

LIVING

Engrossed in the Ethnic and the Exotic

by Fayza Haq

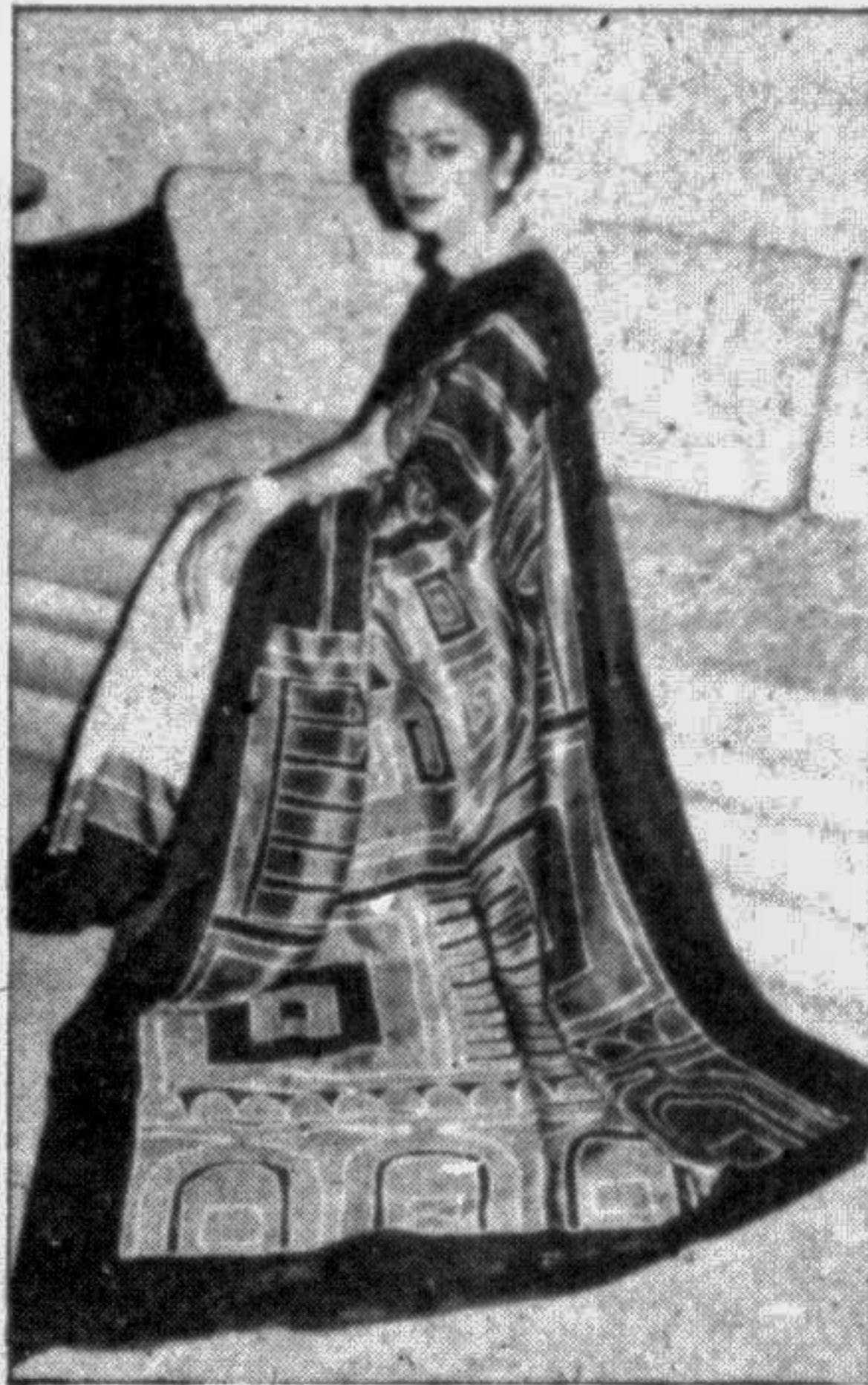
"Naja Naja" is the brand name for the clothes that the young entrepreneurs Rubina Akhter and Shazieh Ahmed have brought out. This has its origin in the South Indian name for the golden cobra, and it represents the colour, texture, smoothness and movement in designs in their products. The products are each an individual piece that has been worked upon — embroidered or hand-painted. There are no replicas. The designs come from nature and the abstractions that culminate from it. In the T-shirts turtles and reptiles like snakes are brought in.

