

## People and Places

# The Angel of Siam



Sprawling Bangkok

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

TWO friends who were planning to visit me in Bangkok one summer were surprised and amused to see the travel books refer to Bangkok as the "City of Angels". Why is it the city of angels they wondered in open cynical amusement. Isn't it in fact just the opposite?

Over the years Bangkok has received some pretty damaging publicity. Most recent was the British Longman Dictionary calling it a place where there are a lot of prostitutes and last summer, Time magazine had a Bangkok bar girl and her customer glaring from the cover of their July issue. Time, the



Rickshaw: Waiting for passenger.



Tourist taking a tuk-tuk.

American news magazine, is widely read throughout the world. Almost everyone in Dhaka who reads this paper and can afford trips to Bangkok for instance, uses Time as his/her international news source. The time that issue hit the newsstands and homes of millions of people, I was walking down a particularly busy San Francisco street and was not surprised to see the most infamous aspect of the city on

and to Longman Dictionary. The magazine cover was perhaps warranted, after all the cover depicted what has unofficially been Thailand's biggest tourist lure for the past three decades. Granted also, that various Thai governments who've come to power have done little but token gestures to stop this despicable trade. But Bangkok, a city of prostitutes? Does that make Bangladesh a country of defaulters?

Going back to the coinage 'city of angels.' If one were to observe the city more closely and look beyond the neon signs that sell flesh, and fake tee-shirts and watches, one would see that Bangkok is indeed the city of angels. It is one of the most vibrant and dynamic cities of the world. It is a city that is eternal, and everyone knows that angels are eternal, immortal. What makes Bangkok eternal is its life, its energy, it is alive and kicking, never in quiet slumber. Bangkok is a reflection of the people that live in it. It is the thriving spirit and soul of Bangkokians that make the city's heart beat in a constant thump.

Bangkokians are extremely trendy, forever being dictated

nose and it is totally the norm, accepted by one and all, no amount of westernization has brought in the taboo against picking one's nose in public. Only outsiders seem to notice or even comment. It's similar to the spitting competition that most Dhakaites tend to engage in all over the streets and bazaars of the city.



A model

On the buses here, people are packed in like sardines in a can but no one pushes or shoves or is loud and obnoxious. I was once on an especially crowded bus that had

been sitting on the same spot at a rush hour one Monday morning when the beads from my necklace suddenly started tumbling down and out on the street. A Thai gentleman who had been standing right behind me, pushed through a dozen or so passengers blocking the doorway, jumped off and picked up all the big, round beads on the street. He hopped on the bus just in time before it started moving once again. I hadn't even thought of doing the same, had been resigned that my necklace was ruined. Where else in the world would any stranger have done the same?

To a lot of people, who sadly know no better, Bangkok is seedy, decadent, full of bars and bar girls, a city that caters to anyone's tastes no matter how small or large. But it isn't just a place where you come for the night life, shopping, and other touristic trysts. It is a city that, personified, is always running, jumping, singing, eating, talking, listening, tasting. A sprawling metropolis full of people, friendly, patient, smiling beautiful people, and vehicles: big white and blue buses, little green minibuses that blare Thai folk songs, motorcycle taxis and messengers, tuk tuks (kin to our baby taxis) that have no silencer pipes, and cars from big Mercedes Benzes (a favourite show of wealth) to small 800cc Daihatsus; everyone knows about the stalled vehicles because the traffic is notorious, most recent publicity being the 'economist'; and temples and gorgeous palaces,

better in the middle of the night. Honest! Or if it's the wee hours of the morning and you're suffering from jet lag, be sure to eat fried bananas, fried to a crisp with sesame seed dressing, absolutely succulent, almost every street is home to a fried banana vendor.

The night life in Bangkok, granted can be seedy and offensive to most of us females and some 'sensitized' men who're out there. But then there are also some of the best Discotheques and clubs in the world here, where all kinds of people mingle freely.

Bangkok must be the only city in the world where a few women unaccompanied by men can go out in the evenings and not get harassed by countless members of the opposite sex. In fact, the only men who

do harass women here are foreigners.

A very close friend of mine in New York was once complaining about male harassment and how she was going to have a nervous breakdown if she got catcalls one more time from the construction workers that are working on a house on her street. I thought about that, about all the men who'd harass me in the States and in Bangladesh: catcalls, and lewd comments and just pestering me to make conversation (Dhaka bazaar scene: 'hey sishter, hey baby!') and then I thought of Bangkok. Ladies, in Bangkok you have a city where construction workers don't leer. Some may gaze at you with open curiosity, but they hardly ever leer.

