

PEOPLE AND PLACES

SINGAPORE

A City of Superlatives

by Samia Islam

BACK from a visit to Singapore exposed me to some common questions — how did you manage to have fun with all the rules and fines (she's faking it to hide her embarrassment)? Surely a country that banned chewing gum is the last place you'd want to go to relax and enjoy (how much did she pay in fines)? Surely there were incidents that you are keeping from us (didn't she end up in the slammer even once, impossible?) etc.

'Singa' (the lion) 'pura' (city) or Singapore began its origin as a British Trading Post, when Sir Stamford Raffles claimed it in 1819 for the British East India Company. The swampy, thick jungle inhabited by a handful of fishermen and sea-gypsies has now transformed and emerged as one of Southeast Asia's most modern and successful cities. Being one of the cleanest, greenest and safest cities of the world, it is indeed a city of superlatives. Its excellent facilities and wealth of attractions make Singapore one of the few countries in the world to receive more tourists than its resident population. There are so many things to see and do in Singapore, that it's rightly called the Big Little Country.

The Arrival

The first thing that we experienced in Singapore was the clockwork efficiency of Changi Airport which gave us an idea about the well-oiled mechanism that runs this island republic. Travelators and escalators rushed us through customs and immigration clearance, and on to the baggage claim areas. From there it was a short walk to where taxis waited to whisk us off to the city and an unforgettable 15-day cosmopolitan experience. Going at about 120 mph the taxi driver gave us quite a scare since we were new to the usual pace of city traffic. As we sped along the picture perfect highways, the trees and the ivy on the roads, the apartments of Kallang and Geylang Serai in the distance, the immaculate traffic with no nuisances all around filled us with a feeling of wonder and amazement that were to be our constant companion for the next 15 days. It might be

worth mentioning that we, an all-female group, were travelling in a new city at eleven o'clock in the night without any knowledge of the roads or our destination. However, this fact seemed to have lost its significance in Singapore.