Rubina has been working on materials since childhood. She did her BFA from Dhaka and worked with "Skill Development for Underprivileged Women", concentrating on the patterns for the "nakshikantha." She worked there for over four years, mainly as the chief designer. Next she was hired by "Aarong" specially for their "nakshikantha". She then

left to study fashion designing at "Kaliwen," a college for fashion at Bangkok, affiliated with another fashion school in France. Shazieh, meanwhile, has painted at school and taught art at "Southbreeze".

The young women get their ideas from patterns from "alpona" which has become a part of Bangladeshi culture. They also follow the traditional Muslim designs — specially as regards the colours and accuracy of patterns.

Talking about boutiques Rubina and Shazieh say, "Some of the boutiques are good but most of them tend to have the same thing. Whoever has a little money, some extra rooms or even a garage, with the help of tailors and embroidery workers, is now opening up a boutique. The boutique owners are not necessarily driven to do something creative — they are out to use some empty



Sarees with exotic geometrical designs



hours in their hands and make some money. The average Bangladeshi women just don't have the sense of how much of accessories to wear with their clothes. We don't want to offend people but that is the way we feel."

The two, however, appeared to approve of sales on the whole. "It is a good way to make money for women and to utilise their knowhow of needle work. But they could have been much better. Everything is a copy of the Indian fashion books in many boutiques," they comment.

This being the first time for them their scope is limited. The "sarees" are aimed at the older group while the T-shirts and scarves are meant for the younger clients.

Among the present designers they consider "Libas" the most promising while they admire Rukhsana Salam's clothes too. They did not think much of Bibi's shows. "She has worked with Valentino, Gucci and Versace, but what are the

new things she has to offer? She is a celebrity but I don't think she is doing enough with her assets," Shazieh comments.

Rubina does not follow any fixed designs. She allows her imagination to flow, free. However, she keeps in mind the backdrop of rice and mustard fields, thatched houses and leafy trees. Even the colours on the rickshaws and baby-taxis as well as the "lungis" that the men wear give her inspiration.

Their ideas are not copies of what one sees in India or Pakistan though they may resemble what one sees on Zee TV. The thoughts behind the design of the clothes come from their own individual experiences. They try not to ape Europe either although they are hoping to get a foothold in western countries in time.

Who are the buyers that they are aiming at? At the moment they have the elite in mind because of the money

the office workers. We feel that it is a handful of people with a lot of money but limited idea of fashion who are setting the trend. This is a hot tropical country yet the boutiques offer gaudy clothes which are complimented by heavy overwhelming jewellery. We can do better than simply copy what is being sported in other parts of the Subcontinent," Rubina elaborates.

Should they not be spending more time in promoting eastern fashion? "We think the eastern and western modes can be combined with satisfactory effects. Nowadays a lot of women are working. The 'saree' is elegant but is not always appropriate or easy, for the office worker to be in all the time. Our next project is the 'shalwar-kameez-dupatta'. The college going girl and the young office worker cannot afford the normal Tk 2000 set. The six yard 'saree' with its other accessories is not easy to manoeuvre with the slush and mud of middle-class travel and work. A 'kurta-shalwar' or 'shalwar-kameez' with a jacket or scarf can be quite acceptable in our society. Even with a limited budget something quite attractive and fashionable can be easily conjured," Rubina says.

"In Bangladesh or even in India many people fail to correctly combine their accessories with western type clothes. They will use lipstick or jewellery which will not match with the rest of the accoutrements. Again many of

our women don't have the figure for western clothes," Rubina elaborates.

Commenting on their expected clientele, Shazieh says, "With our clothes we would want 60% of the customers to be foreigners. Here we are being prejudiced ourselves. Foreigners come and live in Bangladesh. Why do we not give them something which we have instead of them always overshadowing us? We have the confidence that we have a lot to offer the foreigners. They can understand the value of handmade products and can afford it too."

Talking, incidentally, on treatment of models for fashion shows, Rubina recounts, "Foreign models often get

more attention from the organisers than the Bengali girls. I have had the experience of doing a fashion show in which the foreign models were taken out for lunch and given gifts while the local girls were totally ignored. We had worked just as hard as the foreign models and I cannot understand the reason for the disparity."

Rubina has done two courses in fashion designing and dress making. She has worked on pottery with her brothers. She plans to work on jewellery and on interior designing, specializing in quilts. She has designed clothes before and her friends have appreciated it.

Let us wish "Naja Naja" the best of success in its first endeavour of sale scheduled soon this summer. The clothes design business can always do with new aspirants, whether it be in Bangladesh or outside.

