



## Sunderbans - A Wildlife Haven

by Robin Davies

LOOK at the left hand corner of a detailed map of Bangladesh. In the south west, where the Ganges and the Brahmaputra tributaries open their many mouths to the Bay of Bengal, lies an enormous area only accessible to man by waterborne transport. The Sunderbans. Though many people are aware Bangladesh plays host to the major part of the largest mangrove forest in the world, few foreign tourists or expatriates working in the country visit the Sunderbans. This is a pity. They are missing out on quite an experience.

The environment of the Sunderbans can be considered unique. Nature's last bastion and the only wild life sanctuary in the country. A supreme example of a fragile eco-system specially adapted to salinity variations and regular tidal flooding. In an area some 80 kms deep from coastal shore to the hinterland and with around one third of its 5770 sq kms made up of water, there are no permanent human settle-

ments. The forest is too dense and waterlogged. Only a boat can pick its way through the vast water maze that surrounds the islands of mangroves with their up-standing needle-like roots. The Sunderbans its name, and the ferns, grasses and palms that seem to shoot straight up out of the ubiquitous glutinous mud.

Being so untouched by man, apart from a few seasonal wood-cutters, honey-seekers and fishermen, the Sunderbans remains home to a variety of wild and bird life. Home to the rarely seen Royal Bengal tiger, to myriads of beautiful spotted deer, otters, monitor lizards, wild boar, Gangetic dolphins and shiver-making Estuarine crocodiles. According to a guide book, bird life is profuse but what one sees mostly are the eight species of unmistakable multi-coloured kingfishers, the beautiful chestnut winged Brahmany kite and flocks of waders and egrets on the mudflats with the occasional white-bellied

sea eagle soaring far overhead.

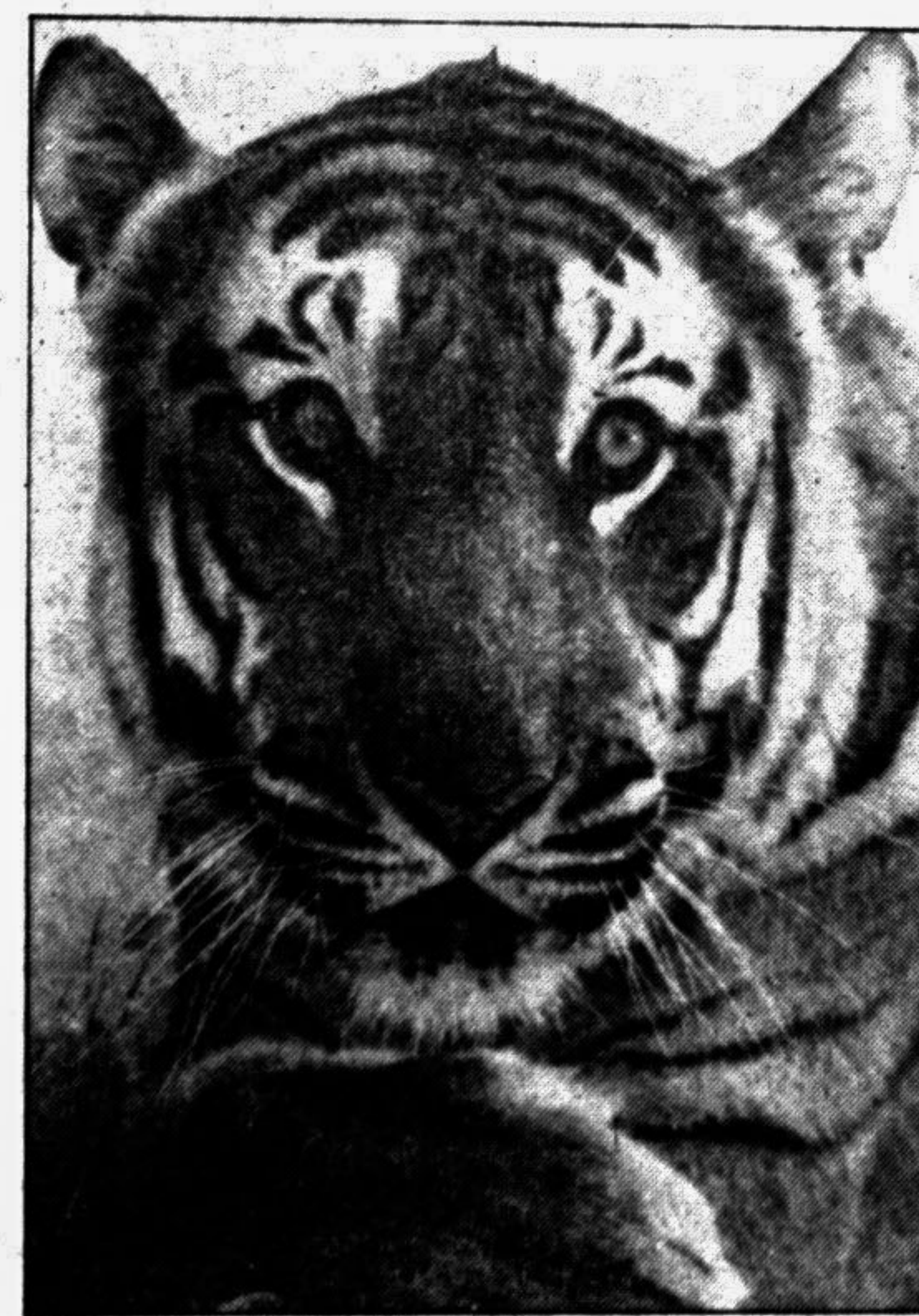
Getting there is part of the experience. With planning and forethought one can board one of the ancient paddle-steamers — one of the four regular Rocket line ships — at the ghat, or landing stage, in the old part of Dhaka. Itself a fascinating maelstrom of local life. For the next 24 to 26 hours down to Mongla, the port on the edge of the Sunderbans, one is made forcibly aware of how Bangladesh is really a land of rivers. That the inland waterways are really the country's highways. That travelling on the water, albeit in the comfort of a paddle-steamer's first class, is the most civilised way of putting one's finger on the country's vibrating pulse.

