

Travel & Tourism



Will Private Airlines Ever Fly Our National Skies?

by Asiuzzaman

THE domestic air service — Short Take-off and Landing (STOL) — did not take off even a year and a half after the government opened the domestic skies to the private sector.

Private entrepreneurs accused the authorities of not making the necessary arrangements to start the STOL service operation, while the authorities said their investment in different STOL ports are idle because of the entrepreneurs.

The private airlines which

received Provisional Air Transport Operation Licence (PATOL) identified a series of problems which delayed the operations. It is now uncertain if the STOL operation will ever start.

In August 1993, the cabinet approved a proposal from the Ministry of the Civil Aviation and Tourism, to open the domestic skies for private entrepreneurs to operate STOL aircraft. The authorities, however, set a condition that STOL

operation will be allowed to service only in the destinations where Biman Bangladesh Airlines does not operate.

Following the cabinet approval, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) invited applications from the private companies to issue PATOL, which is the primary requirement to start STOL service in the country's six specified destinations.

Initially the authorities decided that Barisal, Comilla,

Ishwardi, Shamsnagar, Lalmonirhat and Thakurgaon should be linked with the capital under STOL operation. Biman does not service these destinations. A STOL aircraft can carry 15 to 20 passengers.

In response to CAAB's advertisement, eight firms applied for PATOL. Phase-wise it issued licences to all the eight firms. The PATOL holders are Borak Air, Royal Bengal Airlines, Air Parabat, Victory Aviation Ltd, South Asian Airlines, Eagle Air, Green Air, and Falcon Aviation Ltd. Their licences expired in late October last but were renewed for another six months.

Two or three PATOL-holders completed all formalities to bring aircraft. An airlines also appointed General Sales Agent (GSA) to Barisal, printed tickets, and purchased some equipment necessary to run the STOL service. But it abandoned its plan when it came to know about the heavy duty on importing the aircraft.

An executive of the company said that they had to pay about Tk 70 lakh of value added tax (VAT) and other du-

ties. In a recent meeting the CAAB, the PATOL-holders urged the authorities to exempt the new sector from VAT, which the authorities rejected.

The PATOL-holders also bargained to increase the length of the airstrip from the present 2150ft to 3500ft, so that the operators can bring bigger aircraft. Company sources asked to be allowed to bring aircraft which can carry 30 to 35 passengers.

The private airlines demanded IFR (Instrumental flight rules) facilities for a safe operations. Under IFR system an aircraft is guided by instruments during landing and takeoff.

Currently, CAAB installed communications network for only Visual Flight Rules (VFR), which will be risky during the rainy season and even in cloudy weather.

Despite all these difficulties, one or two private airlines are still trying to start STOL service in the country. The PATOL holders are planning to take up the matter with the new State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism in a bid to find out a solution.

Nepal Tourism in Jet-lag

Nepal tries to revive its Himalayan Shangri-la image as tourist arrivals drop alarmingly. Binod Bhattarai of Inter Press Service reports.

SCENIC Nepal with its towering Himalayan peaks, enchanted temple towns and vibrant culture never needed to sell itself. People heard about Nepal, and they came.

Now, as tourist arrivals plummet, Nepal is asking: Are tourists getting sick of Shangri-la?

To be sure, it is not all Nepal's fault. The plague outbreak in neighboring India in September scared away visitors, and political turmoil in the region has always sent jitters through the fragile tourism industry.

But given the bad press that Kathmandu's worsening garbage and air pollution problems have been getting, many say it is surprising tourists come at all.

The declining quality of the Nepal product and our failure to do effective marketing may be two major factors

we may have overlooked."

Gurung, who designed the award-winning Annapurna Area Conservation Project (ACAP) in one of Nepal's most crowded trekking regions, now coordinates a United Nations Development Programme-funded project to encourage quality tourism.

The project will use a US \$400,000 UNDP grant to clean up Swayambhu Nath, one of Nepal's oldest Buddhist temple complexes situated on a hill overlooking Kathmandu. It will also take up a scheme to improve the tourism services on the trail to Langtang — a popular trekking route north of the Nepali capital.

