

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## Conception of a Modern Museum in the European Context

by Hosne Ara Motahar

**T**HE definition and conception of museum have undergone a considerable change in Europe in recent years. Traditionally the purpose of museum was to preserve, collect, display and interpret objects of importance, that are related with the history and culture of a nation in a scholarly manner for the education and enjoyment of the public. Today museum does not necessarily mean the storehouse of wonders and national treasures or a temple of the arts. Museum has become a place for visiting exhibition, studying, conserving and restoring artifacts, eating, listening to music, seeing films, holding discussions and meeting people. In fact, often the museum is no longer a building at all. But a site as in the case of open air museums, and is found both in the country and in the town. Many of the new types of museums do not have the traditional function of collecting and cataloguing which represent the core activity of traditional museums. Now the idea of a modern museum covers a wide-rang of institutions which include not only on-site museums but folk museums, living museums, hands-on experience, reconstruction of a particular site and interpretation centre.

In 1974, at the 10th general conference of ICOM, it became very clear that museums throughout the world are increasingly considering themselves as a culture centre to serve the community within which they operate instead of a self-contained professional organisation. The Conference thus defined museum as a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.

The Council also recognises that following may fall under this definition: Conservation institutes and exhibition galleries permanently maintained by libraries and archive centres; natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites of a museum nature, for their acquisition, conservation and communication activities; institutions displaying life specimens, such as botanic and zoological gardens, aquaria and vivaria etc; nature reserves; science centres and planetaria.

By this definition a much greater range of institutions now gets the right to be entitled as museums.

Museums have survived massive social change and today, in a smaller world of mass travel, greater leisure, better education, increased environmental awareness and more conscious economic goals, museums play an increasingly important and diverse role in the society. The museums of today, at a general level, seem to be a reflection of an inherent human tendency towards inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness combined with a desire to communicate to others. It also attempts to respond to present day social needs. To achieve this there has been a marked shift of emphasis towards improved public facilities, reflected particularly but not exclusively, in the new types of museums.

Museums in Europe are confronted by pressures from various sectors. In a rapidly changing society, with the innovation and introduction of new technology, new modes of entertainment and the development of cost-effective and market oriented economy, museums are forced to change its traditional ways about using and presenting objects in order to stimulate public interest. New techniques like colour printing, television and video cassette recorder have appeared to provide competition for the museum medium and in doing so have pushed museums to the marketplace. Government policy has also reinforced these trends



Recreation of a viking man in the Yorvik Viking Centre, York, England.



Presentation of everyday life in a 10th century Viking (Scandinavian) village in the Yorvik Viking Centre, York, England.

and endeavoured to make museums cost-effective and market oriented. Museum faces competition from the growth of tourism and likewise industries devoted to leisure as well. For instance, theme parks compete directly with museums as alternative places for visitors to go.

Along with all the technological and social changes, during the past twenty-five years, the museum going public in Europe has changed very much and is still changing. Their range of interest has broadened, they are much less reverent and respectful in their attitudes. The visitors merely distinguish between a museum and an exhibition; they expect to find electronic and other modern technical facilities adequately used and they do not consider the intellect more prestigious or respectable than the emotions. This shows a fundamental change in terms of thought and behaviour throughout the world, and in all fields of activity. People no longer wish to have their lives run for them dictatorially by a few powerful and privileged ones. They are increasingly demanding a say in the planning and organization. As a result, two developments of great importance to museums have emerged. First, there is a growing feeling that the past and the present are complementary to each other and a sensitivity to the achievements of the past can enormously help towards understanding the present.

The second notable change, compared with twenty or thirty years ago, is a willingness to accept the fact that museums can be appreciated emotionally and sensually as well as intellectually. Today's museum is a place in which visitors acquire experiences and receive impressions which stimulate their power of thought and their creative ability.

Museums in Europe were a product of the Renaissance, a creation of the aristocratic and hierarchical society which believed that art and scholarship were for the privileged class of the society. It was not until after 1700 that the general public was admitted to the Imperial Gallery in Vienna on payment of a fee and there were similar opportunities in Rome, at the Quirinal Palace and in Madrid, at the Escorial. In France, the first museum specifically for the public benefit was established in the Abbey of St Vincent at Besancon with the bequest of Head Abbot's personal collection of books, paintings and medallions in 1694. The first public museum in England, the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, was opened in 1683 and was followed by British Museum in 1759. France opened its first truly public museum, the Louvre Museum in 1793, which was based on the magnificent royal collection. But the museums still carried on the tradition of the private collection. Visitors were admitted as a

privilege, not as a right, and consequently, gratitude and admiration, not criticism, was required of them. Museum was thought of as temple of scholarship and as the majority of the visitors were neither scholars nor intellectuals, a fact which the museum world has taken a long time to realize, it remained as an unapproachable entity in the community.