Life along the river is like an animated kaleidoscope from sun up to sun down. Waterborne transport ranges from big steamers to large wooden barges being poled against the sluggish current. From motorized launches jammed with passengers to

black-bananashaped boats rowing to wherever there is a client. From fishing boats anchoring immense fishing nets to the simple thatched houseboats of the water gypsies who spend their life afloat. Each major landing stage reacts to the paddle-steamer's booming siren blast by turning into a frenzy of activity. The pontoons that serve as jetties become paralysed with people. The pontoons that serve as jetties become paralysed with people. The general air of excitement is palpable. Impatient passengers with their bedrolls and bundles, sweetmeat peddlers, snack artists and porters all jostle to be first on board. Once docked, the traffic of people and goods coming and going on the narrow gangway continues until another huge siren blast announces yet another departure.

The surrounding landscape is remarkably flat. Alluvial paddy fields stretch as far as the eye can see. Every now and again clumps of trees mark the beginning of a small settlement or burgeoning township. From the deck one can watch villagers at their every day work as if nothing much had really changed for centuries in their way of life. The river itself is a constant chocolate brown. Pregnant with its heavy load of silt destined for the coastal tidal zone. In parts, the surface is dotted with clumps of free-floating water hyacinths or water chestnuts like tiny green icebergs waiting to engulf any vessel that comes to too long a stop. Overall one has the impression of timelessness. Of the country's inner resilience.

Mongla river port, where one crosses the river to Daingmari forest station to get the necessary permission from the Forestry Department to go into the Sunderbans, marks the end of one voyage and the beginning of the next. Nowadays one can easily transfer from one ship to another thanks to 'The Guide Tours Ltd' — perhaps



