

THE first thing that strikes the eyes of a foreigner while driving through Dhaka City is the huge number of rickshaws. These colourful, man driven vehicles seem to be everywhere. The rickshaw pullers are the masters of the roads in Dhaka. They dominate all other transport means, such as cars, buses and trucks, especially in the populated areas of the city.

A conservative estimate says that there are around 1,000,000 rickshaws in Bangladesh, of which 200,000 in Dhaka. Without exaggeration, one can say that without the rickshaw the social and economic life in Bangladesh would collapse. Imagine how children would go to school, office clerks reach their offices, farmers bring their agricultural produce to the market and sick people visit the government clinic. Almost everybody in Bangladesh is somehow dependent on the rickshaw.

Why then have rickshaws in this country such a bad image? Why is the heavy pedal work of the rickshaw pullers so badly appreciated? Talking to my Bangladeshi friends about rickshaws, I have come to the conclusion that most of them have a negative opinion on these vehicles. The rickshaws hold up

most people have on the rickshaw makes that hardly anybody realises how important the rickshaw is for the economy of Bangladesh. Close to 35 per cent of all transport in Bangladesh goes by rickshaw. This is more than the total river transport volume. This percentage amounts to 29 per cent. Motorised transport only accounts for 15 per cent. The rickshaw is also important in terms of employment generation. A conservative estimate indicates that 1,500,000 people earn their daily plate of rice with the rickshaw. As rickshaw puller, builder, repair mechanic, owner, or as owner of a tea stall where the rickshaw puller goes for his tea and food. In numbers the rickshaw transport sector is the second largest employer next to agriculture. The traditional handloom industry in comparison employs 850,000 people, the modern industry not more than 500,000. In Dhaka over 25 per cent of the population of the working people makes a living from the rickshaw.

Economically the rickshaw is also important for Bangladesh. The annual turnover in the rickshaw transport sector is estimated at more than 400 million dollars. Also on a smaller scale, for example for Dhaka,



Now a lunch break: Chitra-gur is cheap and safe.

— Photo: M Hartsuddin

all other traffic, is their comment. They are responsible for all traffic jams. The rickshaw pullers do not follow the official traffic rules, they are undisciplined and have no manners. Driving in a rickshaw is the most dangerous thing a man or woman can do. It comes close to suicide. The list of what my friends have against rickshaws seems to be endless.

The attitude of the Government towards rickshaws is not much different. Rickshaws are seen as a symbol of underdevelopment and should be abandoned from the road by all means. The current five-year plan hardly says anything about the usefulness of this means of transportation. Most transport plans deal with the expansion of the existing motorised transportation network. The ultimate goal of the Government is more buses, cars and trucks. The rickshaw pullers are the pariahs in the transport system. They are heavily discriminated against other types of transportation. While the police treats car owners and drivers of other motorised vehicles with general respect when trespassing certain traffic rules and regulations, rickshaw pullers have an almost hundred percent chance to be physically beaten up and their vehicles damaged or confiscated.

Also the many development experts and foreign aid donors present in Bangladesh have expressed little interest in the rickshaw. Visiting Dhaka last year, a Netherlands transport expert came to the conclusion, that the present traffic situation which he considered to be a total chaos, could only be solved by the construction of fly-overs and tunnels and a total ban on rickshaws.

