

People and Places

Saudi Arabia Today THROUGH A PILGRIM'S EYE

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

VISITS to holy places by the believers have been, in effect, seeking mercy of the Creator against sin or sinful acts. It emanates from a realisation that life lived hitherto was not in conformity with the dictates of God Almighty in His holy books. The holy city of Mecca in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been the holiest place for the believers in Islam all over the world. It is here that the House of Allah — the Kaaba — is located.

In yonder years, the believers, young and old, used to trek thousands of miles to be at Kaaba — popularly known as the Baitullah Sharif, and seek Allah's infinite mercy for the salvation of their sinful souls. It may be imagined that the strains of the long journey to Mecca could be, at times, fatal in many cases. Still then, this trekking did not stop because the undaunted devotees and seekers of mercy could not consider anything more precious than to lay down their lives on such religious missions.

With the advent of modern-day modes of communication, initially the introduction of sea-going vessels, the journey to Mecca became comparatively easier. Even then, the rough seas often took many a toll of human lives. Barring the problem of transportation, the arduous rituals in the holy place were nonetheless rigorous. The sea of humanity engaged in Tawaaf of Kaaba Sharif or in the uneven rocky span between Safa and Marwa or even people's desperate bid to reach the Hajre Aswad — the black stone with a view to kissing out their sinful hearts — precisely, their 'Kalb' continued to be the most trying experience. In all these, besides pelting stone-chips at the symbolic pillars designated as Satan-I, II and III at Mina, physical strength of individual Hajis has been in the upper hand. Those who can sustain the high pressure of human movement, almost in a frenzy, are rated as good performers. Others would only pity themselves and implore Allah to forgive their physical shortcomings. Alternatively, as per long established practices backed up by the dictates of Hadith and interpretations of the learned Alemas, the weaker people are permitted to hire strongly-built persons, tall, lanky Nigerians to deputise for them or even to carry the infirm on their shoulders in a stretcher.

Over the past few years the Harem Sharif around the holy Kaaba has undergone large-scale change in its size, structure and outfit. The whole setting in and around the Harem, the huge courtyard with Kaaba at the centre, the reservoir of the holy water of 'Jamjam', the expanse between Safa and Marwa have sustained massive and, of course, very costly, change.

The expansion of the Harem Sharif during the last couple of years has been as gathered from highly informed sources, simply bewildering. It is conceivable that the Saudi monarch foresaw the ever-increasing number of Hajis and thus went all out for such a gigantic expansion plan. Inevitably, it called for the demolition of several high-rise buildings, shops and establishments around the original Harem. By all estimations it was not an ordinary expansion programme. Besides the huge plinth area lustily decorated by cream-white, stainless Italian marbles, the over all comfort of the myriads of devotees thronging there every year has been substantially augmented through the commission of a powerful centrally air-conditioning system. The vast expanse of the ceiling overhead kept erect by massive circular of quadrangular white-stone pillars, tastefully ornate, the king-size chandelier hanging majestically from below the ceiling with provision of round the clock power illumination shall baffle human imagination as to their cost involvement.