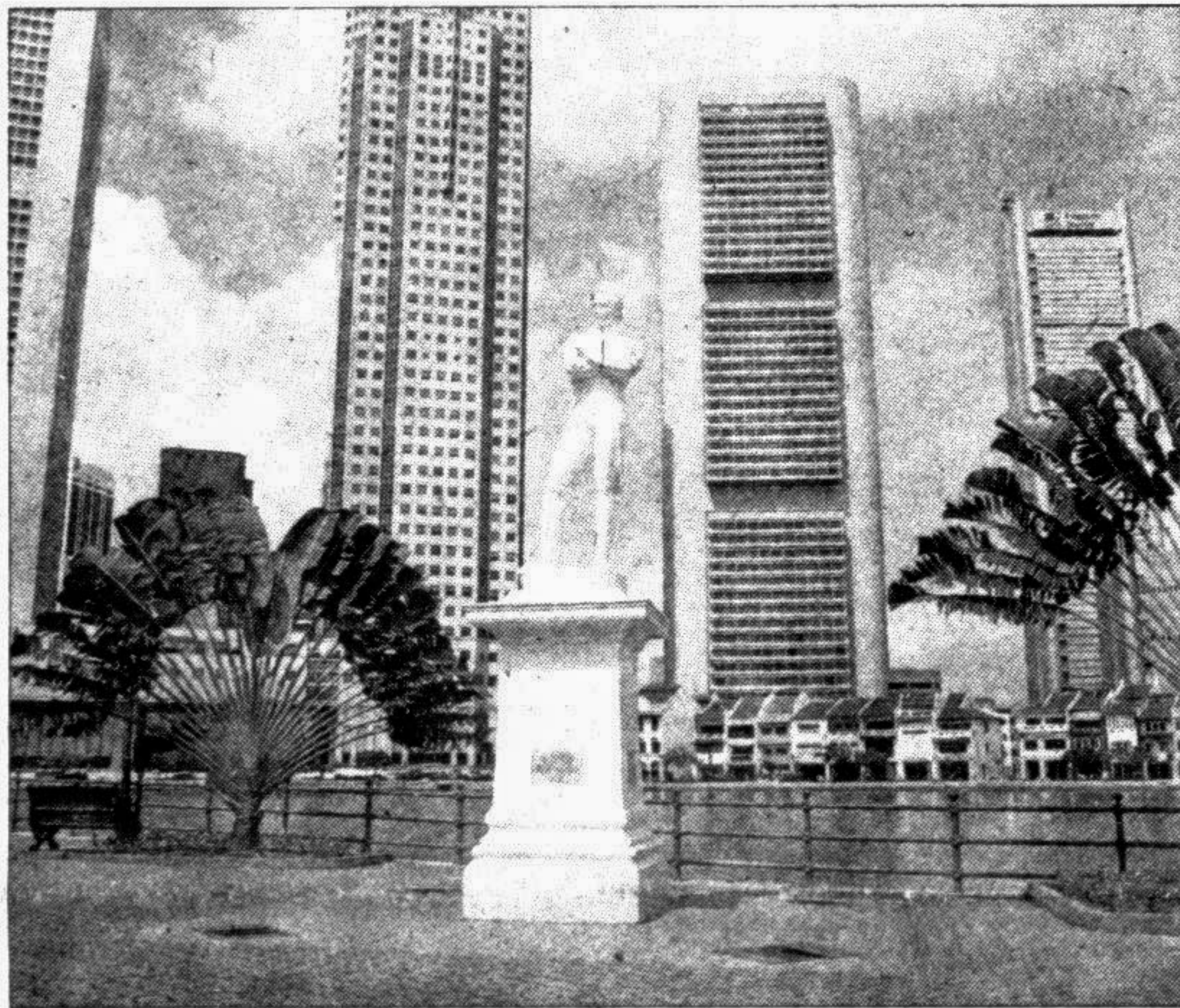
The Shopping

Singapore is a city that turns shopping into a tourist attraction so the next day dawned with lots of potentials.

the things you need to survive in the trendy, happening city since going out without a branded tee or a Levi's 501 or Doc Martens could give you an inferiority complex specially if you belong to the youngish crowd.

Some way along the same road is the famous Raffles Hotel and Raffles City. The hotel still holds on to its original splendour and a walk along its corridors gave us a feeling of

ful Clarke Quay. Here, the old-world charm is mingled with the futuristic appeal of Virtual Reality and the museum of holographic art to offer equal pleasure. Bumboats waited to take us on a ride upon the Singapore river, the pride of Singapore. The 21,400 sqm site has five buildings housing 60 godowns and shophouses restored to their original 19th century style. There are speciality restaurants, shops, entertainment outlets, a food court (that fabulous experience which turns eating-out into a ritual). The only traffic here are the pushcarts plying their wares. Another major feature is the theme ride — the Clarke



Sir Stamford Raffles, justifiably proud of the Singapore he founded

With more than a hundred shopping centres scattered all over the island it's impossible to go anywhere without stumbling onto a mall, each more magnificent than the last one. But shopping is not complete without a visit to Orchard Road, C.K. Tang's or Robinson's or Metro or John Little or Takashimaya will make sure that you face every kind of temptation before leaving through those fabulous doors with a much lighter purse as you will, doubtless, yield to most of them. It's better to buy

being transported in time.

The Sights

The Fabulous Clarke Quay: Picture this — Tongkang (junks) bobbing by the quay-side, pushcarts plying their wares along a five-foot way, while a street artist gives furious touches to the portrait of the Japanese man that he is working on, or the performers at the open air cafe with their endless list of songs, so enchanting that you have to stop and listen with awe — life is like that at wonderful wonder-

Quay Adventure inspired by the river's heritage. The boat ride gave us a vivid idea of Singapore's past within ten minutes. Clarke Quay is extra significant for me because this is where I had my first Shirley Temple.

The Island Of Sentosa: Next we visited the somewhat overrated Sentosa Island. There are options as to how

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The Lion City

by Sayeema Tazlina Hasan Tori

SKYSCRAPERS, highways, neonlight-bathed streets, long spacious cars — all these are bound to give you the impression of one of those famous states of USA. It actually bears a strong resemblance to New York City and can also be called the mini-version of the state. But it's no NYC or Paris — it's Asia's own 'Lion City' or Singapore as known to most of us.

As the plane lands virtually a few inches away from the lap of the harbour in the glowing twilight, it seems as if you are drowned in a magical land of fairies and elves, full of glittering, eye-blinding, winking sequins.

Unlike most other Asian countries, Singapore has a comparatively recent origin. The story of how Singapore got its name starts, rather predictably, with a prince who fell in love with a mermaid and soon partook in an underwater wedding. The couple ascended to dry land and were blessed with three sons. One of the sons, Nila Utama, on reaching an island, the first thing he saw was a lion. Nila Utama named this island 'Singa Pura' or 'Lion City' in honour of the beast he encountered and decided to establish his own base there.

