

UNRAVELLING the history of Bangladeshi cartooning is tricky, because the country represents a triple split — from Pakistan, which itself was a splinter of India when it moved from under British colonialism — and a tradition of duality of culture and language.

This split personality and the rage inherent in being a colonised or otherwise subservient society, fostered much of early cartooning. Octogenarian Kazi Abul Kasem, whose career as a cartoonist began in the 1930s in Calcutta, India, recalls illustrating literary verses with anti-British cartoons. Zainul Abedin, Quamrul Hasan, and others were also involved in

ple. economics, etc. Ahsan Habib, who has five cartoonists on his fulltime staff of eight, is proud of having trained, and created the careers of, some of the country's cartoonists.

Mohd Harun-or-Rashid can be credited with using ingenuity to get his *Cartoon* magazine off the ground. With borrowed money, he purchased pearls in Bangladesh and took them to Bangkok where they sold at a huge profit. Initially, the magazine was irregularly published; it was suspended from 1983-86 when Harun pursued a graduate degree in the United States. *Cartoon* magazine became a monthly of 32 to 40 pages when it was restarted

John A Lent

liberation efforts of the 1940s.

Similarly, the period starting with the language movement of 1952 and up to the 1971 war with West Pakistan was a fertile breeding ground for comic art. Doyen of cartoonists Ranabi (Rafiqun Nabi) said, "There would not have been strong cartoons here if not for the movements of this era." Political cartoons appeared in newspapers and magazines and on posters, banners, placards, and leaflets, proclaiming Pakistan's political ineptitude, mismanagement, oppression, and hatred of Bengali people (which Bangladeshis are).

Three periodicals stood out for their political cartoons — *Sachitra Sandhani* in the late 1950s, *Weekly Forum* in 1969-71, and *Bichitra*, shortly after the war. The latter, a weekly, was particularly important, mixing chuckles with nation-building messages in an assortment of cartoons drawn by Nazrul Islam, Ranabi, and other graduates of the Art Institute of the University of Dhaka.

Other avenues were opened for cartoonists with the appearance of the humor magazines, *Ummad* and *Cartoon*, in 1978 and 1980. For a few years, Bangladesh was unique among South Asian countries in possessing two humor magazines.

Patterned after ("but not copied from") *Mad*, *Ummad* was started by a geography student, Ahsan Habib, and five of his friends. The magazine has remained address, according to Ahsan Habib, because of his fear that advertisements might unduly influence editorial content and because of the "dirty and hard" job of collecting for them. In 1991, *Ummad* converted from quarterly to monthly; it has also branched out into comics with *Duranta* (Turbulent).

A typical issue of *Ummad* contains eight to ten features spread over 28 pages; each story is done by a different cartoonist who attacks social issues such as population, culture, climate, street peo-

in 1987 until its demise six years later.

One fulltime and nine parttime cartoonists drew for *Cartoon* magazine. Like the *Ummad* editor, Harun also took credit for encouraging cartoon development, stating, "I've created a market, and interest among would-be cartoonists. Before, cartoonists were individuals, separate from one another. *Cartoon* has given them an infrastructure, a base." Harun had a number of ideas to make cartooning economically viable and professional, including setting up cartoon interest clubs throughout the country, organizing a cartoon magazine for all of South Asia, converting *Cartoon* to fortnightly status, entering the animation field, and establishing a comic art merchandise shop. Only the latter, *Cartoon Products*, which sells stationary, posters, calendars, and other paper products using US, Asian and Bangladeshi characters (often times without permission), has materialised.

Local comic books are a very new phenomenon in the country. In 1989, another young man, Saeed Bari, created *Suchi Patra*, a company that now brings out 35 monthly titles that combine funnies and adventure. The rain title is *Patla Kabla*, the adventures of two Bengali boys, which sells 3,000. *Tutu Putu Kutu*, the story of three boy adventurers, also has a sale of 3,000, while other titles reach 2,000 or fewer customers.

Comic books are produced in two formats and prices — the preferred newsprint version priced at 10 Taka (US 25 cents) and the white paper type at double the price. Saeed Bari does not expect to make a profit on the initial 3,000 print run of white paper comics, and Taka 14 goes to production (1 Taka of which is for the cartoonist) and 6 Taka to distribution. He, along with almost all those involved in comics, reserved the harshest words for distributors, calling them gangsters and mafia, who demand a disproportionate part of the profits while providing very little service. They are also not known for paying their bills.