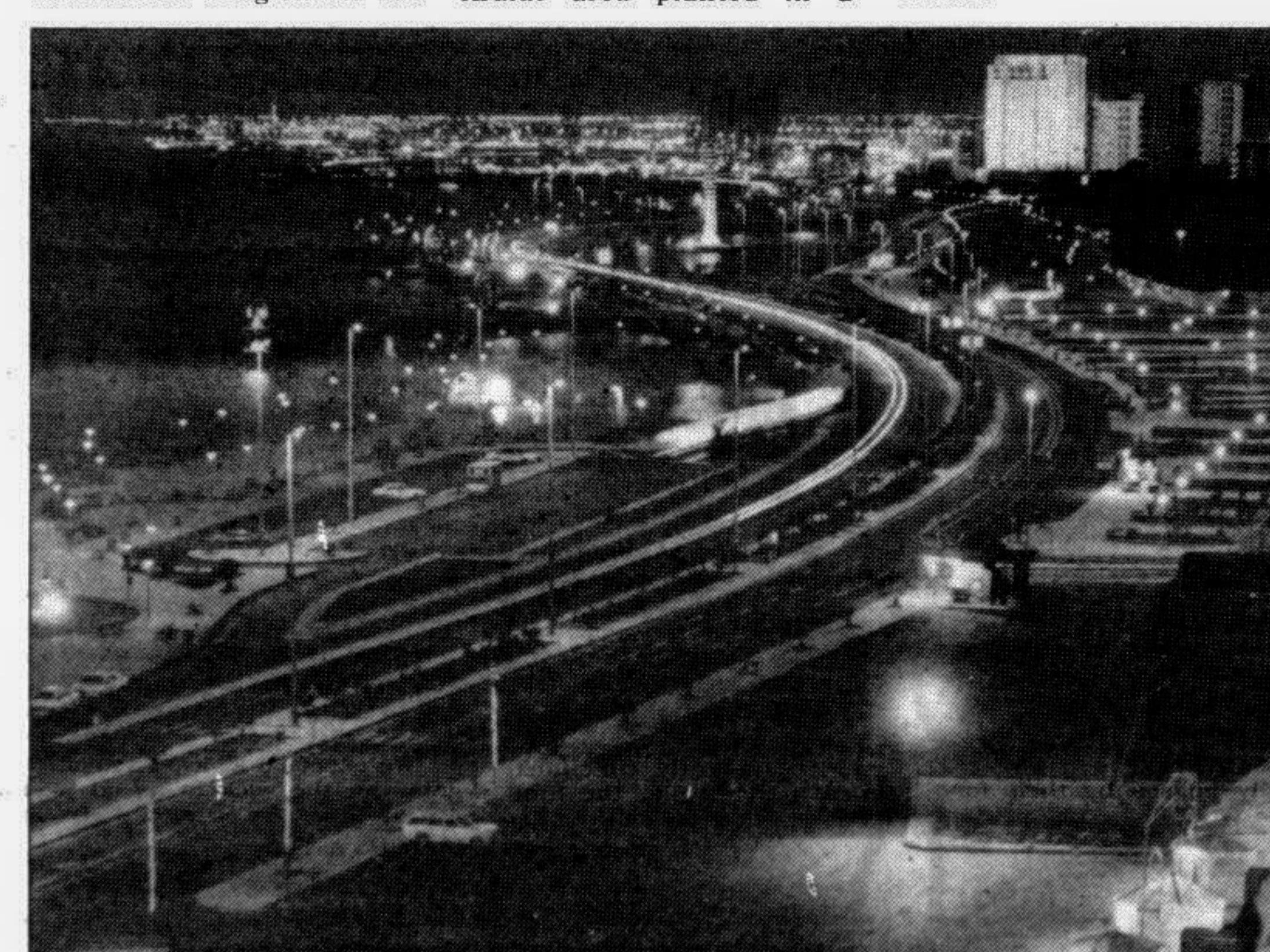
The Safa-Marwa stretch, which was hitherto a rough and uneven trail under the scorching heat of the blazing sun, has been also turned into a mosaic pathway — a two-way traffic under a roof to beat off the sun. The two ends have been, however, retained in their original elevated position to give the Hajis in 'Sayee' a faint semblance of the two hills in yonder

days. The entire span is again illuminated by lights including some yardage bracketed by green lights as a signal mark for the Hajis to walk faster when they are within this limit. It symbolizes Bibi Hajera's desperate quest for water to quench the thirst of her infant child Ismail. Between these two green signals she ran faster.

The well of 'Jamjam' too, has been transformed into a deep tube-well, totally mechanised and bringing out in the process streams of ice-cold water channelled through conduit pipe and taps. Drinking of this holy water after a tiring Tawaaf has

process, both within the city and outside, roads and highways besides long tunnels are being curved out of the hills and mountains which may, however, appear as reckless destruction of nature's gifts. It could also be viewed as a dangerous swallowing of the ecological balance — the balance about which Allah has splendidly described in the holy Quran.

Side by side, the planting of trees along the public thoroughfares has been a redeeming spectacle. Particularly, neem trees in the Arafat area planted in a



Jeddah: Gateway to Mecca

been a part of the Hajj rituals. The believers follow every bit of it with full religious fervour. This water has been eternally considered a panacea for all diseases and that is how the Hajis, upon their homeward journey invariably make it a point to carry canful of Jamjam water or 'Aab-e-Jamjam', as it is universally known, along with them. Surprisingly, there is absolutely no scarcity of water now in Saudi Arabia due to the installation of a massive network. Inside the Harem Sharif and even on the fringe, it is available in plenty round the clock. For domestic needs, however, there is some shortage but a good network of mobile supplies has been successfully meeting the need of the hour.