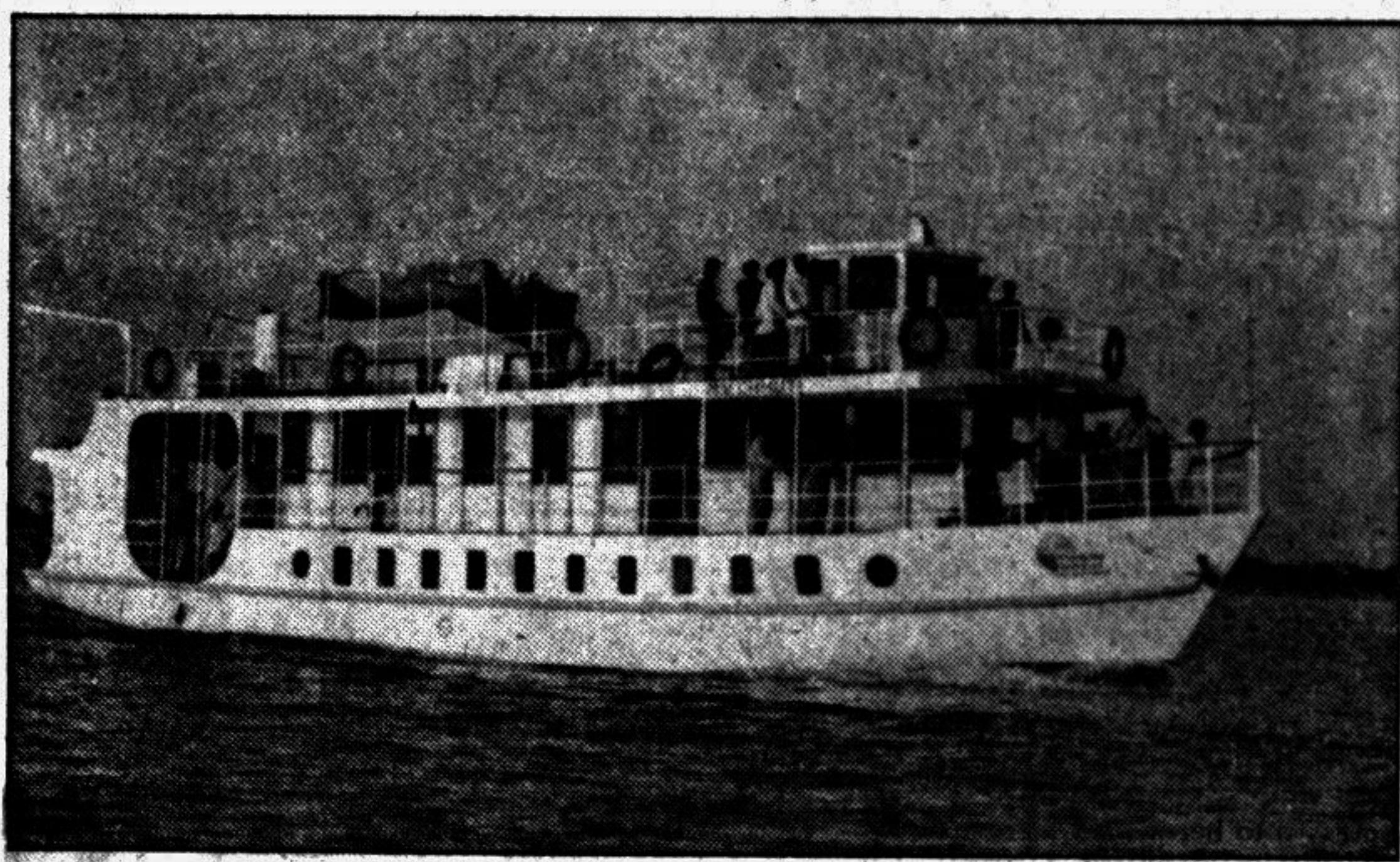
The Royal Bengal Tiger — Parjatan

the best tour operator in the country — newly constructed flat-bottomed river boat, the MV 'Chhuti'.

The boat, the brain-child of the Managing Director, Hasan Mansur, is ideal for its purpose. With ten sleeping cabins, a user-friendly dining-cum-lounge, and a roof deck for uninterrupted viewing, it is the most comfortable way, today, of seeing the Sunderbans. Its shallow draft enables it to penetrate deep into the jungle from where, in a small speed boat, one can glide into the labyrinth of tiny canals and narrow creeks. After a day spent absorbing the mangrove world's implicit green menace, evenings spent safely anchored in the river are magical. The silence, after dusk, is absolute. The nights are so inky black that the stars seem to take on a

new lustre. Cabin-delivered tea each morning adds to the pleasure of watching the early mist give way over the mudflats to the gold fire of the sunrise.

After three blissful nights slowly winding one's way down to Kotka, on the seashore at the southernmost tip of the forest, the MV 'Chhuti' criss-crosses its riverine way back to pick up the larger river highways followed by ocean-going ships heading upstream to Mongla port. Although the voyage ends there, a moment's reflection makes one realise that the stillness and the immensity of the Sunderbans, however fleeting one's personal experience of a unique eco-system, has given a new dimension to the words 'Walaikum assalam' — 'unto you, also peace!'