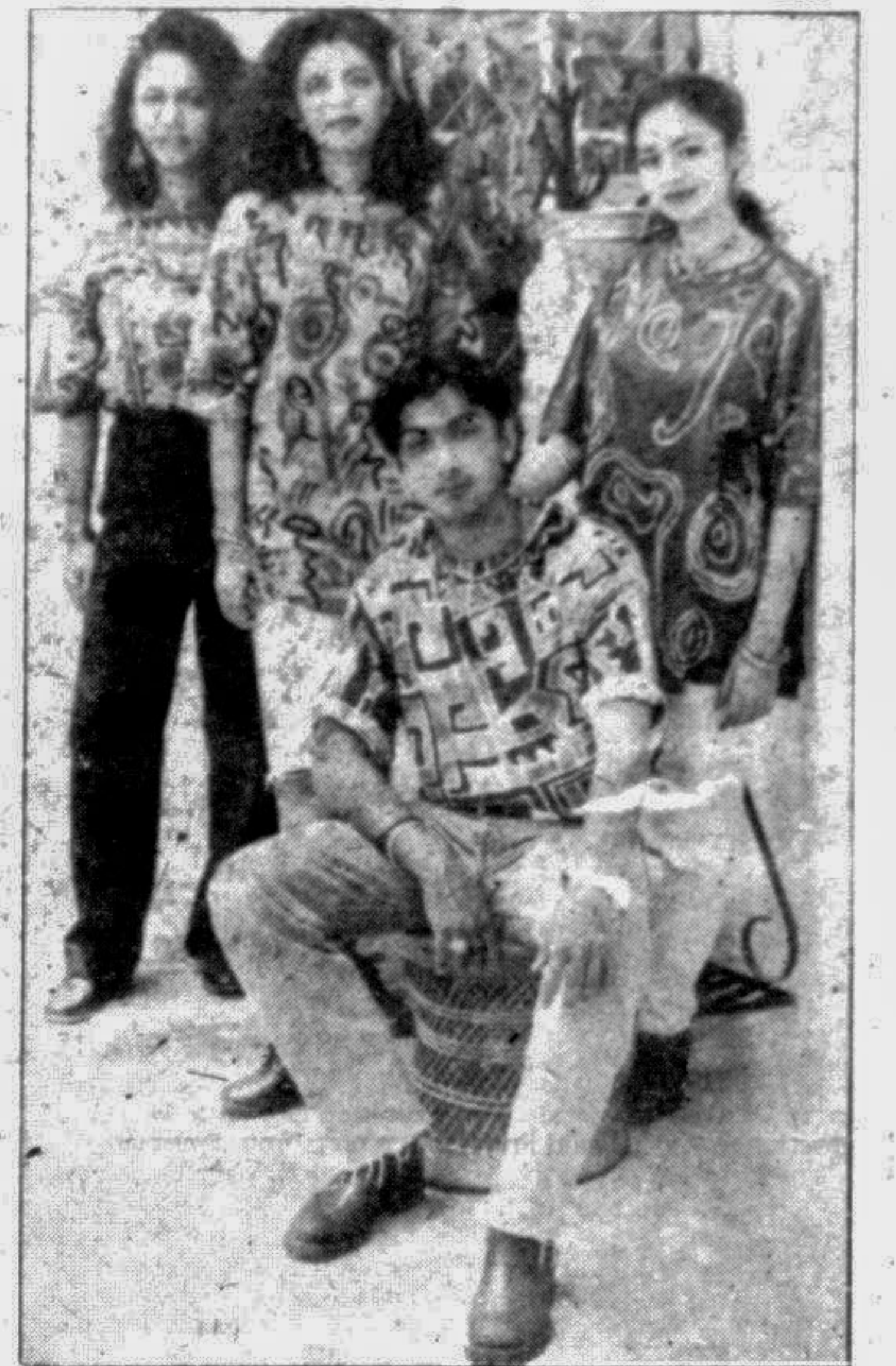


Gay shawls and scarves for all occasions

they have invested must be recovered. At one time they hoped to cater to the middle-class. There are a lot of boutiques but they are expensive for the college-going girls and



Shawls with exquisite colours



Unisex T-Shirts with bright motifs (All photographs by Enamul Haque)

Blending Cultures

by Nico den Tuinder

A kaleidoscope is a wonderful instrument. You look into the tube and slowly turn it round its axis. What do you see? An everlasting change of shape and bright colours, sometimes bizarre, sometimes fascinating. The gadget has the size of a soft drink can. Light comes in at one side of the tube, filters through a moving mix of coloured glass pieces, and is reflected by several mirrors. The more pieces of glass there are, the more heterogeneous and more attractive the display becomes.