On the boulevard adjoining and around Harem Sharif, the congregators have separate Hammams, bathing houses, for men and women with excellent arrangements. But their maintenance demands special attention during the Haj season.

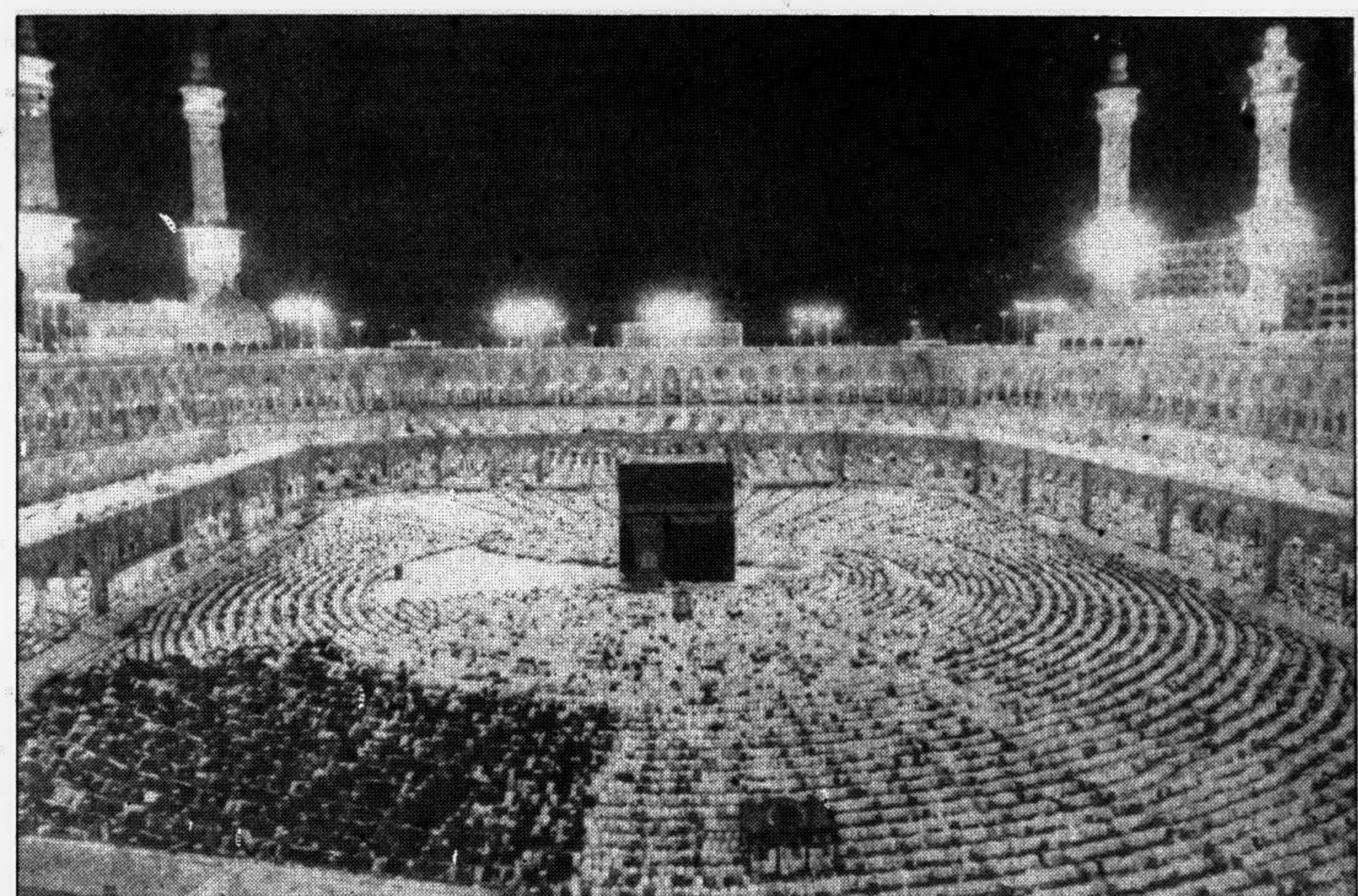
The growth of the city of Mecca over the past few years has almost been colossal. It is assuming massive proportion to make it eventually a metropolis with innumerable fly-overs. The slums and old residential areas are being transformed into posh spots and trading centres. There are however yet some areas where old buildings connected by narrow lanes speak of