I've often heard of men

saying how Bangkok is a 'bad' city. So many people are afraid to send their daughters, wives, sisters to visit Bangkok. What they don't realise is that their daughters, wives etc. are safest in Bangkok, safer than in any other city. Safer than Dhaka even, where we are terrorised by chhittais and gun wielding yundas who'll strip you of everything you are wearing down to your saree. Exceptions are there in incidents of rape and murder. These incidents, however, are rare and far between. Generally, a woman can take a taxi anywhere on her own at any hour of the night in Bangkok and be perfectly safe.

gested roads and highways, its political deadlock, its bureaucratic snafles, its women and sell-out tourist industry, is truly a city of angels. An open city that breathes, and eats and lives, never silent, never at rest. An eternal city of angels that lives on and on...

And hopefully, will live on once they solve their traffic problem, build a subway, stop prostitution and drug racketeering, ameliorate the pollution, stop aiding and abetting the Khmer Rouge and leading 'slash and burn' capitalism in the region... there you see it is not a perfect city. I never said



The Stupa: A special architectural structure commonly found in most Thai Buddhist temple compounds.

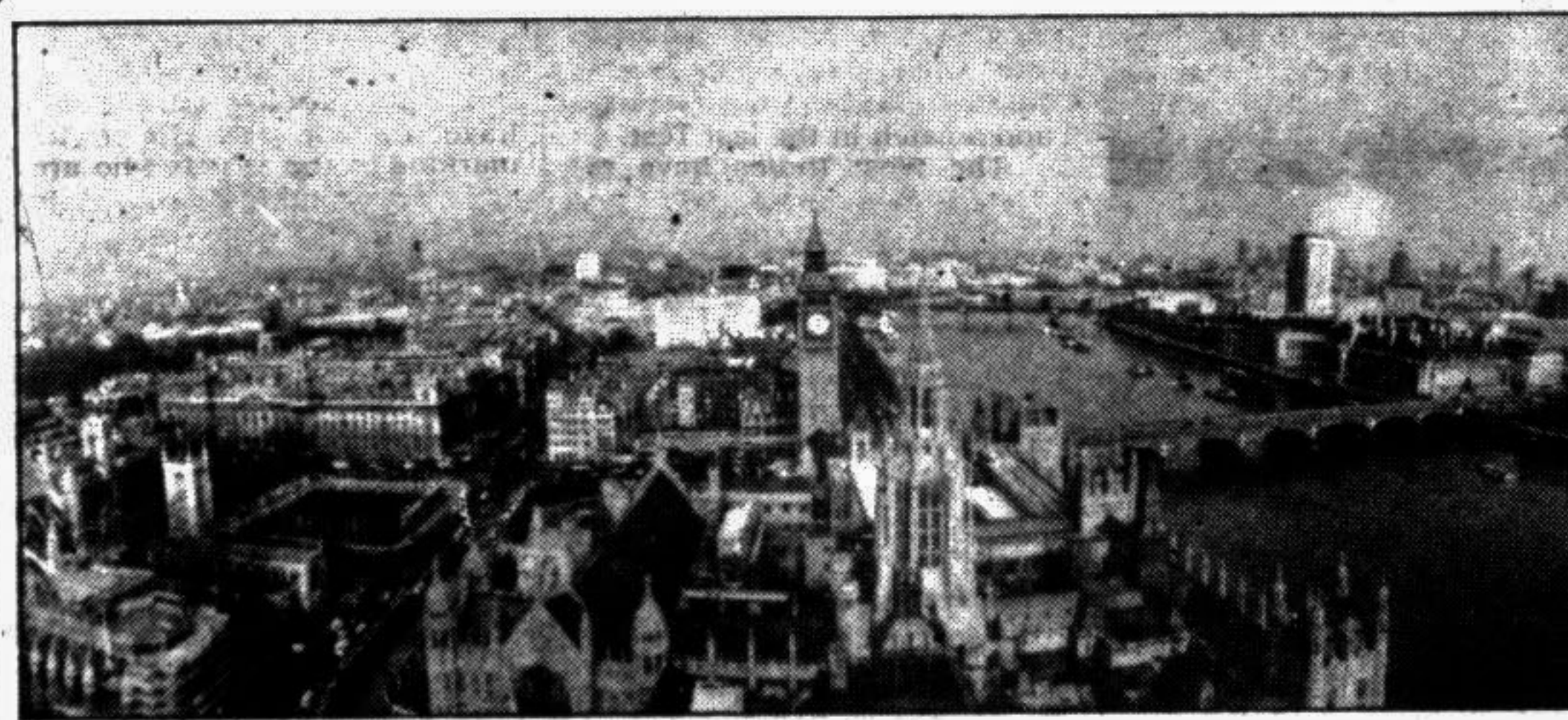
Why is that? Why is it that in a city so permissive, the men are so safe, so courteous and polite? Perhaps because Bangkok with all its problems: its horrendous traffic, its con-