In Singapore, a melting pot of nations, there is always a reason to celebrate. The most incredible fact about the climate of Singapore is that the country has one main season, instead of the regular cycle of four seasons that takes place in

most of the places in the world. The temperature remains moderate and quite pleasant. The biggest weather change Singapore experiences is monsoon. November, December and January are usually referred to as the monsoon season. In fact rainfall in Singapore is so frequent that there is a saying 'Come for tea after the rain stops' — a common phrase used by many who wish to invite their guests.

Like in our country the Singaporeans enjoy a good number of festivals throughout the year and make most of their chance to enrich their lives with joy and liveliness. Out of these celebrated events the most famous are the Christmas, New Year, Lunar New Year, Ramadan, Ponggal, Chingay and Deepavali festivals. The Chinese New Year is very interesting and also has an amazing history behind it. It comes according to the Chinese horoscope. The story began with the fact that one New Year, the Buddha summoned all the animals to him. However, only twelve answered his call. To each of these loyal, obedient flock he gave, in turn, a year to express its personality. The years of these lunar signs are according to the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. This year, it happened to be the dog year.

Talking of Singapore, the first thing to be mentioned is that it is one of the busiest

ports of the world where work remains active twenty-four hours a day. Its hard-working, laborious and sincere citizens have been the country's main source of rapid development and success. However, Singapore is a multi-racial country where we can see a mixture of various races from nearly all parts of the world. Strange enough, unlike perhaps any other country of the world, they have four official languages here. English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil. It is at the same time a country of high facilities, human rights, rules and regulations. Transportation has fantastic way of carrying out itself. MRT (Mass Rapid Transit Corporation) is the most popular electric railway system. I myself have experience of riding these electric transports in different parts of the world — UK, India, America — but none of them had such a neater, cleaner or more systematic appearance. Besides these, taxis and air-conditioned buses are always available to meet the needs of transportation. There is an enormous number of owner-driven cars altogether with other lorries and vehicles that now they need permission to buy cars. One of the most amazing fact about Singapore is that in remembrance of their historical past, rickshaws can still be seen in some parts of the city. They are used for sight seeing purposes by tourists.

Singapore serves people with all sorts of food stuff starting from sea-food to European to Chinese to Indian, Japanese, Malaysian and Indonesian. Every here and there, food centres can be found where they keep food

from different countries and sell at a very cheap price. Fast food shops are found in every corner of shopping malls and plazas, especially McDonald's and Kentucky Chicken. I really have a wild taste of scrumptious fast-food and Japanese food-types. Know what? It felt delightful and home — like to see a pair of 'Shalik' hopping across the open stretch of greenery beside the sliding glass doors of McDonald's. A few days of French cuisine, Pizzas and burgers at a stretch and we soon grew tired of eating them and soon our hearts began to long for everything hot and spicy and Bangladeshi — surprising as it might sound, but our desire didn't go in vain! We seemed to have found eternal taste of our own local food in a certain Bengali restaurant called Sonargon on Serangoon Road. Plain rice, dhal, karala bhaji, fried hilsha — they had all in plenty...

The Singaporeans are a friendly bunch. Even when I went to a certain hair-salon my hair-dresser, Patrick Yeo, continued chatting about interesting subjects while he gave me a fashionable cut. At the same time he gave me advice on the best way to maintain beautiful hair. There's a common term used by the Singaporeans while referring to a stranger. It's 'Lah' which in English means 'friend'.

I was also impressed to see the national unity among the people. Hearing a taxi driver speak in Chinese, I asked whether he was from China. At this he replied: "No Lah, we are not Chinese, Malayan or Indian, but all have the same identity 'Singaporeans'."

PROFILE

A Dissenting Voice in the Chorus of Conformists

Noam Chomsky, internationally renowned linguist and political activist, is a constant thorn in the side of the US administration. He has been called the "chronicler of American imperialism." As his new book appears, Gemini News Service profiles one of the world's most articulate dissenters.

Daya Kishan Thussu writes from London

HE has been abused and vilified as an "enemy" of his country and community. But to admirers inside and outside the United States, internationally renowned linguist and political analyst Noam Chomsky has acquired the status of a moral sage.

