

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

On the Campus : Africa Why Universities have Developed a Vulture-culture

George Frank Asmah writes from Accra

As in many African countries, shortage of money and overcrowded facilities have reduced Ghana's once distinguished universities to congested trouble-spots. And as Gemini News Service recounts, the difficulties have created new phenomena — such as "perching" by students.

PHYSICS student Benjamin-Hayfron recommends artificial respiration for the University of Ghana. He also prescribes multi-vitamin tablets because of the many diseases facing the institution.

His immediate grievance is overcrowding. To fulfil his dream of becoming an aeronautical engineer, he needs to concentrate and study hard. But he shares his small room in the University with 10 other students.

Like many Ghanaians, he tempers his grievances with good humour.

Fellow-sufferer Robert Osei Mensah is a final-year medical student at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. "Rain or shine I must top my class," he says — but his studies are made difficult by the need to share a room with six other students.

"Come to the great University of Science and Technology and you will be surprised to see that many students have turned vultures," he comments. "The only difference is that they do not always have wings and some are not bald. But they exhibit all the qualities of a vulture."

And he adds: "Perching by vultures is now a common phenomenon on campus."

Perching is the phenomenon by which generous residential students allow their non-residential counterparts to lodge with them because the non-residents otherwise find it hard to commute long distances every day to attend lectures.

Benjamin-Hayfron explains that a non-resident student from, say, the northern town of Bolgatanga, about 800 kilometres away, with no relatives

in Accra, will have no choice but to become a vulture in order to obtain a degree.

The result is a complete lack of privacy and dignity: "My girl-friend cannot visit me on campus because I am sharing the same room with macho-men."

It was not always thus. John Bosco Aful, 66-year-old alumni of the University of Science and Technology (UST) and now master of Akuafu Hall at the University of Ghana, recalls that there used to be one student to a room. Some married students even brought their families to stay while they were studying, he says.

"Later it became obvious that the one-man, one-room concept could not be adhered to indefinitely because increasing numbers of students were qualifying for admission. Students had to be paired two to a room, even though it presented problems."

Students were adults. Aful recalls, and needed privacy so that their sweethearts could come to roost for the night without disturbance.

Sharing also created problems of incompatibility. For example, he points out, when a "born-again" Christian filled with the Holy Spirit is paired with a devout Moslem, things may not run smoothly.

The current number of students is far greater than the University's capacity, says Aful, which puts an enormous strain on facilities — particularly on baths and lavatories. Unless sanitary workers doubled their output, the whole campus would soon be in a mess.

The elegant institutions of higher learning are now seriously deteriorating and if things continue this way no-

thing will be done.

Food? Don't even mention the subject. "When UST was really UST," recalls Aful nostalgically, "students were fed on scrambled eggs with bread and imported butter and extra-thick Milo for breakfast."

For lunch, there was yams or rice with chicken stew, with oranges and ice-cream for dessert." Supper was "just inedible."

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Coupons and queuing were introduced, though the food situation was still bearable. The crunch came in 1983 when Ghana's gods stopped the rains. There was famine, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Supplies dried up and new feeding arrangements had to be made.

Lunch, says Aful, became

one will again respect the universities in Ghana as the finest on the African continent."

Esi Ampofo, a 29-year-old fourth-year history student at the University of Cape Coast, agrees. She shares her room with five other women.

Soon it became clear that the diet was generating vast amounts of gas. Emmanuel Andoh Kesson remembers his time at the University of Ghana as one of mass flatulence in lecture rooms, libraries, common rooms — everywhere, creating enormous environmental problems. Campus purity was so violated, he says, that it became a major contributor to the greenhouse effect and global warming.