Gurung's team will teach lodge operators management services and pricing techniques, help set up community garbage disposal and public sanitation systems and organize health and medical facilities for tourists.

Nepal has always relied on word-of-mouth publicity to let the world know about its stupendous mountain scenery and adventure holidays. The project will create slick documentaries to promote Nepal overseas as a holiday destination.

About one-third of visitors to Nepal come here to trek across the Himalayan foothills. "Our aim is to attract rich tourists without discouraging the back-packers," says Gurung. "The low-budget tourists cannot be ignored because of the vital role they play in

spreading tourism income. We can charge premium prices after we have improved the product."

The project is a fore-runner to a new government policy which seeks to hand over promotion, marketing and infrastructure to an autonomous Tourism Development Board that will have representation from the tourism industry.

The idea is to enable this board to take over the responsibilities currently handled by the government's Department of Tourism.

The US \$800,000 plan proposes declaring 1997 a 'Visit Nepal Year' during which an intensive publicity campaign will be released and new product development and environmental projects will be launched.

Kathmandu has allocated US \$1 million for tourism promotion in this year's budget which, with contributions from airlines and the private sector, can cover the costs of the scheme.

The government is also investing in tourism infrastructure as part of a five-year project, being carried out with a US \$11.5 million loan from the Manila-based Asian Development Bank.

"We have had enough of bad publicity," says Karna Shakyia, a Kathmandu hotelier who was the pioneer in affordable hotels for budget travellers to Nepal. "It is time Shangri-la is redressed and re-introduced."

Travel Editor's Note

Is Parjatan an Adequate Tourist Information Center?

by Rahnuma Muneer

What does our national tourism organization Bangladesh Parjatan have to offer a tourist? Does it provide the tourist with adequate information? What kind of information does a tourist look for?

When a traveller wants to travel through Bangladesh on his own, he requires minimum information about transport service, hotel and boarding, costs and maps to guide him through a totally unknown country. All of these are available at any of the information centers of Parjatan. A tourist only needs to visit or call at any one of these

However, guidebooks and maps are only provided for Dhaka, Sylhet, Chittagong and Rangamati, as if these are the only tourist spots in Bangladesh that can be explored. The tourist map of Bangladesh describes almost all the tourist spots but fails to give details on how to get there or whether a traveller will be able to obtain room and boarding.

When a tourist approaches a Parjatan information center, he or she is given a few leaflets. These leaflets can be obtained free of cost from any Parjatan office or major hotel. They inform the tourist of various sight-seeing tours in and outside Dhaka that are provided by Parjatan. Parjatan offers several package tours to the tourist. The descriptions of each of these tours and their costs are also available.

The domestic tour programmes that are provided by Parjatan are a day-long cruise on the river Buriganga, tours to Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, Rangamati and Sylhet. All of these are offered at a very reasonable price. But these tours require that there must be at least 12 persons in a group and are not offered to individual tourists.

What, then, happens to a person visiting alone? Tourists who are interested to travel on their own can purchase maps of Bangladesh and of Dhaka city. These maps also contain information about the various places that may be of interest to a tourist. For example, the

map of Bangladesh tells us about Kuakata, Sylhet, Mymensingh etc. and what we can find there. But no separate maps are provided for these places.

Parjatan also supplies information about hotels, transport services and their costs. Tourists can ask for information over the telephone. However, it is obvious that Parjatan tours revolve around Dhaka city, Sylhet, Chittagong and the Cox's Bazar. In order to expand tourism in Bangladesh, we must also concentrate in promoting places other than these to the foreigners. For example, Parjatan mentions Kuakata, but provides no information about how to get there or what facilities it can provide at the site.

We are aware of the fact that Parjatan is unable to do these because of lack of proper roads and highways. But if we can draw the attention of foreigners to these still unexploited places the government will automatically be forced to draw them.

"HOLIDAY complex, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation", reads the conspicuous sign in the sleepy sea-side village of Kuakata, Patuakhali. What is less apparent, however, is the holiday complex itself. The sign stands alone in the middle of an open field, overlooking the Bay of Bengal.

