



## Culture and Heritage

by Itmam Mahmud Choudhury

"WHAT is it like living outside Bangladesh for a Bengali? This is a question I have been asked many a time by relatives when I return to Dhaka to visit them. My answer to their question was always very brief — "Fine". I never did elaborate to them about my experiences and opinions of living in a foreign country. This is a chance for me to tell you all readers what it feels like living in a foreign land from my point of view.

I am a Bengali Singaporean living in this island city for more than a decade. There are many other Bengalis living here too. Most of them migrated here from Bangladesh because of better job prospects and every year more Bengalis are coming to Singapore in search of a brighter future. Even though there are a lot of Bengalis who have been living here for a long time, none of them have lost their touch with Bangladesh. Every year almost all the Bengali families residing here return to their country of origin to visit their loved ones. Thus, as you can see, their ties with their motherland is still very intact.

But the real problem lies among the youth of the Bengali community here. The older generation are worried that the younger ones will isolate their homeland, Bangladesh, both mentally and physically and let their Bengali culture erode until they have forgotten their customs and lost their Bengali identity. The youth of today including me are growing up in a period of rising cultural imperialism from the West. Singapore being a modern country has many western aspects to its society. This is due to global trade and exchange of technologies which has brought the East closer to the West. As a result, different forms of Western culture and their lifestyles have infiltrated into our Asian society and influenced the way we live by the western culture. The way we talk, eat, dress and how we enjoy ourselves are very much or in fact totally westernized. As a result of such extensive westernization, there is the inevitable replacement of culture among the Bengali youth. People might say that we have fallen victim to the western culture and dumped our Bengali heritage. However, this may not be true, because we have taken the best out of the Bengali and Western culture and combined them to pro-

duce an improvised one which is adequate to meet the needs of today's generation so that they can keep up with the times as well as be in harmony with the past.

Another reason why the young Bengali residents still adhere to the Bengali culture is due to the fact that Singapore is a part of Asia which is dominated by the Oriental culture. Certain traditions such as marriages are quite similar among the Asian countries. Furthermore, Singapore is made up of a

the mainstay. This gives us a chance to practice the language in spoken form. Although most of the young ones do not know how to write or read well, at least we can speak well. So when we return to Bangladesh communication does not become a problem.

Eid is celebrated among us in Singapore and during this special occasion we visit one another. This brings the Bengali community closer together and creates a homely atmosphere. This makes us forget momentarily that we are



We love Bangladesh, no matter where we are.

multi-ethnic society — the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians are the three major races. We Bengalis have been associated with the Indian race because we are part of the vast Indian sub-continent. Since many of the Indian customs are similar to the Bengali ones, the younger generation Bengalis are better able to appreciate our culture.

Every year, many activities such as plays ('natoks'), dance items, musical excerpts, story telling competitions and recitation of Bengali poems are organised to portray our rich culture and history. This is aimed at the younger generation and they are asked to participate in such activities. This enables them to learn and understand more about Bangladesh's multi-faceted culture. Language is an important element for understanding our culture. In Singapore, English is the most widely spoken language. It is used at home, in the office and in schools; but at home Bengali is

living outside Bangladesh. During Eid and other social gatherings, I enjoy being with Bengalis and mingling with them. It makes one feel proud of Bangladesh. Even the type of food we eat has not been affected by my living in Singapore. All the different types of spices and ingredients can be found here to prepare any Bengali dish. There is even a restaurant specialising in Bengali cuisines from the simple 'dal-bhat' to more exquisite dishes.

Living in Singapore has not caused me to lose my roots. Although life in Singapore is much more different from that in Bangladesh, I am still as "Bengali" as ever.

The writer, a Bengali Singaporean, has passed his A-level Exam recently. He is now undergoing two and a half years' compulsory National Service and will continue his studies in the National University of Singapore after his NS.

Sick of this book, sick of all these books and tapes and papers and everything in here. I stand straight, bend back and forth, back and forth, stretch back and forth, walk around a bit. Then go to the window where the sun has thankfully been dimmed by a cloud. It's a nice moment, with clouds drifting in our star's way, then clearing out. I like clouds, and I like rain, but the sun's annoying with all that light. The air's cool and fresh, and rain seems a prospective visitor: yes, the rain is welcome to visit me any day. And there are the trees, they're still alive.