The negative view which



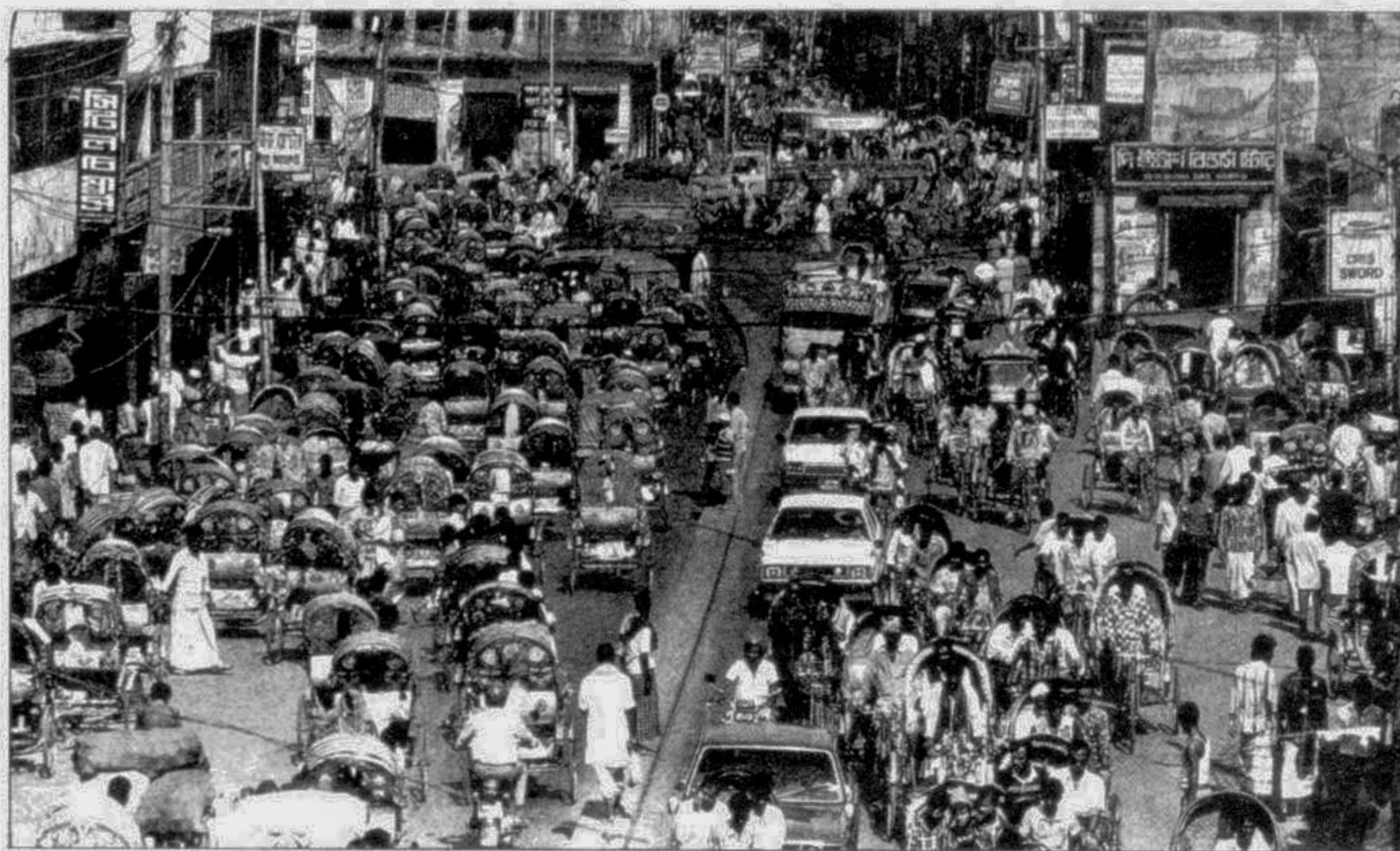
Submerged road: Rainy day phenomenon of Dhaka.

— Star photo

A Foreigner Looks at the Rickshaws

A Way of Life in Dhaka

by Hans Rolloos



A typical Old Dhaka scene.

Photo, Courtesy: Shah Ahmed Sadeque

Increase. It is projected that in the year 2000 the number of rickshaws will go up to 2.2 million, an average increase of ten per cent per year.

"We Bangladeshi people have to learn to live with the rickshaw, just as we have learned to live with cyclone and other natural disasters," one of project colleagues commented discussing the rickshaw phenomenon. "We often consider rickshaws as a pest like our black crows. Still we could not exist without them. For me 'rickshaw' is a way of life. I would not be able to go to my office, visit my friends or go to the cinema."

In Dhaka for sure if you do not own a motorcycle or car the rickshaw is the most appropriate means of transport. Taxis are scarce and expensive. City buses are overcrowded with passengers. Especially for short distances the rickshaw is ideal. And then, you can easily find

your present expenditure on rickshaws, you can easily buy such a vehicle. Take for instance the people in China or central Java in Indonesia. Almost everybody uses a bicycle in these countries.

