



Rediscovering Mirzapur A Jewel in the North

by Schreazad Joya Manami Latif

In the North of Bangladesh, tucked away about 70 kilometers from the northernmost point of Tetulia, lies Mirzapur village. There are various stories telling the history of the village, home to 3,000 men and women, all of whom are Muslim.

Mirzapur is little known to most people in Bangladesh. When I started off on a family picnic to return to our roots a week and a half ago, it was little known to me. I'd thought it would be simply a village, special to me because it is where my ancestors had set up a home a few hundred years ago and more recently, (circa

50 years ago) my grandfather had started his schooling. But what I discovered in Mirzapur was anything but a simple village.

In a corner of the village stands one of the most beautiful mosques ever built. Most recently the mosques I had

seen had been in Brunei and Malaysia. Although beautiful, they are too new and shiny with Italian chandeliers and Japanese television monitors.

I have never been to Ajmer or Jaipur, but am told that the Mirzapur mosque is in the Jaipuree style with motifs from the Mughul era. Beautiful brick-red Islamic motifs adorn the outer walls of the mosque, the courtyard of which is surrounded by a low wall.

Villagers pray there five times a day every day, at the sound of the Azan, indifferent to the mosque's history, as if it were just another mosque in Bangladesh and not an object of beauty to be preserved and cherished as a national heritage.

Standing in front of the mosque, my family and I clicked away with our Minolta's. Suddenly an argument broke out on the question of whether the mosque was built by Shi'ites or had originally been a temple. There are various facts that support both the stories.

According to some who had last seen the mosque in the mid-60s, there used to be two tiles on the front of the mosque. One depicted the Hindu Tika, sign of fertility and the other, Hanuman, the monkey God. Some say that the tiles were the autograph of the craftsman who made the mosque; the same man who built the fabulous Kantojee Mandir, also in Dinajpur. His two trademark tiles have been sadly defaced today.

Another story is that the mosque had been a temple at one time. During the Mughul era, it was partially broken to build a mosque. Given the dome architecture of the outer building, this fact is questionable. But will we ever know? History, after all, is what we make it.

Mirzapur also houses the ruins of an Imambara that fell during the Bihar quake in 1304 of the Bengali calendar. An Imambara is where Shi'ites bury their ancestors and family members, and hold days of feasting and prayers, especially during the month of Moharram. According to my grandfather who heard it from his grandmother, his great-grandfather Sonarulla Talukdar took it as divine providence when the Bihar quake destroyed the Imambara, and declared his family Sunni. The founders of Mirzapur became Sunni and eventually built the 400 year old mosque. The mosque and Imambara are not the only originals of this picturesque little village.

Mirzapur High School is the oldest school in Dinajpur, one of the oldest in the country, started by the Mirza's in 1876. As I walked down the dusty paths, marvelling at the landscape and mud homes with thatched roofs, a group of twenty children, all of primary school age, followed me around. On questioning them, I discovered that they all attend school. In a village of 3,000, with a growing number of little children, Mirzapur's school has 99% enrollment.