I'm just emptying my skull of any thoughts, I'll embrace only images right now, but dwell on nothing. What passes, passes and I don't observe, I merely am... and I am... and I am... people may come and they may go, but I am... I am... I am... I am... Something of a discordance jars me, shaking me out of the reverie, and I track to see what it could be. Ah. A new family has moved in, and a little boy is jumping about the room directly opposite my window, in clear sight, two or three houses away. Noisy pest, I suppose. I wonder if he has an elder sib.

— Hello, I wonder, how you can possibly tolerate that abomination? Were he to be in my house, I'd subject him to a harsh spanking. But I guess, you being his sister, you mother him, and, well, I wish you well. I hope you'll like your new apartment too. You're pretty, Hmm.

She's graceful as a swan, and a sight for sore eyes; better her than a textbook, or a magazine, or any other of my neighbours. Until now, none of the females were ever worthy of anything more than a glance, and in some cases, not even that: fat, or old, or wrinkly, or pudgy, or ugly, or a deluge (unimaginable!) combination of these factors.

Well, at least I've got more sights to see once in a while. I ask my mother, who lives in that house there? And she responds, shrugging, I don't know. You could find out for yourself. I shake my head. No, I don't think that's a good idea. I's just curious anyway.

The curtains are drawn, jazz pervading the space in my room, and I start singing my brains out; words very likely no one in this area has or ever will hear in the next millennium, unless they have the culture to cultivate my company. "After you've gone/there's no denying/you feel

blue/you feel sad/zap boo dee dee bop bop baa". Well, few people listen to the Quintet du Hot Club de la France anyway.

— of course, if I'd any brains in the first place, I'd have stopped sooner. A wind, and the curtains part, and a glimpse, and she smiles wryly at me and presses her fingers against her ears. Very funny, very funny, very funny. I hadn't known I was that audible. Alright, I'll spare you my lungs, and return to my labours.

I can hear shouts outside, but I'm a good boy. I mind my own business, for isn't it said, Do unto others as you'd want them to do to you? Or was that, Do unto others before they do you in? The shouts range from a roar to a holler, and some sound effects too, so it may seem, plates crashing among other things. Someone's going to have quite a



mess to clean. Not me at any rate.

After an hour, maybe more, maybe less, the chaos subsides, and I chance a glance outside.

She's sad today, starting despondently out the window. What's the matter? Of course, she can't, won't tell me, but I take it on to me to wipe that face clear of those lines, minding an amiable nitwit, just goofing off, risking my dignity for an obscure cause... and she watches, and she watches, and eventually, when I'm so tired, she rewards me with a tentative, small smile, that makes

## Windows

by Ahsan S Kabir

the effort worth all the trouble.

What troubles her? Do I really want to know?

Things look different at different distances. Closer, some things grow ever more magnificent and awing; yet some only diminish in their lustre, and disappoint. I don't want to know her, because that may spoil whatever impression I have; free to muse, content to speculate, to delude, to ponder and wonder, we remain at a respectful distance; nor does she seem to want to change the scenario as it

Every person lives so many different lives, all contained in one body. The way we are with our parents and siblings, friends and relations, are all discrete shades, and once in a while, we meet someone who is totally independent of all the others we know; that grants him or her a distinction in our perception of all the others we know; that grants him or her a distinction in our perception. She is such an instance in my life. I've not a desire to share her with or draw her into my larger circle. All my knowledge of her is restricted to my crayon. I enjoy our relationship, mute and visual, exactly as it is. Besides, there are some things one cannot explain to others, without the fear of being misunderstood.

Strange I've never seen her on the streets, or maybe in a city like this, where the latest

she, as a model would, strides down the veranda, carelessly spinning around, arms raised, a dancer a shadow, a statue, a woman. Her audacity astounds me — what would the neighbours say if they saw — Isn't she pretty, pretty in pink? I clap my hands, and she bows, turns, cocks her head back and smiles, and hurriedly returns somewhere.