The Off-beaten and Divergent Paths of Cartooning in Bangladesh

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The five or six (one fulltime) cartoonists who draw for *Suchi Patra* are paid 2000

Taka (US \$50) to do a book of eleven small stories, each complete in itself as serialization is very rare.

The budding comic book industry of Bangladesh faces formidable challenges. Because of the newness of the medium, investment capital is in short supply as the market is not yet stabilized. Further, local comics must contend with the illegal trade in Indian comic books, brought in at various points along the extensive border the two countries share. Bangladeshi authorities do not crack down, according to Harun, because the "government is not concerned if the country is culturally invaded; it is only concerned with politics." Hawkers do not mind, actually preferring Indian comics as the margin of profit is larger, and readers like them because they are laminated and in full colour.

Strips in Bangladeshi newspapers have been around for years, although

almost all of them are American or European. An exception is "Tokai", Ranabi's character started in *Bichitra* in 1977. Ranabi said that he had thought of doing a "Charlie Brown-like" strip in the late 1960s, but shelved the idea while in Greece as a student during 1973-76.

After the idea was accepted by *Bichitra*, Ranabi spent two years contemplating the makeup of the strip: "How to do it? Which part of society should he come from? Charlie Brown is from the upper deck of society, but this was not needed in Bangladesh. I knew a small boy called Mochtar, who was sick because of liver problem. Mochtar always sat in front of my door, his stomach big, holding his lungi. He always asked, 'What time is it?' After I had known him six to eight months, he died. I got the portrait of

"Tokai" from that boy." Ranabi kept the drawing simple — "a bit illustrative, a bit realistic for our general readers who do not have aesthetic richness." He said that

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If he had used modern drawings, the readers would not have identified with "Tokai". "Tokai" is a street-wise urchin, witty and insightful in depicting Bangladeshi soci-

ety. Ranabi described him as, a downtrodden street boy with no family, no food, nothing. He is an ideal character portraying many children of Bangladesh. We used to say that Bangladesh itself is the "Tokai" of the world community.

When people are frustrated with the many problems here, they use "Tokai" as the name of the poor country. "Tokai" does not mean anything, but three years ago, it was put in the Bengali dictionary.

Obviously, the strip has caught the fancy of the Bangladeshis, judging from public opinion. Ranabi said he receives many letters concerning "Tokai". Some heap abuse on him for putting certain words in "Tokai's" mouth; others think they can participate in the strip. He explained: "Many send subjects. They write: 'Yesterday, I saw

something very interesting." But, it is not very interesting at all. They say, "You should do something about it and please mention my name in the strip." The readers are often demanding, according to Ranabi, and he has to change "Tokai" to meet their wishes. He said: "They ask, 'Why is Tokai' on the roads and in Dhaka? He should be in the villages.' So I had to change him around. I took him to the rural areas for awhile, and after six months, I got him back in the beginning, one week, I'd draw three hairs on his head another time, four hairs. Letters came in: 'How many hairs does Tokai' have?' So I gave him three. Once, I put shorts on Tokai".

Immediately, there was an objection: "He should wear a lungi". In winter, "Put some clothes on him." Sometimes I change "Tokai" according to reader reactions, sometimes I don't.

Another thing readers are noted for is putting political meanings into the strip that were not meant by the cartoonist. Ranabi said the result is that "Tokai" is now considered a social character. He added: "If I put something about love in 'Tokai', they don't feel good. Immediately, they send letters: 'Forget about love, say something about politics and economics.'" When I interviewed Ranabi, Bangladesh was suffering from one of its perennial floods. The next day's "Tokai" concerned itself with the floods. "If it didn't," Ranabi said, "hundreds of letters would arrive, asking, 'Why didn't you say anything about the floods?'"

Because of this reader demand, Ranabi has inserted messages into the strip — "not direct political" ones, but those mixed with social themes. "Tokai" reads like a history of Bangladesh, Ranabi said, because over the years, current events have been featured. As an example, "When there was a story about a sky lab falling, I had to explain this to the readers. They had no knowledge of a sky lab. So I asked, in 'Tokai', what would happen if it fell in Bangladesh. I showed how some people would make it into a fair; some would check to see if there were dollars in it. You need a local reference level for cartoons. Ranabi thinks Bangladeshi readers are becoming comics literate. Five to ten years Continued on page 10

ARCHITECTURE Interior Designers Build on Successes

THE watchwords for today's British architects and designers are individuality and versatility. Leading firms scorn the once-fashionable enthusiasm for schools of design and architectural style.