As political debate becomes increasingly limited in academia and the mainstream media, Chomsky provides an ever more necessary role in challenging "accepted wisdom."

In his latest book *World Orders Old and New*, he argues that the so-called new world order is nothing more than an ingenious piece of "historical engineering."

Taking numerous cases Chomsky shows that the basic rules of world order remain as they have always been: "the rule of law for the weak, the rule of force for the strong; the principles of economic rationality for the weak, state power and intervention for the strong."

Intellectuals come in for particular criticism as playing an essential part in propping up the status quo by being "wilfully blind." He accuses them elsewhere of moral cowardice, maintaining a "culture of respectability."

His distaste for moral cowardice was formed, he says, after a playground encounter

with a bully when he was six. Since then he has believed the most important thing is to be on the side of the right, with the underdog against the bully.

For Palestinian-American academic Edward Said, Chomsky has not only appropriated for himself the turf of political philosophy and hard contemporary analysis; he has done it with great moral authority.

As a reward, he has been marginalised by the mainstream academic community and the media. His books are published in the US by a radical cooperative and receive little coverage.

His opposition to US policy in the Middle East has also alienated him from the Jewish community in which he was brought up.

In his latest book he goes out on a limb once more by arguing that the Middle East peace being celebrated by Americans means further loss of power by the dispossessed Palestinians.

"I have been called a fascist and an anti-semitic," he says matter of factly. A lean, bespectacled man, Chomsky's modesty has remained despite his international reputation.

Noam Avram Chomsky was born in Philadelphia in 1928 into an immigrant family which had arrived from east-

ern Europe in 1913. His father whom he describes as an ultra-orthodox Jew, was a distinguished Hebrew scholar and his mother was highly cultured.

A graduate of Pennsylvania and Harvard universities, in 1955 he joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to teach linguistics. He is still there, now a full professor.

His 1957 book *Syntactic Structures* brought about a revolution in linguistic theory. Chomsky argued that the human brain has innate grammatical structures. This challenged the view that language was entirely learned.

It was a radical approach, with the implication that ordinary people, so disdainfully exploited by the "knowledgeable" human beings, respect for ordinary people has been a life-long concern for Chomsky.

One of my greatest influences was my uncle who sold newspapers in New York," he says. "He was a self-made, self-educated man and one of the most exciting intellectuals I have met in my life."

In the 1960s Chomsky decided that he could no longer confine his work to linguistics and that he must become an activist, though he was aware of what it might mean for his career. His wife went back to graduate school so that she



Noam Chomsky, 'Chronicler of American imperialism'

could support the family, it needed.

He became one of the most articulate and outspoken critics of the US invasion of Vietnam and his writings on the subject received international acclaim and made him the foremost dissenting voice in the US.

At one point he was jailed for demonstrating against the war and his name was put on an "enemy list" of the US State Department.

Since then he has been what Edward Said calls a "chronicler of American imperialism," exposing the hypocrisy of US foreign policy.

His *Necessary Illusions* is now considered a modern classic, a significant text in understanding thought control mechanisms in democratic societies. In it, Chomsky argued that the "cultural managers" are adept at controlling debates on political issues in ways that "serve the interests of dominant elite groups in society."

With Edward Herman he wrote *Manufacturing Consent*, a definitive work on the functioning of the western media, a book which should be compulsory reading in all journalism schools and newspaper offices.

His view of the media is dismissed by many journalists as conspiracy theory. Chomsky

argues that their rebuttal effectively bans any critical analysis of institutions of power.

There is little need for governments to worry about censorship in a climate where those who work in the media have, as he puts it, "internalised the values" of the system to such an extent that they are unable to see beyond it.

Manufacturing Consent is also the title of a 1992 film starring the philosopher-activist made by a consortium led by the National Film Board of Canada. The film, with versions in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, has been widely shown in the North. A video version made by the British Film Institute is now commercially available.