Three in the morning, I can't sleep for the heat and more, get up, I gaze at a dark cloudless sky, and the silence of the city is welcome. She appears, perhaps a victim of the same black enemy, she too probes her surroundings. Soon she faces me, her expression blurred, we meet, silent as usual, acknowledging the other's presence with a nod. Sitting on the window sill, both of us — she, indistinct but for the illumination of her nightgown by the moon, I, enveloped by curtains and cast as a shadow by the fluorescent lights within — we speak our thoughts so it seems, though our lips remain pressed closed firmly. The night morphs our reality, so I may reckon what is in truth gibberish. Nevertheless, I somehow feel that my knowledge of her has increased vastly, that I understand the ways of her life, and the root of her unhappiness, and the causes for joy; and that she too has finally come to realise me.

So the days and nights go, occasionally we view each other, always at a distance, never speaking, and a weird kind of intimacy grows. I don't love her in any way; at least, I deny those thoughts; but I may be telling the truth too. It's just that we communicate without communicating, and I don't know, it's just strange, the way we — the way we are.

And then, one day, I realise I haven't seen her in some time. Well, oh well, maybe she's been busy, and maybe she's just moved away, as quickly as she moved in. Funny, this hollowness I sense momentarily within me, but it eases quickly. I've just been under a lot of stress lately, totally unrelated to her, she whose name I don't know.

My mother asks, Do you know? This girl some houses away died a few weeks ago.

I freeze. Then, What? So I finally find your name. Did you ever know mine? I'll give you it now. What happened to you, I don't want to know. If I'd known you, and what you were, how would things have been? It's so quiet here, so peaceful, so beautiful, not betraying what might lurk beyond the dirt nor the stones.

gossip traverses mouths and ears at the speed of light, yet whose denizens remain peculiarly insular, not so strange — yet we are neighbours, but we're in a conservative part of town, what could be called a hole.

I guess it's my turn to be sad, now, but I don't expect her. It's night, eleven o'clock, she's probably asleep; her place is entirely dark. I'll work off this depression, though, just I'll...

A light, and the stage is set; the distant sounds of music, and the show starts, and

stands, so so far our thoughts are in accord.

What's her name? It probably starts with an "s"; for half the girls I know, that's true, and ninety five per cent of them have names ending with an "a". So I might be right; and I might be wrong.

And over the weeks, whenever the Fates decree a coincidence in our motions, we watch each other watch the other watch the other watch the other... with different expressions on our faces, perhaps telling nothing, perhaps telling everything.

even become so monstrous that if they can't find, anything they stab the people and run away. So, how safe are we really in roads and highways? If you leave the house in the morning, you cannot be too sure whether you'll come back home — safe, dead or injured. Something must be done soon to annihilate these problems otherwise, it's not going to be us who will only be affected, it's but also the future generation of the country.

Drugs — the very word sounds deadly and murderous. In fact, it is deadly and murderous for the young people of today and tomorrow. Most of the people who become heavily addicted to it cannot stop once they get the taste of it. These drugs are expensive and since the users have no source of income they start mugging people and stab those who refuse to give anything?

Broken marriages represent yet another crucial problem in our society particularly among the poor. The dowry system is that cause of all the mishaps as so many women are killed for it. If a girl's parents fail to give their son-in-law what he wants he beats her up cruelly and mercilessly. Many of these girls die from the beating and from those who do not, many kill themselves. In fact, beating up their wives have become a woman factor among the lower class and uneducated husbands of our society. Fortunately this kind of attitude towards women have met with a lot of protests lately as women's liberation is now regarded as a very important issue.