To an outsider, Mirzapur

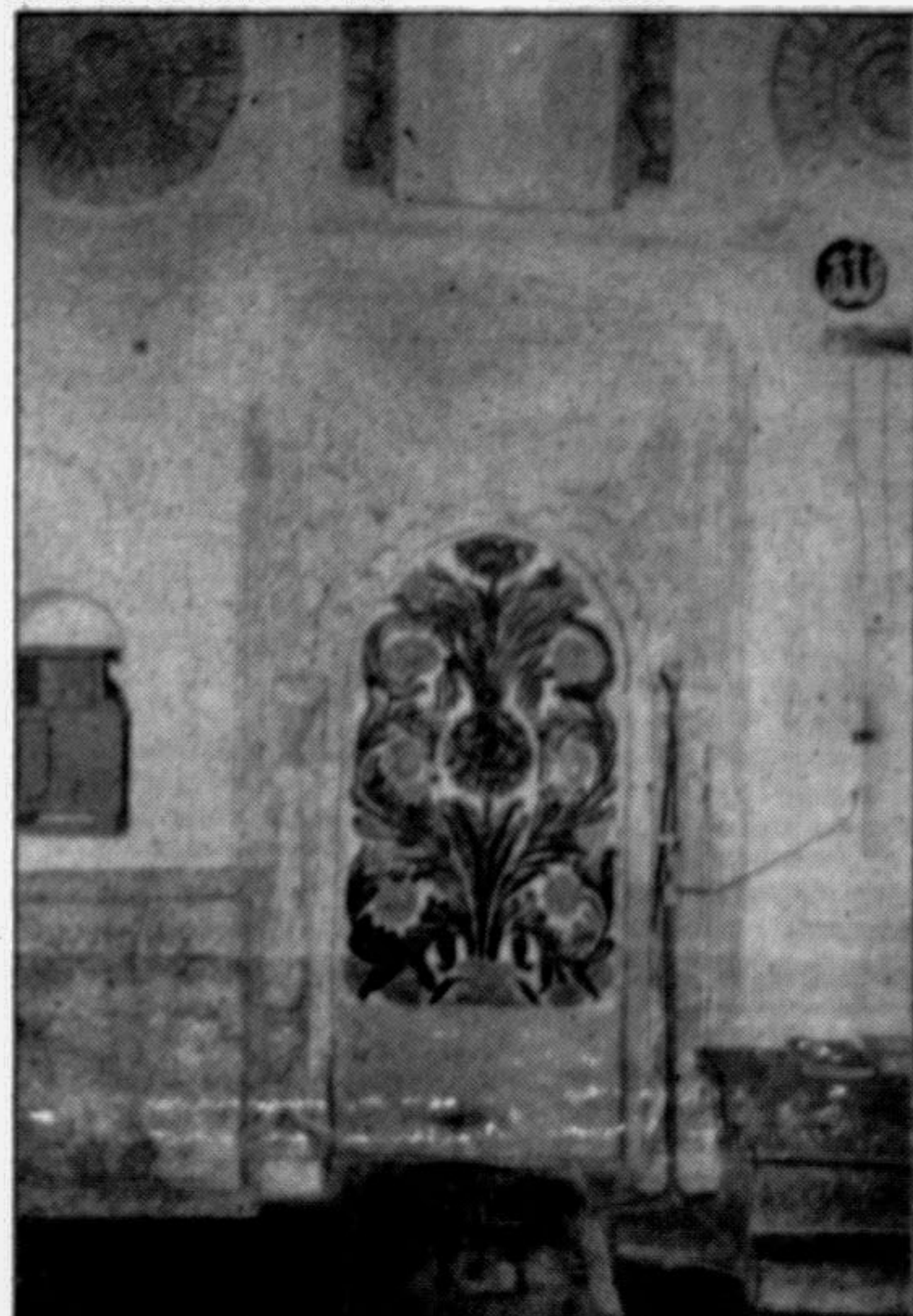
seems idyllic with its natural landscape of golden fields and picturesque hills and historic gems. But all is not perfect in Mirzapur. A talk with the school's principal and other village elders revealed that there was a tremendous brain drain on the village. Many grow

up here, go to school, attend college in nearby Attari Thana, but few ever come back. There is little to come back to unless one is a farmer with much land. Even then, most prefer city life these days - a common story all across Bangladesh.

Looking back, I see that it has all come full circle. My ancestors settled in Mirzapur so many hundreds of years ago, my earlier generation moved away from it to the calling of the big city, and I in 1995 rediscovered what they had left behind - a heritage that is not mine alone but the rest of the country's.



Visitors at the Ferrata Mosque in Mirzapur. — Star photo



Designs in the inside of the mosque. — Star photo

THE tale of Biman's Airbus procurement is too long. Two and a half years is a long time for a commercial organisation like Biman which is badly in need of an aircraft to maintain schedules to its international and regional destinations. Possibly Biman is the only airlines in the world which operates to about 30 international destinations with only five wide-bodies dc-10-30 aircraft.

Since mid-1992, the nation-

A Saga of Biman Airbus Procurement

by Asiuzzaman

nal carrier, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, has desperately tried to procure two aircrafts. So far four tenders have been floated. Initially the Biman management tried to take two 310-300 aircrafts on lease. The first tender was floated in November 1992 in which the Royal Jordanian Airlines and

Kuwait Airways were the main competitors. The offer of Jordanian Airlines were approved by Biman authorities sometime in March 1993. But according to sources the planes were already sold because of the delay in taking final decision.

Biman authorities then

decided to purchase two used Airbus on suppliers credit and a fresh tender was floated asking the bidders that the aircraft should be supplied by October '93. The offers were submitted in July '93 with a validity of 120 days. But the committee of engineers took three months to complete the

technical evaluation of the bidders and shortlisted four firms as technically qualified. These were Concorde multi-trade inc., Velos airleasing co., Airbus industries ltd., and aircraft leasing and management co.