Russia has traditionally been one huge kaleidoscope, containing many different peoples and cultures in its vast territory. Each successive regime added new pieces and turned the wheel of history some degrees. Foreign technology, people and ideas blended with deshi elements to produce a richly mixed community. Peter the Great studied shipbuilding in The Netherlands; thousands of Germans immigrated in the nineteenth century, and Lenin tried to put western philosophical thinking to practice.

With pogroms and the Gulag Archipel the scene was not always pleasant. But the ever-changing and often stressed society also produced writers like Gogol and Dostoyevski, composers like Shostakovich and Stravinsky; scientists like Pavlov and Sacharov, and architectural wonders like the Winter Palace and the Kremlin.

Under the present regime Russian society is rapidly westernising. Mac Donald's has opened its first fast-food restaurant, and rock-and-roll is becoming very popular. Democrats and fascists compete for power.

Siberian Kaleidoscope, a folk dance and entertainment group, recently got a chance to show what a mixing of cultures can produce. A dragon dancing on rock-and-roll music tried to eat children in the audience, a magician played tricks with handkerchiefs while talking in English, and a couple put out cigarettes with a whip on the Latin American cha cha cha dance. These acts united with traditional Siberian folk dances. Young men in colourful dress, for example, tried to

impress the other sex by performing feats like jumping over their head, dancing on their haunches and throwing their legs high into the air. Yet another dance was based on the Russian winter.

The show demonstrated that cultures do not necessarily exclude each other. Mix some of their elements together and you get a new rich alloy. It is a pity, therefore, that the Bengalis get few opportunities to acquaint themselves with foreign cultures, to get to know them, and to absorb them if they so desire. They have to resort to the foreign enclaves of the multi-star hotels, and to foreign cultural institutes such as the Alliance Francaise.

Siberian Kaleidoscope. Chief Ballet Master: Victor Selverstov. Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, June 7-12.



A scene from the Russian cultural show

anyone who has ever abroad knows there is a big difference between shopping in Bangladesh and in the west. For a foreign woman newly arrived in Dhaka it can be quite intimidating at first. She has to learn to adapt to unfamiliar ways of doing business if she wants to get the most out of this new experience — and learn some basic Bangla if she is not going to pay through the nose for everything. Looking back I realize now that I landed in the deep end when I took myself off to New Market just after I arrived. I went alone and it was shortly after the market opened. I didn't expect to see too many other foreigners wandering around but I certainly wasn't prepared to find myself not just the only foreigner but almost the only female around. How strange to see all these men around, doing the family shopping. At home, most men especially middle-aged and beyond, wouldn't be seen dead with a shopping bag. I was going to have to get used to this and learn how to shop the local way. I soon found that a little bit of Bangla goes a long way. (One of the first phrases I learned to use, and which always gives me a great deal of satisfaction is "dam beshi!") It tells the merchants right off that this "bideshi" is not too green; especially if she knows her numbers. I started off in the fruit and vegetable market. It's much easier to appear confident when you don't have to get into big numbers. In fact, before lemons and mangoes came into season I could do quite well enough without counting past twenty. It's a lot easier to bargain too if you've checked the newspaper for the daily prices before you set off. Then hang around long enough and find out that the customer in front of you pays.

The easiest place to be in New Market I found, and where you can almost count on being left in peace is in the bookshops. I've spent many happy hours in this area. I think booksellers the world over seem to be a special breed and appreciate their customers' need to browse.

Shopping for women's clothes is the biggest challenge for a foreign woman. I hadn't been in Dhaka very long before I decided that the

clothes I had brought with me from Canada somehow didn't look right in Bangladesh. I might look classy at home in khaki and beige, but here I looked like a sparrow among birds of paradise. Bangladeshi ladies (I discovered they come out to shop in family groups on Fridays) manage to look gorgeous in brilliant colours that I would have never dreamt of wearing myself. While I couldn't quite see myself in a 'sari' yet, I'd taken quite a liking to 'shalwar kameez'. Besides being so practical, Bangladeshi women, look so elegant in them, especially with a scarf draped just so. I wondered if I could look as good in them. They certainly have to be more comfortable, I thought, than my western clothes which were beginning to fit rather too close for comfort. No zippers to struggle with and remind me of those extra few pounds I'd gained and nice loose tops.