This is not all. Selling young girls have now become a business among some people. What these people do is that they give false hopes of success to innocent young girls and steal them away at night. They take them away to neighbouring countries and sell them off to become prostitutes. Many of us who travel a lot

see many small children working, selling flowers, begging or roaming in the streets. These are children from broken marriages and some of them have parents who are either dead or incapable of working. These children are sent to work at an early age when they are supposed to be going to school. They have no future — nothing to live for because they have to look for themselves and earn their own living. This is definitely not the kind of life they relish but do they have a choice? They also want to live a full life, they want to go to school and learn. But who will take their — responsibility? Undertaking these children's responsibility and trying to change their lifestyle is an enormous and challenging task, nevertheless the Government have already taken steps that ensures a bright future for them.



## Lend Me an Ear

by Nahid Hussain

I would like to have your attention my fellow adolescent readers. Have you ever fallen susceptible to peer pressure? Do you have a complex problem? Did you ever think of committing suicide?

Studies have shown that most teenagers had thought or felt so. The reason indicated was emotions. Our emotions have thrown us, at least once in awkward situations when we behave eccentrically much to the annoyance of our elders.

Most adolescents are subject to pressure. Often we will stay out late which inadvertently causes distress to our folks. Slowly this develops into an unsatiable habit which only helps to get into rows with parents ending with heavy minds on either sides, we might be encouraged to smoke and if one is 'lucky' be introduced to drugs. One hesitates but ends up in their friends' footsteps. Usually one does this, because he would like to be part of the group. It gives him the feeling that he is cool and 'grown up'.

Then again at times you may feel inferior to others. Many will take the opportunity to make you feel worse by dumping all rubbish talks into your head. There is no reason to feel so. Inferiority complex only deteriorates one's performance; it's a fact. Those who suffer from superiority complex, they just write off others. Ignore them or teach them a lesson should be the attitude towards them.

There are many out there who are short-tempered (due to release of more hormones, eh?). For a few comments, you get fired up and own into dirty scrimmages. Never make this mistake. If you get aggravated quickly, this will incite them more. Ignore such characters — their antics will not last long as they will lose interest. Those of you who get into brawls over and over, tell me are they worth all the bruises and pains you suffer?

If a young person loses something he feels as if the world has no meaning left and has called it a day. A friend of

mine lost a role in a drama. He thought he lost a major battle. He was afterwards irritated by someone in his household — irritated enough to break the blades of his pedestal fan. Has he gained anything? No, rather he now spends sweaty days and nights. Come on, leave these aside. Try again or pursue something else. If you don't, you will be bereft of many things — due to your own dislike and arrogance.

There are many teenagers who fall in love. If it does not succeed, they only think of the most cowardly option — suicide. What is this? Just don't let your emotions run wild. In life there will always be 'yes' and 'no'. If measures are not taken, these will prevail in your later life accompanied by anxiety, restlessness and what not. That will not be very healthy.

Get those emotions under control. Throw all those damn critics aside. Believe in yourself. Never let your emotions get the better of you.

## On The Fascinating Forbidden

by Kazi. K. Arafat.

WHAT is man?

Man is most intelligent.... No! Man is a beast who can only fight, hate, kill, and yet smile all the time.

I'm his best friend the only thing he loves.

I am violence.

I am anger.

Left in cages — a prisoner.

The first to escape.

I'm a monster.

Breaking window in houses.

Wrecking those damned ivory towers you make by cheating people.

Didn't you recognize me yet?

If your age is above two, you surely did.

I was your first toy.

Remember that little red gun Abbu bought?

I am everybody's favourite toy.

All the pacifist hypocrites have bodyguards.

And what do they have?

Even the dainty social butterflies carry me in their expensive purses.

So take my help and live.

Before you, too, get killed someday — by me!

God and good intentions aren't enough to shoo away evil — you

also have to have firepower.

I'm everywhere — in TV, radio, books, music.

I see everything through my steel barrel.

I am the unhappiness.

Which gives you eternal peace.

All that shall remain of this world

Is that little wisp of smoke

That comes out of my barrel

After a shot has been fired.

And then it'll be the end.

## PEACE IN LOVE

by Najma Jalil

Peace to me is the highest virtue. For it makes the dream of my love come true.