A village road (above) and a tunnel crossing (below)

the bygone years. Misfala is one such location which has striking semblance of our old Dhaka. This area is in the proximity of Baitullah Sharif and Hajis from Bangladesh in particular find accommodations here at comparably cheaper rental ceilings. Although all the holdings in the lanes and by-lanes belong to Saudi owners, the invasion of Saudi wealth and affluence is yet to be seen here. Paradoxically, this area is a recluse for the poor, hapless Bangladeshis and people from other non-Arab countries who are here to pursue lesser vocations. Their poverty-ridden faces are apt to be shocking to their fellow countrymen on short visits during the Haj and the Umrah.

Side by side, the planting of trees along the public thoroughfares has been a redeeming spectacle. Particularly, neem trees in the Arafat area planted in a



The Holy Kaaba at Mecca

tributed to AFP deserves attention. Alluding to a new incentive introduced by Saudi Arabia for expanding foreign investment base in the kingdom which provides, inter alia, tax exemptions, the news item finds it coincidental with the pressure being made by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Saudi Arabia to tackle a persistent budget deficit created by a sharp decline in oil prices. It further appears that, despite a large reduction in expenditure, the deficit stood at eight billion dollars in 1992 and projection for 1993 was 7.4 billion dollars.

The Saudi government is reportedly committed to make further cut in expenditure in 1993-94 fiscal year. Obviously, such a stance would be to offset the depleted revenue earnings from oil. One wonders, therefore, if the massive development work already undertaken shall be completed or shelved half way.

Although reduction in oil output has been identified as one of the main reasons, besides lesser selling price, for the kingdom's current state of finance, it may not be altogether impertinent to say that much of the crisis could have originated from the colossal stake it had during the last Gulf war. US involvement in the war obliged Saudi Arabia to meet full expenses towards toll of protection.

Pending generation of accel-

erated revenue resources as a consequence upon the new investment policy, the development activities in the kingdom may have to go slow.

To a casual visitor to Saudi Arabia, incidences of wastage can be somewhat baffling. One of these has been the almost round the clock use of power. Passing through the highways linking one city to another with thinner or no human habitation on either side, illuminated un-walled structures by eye-catching lamps could create unwholesome impression.

Companies producing soft drinks, curds, breads and other confectionery items and mineral water distribute liberally amongst the Hajis; truck-loads of such products are often seen around the Harem Sharif. Such distribution being absolutely free, attracts poorer sections of the Hajis who eventually engage themselves in literal physical battles or acrobatics to collect packets thrown at the crowd from the stationary vehicles. Tragically again, a big portion of such eatables and snacks go straight to the dustbins making huge piles. Such wastage can easily give an impression that the items so generously doled out maybe are not worthy of human consumption: maybe some of those could have been date-expired!

Pilgrims from all over the world congregate in big num-

bers during Haj while performers of Umrah throng there round the year.

The barrier of language has been a major problem for non-Arabs. The Saudi shop-keepers, on their part, hardly can speak any other language than Arabic. A very few do, however, converse in broken English with non-Arabs who understand the language. But the Bangalees in particular, those from rural Bangladesh, understand noth-

ing but their own mother tongue. They are the ones who suffer most and are often cheated.

Saudi businessmen and traders do not have to struggle very hard to understand the foreigners. They just ignore them. For instance, bargaining in shopping centres in our country is a very common practice. But many of the Saudi salesmen outwardly profess

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An oil refinery at Yanbu

ANCIENT LINKS

Asians were Down Under before Captain Cook

A USTRALIAN history books still credit Dutch sailors in the 1600s for having "discovered" the vast southern continent. And when Captain Cook landed on Botany Bay in 1770, he claimed the "unoccupied" land for his sovereign, and Australia became a British penal colony.