"In principle, you are right," is their response. "But in Bangladesh things are different. Firstly, we lack the money to buy a bicycle. A new one costs at least 4,000 Taka. Then in Dhaka a bicycle easily gets stolen. Thirdly, consider safety. Our bus and truck drivers have little respect for anybody on less than four wheels. Last, what about our women? In our country it is not accepted that a woman rides on a bicycle. Although I can respect these arguments, one reason is never mentioned: status. In contrast to my own country, where even our Queen rides on a bicycle, the Bangladeshi society is very much status oriented. Many a Bangladeshi considers riding a bicycle a sign of poverty. This is also one of the main reasons why many people who are in the position of buying just do not do it. Driving in a rickshaw has become a status symbol. Even in rural areas. Very often I come to young village people who could easily drive a bicycle, but for social status reasons stick to the rickshaw. Bicycles are not popular vehicles in the villages. The Grameen Bank, for instance, with a network of 1.5 million borrowers provides many loans for rickshaws but very few for bicycles.

The lack of interest for bicycles has made that the cycle industry in this country has never really come off the ground. Most existing cycle manufacturers hardly make any profit and have a hard time in competing with bicycles from China and India. It is well known that a large part of the Indian cycles are smuggled into the country. Although the local cycle manufacturers regularly protest against the illegal entry of cycles, the Government has done little to stop this illegal practice. Another complaint from the manufacturers is, the relative high tax they have to pay on the import of parts. The tax on cycle tires for instance is 150 per cent. This compares very high to car tires for which the tax percentage is 50 per cent. The current tax policy clearly supports the motorised transport sector.

Still, one would say, if the cycle enterprises are facing problems, Bangladesh with so many rickshaws around for sure must have a well developed rickshaw industry. Unfortunately that is not the case. Only fifty per cent of the rickshaw parts are locally produced, the rest, the more sophisticated parts, such as bearings, chains, wheels are mostly imported.

I can see this with my own eyes when visiting a small rickshaw assembling enterprise in Old Dhaka. A year ago the owner, Taher, has taken over the enterprise from his father. Taher receives me in a friendly manner with tea and 'mistee'. Showing me around in his workshop, he says jokingly: "I have no secrets. The construction of rickshaws is everywhere the same. The difference lies in the quality of the craftsmanship and parts. Bearings from China, for instance, are better than the ones from India. The same goes for brakes and tires."

Taher shows me the difference between local and imported spikes. The local spikes although much cheaper can only take 300 kilos of weight. The imported ones up to 600 kilos. It all depends on what the client wants. Taher's workshop produces five rickshaws per week. More than 200 rickshaws per year. The decorative work Taher leaves to a friend, who lives in the same neighbourhood. His friend's painting shop is already three generations old. I talk to

Taher's friend and his seventy year old grandfather. "Rickshaw painting started in the fifties," the oldman recalls. "In all these years rickshaw painting has become an art in itself. We paint the dream world of the common man. Our subjects are heroes, beautiful women, the eternal fight between good and evil." His grandson adds: "Over the last ten years there have been new trends. Because of the influence of television and film, we now have more pictures of

film stars, gangsters with guns and knives, love scenes and nowadays heroes such as your national football champion Rudd Oulit."

Is driving a rickshaw inhuman? At first sight this seems to be an unnecessary question. You need little fantasy to imagine the physical condition of a rickshaw driver pulling 300 kilos of weight during the hottest time of the day. Rickshaw pulling is not a light activity. Just consider the fact that a rickshaw puller drives an average distance of 60 kilometers per day with a load between 50 and 300 kilos. Take into account that the hot and humid climate of Bangladesh. Especially during the rainy season, when the streets are flooded with black water from clogged sewage drains, rickshaw pedalling is a major physical effort. Still most of the pullers would not like to do anything else. Working in soaking muddy rice fields, in badly ventilated jute and textile factories or to be a coolie in the market is just that heavy.

All is already twelve years rickshaw puller. He is one of the few drivers who has his own rickshaw. On an average he earns 100 Taka per day. That's more than a college graduate

gets with the Government job. "I am lucky," he says, "I do not have to make the daily rent deposit of 40 Taka. I am my own boss." Alf's colleagues whom I meet in a small tea stall close to Elephant Road agree with him. "We know that we are exploited by the rickshaw owners and often harassed by the police," they say. "Still we would not like to do anything else. Before we were working as sharecroppers in the village. Our land was often affected by floods and drought. Rickshaw pulling gives us more security."