Those bids were cancelled

following controversies mounted over a bidder who was about to be fit for the deal.

Biman authorities then went for a third tender to procure two used aircrafts which were asked to be delivered by August 31, 1994. Biman got nine offers against this tender, of which three were technically qualified. The financial offers of the three companies were evaluated along with others. Three offers were referred to the government purchasing committee, which rejected the bids because of similar controversy.

The authorities had no alternative but to float a fourth tender. But this time the authorities changed decision and wanted to buy two brand new Airbus with zero flight hour. Four firms including the Manufacturer Airbus Company participated in the bidding.

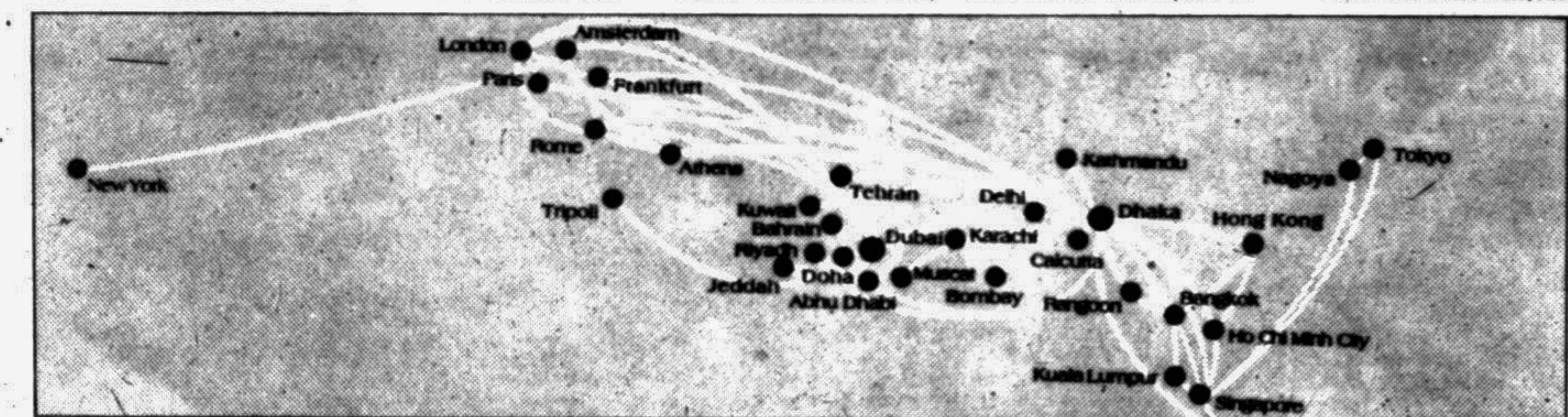
The Airbus company has been selected among the four bidders to supply the aircraft. A memorandum of understanding has been signed between Biman and the Airbus industry early this month following the government purchase committee and has been approved by the prime minister. It will cost Biman \$153.75 million and an additional amount of about \$45 million for spares. The final agreement is expected to be signed on January 31 and the aircraft will be delivered in 1996.

Biman has also floated a tender to procure two Airbus on lease to cover the interim period.

Even after the signing of the MOU with the Airbus industry, controversy over the matter carries on. Some Biman sources related the transfer of the state minister of Civil Aviation with the Airbus deal while some other pointed out that it is now pending with the court. A bidder filed a case with the fourth sub-judge court challenging certain anomalous points in the tender schedule.

Some Biman officials expressed apprehension of trouble as some of the bidders were still insisting that the deal with the Airbus industry was not fairly done.

Despite all these problems and obstacles, we think that in order to face the present market competition, the National Carrier needs to procure an aircraft immediately



Biman's international route map — Degonto

A City of Pagodas

THE train pulls out as the sun sets in the Myanmar (formerly Burma) city of Yangon, or Rangoon. Soon it has left the city and is wandering through leafy suburbs, past bullock carts and boys playing ball, past the rattan and bamboo huts and the rustling rolling stock left over from past colonial era.

The journey to Mandalay takes about a day, at the end of which you must have a hotel bed to sleep. After several hours of sleep and a shower you are ready to walk down the street which is lit only by the heavenly stars.

You will hear the sound of music, drums and cymbals coming from a distance. Walking towards it will bring you to the Chinatown, where little boys are playing ball and dancing to the music.

Mandalay is a youthful city in Myanmar terms, built between 1857 and 1859 by king Mindon. The devout King built his City of Gems to fulfill the prophecy made by the Buddha that Mandalay would be an important religious city.