It was not until the Long Succession of international exhibition begun with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 that a change came in the relationship between museum and the public in a fundamental way. These exhibitions attracted very large numbers of visitors of all classes, and they forced government to realise that the sciences and the useful arts were the proper concern of the community as a whole. They brought the renaissance of the modern museum in terms of dramatic displays relating the social life of the community. Not that all museums followed this example, but the environment within which the museums in Europe operated had changed. But as for the educational role of the museums, it is only comparatively recently that it has become generally respectable to regard education and pleasure as closely connected, both for children and for adults.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the museum scene throughout the world had changed significantly. In Europe, with the population in the industrialized nations moving to the urban centres, many communities developed their own museums throughout their local authorities. In certain countries, like France, a more centralized state museum developed. New types of museums also cropped up. While many of the earlier museums were encyclopedic in character, reflecting the spirit of their age, the new museums were more specialized. One such notable development was the proliferation of 'Folk Museums'. The first of this kind, the museum of Scandinavian Folklore was opened in Sweden in 1873 which was followed by the first Open Air Museum in 1891 at Skansen in Sweden. Science museums were much earlier in their origin. The Dutch museum of Pieter Teyler and the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers in Paris had collections of scientific instruments at the end of the 18th century. The application of science to industry was exhibited at the Conservatoire and in the Science Museum at South Kensington in London in the

Continued on page 11

## In Pursuit of a Higher Dream

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

**T**HE pursuit of higher education 'to broaden ones horizon' has become more of a mirage in Bangladesh. Riddled with violent politics, aborted classes and unabated session jams, the state-run institutions have failed in their objective to give students the intellectual stimulus they need so badly. If it is academic atmosphere we are talking of there simply isn't one. Horror is the dwindling commitment of many teachers of these institutions who are frustrated and disenchanting by

For the students this means that they can easily transfer to US universities from NSU without losing any credits. Ahmed explains that this does not mean that NSU's main purpose is to send students abroad. "On the contrary we are trying to keep students here but we must create the opportunity for them to pursue higher studies abroad if that is what they want," he says.

At present, NSU has 284 students and a teacher-student ratio of 1:11. The medium of instruction is English, with in-

are somewhat justified by the fact that NSU pays its teachers Tk 50,000 to 60,000 per month.

As a very young university, NSU, established in 1992, has a long way to go before it can be a complete substitute for a US university. For one thing, there is no sprawling campus with huge buildings, leafy trees and open fields. The university, at the moment has only the top floor of a building with five classrooms, a computer room and a cafeteria. In January it plans to shift to a six storied building where all the floors will belong to NSU. Later, promises its president, the university will have a proper campus outside the city.