The sight sums up the extent of tourist development in Kuakata. It may well be a rude shock for travelers lured here by advertisements on BTV. Parjatan's activities seem confined to publicizing the resort from their posh Dhaka headquarters.

On arrival at the resort, the weary traveler will discover that the *Dak Bungalow* is the only cement building in the area, and there is no guarantee of a comfortable room. Hotel Amanot, a tiny tin house, is the only other option for tourists.

We visited Kuakata near the end of January. Our accommodation had been confirmed and we therefore saw no reason to worry, until our arrival at the "Bungalow". There appeared to be only three rooms in the building. Two of them were being repainted and had no furniture. To add to the misery, the *darwan* was most uncooperative. "I don't know anything about this," he said referring to our booking for two rooms. "The TNO has not told me about it," he stubbornly insisted despite our haggard appearances and protestations. "We have a system to follow here." After protracted negotiations, we finally got one room for the three of us.

The only furnished room was occupied by the contractor in charge of the painting. Judging by his piggishness rivaling the *darwan's*, we would have to sleep under the stars unless a negotiation was started. We finally got one room for the three of us.

The *darwan* later informed us that the tourism secretary and the air chief had come to Kuakata by helicopter earlier that day. No wonder the road to Kuakata is a nightmare, we realized. If those at the top could condescend to travel like everyone else, they may realize that developing a tourist resort is a formidable task.

Even if your car suspension doesn't give way en route to Kuakata, your spine will. Your insides are jolted upside down and left to right like the contents of a washing machine, as you travel down the bumpy road. Your brains turn to mush and your legs to jelly by the time you end your "Odyssey".

Kuakata: Hellish Road to Heaven

by Lamis Hossain

six and a half hours by jeep. The road past Patuakhali and through to Amtali is rid with potholes, but it is silky smooth compared to what awaits you ahead. The journey up to Patuakhali includes three ferries, which generally came on time.

Parjatan has made no efforts to dot the road to Kuakata with convenient public facilities like resthouses and toilets, which it should do, so you will have to hold your bladder until you arrive. The scenery consists mainly of open fields, lovely canals, buffaloes, and date trees. Unfortunately, the uncomfort-

instead? On the way, we saw a rented white station wagon heading for Kuakata with nine people. On our way back we spotted the same car abandoned by the road.