MV 'Chhuti' promises an enjoyable journey. — Courtesy Guide Tours

## Anecdote of a Traveller

by Zunaid Iqbal

I have encountered many interesting people around the globe. Often the experiences have been of great amusement, seldom of great excitement, and rarely of confusion. Some of these experiences may be peculiarly interesting; especially, the ones that began with me introducing myself, 'I am from Bangladesh.'

I spent a major portion of my college years in a very isolated area of southeastern Kentucky, midway into the widely known region of Appalachian trail. Exciting as it was, the city that I lived in was up on a hill. Every time there was an onrush of a cold front, during the cooler seasons, it snowed. Worst of all, as often as I saw snow, the downhill ride by foot turned impossible, even the car rides sometimes ranged definitely within the caution region.

The people in this town fondly relate themselves to a quaint term called 'hill billies,' which identifies the rural folk. Hill billies claim to be void of urban materialism, clean of metropolitan complexity, and care free of the suave 'city-slickers.' The men are proud of their old Dodge pick-up trucks, and comfortable with the 'fatigued' pair of jeans. The women, although oblivious of French cosmetics are endowed with all the natural beauties. Some are masters at household disciplinary, others are daredevils — diving from high cliffs, or scaling mountains.

And hence there was one week that the college was closed because of heavy snowfall. All the major highways that connected this town to civilization was under an impenetrable layer of snow. People that commuted to the town from outside were hopelessly stuck. It was the fourth day that the school was out, a very rare event, and I heard the rumor about food rationing. The alarming news said that the catering services were disconnected.

I was relishing on a glass of warm chocolate milk at a college dining room. Now, warm milk is almost a never to drink item in America. The idea is probably in close proximity to drinking warm 'sherbet.' Anyway, a young lady sitting close by noticed this antiquity; probably, she was doubly curious by my skin color. I had seen her around the campus before, but never knew her. She got out of her chair and took the

one facing me.

The conversation began with all the regular questions of, where I was from, my name, where Bangladesh was (although she seemed to have a rough idea) etcetera. This woman, Carlene, as I learned her name, was quite an interesting character. She was concerned about natural disasters in Bangladesh, political problems, 'harkats,' democracy. Finally, I did not expect a young lady, native of southeast Kentucky, and beautiful concerned about Bangladesh, almost a 'trivial' issue and surely insignificant to any as someone as her. I was amused and surprised after our half-hour conversation.

But a bigger surprise still awaited. Pointing at my milk she asked, 'Do you get chocolate milk in Bangladesh?' I was a little shocked, trying to guess whether she was being sarcastic, or curiously naïve. Her next question gave away her point as she said that she did not know if poor people from Bangladesh could afford a luxury like chocolate milk. I felt a little defensive. Being brought up in Dhaka, in an upper-middle class family, chocolate milk has definitely been obvious to me, and probably equally insignificant. I couldn't see why anyone in Bangladesh should not have access to chocolate milk. So, after a few seconds of deliberation, I decided to be sarcastic, and prompted, 'Well, we don't get chocolate milk, but have somewhat similar in taste and nutritional value: grass juice... better, it is free for everyone.'

She probably believed my story. Or, maybe I just assumed that she did. She smiled along with surprised look saying 'interesting.' She walked away, and I was happy with a smug to get back at her. I disposed off my cup and started to walk out of the dining hall. Suddenly, some distant knowledge recurred on me from the ninth grade science book... after the flood water retreats, the cattle in rural Bangladesh die from grazing on the grass polluted from the dirty water. 'interesting,' I said this time. I wondered, if the 'grass juice' pun was a good one after all. Perhaps it is a nature in urbanites alike me to be highly involved in 'significant' issues such as democracy, election and maybe harkats (whoever said we don't need any), and sincerely forget everything else, obviously 'insignificant.'

## Singapore: Some Experiences

by S M Mizanur Rahman

I had the opportunity to attend the 9th International Conference of Historical Geographers Pre-Conference Symposium organized by the Department of Geography, The National University of Singapore. Besides the paper sessions, the Symposium included field trips. Two local field trips, the first on 28th June to historic districts in the central area and the second, on 30th June to places of significance, during World War II and the Japanese occupation were included in the full-symposium package. Here is the history of Little India Arcade which is one of the historical places I had the opportunity to make a tour.