In the past a number of political parties and NGOs have tried to improve the living conditions of the rickshaw pullers. In many places rickshaw drivers unions and cooperatives have been set up. Although initiated with the best intentions the activities of these organisations have brought little change into the lives of the rickshaw pullers. Some organisations have requested the government to adjust the existing rickshaw license. The present licence dates from 1944, the year that the first rickshaws arrived in Dhaka. The licence says a lot about the safety and maintenance requirements of rickshaw, but hardly considers the

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Generating employment for others: A roadside mechanic and child assistants.

— Photo, Courtesy: Shah Ahmed Sadeque

Environment: The Right to Live

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

WHAT could be more intimate and enduring than the relationship between women and nature? For a village woman, her interaction with her environment begins from the moment she wakes up whether it is walking miles to get water from the pond or fire wood for cooking, feeding the cow, planting new vegetables or threshing the rice. All the more reason for her to bear the brunt of all kinds of environmental degradation—deforestation, water contamination, floods etc. Any attack on nature therefore, is a personal humiliation for herself.

This humiliation is shared by Maneka Gandhi, a former Environment Minister, for whom environment and politics are inseparable and mean the same thing: the way to live.

It was at a workshop on Women and Environment arranged by NARI (National Association for Resource Improvement) that Maneka shared her ideas on environmentally sound development and women in politics. The whole problem of environment says Maneka, is that it is segregated and regarded as a soft subject when it should be part of everything. Believing in environment, according to her, means believing in the right to live.

In an impassioned, candid speech Maneka spoke of her pain of losing her husband and disappointment of losing her first election at 28. "After the initial period of misery was over, I asked myself what I would have done for India if I had won." It was in answering this question that Maneka discovered what she was destined to do work for saving the environment.

Maneka speaks strongly of the evils of 'modern development' that is often based on ignorance and the greed of politicians. The evils include the building of dams which displaces people, causes floods, salinity and alkalinity and destroys the natural habitat of many plant and animal species. Maneka gives the example of India which has so far built 1600 dams at a cost of 78000 crore rupee loans out of which 800 do not work due to engineering problems while the ones that work do more harm than good. Moreover, says Maneka, the high costs of the dam raises taxes, and takes away state funds from vital areas such as education, family planning and women's issues.

Maneka has many such examples of misguided development policies that have caused irreparable harm to nature and

man. She speaks of the indiscriminate toxic waste dumping in the Bay of Bengal, a practice that has killed millions of fish, destroyed the livelihood of fisherman and contaminated water so that the Bay is now considered to be dying.



Maneka Gandhi

Women, says Maneka can play an invaluable role in preventing such disasters, the answer being tied to women entering politics—not as wives or daughters of political martyrs but by equipping themselves with knowledge and making a niche for themselves.

But what about village women, how will they enter politics? The only way this is possible, says Maneka, is by giving women more time to be able to think, complain and interact with each other. A woman she says, spend too

much time doing household chores walking up to 8 hrs up and down just to bring water to the house, washing clothes, cooking etc. If the water is brought closer to her, says Maneka, by growing wood locks and grass around the villages then she will have time to interconnect and network with other women. "Give her time to grumble—something out of which a political movement is possible" she says.

Maneka adds that in India illiteracy, especially among girl children is rising because wood is becoming more and more scarce due to deforestation and the girls are needed at home to collect firewood. Availability of alternative energy such as biogas and solar energy, can solve this problem.

An environmental movement can only begin with personal awareness. "You have to change yourself to change the world," says Maneka. "Environment", has become to mean a series of seminars where everybody teaches everybody and nobody acts." Maneka, herself is a strong believer of practising what she preaches, a philosophy her husband taught her. One must be aware of what one does she stresses, whether it is smoking a pack of cigarettes that used two acres of forest land for growing the tobacco or using polythene bags that block