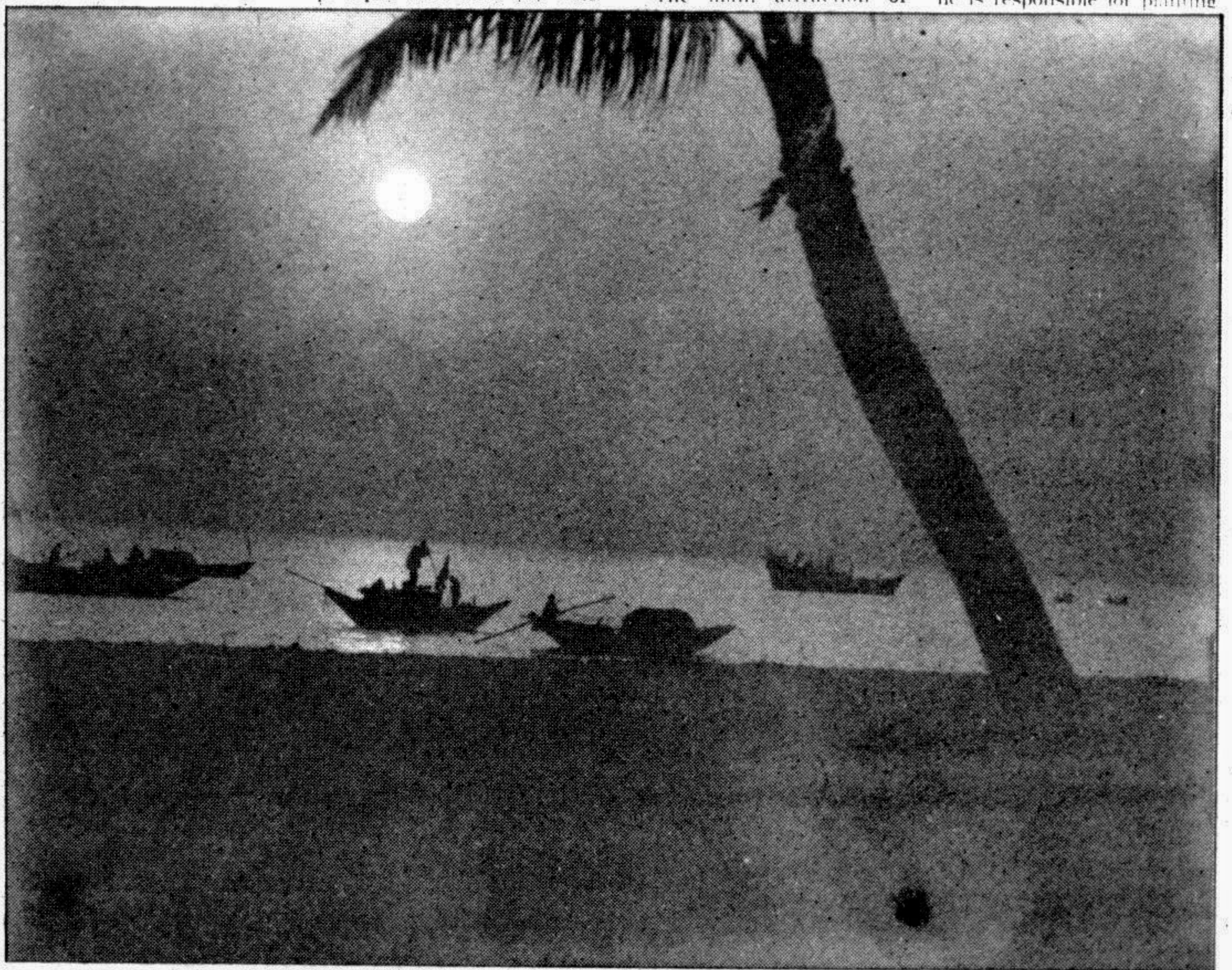
From Kephupara, there are three more ferries or rafts with engines which operate only when somebody needs them to cross. Don't just wait there thinking that they are bound to arrive at every ten minute interval. You have to beep your car horn loudly to call the ferry over from the other side. Ours came over promptly with three cows on

for miles and miles until they disappear from your range of vision altogether. Although the beach length is much shorter than Cox's Bazar, it gives the impression of being longer because it is absolutely devoid of teeming tourists. The sandy stretch is extremely clean: no bottle caps, plastic bags and shiny green potato chip packets. You could walk along the beach for a good half hour without seeing anyone except a few fisherman, village children wrestling on the sand and some stray dogs.

The main attraction of

ing into the sea, don't go to Kuakata in winter. The fog will deny you the opportunity.

Although a forest serves as a backdrop to the beach, there are hardly any trees on the beach itself — which is why we thought it odd that a couple of coconut trees stood picture perfect on the sand as if someone had ordained them there. A young boy called Yusuf un-veiled the mystery. A gentleman called Fayed Mia of Barisal had the foresight, decades ago, to take out a long term lease on several acres of land in this lovely resort. He must have been a man of some taste, as he is responsible for planting



Sunset at Kuakata

Syed Noor Hossain

able journey means that you can't enjoy the view.

The road from Amtali to Kuakata is the worst. The bad patches come in irritating intervals: the paved road gives way to a path of broken bricks about to be pitched, which in turn leads to a completely non-existent road, which after a while leads to a paved road once again. Why don't they complete the paved section in a continuous stretch

board. The last two ferries should be replaced by bridges. They take you across such a short distance of the river, that you would be twice as fast getting there by boat.