### Little India Arcade

The retrofitting works that started 15 months ago at the Hindu Community's property, known as the Little India Arcade have been completed. Some tenants started their retail business since mid February last year. The new shopping complex in which 90 per cent of the traders are Indians, officially opened on April 15, a day after the Tamil New Year. The twenty-six shophouses which had been the property of the temples administered by the Hindu Endowments Board have been transformed into a modern shopping complex, reflecting the general pattern of change taking place across the island.

Indians began to migrate to Singapore since the founding of this island by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. They initially settled in the southern part of the island.

The Serangoon Road area was developed around 1828. In the 1880's South Indian traders settled in and around Cross Street, Market Street and Chulia Street began to move to the Serangoon Road area. The major portion of the land on which the present Little India Arcade stands was given to the Sri Mariamman Temple in March 1851 by the British Colonial Government. Though there is no concrete evidence as to who owned the land, it was used as a place for the cremation of Hindus. There are documents to show that Hindu burial and cremation grounds were in those days under the charge of the Sri Mariamman Temple.

To confirm this assertion a stone slab bearing the words 'This burning ground belonging to Hindoo People of Madras Singapore 1828' was discovered during the

retrofitting works at Little India Arcade. This slab stone could have been placed there when the original building was built in 1913.

In 1907, the Sri Mariamman Temple and the then Sri Narasimha Perumal Temple (now Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple) were incorporated as a single endowment under the Mohammedan-Hindu Endowments Ordinance. The land belonging to the endowment was originally used as a cattle pen and stable as suggested by another stone slab found during the retrofitting works. Indian traders carried out their traditional activities and dominated the Serangoon Road area at the time and reared cows and buffaloes. Bullock carts and coaches drawn by horses were used as modes of transport. The shop houses were erected on the land before the First World War. The tenants paid a small rent and were protected by the Rent Control Act which was applicable to premises built before the Second World War. With the Rent Control Act abolished in 1990 the Hindu Endowments Board Act was amended in the later part of 1992, to empower the Board to undertake projects to enhance the value of its properties.

A company to develop the Little India Arcade was formed in 1993. The properties in Little India Arcade belonging to the Board were transferred to the newly-formed company. The Board

centered into a joint venture with DBS Land to develop the Little India Arcade to an excellent shopping complex for Indian traditional trades.