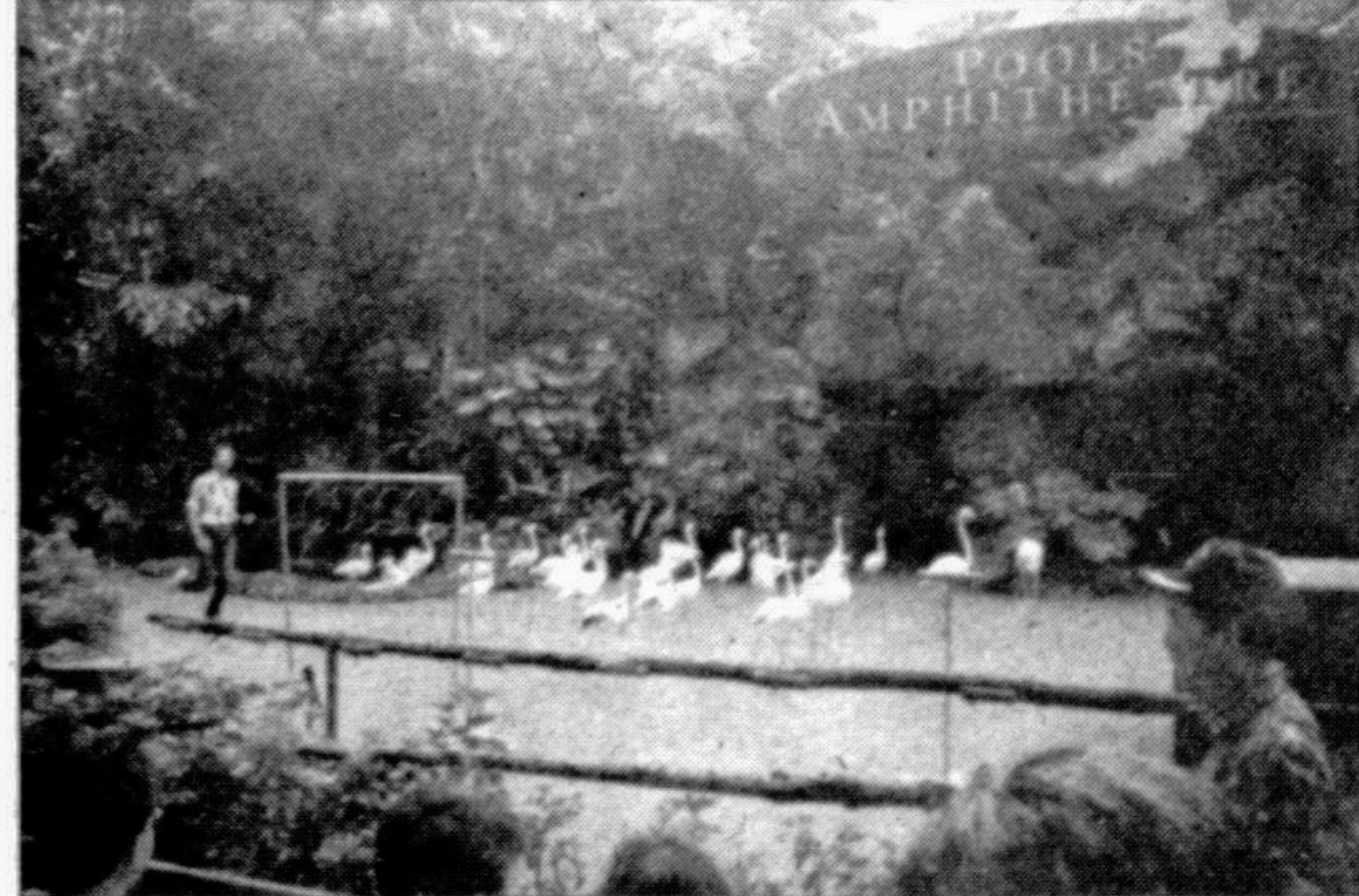
Chomsky writes regularly for the US-based *21st Century* magazine and is also involved in Southend Press, a non-profit publishing company which promotes dissenting books.

How does he manage his distinguished academic research and at the same time produce meticulously researched, robustly argued political books and articles? He says "I keep in touch with several groups and communities and give frequent lectures and talks and the books follow from there."

Hundreds of lecture tours, talks, interviews, numerous articles and books. Does it make any difference? Chomsky says yes. His proof of the change is that during the 1990 Gulf crisis, Americans were on the street opposing military action even before the war had begun — unlike the Vietnam war when they came on the streets only after years of US bombing of Vietnam.

How does he relax? By going on holiday with his family but without any books, television or radio. "We become like hermits," he says with a smile, "cut off from the world."

DAYA KISHAN THUSSU is Associate Editor of Gemini News Service.



Entrance to Asian Village, Sentosa Island