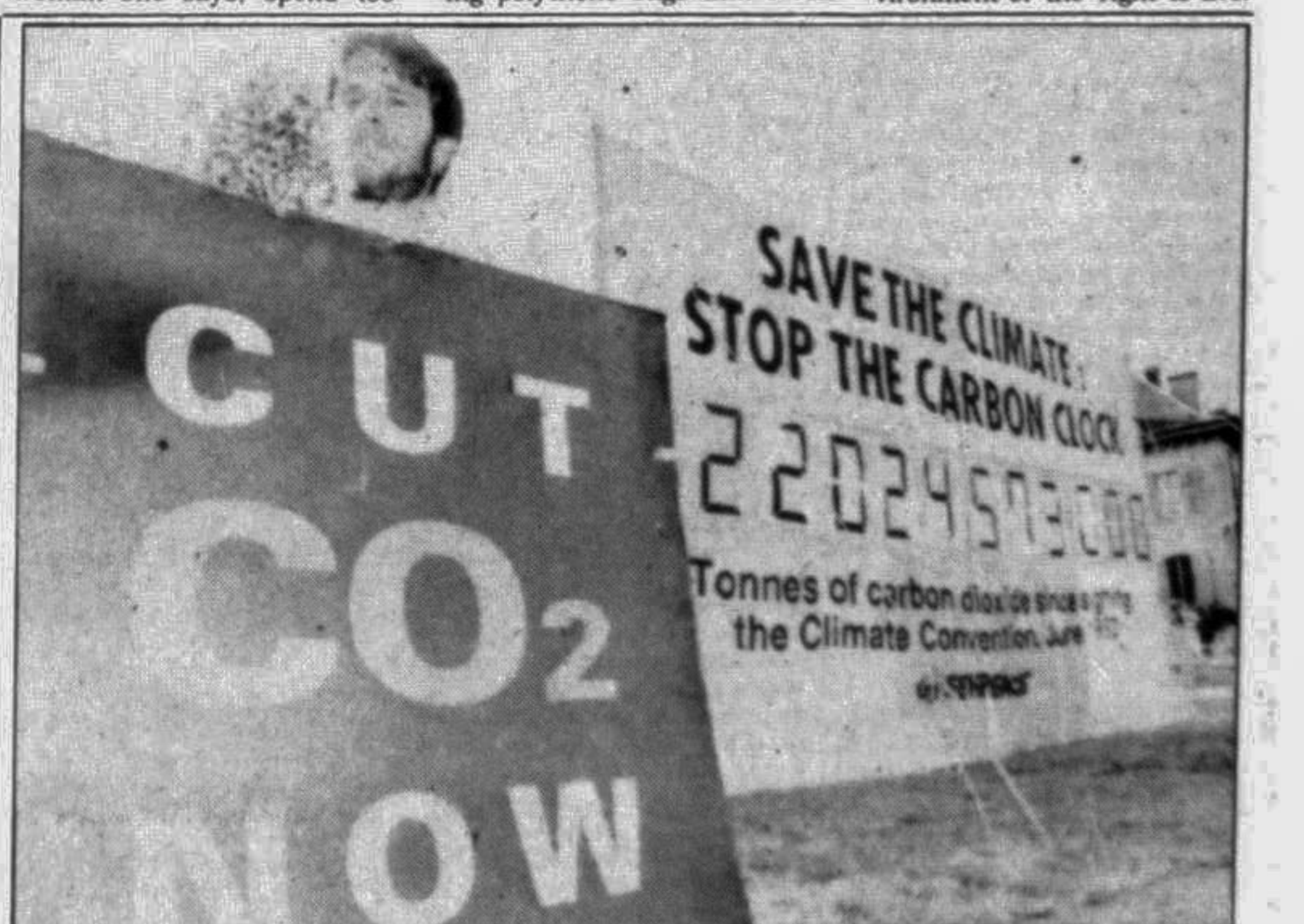
ponds and rivers. Industrialization is not the type of 'modernization' that countries of the third world should adopt according to Maneka. If modernization was so good then why are the countries of South Asia that are becoming increasingly industrialized getting poorer and poorer, she demands. Development, Maneka adds, can only be sustainable through cottage industries not heavy metal industries.

NGOs must become more self reliant says Maneka, and stop looking for aid and government assistance. They must find solutions among themselves and work independently.

Critical of western form of education traditionally adopted by the sub continent, Maneka endorses a more practical form of education that is relevant to say, a village person for whom subjects like English literature or history are as remote as the countries they came from.

On family planning Maneka suggests community based programmes managed by women a practice that has worked wonders to reduce the population in Thailand.

Whether she is called a politician, environmental activist or feminist, perhaps she is all of them rolled into one, her dedication and strength is an inspiration for any one who believes in protecting the environment or the 'right to live'.



GENEVA, Switzerland: A Greenpeace activist holds up a placard near a sign telling the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitted into the air, as a UN conference on the climate got under way 16 Aug. The sign says that over 22 million tons of CO₂ has been added to the atmosphere since the signing of the Climate Convention in 1992.

— AFP photo