Let peace be my only guide

To show me its blissful destination

And true love my only pride

To offer me its unique disposition

Peace in love is a state of mind

Which helps me to find

Not only Love's sacred affinity

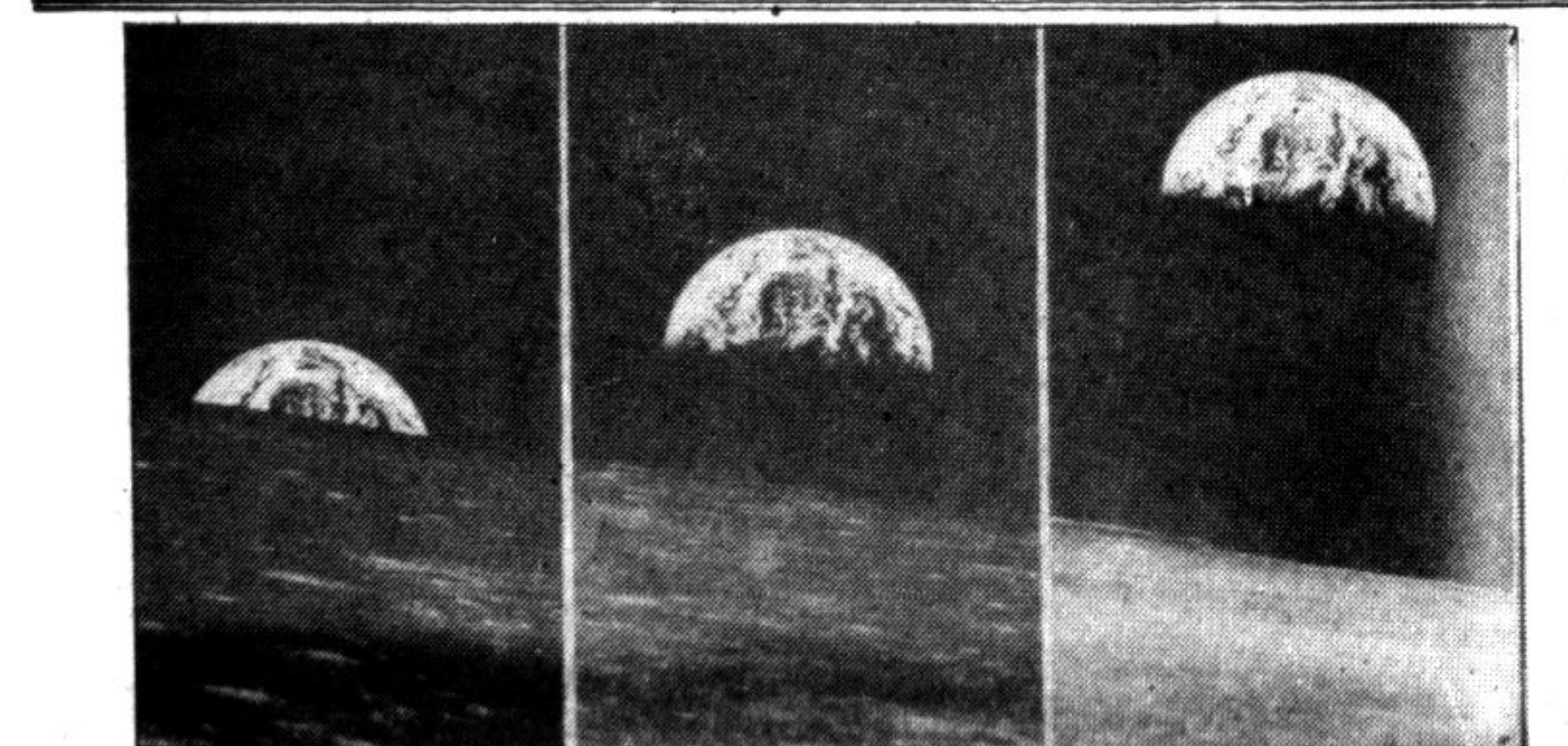
But also its faith, confidence and stability

And all these together makes me sure

That the instance of my love is pure

For true love is a worthwhile treasure

Which binds two hearts with happiness and pleasure.



This sequence of photographs of the Earth rising over the moon was made from the Apollo 10 Command Module.