Some build a reputation for a particular speciality which may even be as unexpected as Eva Jiricna's extraordinary staircases, cur-

rently sought after by international as well as English clients. But most switch painlessly between designing luxury homes, commercial premises and transport centres.

Lynne Edmunds

Troughton McAslan certainly fits into this versatile and individualistic mould, working half for international clients and half for British-based ones. Overseas projects just completed by the practise are Japan's Kobe Institute building, in Kobe — a demanding two-year project — and the administrative headquarters for Turkey's biggest bank.

In Britain they have taken on a broad spread of work, starting with the task of fashioning a striking extension to London's Imperial College from "two pretty bleak existing 1950s buildings."

For that we are working in concrete, steel and glass," said Mr McAslan. "We are not interested in current taste and fashion — that just distracts architects from their own language. We use mate-

rials and techniques in a way which responds to the modernist tradition."

The practise, now involving 16 architects full-time, acknowledges the influence and inspiration of modernist pioneers like American Frank Lloyd Wright, traditional Spanish architect Gaudi and the Scots genius Renie Macintosh.

Mr McAslan admires Louis

predominates in the new public square they have just completed in London's unfashionable area of Peckham. It has extensive paved public areas where people can wander free from traffic and is entered through a gateway with a canopy, immediately giving the feeling of a village.

Station design is now featuring strongly in their work — starting with the very de-

signed to border the area of the Surrey Docks that is now re-christened Brunswick Quay. The main colour of the bloc which has rendered walls on external insulation, is canary yellow. The unique design of the building allows the three-storey section to "wrap-around" at both ends — so creating exceptional living rooms each with a water view — and to interlock with the maisonettes which make up the top two storeys.

These maisonettes have external, mauve coloured, glazed, walls decorated with cedar panels. The roof will either be zinc or steel with standing seams.

Czechoslovakian-born Eva Jiricna who came to London on a working assignment, and stayed to escape the Russian occupation is now both a pillar of the British architectural establishment. She is a council member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Arts, which named her Royal Designer for Industry in 1991, and a year ago, she was made a Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for her services to interior design and also one of the most innovative people in her field.

apartment interiors and most of all her staircases. She has turned stairs into high-tech works of sculpture, using glass, steel and timber.

Her latest is in a luxury shoe shop in London's fashionable Bond Street. But the biggest and most striking is the three-flight model in the London fashion boutique of Joseph. It has a current market value of £50,000.

Eva Jiricna's aim is to explore and stretch modern technology while guarding human comfort. "We constantly search for materials, technologies and production

methods and work with top class structural engineers and other experts."

Whether working on a restaurant or company headquarters in Germany and Switzerland, or on the interior of the revolutionary Lloyd's of London building in the City her objective is "long life and low maintenance."

Recently, to create, a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in a huge Victorian institutional building in London, she removed two of the trusses supporting the 54 pitched roof and put in a stainless steel tension

cable system.

One-bedroom is reached by a semi-circular staircase of steel with perforated aluminium treads and is entered through a glazed screen. The kitchen lined in aluminium roller shutter sections has doors which slide away behind the lining. Cupboards and shelves are covered in satin-finish stainless steel. Needless to say, Eva Jiricna's own London apartment, which she has worked on for years is far from finished.

The writer is a contributor to the Daily Telegraph — LPS



Drawing of the flats in the Royal Patriotic Building, London.

Khan among more recent visionaries. "He is the master of our kind of architecture," he said. "His work is hard and tough while at the same time refined and beautiful, with roots in historical architecture not present day pastiche."

II

The firm insists on taking the longer view. "We ignore public attitudes so avoid getting sucked into trivial fashions."

The human scale certainly

manding refurbishment of London's Grade I listed Paddington Station, as part of a new link to Heathrow Airport. They are also working on a country railway station at Redhill in Surrey and sections of the London Underground.

Troughton McAslan has had a long-standing connection with Poland since John McAslan started teaching at Warsaw University. This became reciprocal last year when the firm, together with the British Council through

ing.