What the books leave out is that there were thriving cultural and trade contacts between Australian Aborigines and Asians for many centuries before Captain Cook.

"Because of the Eurocentric vision of Australian historiography, we have failed to give credit to the early links between Australian Aborigines and Asians," says Christine Choo, a Malaysian-born historian at Western Australian University.

Choo is one of a growing number of Australian social researchers, historians and anthropologists of Asian and Aboriginal descent who are unravelling Australia's 'secret' history — one not found in Australian text books today.

Choo has documented how Aboriginal people near this northern Australian city had established effective trade and cultural links with Asia long before the Europeans arrived.

Darwin is only 500 km away from islands in the Indonesian archipelago, and seafarers from East Asia regularly sailed to northern Australia for valued sea products like turtle, sea cucumbers and trocous shells for the Chinese market.

Later waves of sea-faring Asians, including Malays, Filipinos, Japanese and Chinese came to work in the pearl fishing and other industries.

Choo has collected stories among Aboriginal communities in northern Australia that indicate Malay food habits and Asian culture in Aboriginal ceremonial rituals. And Aboriginal art in Arnhem Land show influences from the Indonesian island of Makassar in its carved

Asians had been sailing back and forth to Australia long before Europeans "discovered" the southern continent. Kalinga Seneviratne of Inter Press Service explains, from Darwin, Australia.



figures, bark paintings and carvings on bamboo pipes.

Australian historians say unlike later contact with Europeans, Aboriginal Australians and Asians treated each other with mutual respect.

"White people saw only nomads and hunter gatherers here," says Aboriginal priest, Rev Djinyini Gondarra of the Utinga Church. "The Makassans met the Aboriginal people in their own camps, not on missions or cattle stations, and they saw the Aboriginals had their own economic and cultural systems."

While Australian Minister Paul Keating has been trying to re-integrate Australia to Asia, a hundred years ago white colonisers were hostile to any

contacts with Asians and they legislated accordingly.

The Aborigines Act of 1905 which created Aboriginal reserves also included harsh clauses to prevent contacts between Asians and Aborigines, especially women. But today, descendants of these contacts are at the forefront of re-discovering Aboriginal-Asian roots in music, art, culture and anthropology.

Aboriginal-Asian Jimmy Chi is the creator of the highly-acclaimed musical 'Bran Nue Day', which is currently making a national tour.

Anthropologist Gary Lee is another Aboriginal-Asian who has recently produced a play in Darwin tracing back the roots of

his family history to the Philippines. 'Keep Him in My Heart' is the story of the 19th century romance between an Aboriginal woman, Lily McKeddie, and a Filipino pearl diver, Antonio Cubillo.

The Cubillo clan now has 400 members and is the oldest and best known Aboriginal group in Darwin. Says Lee, a great-grandson of Lily McKeddie: "I want people in Australia to realise that there has been this Aboriginal-Asian history up here which goes back longer than Aboriginal-European history. My play is just one among many stories up here."

He adds, "Australians and Asians have lived together without much hassle for centuries, and there has been a great deal of cultural exchanges which is evident in Arnhem Land today."

Lee produced 'Keep Him in My Heart' with first-generation Filipino migrants like Betchay Mondragon, who is the play's artistic director. Says Mondragon: "What was significant for me was the discovery of that heritage, which Filipinos in Australia are not familiar with."

She says plays like these help create a stronger link between the two peoples with colonial pasts that have prejudiced each other's views. Because of their colonial upbringing, many Filipinos look down on people who are darker than them.

"Filipinos came here very ignorant, believing Australia was a white man's land, only to find Asians had been here long before the Europeans," adds Mondragon.

Aboriginal-Asians are cynical of the Australian government's recent moves to link up with Asia, and say it is largely related to trade and business, and leaves out cultural exchanges.

Lee says the contemporary Australian art scene is still heavily Anglo-centric, although the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and others have shown interest in making his play more accessible to wider audiences.

Malaysian-born social scientist Kee Pokong of the Melbourne-based Bureau of Immigration and Population Research says there is a greater attention and acceptance in Australia now of the role of Asians and Pacific islanders in Australian history.

The remarkable part of Asian-Australians is the authenticity of their work," he notes. "They are able to talk about the experience of their ancestors and what they themselves are encountering, rather than relying on second-hand research and interpretation."