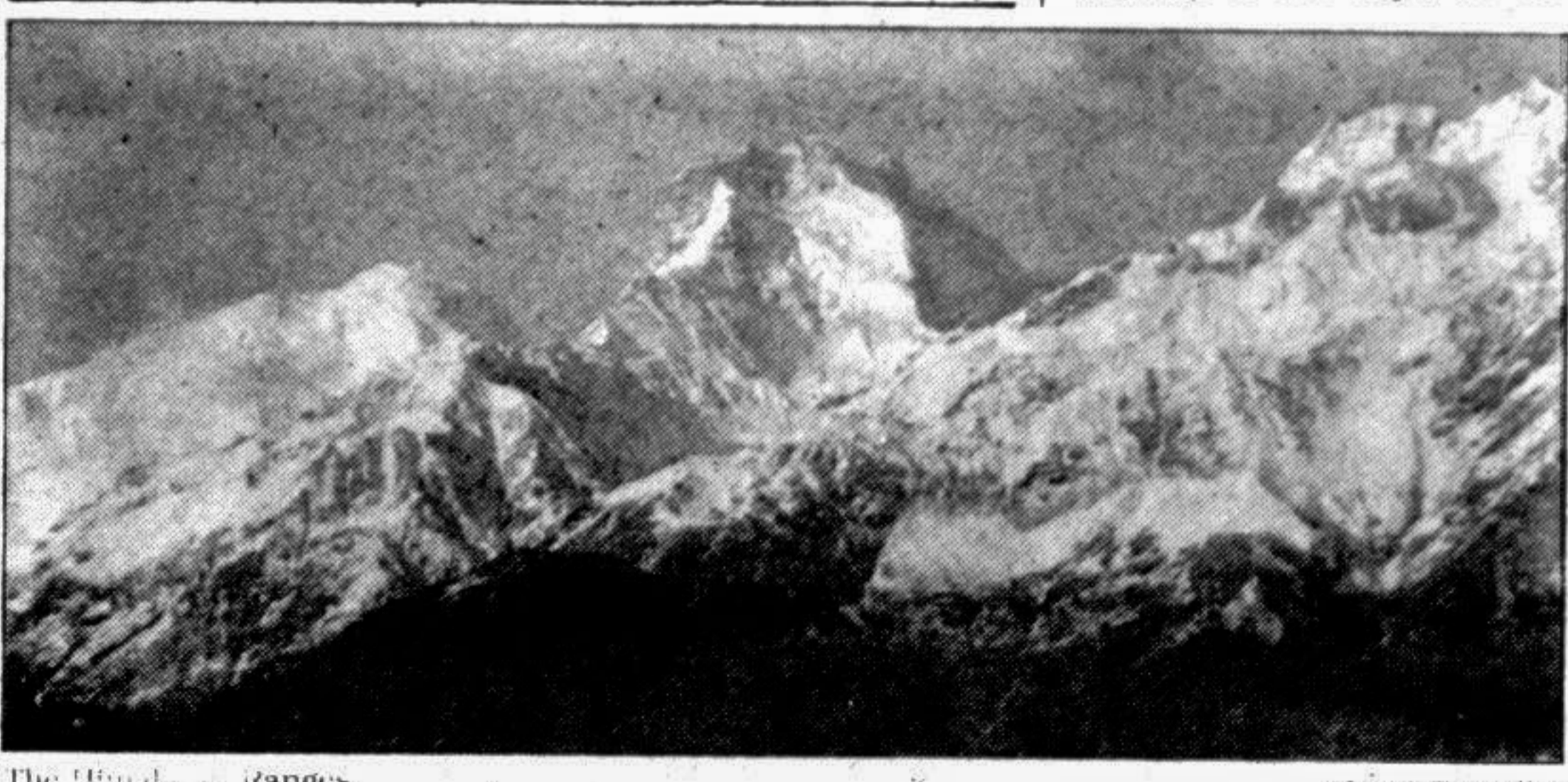
We went straight to the beach after our arrival in Kuakata which turned out to be a wise decision. Memories of a bumpy journey were instantly swept away.

Kuakata beach seems almost endless. The sandy dunes run

Kuakata is the fact that you can see the sun rise and set from the same place, which is quite rare in the world, apparently. For the less astute among us, like this writer in question, please note that the sun doesn't literally rise and set from the same spot. You can simply see both events from the beach which stretches straight from East to West. If you are planning to take spectacular photos of the sun sink-

the very same coconut trees which appear so often in Parjatan photos.