III

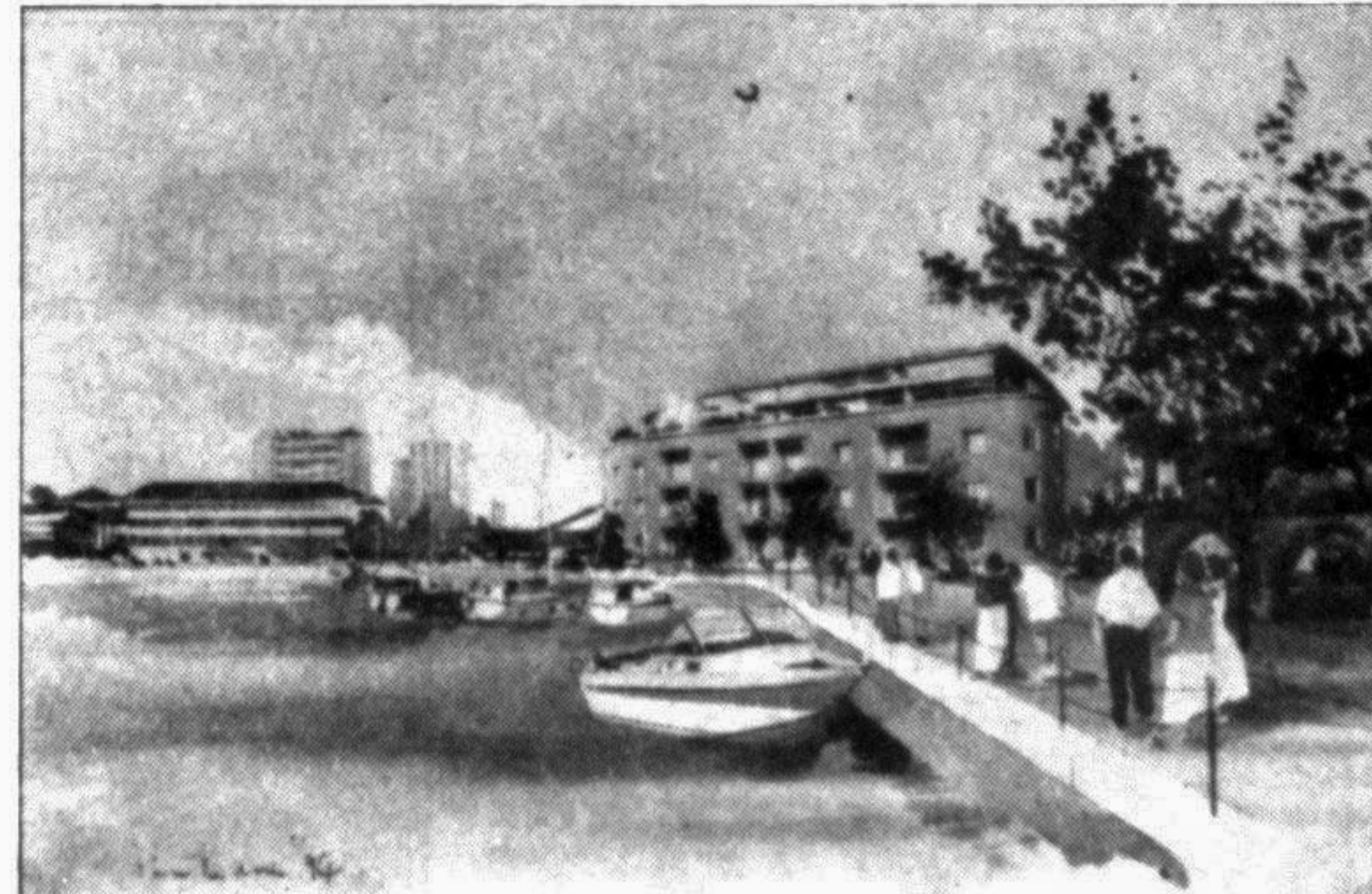
This industrial area, with pockets of modest terraced housing for dockers and their families, has been transformed into a modernistic mix of futuristic office blocks and luxury houses and apartments.

But innovative architect Tchaik Chassay — a Briton of Russian descent — has put his own totally individualistic stamp on a Docklands building of 24 apartments de-

IV

The winner of nine major architectural awards to date, she has worked on cathedrals and museums, cafes and boutiques but is currently internationally celebrated for her

A sketch of one of the flats in the Royal Patriotic Building, London.



A sketch of one of the flats in the Royal Patriotic Building, London.