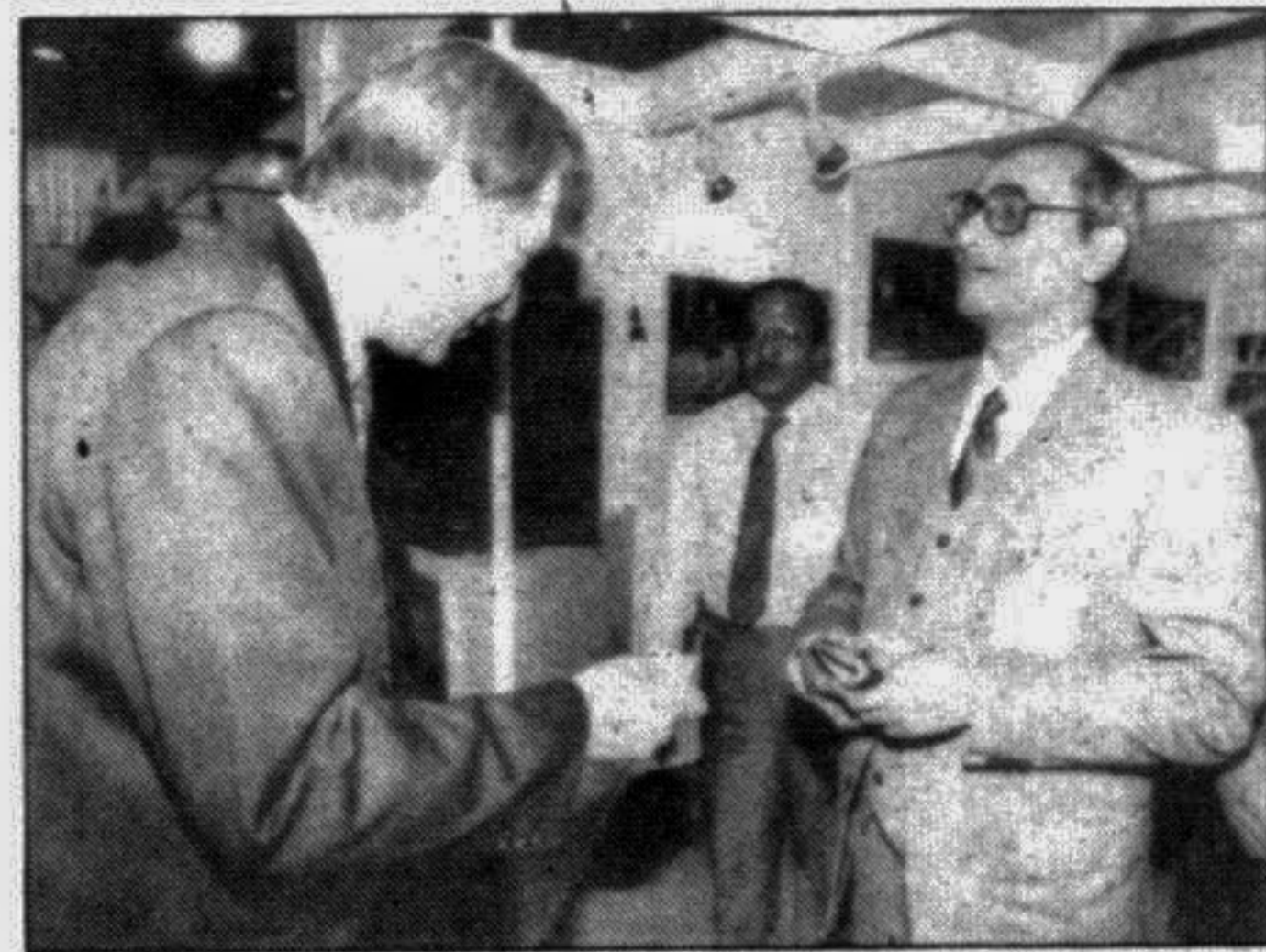
Bangladesh was conspicuous at ITB 1993 in Berlin by the vigorous promotion of its tourist destinations that included lovely beaches, archaeological sites, fairs and festivals as well as the Sunderbans, reportedly the largest mangrove forest of its kind. The government's plan to develop small offshore estates in Chittagong for tourist complexes is now awaiting suitable foreign investors, with possible German participation not unlikely. Tourism has been declared an industry by the national government so as to enable it to operate more system-

atically both at home and abroad.