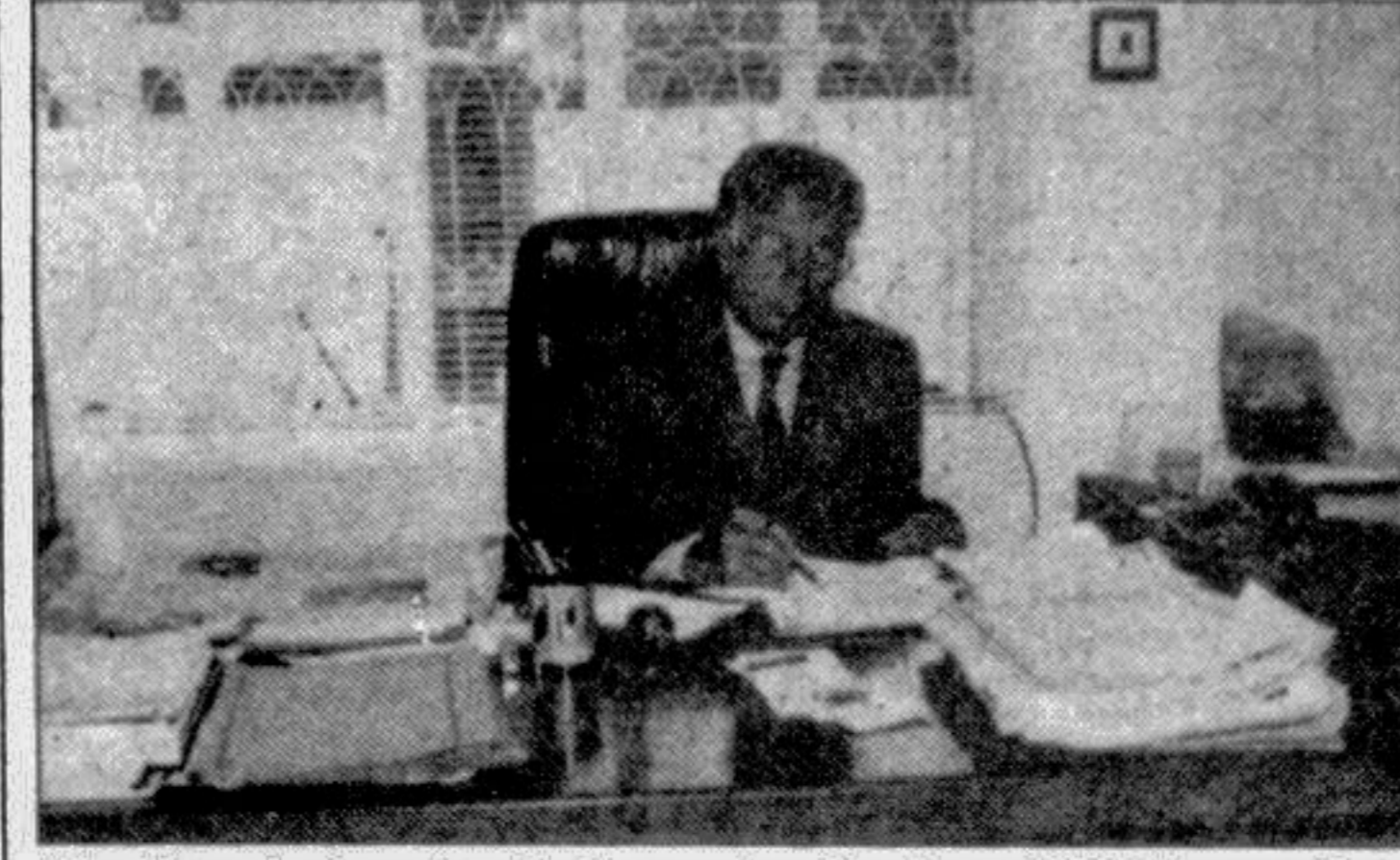
Fields of study, too, are limited to a handful: Economics, Business Administration and Computer Science with additions of Environmental Science, Sociology and Anthropology by next year. This has been deliberate says Ahmed. "We are introducing a few subjects now because we want to do them well."

Recreational facilities — something that US universities are particularly famous for, are very modest at NSU at the moment. Fields are requisitioned for sports events and the students have taken their own initiative to form drama and environmental clubs. Inter university matches and games are also arranged from time to time.

In spite of the limitations, the students at NSU are not unhappy. Deep, a Computer Science major and vice president of NSU's Green Club says that although at first he had some difficulty understanding the American system, he later realized how efficient it was. "The biggest advantage," says Deep, "is that we are going to graduate before any of our friends at other universities. Moreover," he adds, "we are getting an American education and learning about American life right here in our own country."

Many of the students at NSU, are ignorant children whose parents want them to stay with them at home. Farzana, an Economics major, in her sophomore year says that she came to NSU after her 'A' levels and liked it so much that she decided to stay. Raunak, a Computer Science major and a 4.0 student has come back after finishing high school in the US because he is the only child of his parents who want him to stay with them.

With busy class schedules, mid term examinations and daily quizzes, there is hardly any time for the type of politics that students in state-run universities choose to indulge in. "There is so much pressure to maintain your GPA and get good grades, we just don't have any time for all that," says Raunak who also tutors in his spare time. "Teachers expect us to read the textbook before class and if a student continues to miss classes, there is no way he will pass," he says. Raunak adds that even students with



"Quality of education is the main objective of NSU," says the President.



Economics at NSU: Nancy Scannel at work.

continuous disruptions of classes and the disinterest of the students themselves.