Images of the Shweyattaw Buddha, with his right hand

pointing into the distance, are found at various temples within the city, but the most famous one is in Mandalay Hill. The Mandalay Hill was first known as the Hill of the Ogres. When the Lord Buddha appeared, the fierce giants bowed down in devotion.

The first impression at Mandalay Hill is of a whispering silence: the rustle of longyi, the soft step of feet on stone and the intonation of pagoda bells. But there is another side to all this: a bright, crowded musical mood that punctuates the day.

The Mahamuni Pagoda houses the silver-faced Living Buddha from Arakan, which was brought to Mandalay in 1784. Every morning now for 210 years its silver face has been washed and its teeth polished in a predawn ritual. Its body is greatly distorted by an estimated eight tonnes of gold leaf, with more added each day.

Many gold bracelets, necklaces and trinkets hang on the statues large chest. Every day workers sweep the dust of the gold offerings from the ground and reapply it.

There is little left within the Royal Endowment to recall

king Mindon's palace. The Shweyandaw kyaung, where the king died, is the best reminder with its teak carvings and enormous verandah. The chief attraction, though, is the model of the Glass Palace — 156 apartments on the central terrace, with the king's right in the centre.

Mandalay Marionettes perform pieces in the Shwebo tradition. The show includes scenes from the lives and legends of the Buddha and a Himalayan story with a snake and prancing ogres. With Buddhist lent and the rainy season over, every night brings something new: a nat festival at a specially constructed shrine, a full-scale pwe, a Chinese spirit festival.

Close to Mandalay lie three one-time capitals of Myanmar. The road to Amarapura, the nearest of them, runs through a district of marble earners. There are wood carving and goldleaf-making districts, too. Amarapura is a centre for silk weaving and there are hand-spinning looms in the houses of teak and bamboo.

The U Bein's Bridge, built in 1782, has 1092 teak posts brought from royal palace at Ava. The view from here is

exquisite — white pagodas, bamboo rafts flecking the lakes, and bright green nurseries on all sides. In the distance is the Mandalay Hill, with more pagodas, and to the east, the Shan Hills.

The neighbouring Sagaing Hills contain more than 900 monasteries and nunneries, some of which can trace their roots back to the cave foundations of the early 14th century.

— Discovery



An 'ogress' of Mandalay Hill. — Discovery

Travel Briefs

Meter Rise in Sea Level, Sundarbans Sinking.

An Asian Development Bank report predicted a 1 meter rise in sea level. The report warns that the Sundarbans, one of the largest single tract mangroves in the world, might vanish forever. The loss of the Sundarbans will lead to loss of biodiversity, a natural sink for greenhouse effect producing carbon dioxide, and a major supply of biomass (important source of world energy).

The macroeconomic impact of these losses will be harsh: annual loss in GNP of \$1 billion by 2010 and \$5.3 b by 2070 is predicted.

A one meter rise in sea level will submerge land in Bangladesh, Micronesia, the Fiji Islands, and Kiribati of Australia.

The social damages, including overcrowding in urban area, unemployment, and environmental refugee problems, will be nightmarish, concludes the ADB report. — Press Release.

Will US Congress Pass Open Skies Legislation?

Congress is likely to pass legislation quickly in 1995 increasing the allowable share of foreign-owned US airlines from 25 per cent to 49 per cent. The Clinton Administration supports the increase on condition of reciprocity - i.e., a foreign country must offer the US the same opportunity to own its airlines. The administration will soon present details on its 'open skies' proposal - essentially free aviation trade with 9 small European countries. The arrangement was designed to put pressure on the United Kingdom, France and Germany to open their markets to more US carriers. — Monitor

Snowstorm Closes Twin Cities Airport

On November 28 last year, a blustery snowstorm closed the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport on one of the busiest travel days of the year (Thanksgiving). About 100 flights were cancelled. In the middle of the afternoon, visibility in the windblown snow was down to just 50 ft at Munro. S.D. About 6 inches of snow fell in 2 hours at the Twin Cities airport. 32,000 people were scheduled to fly through Northwest Airlines' Minneapolis airport hub on the day. — UNF

Emirates Holds Award Ceremony in City

Emirates held a Top Ten Agents award ceremony in Dhaka on January 19. The ceremony took place at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel. It was presided over by Mohammed Shareef Abul Raheem, Mr. Peter Hill, Sr. General Manager Commercial Operations West Asia and Pacific Rim, and Mr. Ram Menon, Sr. General Manager of Cargo, were present. — Emirates.