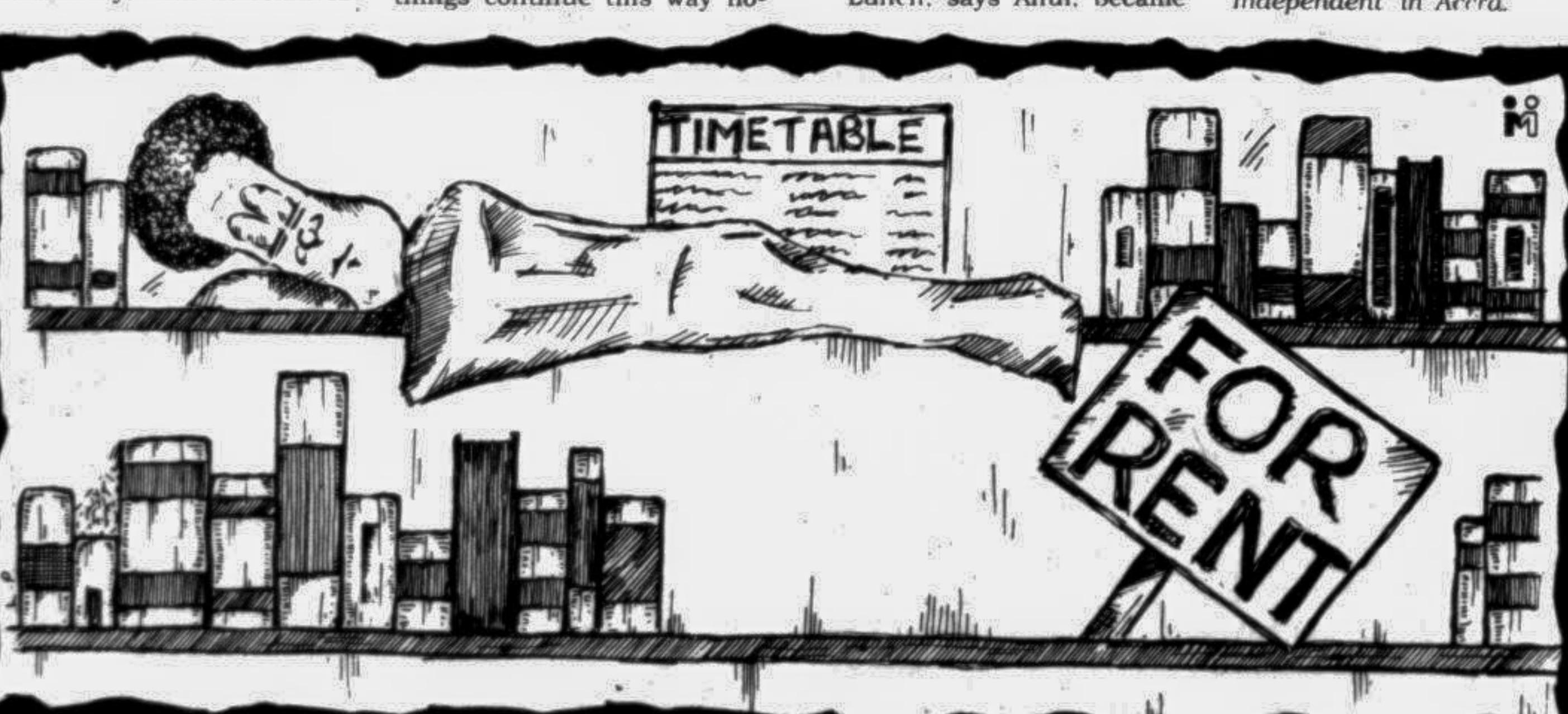
"We added a few other grievances to the food palaver and embarked on *aluta*," he observes. (*A luta continua* — Portuguese for "the revolution continues" — is a popular phrase among students, for whom *aluta* has come to mean "demonstration.") After the ensuing clashes between security forces and students, the university was closed for 10 months.

The food situation has not improved since then. Today, students have to feed themselves, and complain that hawkers are stationed far from the halls of residence.

Neither the authorities nor the government, both strapped for cash, seem to have any solutions.

The students struggle on with all the good humour they can muster, but the possibility of trouble is always present. Say Osei Mensah: "With campus congestion persisting, we will continue to undertake violent demonstrations to seek redress."

GEORGE FRANK ASMAH is editor of the weekly *Independent* in Accra.



Pyrates Become Buccaneers and Bring Terror to the Campus

Nkechi Nwankwo writes from Lagos

Secret societies have brought fear to Nigerian universities and even to secondary schools. Concern about campus cults has become so widespread that the government and police have stepped in to curb them.

WHEN Nigeria's Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka and a group of friends set up a university fraternity known as the Pyrates 40 years ago, they did not foresee that their idealism would be corrupted into secret cults.