ditions, but they were faced with something that their parents were not: the problem of being juxtaposed between two different cultures and not being able to identify themselves with just one of those two. Not being exposed firsthand to Bengali culture has caused them to be confused about many of its more traditional aspects, such as arranged marriage. Whenever they go to Bangladesh, they are not able to understand the nuances of the language and thus often feel alienated in their ability to communicate well with others. 'Home' for them is England, at least according to their passports, but they are still bound to Bangladesh through their cultural ties. Thus, their generation is faced with the prospect of having to reconcile their two contrasting bonds into one harmonious one.

However, the position they are in need not be entirely negative. After all, multiculturalism has become the current 'buzzword' of the 1990's, with the world becoming smaller and smaller, due to global economic and political interdependence. It is hoped that as more and more people migrate to other countries, they will acquire more knowledge of and tolerance towards the eccentricities and societal norms of other cultures. What better way to start than have our own children involved in this process?

(Shoma, as she is known in the family, wrote this piece last summer while studying in the London School of Economics (LSE). She is about to graduate from Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, USA.)

Photos: Courtesy — LPS



Spectacular London

# Home is where the Heart is

by Fehmin Shoma Farashuddin

I'M sure that many of the readers in Bangladesh have at least one member of their extended family living abroad, or at least are acquainted with someone who is. Have you ever wondered what their life is like? Have you ever wondered about their children, who are faced with the task of growing up displaced from their own culture? Last summer, I spent a considerable amount of time conducting research in the East End of London. The East End has in its time been the refuge to many an immigrant group; presently it is the Bengali community that predominates there. I had the privilege of speaking with many of the older residents of the area, as well as with many first generation British Bengalis.

The older residents, mostly pensioners, spoke whimsically about the 'desher mati' and how they longed to return there one day. The majority of those whom I interviewed had gone to England in the 1950's or '60's. They had gone there in the hope of making their fortunes and returning home to enjoy the fruits of their hard-earned labour. They told me about the many hardships they had had to face: being parted from loved ones and being introduced to a foreign setting. They had been lured to England by the prospects of greater economic opportunities than were available back home, yet when it was time to return home, they found themselves unable to do so. They found that they had become alienated from everyday life in Bangladesh, that the 'idealized' vision of the homeland they had held sacred for so long did not live up to their expectations.

Faced with the prospect of living in England permanently, they have done their best to

make their community as homelike as possible, and with great success. The area around Brick Lane, a popular Sunday market location in the East End, can truly call itself a 'home away from home'. I was amazed when I went there: every conceivable necessity from home is available, ranging from chanachur to Bangla newspapers. Even the stores have their signs written in Bangla ('Ekhane taja deshi maach pawajay').

But, no matter how much effort you put into it, 'home' cannot be completely recreated. Thus, not only did they find that they had become alienated from daily life back home but to add to that, they had also kept themselves distanced from the culture of their chosen country. When you move abroad, you only

physically distance yourself from your homeland. Emotionally and psychologically, you try to remain as attached to your culture and heritage as possible. For example, you still celebrate Poyla Boishakh, remember the martyrs of the Language Movement on Ekushey February and of course, celebrate Eid. The difficulties arise in your daily life, especially when you try to infuse your children with old, traditional values at the same time as they are being exposed to the culture of the 'new' home.

My conversations with teenaged residents of the East End provided me with some insights into this world of dual cultures. As a result of having been born and raised there, they were more attuned to British culture than their par-