"German tourists have begun to take serious interest in Bangladesh but it will take some time before this translates into a regular tide", said a spokesman for the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, the national tourism promotion organisation that coordinated the national presence. Regional packages are still the best promotional means for Bangladesh.

Although several tourism fairs take place in other parts of Europe, the ITB is regarded as truly the world tourism fair for its breadth of participation, nature of interaction and the dynamics of the global market projected therein. Furthermore, it provides a golden opportunity for developing countries to expand their tourism sectors, diversify their economic structures, create employment and earn foreign exchange.

That environmental consciousness was not just a fad was reflected again this year by the deepening of involvement in the environmental dimension of tourism. There was sharply rising concern for touristic deprivations in several countries, especially in the developing world. Special discussions on "Eco-Travel or Ego-Tourism?" saw the issues laid bare. There was even a seminar on "Ecology in the skies — aviation and environmental pollution". The findings were unanimous in the view that there was no al-



Bangladesh continued to promote an awareness of its touristic delights at the International Tourism Exchange (ITB) Berlin 1993. Picture shows German Mayor of Berlin Ekkehard Diepgen (left) being received at the Bangladesh pavilion by Mr. Mudd Choudhuri, Managing Director of Bangladesh Biman. — Photo: IS/Leb

ternative to the conservation of nature if tourism itself was to survive and thrive. Germany's stance on the environment and its policy initiatives to promote ecological consciousness have been regarded as exemplary, also reflected in the attitude of the average German tourist in his choice of tourist destinations.

The ITB plays a significant role in facilitating a comprehensive and unique survey of worldwide supply and demand for touristic attractions and facilities, establishing new

tourism trends and playing a leading part as a test market for new forms of travel and packages. It is also accompanied by an extensive programme of meetings, seminars and workshops. Some of the notable ones this year were on "Electronics in Tourism", "Tourism in the Third World" and "China Day".

The ITB Berlin is unrivalled as a means of meeting the communication requirements of a market that will soon become the largest industry in the world. According to statistics released by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), Madrid for 1992, 476 million tourist arrivals took place, with earnings from global tourism in that year rising to US\$ 279 billion. The trend here has been continually upward.

THE RIVERFRONT SKYLINE OF BANGKOK Paradigm of Continuity and Change

by Iftexhar Ahmed

THE Chao Praya river runs through the city of Bangkok, lending this city of charms another charming dimension. All along the river, on both its banks, are arranged a variety of scenarios, varying from the most opulent to the ultimate sordid! Bangkok has often been referred to as the "Venice of the East". In fact, before any other route of access was available the Chao Praya provided the only entry point into the land. Among the early western travellers was the writer Joseph Conrad, whose visit in 1888 impressed him profoundly. The plethora of gorgeous palaces and temples, as well as picturesque indigenous architecture, all strewn along his entry path on the river banks, stirred his imagination vividly — he had described the cityscape as, "tremendous, overpowering, almost palpable, which seemed to enter one's breast with the breath of one's nostrils and soak into one's limbs through every pore of the skin..."

The power of that magnificent splendour is still there, albeit in different form, after withstanding the successive and ever-accelerating transformations over the years. No longer is there a profusion of Conrad's vegetable-matter style of architecture. Whatever little semblance to this indigenous heritage remains in the form of shoddy shanties and run-down shacks: symbols of this century's resourceful human adaptation to human degradation. Gone from the city's riverfront is the idyllic image of organic cottages under the shade of awaying palm fronds. One may have to travel beyond the city limits to witness such scenes of tranquillity!