The alternative is hardly satisfactory. It means either spending an obscene amount of foreign exchange to get an education abroad or wasting several years of one's life just to acquire a degree. In this discouraging scenario, attempts are being made from the private sector to solve the problem. In the last few years Bangladesh, especially, Dhaka has seen a modest growth of private institutions struggling to provide what state-run universities have been unable to do. Unfortunately, most of these institutions are very expensive and out of the reach of a majority of young people who do take higher education seriously. As a rejoinder to this accusation, some of these private entities claim that they provide the same standard education as foreign universities (where these people will go anyway), at a much lower cost. Musleuddin Ahmed, president of North South University (NSU), a pioneer private university in Bangladesh, in an exclusive interview tells The Daily Star how this claim is substantiated.

To begin with, says its president, NSU follows the American college system with its curriculum corresponding with that of the University of Illinois Urbana Champagne. The courses, he adds, are modified to be relevant in Bangladesh's context. "If it is economics, the examples will be from the Bangladesh economy; if it is environmental studies, we keep in view the particular environmental problems of Bangladesh — water pollution, sanitation etc," says Ahmed.

In addition to this, NSU boasts of having teachers either Bangladeshi or foreign who have degrees from the US or Canada. This includes visiting professors from the US and Canadian universities who teach at NSU for one or two semesters. With this combination of partly permanent and partly floating teachers the university ensures a constant flow of new ideas and latest techniques in teaching, Ahmed comments.

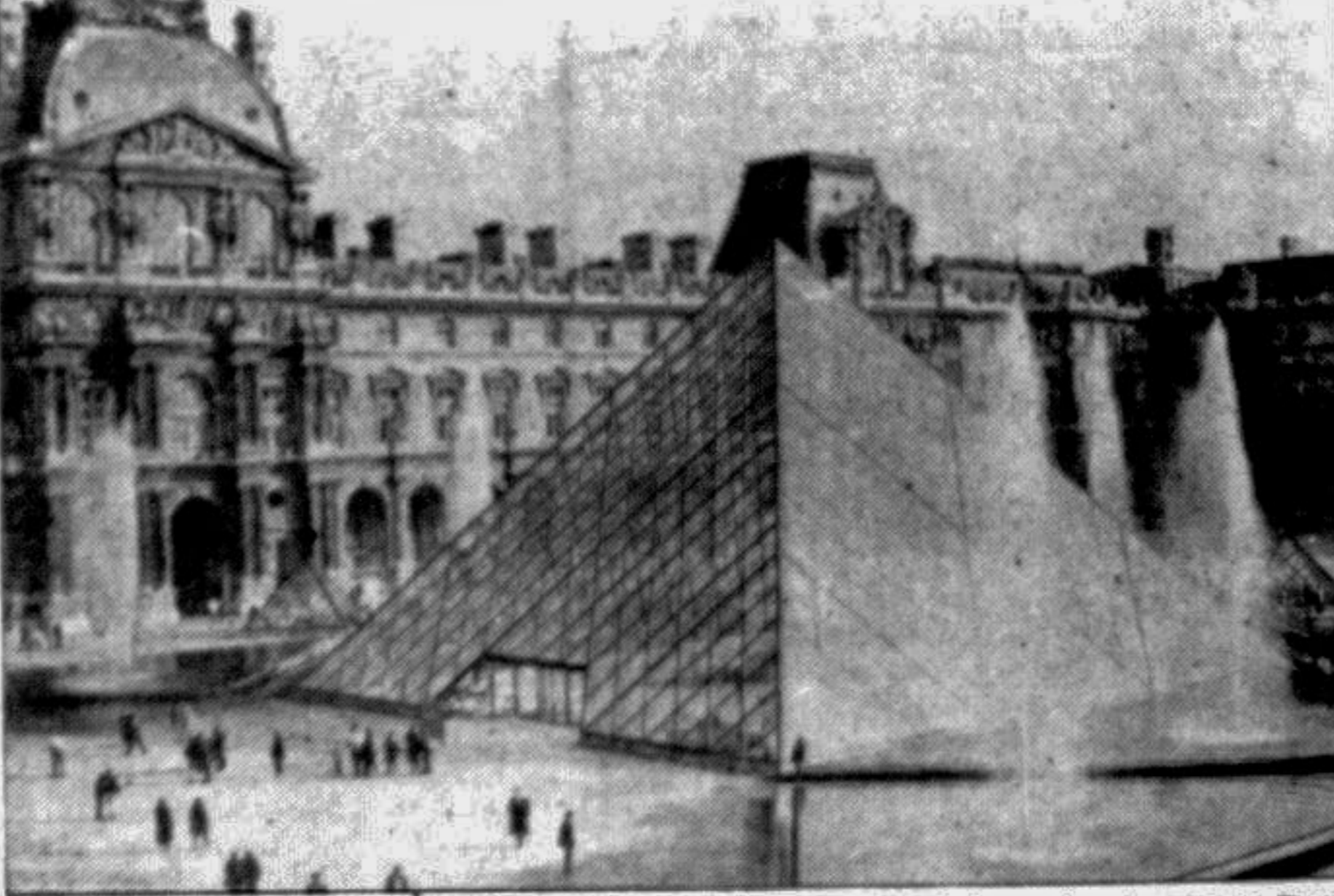
To maintain academic standards, NSU's performance is monitored by the International Advisory Board headed by Dr Peter Timmer, a professor of Harvard University and eight other professors of prominent US universities. Moreover, says NSU's president, with the institution's collaboration with American universities there will be a constant assessment of NSU's performance through exchange of papers and reports. "If they think that we need to improve things, then they will advise us and they will make the necessary changes," he adds.