Like many students before and since, they wanted to challenge academic norms and to "sail the seas and persecute evil doers, injustice, corruption and oppression" in their campus at University College, Ibadan, and in the country at large.

Such groups were part of the independence movement. As well as protesting against oppression, they often made donations to charity and helped build social amenities.

But the motivations of the Pyrates — now known as the National Association of Seadogs — and other similar associations have changed with the times and some are believed to be behind a series of violent and sometimes fatal clashes which has disturbed university life.

One of the most serious disruptions is at the University of Lagos, which was closed from

March to June following bloody fights between students. The fighting and arson was apparently triggered by outgoing Student Union president Omoyle Sowore's attempt to expose and punish cult members.

The closure is just one of a long list of forced vacations that has made a mess of the university's calendar. The institution is yet to complete the 1992-93 session. Students registered for four-year degree programmes may find themselves spending up to six years through no fault of their own.

Other universities have also been hit, and secret cults are often blamed. They go by various names, such as Mafia, Black Axe and Buccaneers, and they are feared for terrorising, raping and even killing.

In 1991 an Ibadan University student received 22 knife wounds in an attack by cult members. The following year, eight students from polytechnics in two states were murdered in cult clashes. In 1993 a medical student at Enugu State University of Technology was killed.

Education Minister Dr Iyorchia Ayu assured the nation that the Ministry has

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Folklore : Concept and Context

by Shamsuzzaman Khan

FOLKLORES are passed on by tradition, whether by word of mouth, by verbal instruction and example, by demonstration, or by custom and practice. Customarily folklores are orally transmitted. In folklore scholarship, therefore, tradition and oral transmission are the two key-sources.

In the beginning, the study of folklore was generally confined to myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, ballads and folksongs, and other oral traditions of lesser importance.

With the passage of time, the domain of folklore became much wider and eventually it began to encompass verbal, material, and gestural elements of tradition. As a result, folklore now includes, among other components, folk art, folk craft, folk architecture, folk costume, folk dance, folk music, folk medicine, folk custom, and folk belief.

In the 1960s some American folklorists, whom Richard M Dorson described as "Young Turks", began to view folklore as a dynamic process. They challenged the text-oriented study of folklore. According to them, the text cannot be extrapolated from its context.

Folklore has been defined by Dan Ben-Amos as "artistic communication in small groups." Art is one of the broad components of culture, and folklore falls in this category as an artistic process. The folklore process is artistic because the factor of rhythm, as Ben-Amos points out, "changes human noise to music, movement and gesture to dance, and object to sculpture."

Innumerable such examples may be cited to illustrate the artistic nature of folklore. Folklore communicative process because it is found in various communicative medium: musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic. By a small group, Ben-Amos has meant "a number of persons who communicate with one another, often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all others, not a second through other people, but face-to-face." As Ben-Amos states, "a group could be a family, a street-corner gang, a roomful of factory workers, a village, or even a tribe." For the folkloric act to happen, Ben-Amos believes two social conditions are necessary: both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation in which "people confront each other, face to face, and relate to each other directly." He argues that

even when a certain literary theme or musical style is known regionally, nationally or internationally, its actual existence depends upon such small group situations.

Ben-Amos has excluded the two key terms of folklore — tradition and oral transmission — from his definition. He believes that the traditional character of folklore is an analytical one.

The cultural use of folklore is not necessarily dependent upon historical development since certain folklore forms derive their efficacy from their supposed newness. On the other hand, what we call tradition may often be a rhetorical device or a socially instrumental convention. Ben-Amos argues that since oral texts constantly appear in print as they cross into the domain of written literature, there is no point in insisting on oral transmission. Because folklore is so widely diffused that in many cases face-to-face interaction between the performers and the audience is not absolutely necessary for the folklore act to happen. A *baul* does not require an audience as he sings while wandering. But he is heard by countless people, many of whom are unseen by him. When a group of craftsmen perform their skilling in a small workshop, they do not necessarily communicate directly with all their patrons. Nevertheless, their craftsmanship may be appreciated by their unknown consumers.

This sense of appreciation is automatically conveyed to craftsmen as they find their products to be in great demand. That tradition is a key concept in folklore, which must be recognized, no matter

whether we use the term or not, in defining folklore.