Though the riverfront offers a view of human misery, it also offers hope. Thailand's rapidly improving economic growth is manifested in many a mighty ivory tower along the riverfront. Juxtaposed with ancient religious structures, these symbols of corporate power and real estate affluence lend further variety to the motley arrangement of buildings on the banks. The Shangri-La, Sheraton and Oriental hotels rise up skyward, dwarfing the once dominating aspect of the Royal Palace and Grand Temple (Wat Pra Keo).

As in many non-Western cities, the need to house the rising urban populations have re-

sulted in many recently built high-rise apartment complexes and condominiums. Scattered all over Bangkok, these dominant elements of the skyline jostle with other kinds of buildings to gain frontage along the river bank. From early times the river offered a natural demarcating boundary, and all along this boundary the valuable urban riverfront land has been densely built upon. Not an inch of land has been spared; like lines of rowhouses, a contrast of architectural styles have been assembled over time, compactly packed on the banks, some indeed appearing to be part of a large happy family of architectural "puppy-pieces", fashion hallmarks, boat sheds and hovels.

The lack of available land with transportation links has created the high value of land along the river. This in turn has promoted the indiscriminate architectural mingling, probably a headache for the city municipal authorities, but for the visitor it is a remarkable, unfolding magical tapestry!

Along the riverfront can be seen many ornate Buddhist temples and pagodas, but these are not the only examples of religious and ceremonial architecture. A large church with a beef belfry glowers from the bank, its Neo-classical facade poses a sharp contrast to the general Oriental ambience. A slim minaret from a neighborhood mosque struggles for attention from the entanglement of the urban built environment. The

Buddhist structures represent a sense of continuity — varying from ancient dilapidated temples to recently completed structures which are modern in all respects except in spirit. Religious structures in most cultures aspire to reach the sky, and hence divinity. Thai Buddhist architecture is endowed with a variety of such devices — from the Shikharalike Prang to the tiled cruciform Prasat these heavenly roof structures represent the chronological influence on Buddhism from India, China, Cambodia, Burma and other parts of Asia.