NSU's new campus from January '94: Reaching out with higher ambitions.



A recreated street in the York Castle Museum, England, the oldest of such presentation in any Museum.



The Louvre Palace and Museum with its modern pyramid-shaped entrance in Paris, France.

## Being Like the West — Is it Always the Best?

by C A A Quassed-bin-Husayne

**A**SK any body in the age group of 16 to 20, "what's the next step?" The reply is enviable, "trying to go abroad." It is true. Our higher education being in a pathetic state, all parents, wishing that their children should have a good education, try their best to send them abroad. Though education is put forward as the only objective by the youngsters, it is also true that a lot of their eagerness stems from the prospect of freedom — of a life where there would be none to impose limits.

Between friends it is not uncommon to hear statements like "I am rotting in this hot, stinking place" or "I want to go anywhere than stay here. I am sick of this place". It is sad but true that many youngsters who do go, do so with the intention of never returning. A lot of them do not even succeed over there.

Bogged down, with 'odd jobs' and 'fun' and 'friends' many do not complete their studies, or they prolong it over extra semesters. It is alarming to see that many of these young people have gone on their family incomes — which means 5 to 10 lakh Taka every year, a lot of which go to waste.

I believe that the principal cause behind this outburst of wildness is improper upbringing. A child should be made to thoroughly know that there are some issues in life which are absolute and which have no scope for debate. Certain things are right and certain things are wrong. The fact that everybody does it, does not change the truth, however well it may be disguised. A strong ethical base should be created so that one can confront one's own evil,

look temptation in the eye, recognise it when it approaches and say no when it persists. Every youngster should be made to get used to solitude. For the simple reason that he or she may be excluded from groups. Being left out should not hurt a person so much that he or she should do anything just to gain company. One should have the moral strength to say "you go your way, I go on mine". This is a task for the parents to ensure. They often adopt a wrong approach with their children, being stern and confining them. In effect, the sudden release of pressure drives them crazy. I believe that if they could explain the negative aspects of something very clearly from a young age, if they could infuse into the child a powerful sense of propriety through discussions and

love, the children would grow up actually not wanting to indulge in even when given the opportunity to do so.

Patriotism should also be tutored from a very tender age. Simply having wealth, and being able to go abroad every now and then does not change one's origin. It's a fact that many youngsters try to deny. Respect for one's elders, for the motherland, for one's own heritage and a strong bond with one's own culture are traits that are mandatory for every son or daughter of the soil. In order to adapt foreign traits, one must be taught not to forget one's own.

It is true that the west displays superiority in world politics, commerce, science, power etc. So in order to achieve their status, we must adopt that which has led them to this glory

— their technology and assiduous work, their science, their art. To be more like them — just by copying their attire or their many 'unconventional' ways of life, we shall only be able to bring upon ourselves the lamentable and ruinous state of their younger generation.

A comparison of social structures clearly reveals that there are areas where our society has a definite edge over the west. Family values play a dominating role in our lives and that should be clearly imprinted into the minds of youngsters.

All of us should build within ourselves the power to stand against the tide, unbending to its force. For if we do bend, then we might be washed away and lost forever.

So the question that remains is a very serious one: being like the west — is it really always the best?