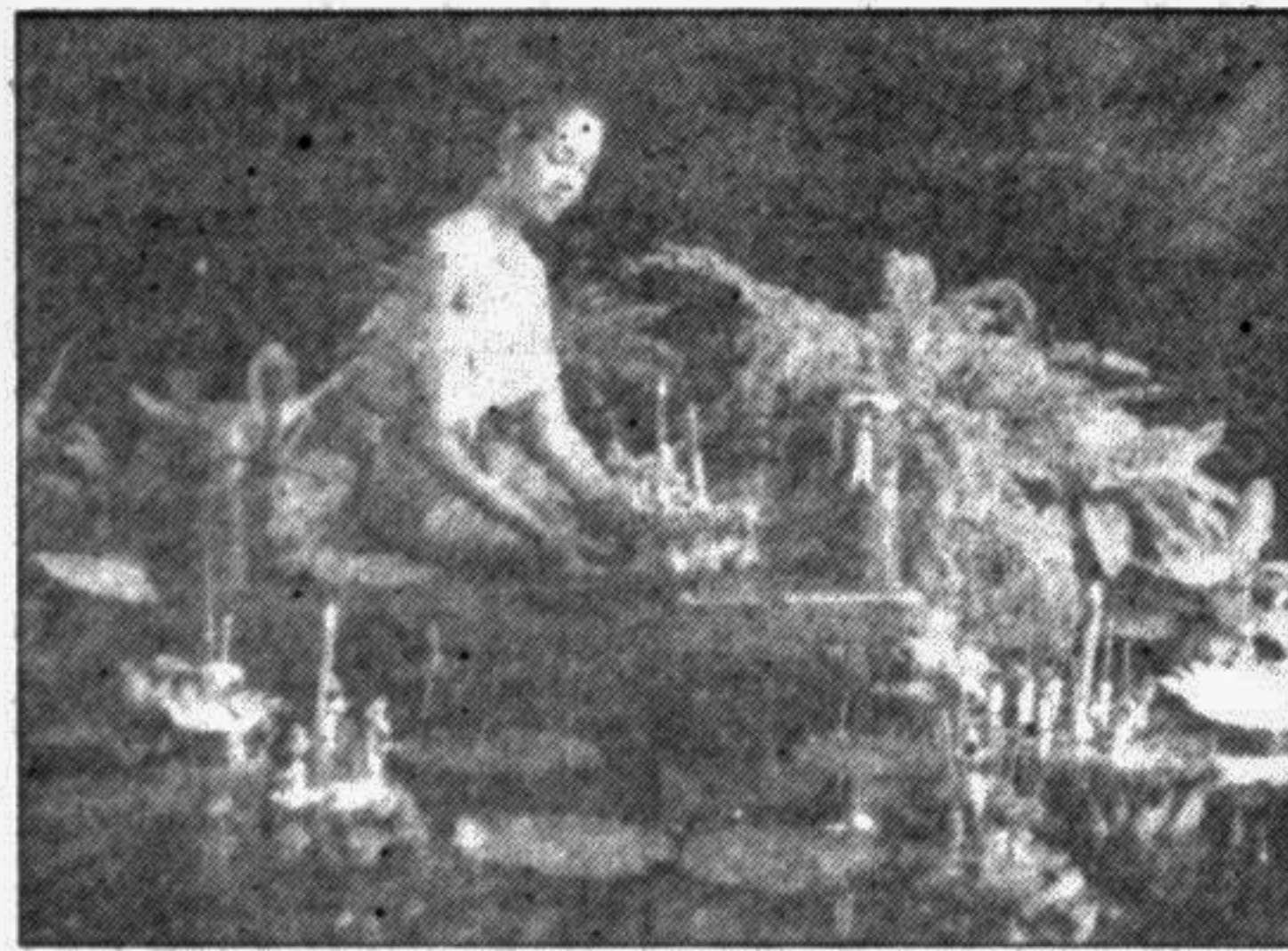
A ballerina

The cover of Time, for all the world to see, nod their heads and judge. One (especially Americans) should not however, forget that Thailand's notoriety as the 'sex capital of the world' was born primarily because of the legacy of the Vietnam War.

The industry was originally started mainly for the fuelling of American G.I.'s during the latter part of the sixties. This took offense to the Time cover

or even a sarong skirt, literally, anything: Western or Eastern or a mix of both, absolutely anything goes.

The habits and mannerisms of Bangkok, though are very Eastern. A common sight is of a beautifully dressed Thai woman in a short, tight skirt suit, with her hair and makeup perfectly done, one perfectly manicured finger up her nose! It is actually amazing how everyone here picks his/her



Loy Krathong Festival: Honouring the water spirits.

yes there are other temples and palaces apart from the ones most of you — all first timers spend exactly half an hour gawking at (Royal Palace); and food! Food is everywhere. One can walk down virtually any street of Bangkok and, literally, eat everything on it! From noodles to fried chicken to various seafood to fruits to roti (Thai style) to fried bananas to sticky rice to waffles to... the list is endless. This is only street food. There is also every kind of food from around the world available in restaurants here, be it Chinese or Hungarian or Bangladeshi (Himali Chachas, where you can eat koi maach by the size of a man's arm).

When I say it is a city that never sleeps, that too I say literally. It is a city that never shuts its eyes. In the middle of the night one can walk down any street in the centre of the city and in the outskirts and hit traffic, vendors hawking Gucci handbags and Armani tee-shirts, and people sitting around pavement stalls eating. The next time you are in Bangkok, and starved at three in the morning, step out of your hotel and go sit at a street stall and order 'baamm haeng', a noodle dish that is absolutely heavenly and tastes



Tourist attractions