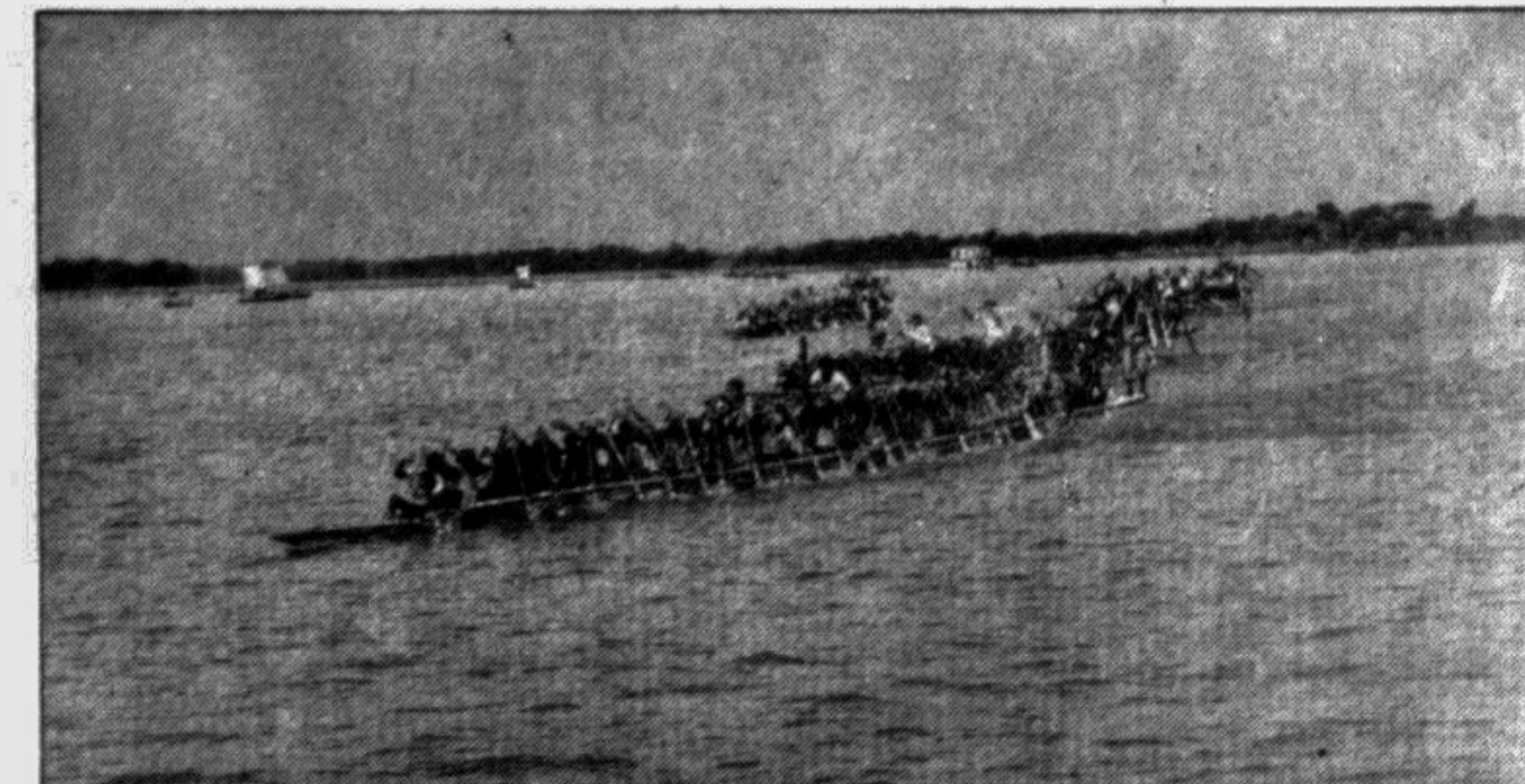
The riverfront gets its dynamism from the diversity of movements on the water surface. Longtail boats, ferries, rice-barges, row-boats, steamers and an endless list of waterborne vehicles with various cargoes ply up and down, back and forth on the river. Some are examples of floating architecture — from the tin-sheet roofed junks of the less fortunate to the tacky boat restaurants catering to tourist crowds — all are transformations of the age-old oriental tradition of living on the water.

Minus the half-burnt corpses, the Chao Praya is as polluted as the Ganges in Varanasi. This Newly industrialized country relentlessly dumps industrial waste as well as sewage into the river. An appalled tourist had remarked, "No country charges money for a ride on its sewer system." However disturbed the tourists

may be, life goes on relatively unchanged for many in Bangkok: the small boys dive and splash in the waters daily, clothes and utensils are washed, water is collected and distributed throughout the city for drinking and cooking. A hopeful sign is the recently launched environmental programmes, undertaken by the government and led by Her Highness Queen Sirikit.

For someone travelling to Bangkok, a ride on the Chao Praya is highly recommended. A one-way fare on the public Chao Praya Express is only around 25 US cents — a comfy and wonderful tour bargain. One can get off at random to explore the banks. The perspectives along the river are endless, one can never become bored of them. The skyline varies in its charm from dawn to dusk. At night the banks become alive with a multitude of lights of different colors and brightnesses. Old and new, rich and poor, the crumbling and the freshly built, the tall and the small, mighty and weak, all merge to form a kaleidoscopic panorama of architecture and human drama along the banks of this ancient river in this city of contrasts.

Ancient rivers have given birth to many ancient cities. Ancient cities develop over time gathering character, forming countenances and each city creating in itself a special spirit, which is unique in most regards. Given the conditions of rapid change of this age, years from now this fascinating skyline of Bangkok will undergo further change. Yet I am sure the unique spirit of Bangkok will endure over time and will endlessly be reflected from the waves of the Chao Praya.



Traditional boat race: On any national occasion of festivity, the rivers in Bangladesh throb with excitement of the competing boatmen.



View along the Chao Praya river in Bangkok: a diverse, eclectic and transforming Skyline.