Land in Kuakata will cost more nowadays. After making a few inquiries, we were told that a *bigha* would cost Tk 10,000, but the villagers here are smart. They have deduced that waiting a while before selling anything may be more profitable in light of the comings and goings of Parjatan officials (by helicopter).



The Himalayas Ranges

Nepal Tourism

Travel Briefs

Air France increases cargo rates: Air France is to increase its ex-France cargo rates from March 1. Rate increases are likely to be similar to those announced by other major airlines such as Lufthansa and British Airways.

Subcontinent incorporated into ANERA: Members of Asia North America Eastbound Rate Agreement (ANERA) owners have formally incorporated the sub continent section into ANERA to achieve stability in trade. The subcontinent section of ANERA comprises of Sea-Land Services, American President Lines, Maersk Line etc.

Fear of the Japanese Airlines: Japanese airlines are worried that the recent massive earthquake in central Japan may dampen demand for overseas travels especially in the quake-stricken areas. Residents in central Japan will be busy bringing their life back to normal, so they may not be able to think about holidays abroad for some time. — Monitor

KLM names aircrafts after famous bridges: From July 1995 KLM Royal Dutch airlines' continuing commitment to 'Bridging the World' will be displayed on the fuselages of its own aircraft when it begins to take delivery of a new series of seven Boeing 767-300ERS. Each of the new aircrafts will be named after a world famous bridge. The first in this series will be named after Amsterdam's own Blauwe Brug (Blue Bridge) spanning the river Amstel. Other names will include New York's Brooklyn Bridge, San Francisco's Golden Gate and the Tower Bridge of London. — Monitor

Best Employee of the Month Dec. '94: Md. Mahtabuddin Mridha, a security person of the Security Dept of Hotel Sonargaon has been selected the Best Employee of the Month. He joined Sonargaon in September 1981. — Sonargaon Tattler

Summit Opens in Rangoon: The 250-room Summit Parkview has opened to guests in Rangoon. Each guestroom has air conditioning, satellite television and in-house movies. The hotel also has a cafe and lounge, business center and meeting facilities and a health club. — Monitor

Sonargaon honors Dilip Kumar: Hotel Sonargaon had given a reception in honor of Dilip Kumar on Jan. 23, 1995. The legendary actor had also stayed in the same hotel during his visit to Bangladesh. — Sonargaon Tattler

SIA looks back on 1994: The Singapore Airline's biggest aircraft order worth \$15.7 billion; the arrival of the first Mega Ark B747-400 freighter; the award from Air Transport World Magazine as best airline for the past 20 years; the signing of a new profit-sharing agreement; the partnership with India's TATA industries; various overseas joint ventures — these were some of the milestones of a eventful year for Singapore Airlines — Monitor

Airline of the year: Britain's Virgin Atlantic has been named 1995 Airline of the Year in an international award scheme. The 13th annual awards were based on a year-long poll among 1500 of the UK's most frequent travellers. Virgin Atlantic, the only airline to have previously won the main award three years in a row, also scooped the top awards in four other categories. The company also carried off the honors for its ground and check-in staff and for the standard of its in-flight magazine. — LPS

Greater Competition for Suez Canal: Egypt's 125-year old Suez Canal faces greater competition from existing world trade routes then from plans for new transport networks following peace between Israel and Jordan. — Bangladesh Shipping Times

Emirates wins Airline Awards: The 13th annual awards is jointly sponsored by Executive Travel Magazine and the world's largest business travel agency, Carlson Wagonlit Travel. The middle East carrier, Emirates, have won in five categories including best carrier to the middle East, best first and economy classes and best long-haul carrier. — LPS

Parjatan's new leaflet: Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation has brought out a new leaflet on the domestic tour programmes. It informs the tourist about the different package tours that it has to offer them. These include sight-seeing tours in Dhaka city (3 hrs., Tk.200); day-long cruise on Buriganga (5 hrs., Tk.500); Dhaka-Cox's Bazar-Dhaka tour (3 day-2 night, Tk. 4500). We are not sure whether travellers will take advantage of these packages at such exorbitant prices. — R.M.