DHL Plans Expansions in Asia-Pacific Region

DHL Worldwide Express is planning a big increase in its operations within the Asia-Pacific region over the next 12-18 months. DHL already works with airlines in Southeast Asia and is talking to many carriers in the region about enhanced cooperation. DHL's rival company TNT Express Worldwide is already making progress in air express service from its Manila hub.

Also, Federal Express plans to develop the former Subic Bay US military base in the Philippines into an intra-Asian express hub. But Federal Express still operates from the US, not within Asia. DHL has the advantage of being within Asia already, delivering overnight packages between key centers such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Southeast Asia continues to be one of DHL's fastest growing markets. — Monitor.

Singapore Airlines Acquires New GM

Singapore Airlines just acquired a new General Manager Tan Chong Beng for its Bangladesh operations. Mr. Beng's focus is to uphold the worldclass quality reputation of the airline. The passenger mix to and from Dhaka travelling via Singapore Airlines is different from that on other carriers. Mr. Beng said in a recent interview with Monitor, 95 per cent of the passengers are businessmen and officials. Mr. Beng also opposes fare wars, urging other foreign carriers to work closely to fight any price wars. — GW.

The Travel Agents' Business in BD

Travel agents in Bangladesh face tough competition. Travel agents get only a few per cent commission on airline fares. Meanwhile, the number of travel agencies in the country is increasing. — GW.

The Olympics and Australian Tourism

The 2000 Olympics will be held in Sydney, Australia. The country expects a major increase in the number of foreigners in the country over the next decade - an extra 1.3 millions between 1994 and 2004, says KPMG Peat Marwick. The Australian Tourist Commission is analysing detailed marketing strategies and pricing. It will use the attention gained by the Olympics to draw foreigners to the country during the Games, and for as long afterward as possible.

The ATC is preparing a Tourism Olympics Business Plan to study issues such as transport, accommodation, product development and quality standards, and the coverage of Australia during the telecast of the games. It expects about 6.8 million tourists in 2000 alone. In 1993, a record 3 million foreigners visited Australia, 15 per cent more than in 1992. — Monitor.

Delta Creates Luggage Sizers

The American airline Delta has developed a luggage sizer to measure carry-on luggage at ticket counters and gate areas. The sizer itself is a 24-16-10 inch metal frame called Size Wise. All carry-on luggage must fit the size. — Monitor.

The Royal Bengal Tiger on the Emirates Inflight

The Royal Bengal Tiger adorned both the Arabic and English covers of Emirates' inflight magazine 'Emirates in Flight'. The December issue of the magazine described Bangladesh with articles and photographs both in Arabic and English.

Anthony Dalton writes in 'Under a Smiling Sun', 'Bangladesh may not yet be on the tourist map, but it offers a wealth of interesting wildlife and hospitable people.' He writes about both natural and archeological sites which fascinated him.

He writes about Lalbagh Fort, Ahsan Manzil and historical buildings of the old part of Dhaka and Buddhist monasteries at Mainamati, Comilla and Mahasthangarh, Bogra, the 16th-century mosque in Sherpur and the Sati Gombad Mosque built in 1459. Dalton found Rangamati to be a relaxing change and Foy's Lake in Chittagong 'a peaceful place to walk amid tropical vegetation'.

After describing the legacy of the British period, he writes, 'Arguably the strangest is the clock tower at Sylhet. It is made entirely of corrugated iron sheeting.' Dalton praises Dhaka's 'world class hotels' and Parjatan's 'well-run' smaller hotels in other parts of the country.

The article also describes an encounter with the emperor of the Sundarbans taking a swim. 'Most of the tigers may have gone now,' writes Dalton, 'but the few that remain do not always stay hidden. The exotic birds still ride the airways, the marine creatures still show themselves, and the Bengalis, like the sun, keep smiling.' — Monitor.

Gomes Exec Chef of Sheraton

Robert Gomes, a Bangladeshi national has been appointed the new executive chef of Dhaka Sheraton Hotel. Gomes will be responsible to upgrade the food standard and quality of Dhaka Sheraton hotel and to help arrange food festivals for the hotel. — Monitor

Hotel to be built in Yangon

A Malaysian firm is to build a \$5 million hotel at Yangon Int. Airport and operate it for 30 years before handing it over to Myanmar authorities. The 121-room hotel is scheduled to open in May 1996.