In fact, the largest segment of our folklore is still traditional. However, what deserves our serious attention is the contextual character of folklore. When we record a folksong, photograph a craftsman at work, or describe an object of folk art, we create only the text. Since the text is not folklore, we have to analyse the text in its context to reconstruct the performance of the act that the text represents. So far we have mostly studied folklore in a textual manner, with little or no attention to contextual aspects. In other words, we have studied tales not story tellers, songs not singers, or craft objects not craftsmen. As a result, our studies are full of text-centered interpretations with no consideration being given to performers. We must bear in mind that a performer's act is related directly to his/her social condition, immediate environment, historical period, and economic circumstances as well as to his/her personal training, development of skill, and expression of talent.

In order to reconstruct or understand the performance of the performer, a scholar must take into account all these criteria. Folklore is a living manifestation of human creativity. Hence it has to be studied in terms of performance-centered analysis within a broad contextual framework.

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From popular fairy tale.

Photo: Courtesy — Anwar Hossain

Archaeological Monuments Need to be Preserved Well

by Sanchita Chowdhury

THE history of this sub-continent forms one of the most interesting and fascinating chapters in the evolution of human civilization. The ancient history of this vast territory reveals a close association with those civilizations of Mesopotamia, Babilonia and Assyria. In this respect, this part of the subcontinent now called Bangladesh has a distinct place in world history. Its archaeological entity has such possibilities which deserve more of research and discovery.

The remains of ancient

Bangladesh with its resourceful antiquity attract a number of tourists every year. Yet a proper understanding of its glorious past is handicapped by several disadvantages. Firstly, a number of scholars have attempted to read the past through the spectacles of the present. They are sometimes influenced by confusing conditions and, thus, have deviated from giving real historical details. Secondly, the unnecessary glorification of the past is another potent factor that de

viates from actual historical records and date. The greatest obstacle in understanding the ancient history of Bangladesh is the absence of a chronological text.

Few well known historical features of ancient Bengal have been recorded in the annals of Bangladesh after the liberation. But significant remains and signs such as monuments, mosques and Hindu temples, Buddha Viharas are being ruined just by negligence, with the evolution of modernity.

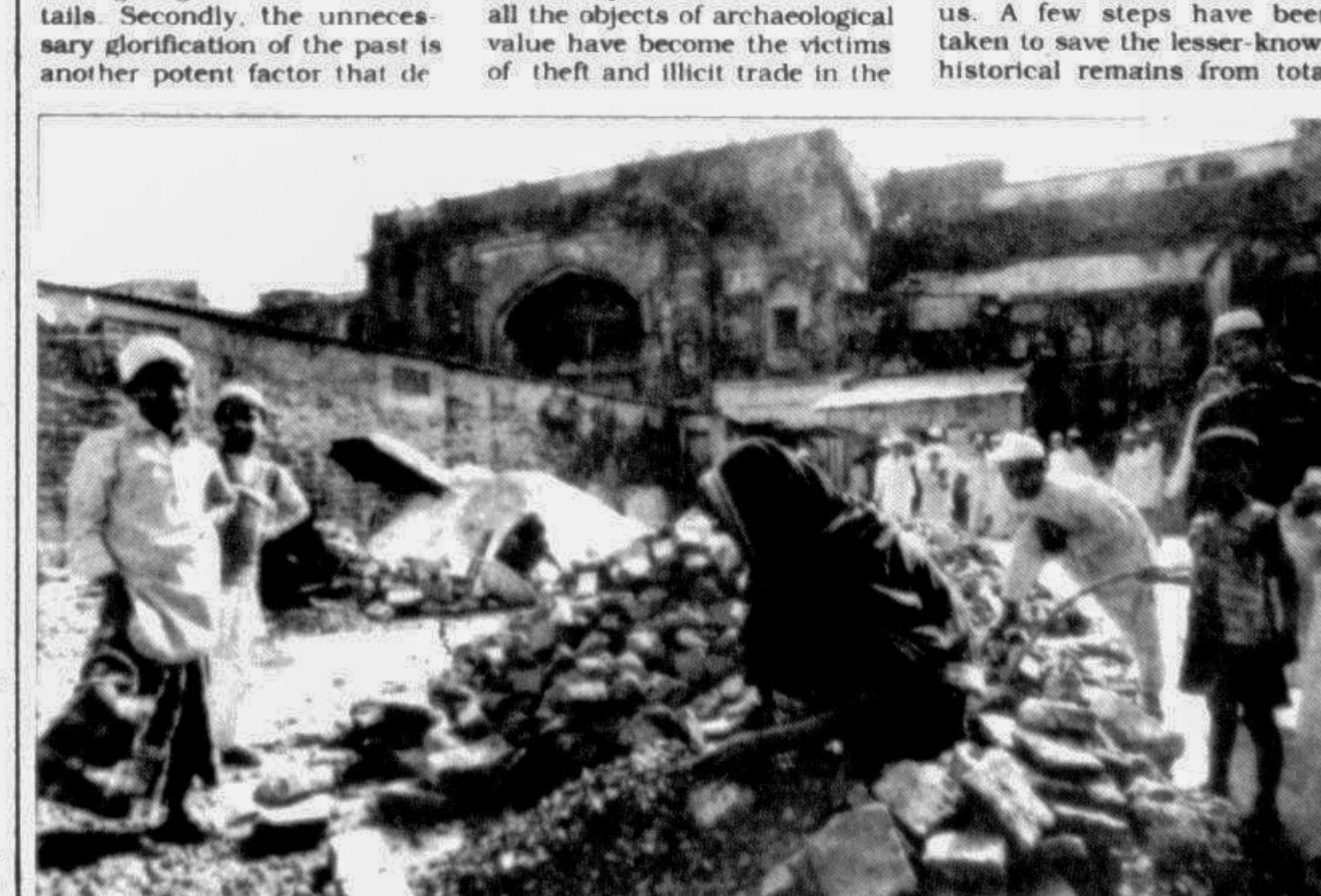
The development and evolution of ways of life, demographic pressure, industrialisation, pollution, neglect, poverty, urbanisation, haphazard building construction, and natural catastrophes — all these represent serious dangers that threaten the archaeological evidences of the remote past. Fragments of ancient structures, stones, statues, fossils of prehistoric animals — all the objects of archaeological value have become the victims of theft and illicit trade in the