I was, however, rather apprehensive about actually going out to buy such an outfit. This was not going to be the straightforward experience I was used to. At home I could window shop to my heart's content, checking out the new styles and comparing prices without having to set foot inside a store. Once inside, I could make my choice from the racks and try on as many as I wanted. I rarely needed to ask for help and any high-pressure sales talk would send me packing.

Here at New Market anyone entering the area of women's clothing stores is fair game. As a foreigner I stick out like a sore thumb and it's almost impossible to just browse. Everywhere I am entreated to please come and "Just look". Forget about window shopping — everything is open to the street in these little stores. There are no doors and windows to isolate (and protect) you from the merchants who have had their eyes on you ever since you came into view. Forget about comparing prices beforehand too. I already knew that the price of every item is open to negotiation. But the biggest difference, which comes as quite a shock, is that all the merchants are men. I'd never

New Experiences at New Market

by Gillian Meakin

bought any clothes from a man before. (Heaven forbid I should have to buy any articles of clothing of a more intimate nature, I think at this point.)

The sizes here are different than at home and are still something of a mystery to me. Going by the size numbers I have to buy here you would think I had turned into an elephant overnight! The first time I got as far as picking out a few styles, I look around hopefully in the back corner for a changing room, and then realise that I will have to be content with holding the top against the front of me. I felt a bit self-conscious at first in front of all these men (several others have suddenly appeared) who seem to be enjoying the spectacle, but I managed to make my choice after "trying on" a few.

Next hurdle to get over is the dreaded bargaining session. How I long for simple price tags on everything. I know I would have to have more money than sense to pay the first price asked. I used to be naive enough to believe I had done well when the merchant looked disappointed, as if he has just given it away.

By the time I leave the store with my purchase, we have usually had quite a conversation, or to be more precise, I have given away as much of my family history as I am able to provide in my basic Bangla. Finally, all smiling now, I am reminded to be sure to come back again. They know a good customer when they see one! After several successful forays for 'shalwar kameez' I am getting to feel quite an old hand at buying "off the peg". Everyone tells me that I could do so much better with tailor-made but I wonder if I am ready yet for that experience. Are there any lady tailors here?

As with shopping for clothes anywhere else in the world, one thing leads to another and I find I need some new shoes now. This turns out to be a piece of cake. There is so little to a pair of sandals here that it's easy to get a perfect fit. (I am reminded by a friend that this is all well and good if you happen to have

following any new purchase — the inevitable question, "How much did you pay?" I am not used to this, although if I have got a terrific bargain I might brag a little to a friend. Judging by the horrified expressions I gather it's usually too much! Still I have learned to submit to this and I even do it myself now. How else can one discover what is the going price these days?

When the time comes to go home to Canada and back to the kind of shopping I am more used to, I know I will have some regrets. It will be nice to blend in with the crowd once more but I'll miss the colour excitement of shopping here. Besides, I shall be very loath to give up those hard earned bargaining skills — after I've seen the price tag!

small feet.) Best of all there are fixed price self-serve shoe shops. This is such a pleasant experience I have bought three pairs of Bangladeshi sandals in three months.

To complete the outfit a few Bangles would be nice. I so admire these sets of colourful glass Bangles I see Bangladeshi women wearing but they fit so snug I wonder how they manage to get them on, and then if they will ever come off. I regretfully have to give up this idea not being prepared to submit to minor torture. Another reminder that I am not as petite as I thought.

In Bangladesh there is still one more step to go through



Minder on the Orient Express on Star Plus

COOKERY

- | | |
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| <p>Dropped Scones
100g self-raising flour (4 oz)
pinch of salt
50g caster sugar (2 oz)
1 egg
milk to mix, approx 60 ml (4 tbsp) few drops lemon essence, optional</p> | <p>Serve buttered, hot or cold.</p> <p>Girdle Scones
200g self-raising flour (8 oz)
pinch of salt
25g lard (1 oz)
25g sugar (1 oz)
1 egg, beaten with enough milk to make 125 ml (1/4 pt)</p> |
|--|--|
- Mix flour, salt and sugar, add egg and gradually beat in milk to make a thick batter.
 - Add essence, if used.
 - Bake 2 or 3 at a time by dropping spoonfuls of the mixture on to a hot, well-greased girdle.
 - Cook until the underside is golden brown and the top is covered with bubbles.
 - Turn and brown on the other side.