recent decades.

Many historical sites are in a state of threat throughout Bangladesh. The remains of the ancient Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim art, culture and civilisation have significantly increased tourism. But Paharpur in Rajshahi, Mahasthangarh in Bogra and Moynamoti in Comilla — all bearing the remains and fragments of renowned ancient civilisation are on the verge of ruination because of sheer neglect.

The task of safeguarding the heritage of Bangladesh is inherently a challenging one because of lack of financial backing on the part of the government. Besides the known historical sites, a large number of unknown places of historical interest also remain neglected.

Both the past and present are essential for individual enlightenment and creativity. The essential challenge of preserving the past is left before us. A few steps have been taken to save the lesser-known historical remains from total



Remains of Bara Katra, Dhaka.

Photo: Courtesy — Anwar Hossain

ruination now. Monuments, buildings, ornamental works, statues of stone pottery, sculpture, fascinating inscriptions on stone wall — these archaeological evidences provide us with considerable knowledge. From time immemorial streams of migrating tribes and races have come to this country and have increased, rather, enriched its racial complexities. So the inheritance of the culture of ancient Bangladesh is of diverse origins. Hence, a timely and careful preservation of archaeological objects provides considerable information about the taste and temperament of our ancestors.

The National Museum authorities in the meantime, have taken some vital steps to protect our ancient sites from total destruction. During the liberation struggle the entire country was occupied and somewhat damaged while some rare objects of archaeological importance had been looted. The oppressive rulers of the Pakistan tried their best to undermine our national heritage and culture. Time has come to take bold steps to safeguard the remains of our precious past.

Two celebrated Chinese travellers, Fa-Hien and Hien-Tsang visited this Indo-Pak Bengal sub-continent during the reign of Chandra Gupta II and Harshavardhana. The flourishing Buddhism and some political and secular matters have been described by them. From the 8th century A.D. this sub-continent attracted the attention of the Arabs. The Arab conquest of Sind brought a tremendous change in the history of the following centuries. Next, with the triumph by the Muslims of ancient Bangladesh, mosques, minarets, monuments came up and various Arabic inscriptions had been engraved on stone which provide information about Muslim sculptors and architects. Now all the signs of Muslim inheritance too are

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