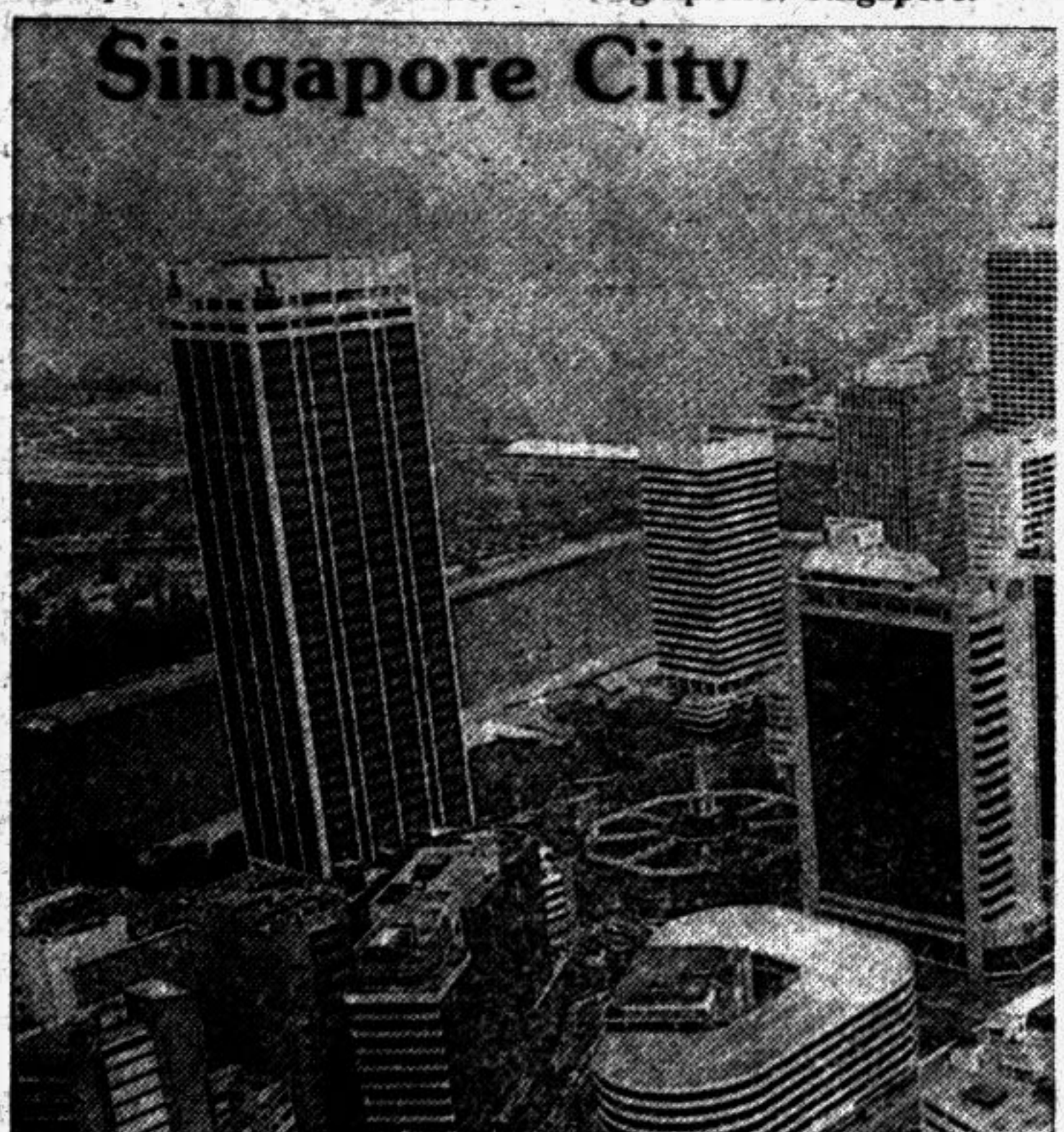
### The Kranji War Memorial

I visited the Kranji War Memorial where thousands of soldiers of Indian Army died during the World War II (1939-45) and the Japanese Occupation. The war ceme-

tery, has been erected there. It is a place of solitude and also a place of historical importance and attracts Geographers and Historians all over the world.

The writer participated the 9th International Conference of Historical Geographers in Singapore 28-30 June, 1995.

References: Guide-book — Field-trip: 9th International Conference of Historical Geographers, Singapore.



The Kranji war Memorial in Singapore — Photo by Author

## Travel Briefs

**SIA starts US cargo flights:** Singapore Airlines Ltd (SIA) said it will begin its first Boeing 747-400 air freight service to Chicago.

The weekly service will operate from Singapore to Chicago via Taipei and Anchorage. Most of the Cargo carried to Chicago is expected to be garments and electronics. — Monitor

**Quantas Pacific Pass:** Travellers who arrive in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji on any airline should make note of a South Pacific airpass available through Quantas.

The pass has two categories — one for sectors only in Australia, another for trips among the South Pacific countries. It costs between A \$ 180 and A \$ 230 per sector. — Monitor

**Sonargaon's service at ZIA:** Hotel Sonargaon has opened a counter for personalized service to passengers arriving at Zia International Airport. It is situated at the arrival hall of the airport and is meant for those passengers who require booking at the five star hotel. Their customers are then transported to the hotel in a Limousine. — RM

**Best supervisor of October:** Quazi Elias of Front Office Department of Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel has been selected as the best supervisor for the month of October '95.

He joined the hotel as telephone operator in 1981. — Sonargaon Tattler

**Higher frequencies for Cathay:** With the winter time-table, Cathay Pacific is offering more flights. Toronto will receive another flight on Fridays and will then be served five times a week. Frequency to Johannesburg is being increased by one flight to three a week. — BD Shipping Times

**Suez Canal fees reduced:** The Suez Canal Authority announced recently that it would reduce shipping fees by 20 per cent from the beginning of this year after a drop in the number of oil tankers using the international waterway.

The number of oil tankers using the canal fell by 10 per cent in the first half of 1995 compared to that of 1994. — Monitor

## Easter Island - Still Mysterieres II

BUT Easter Island is more than an open air archaeological museum. It gives one the chance of seeing what ordinary life means in a tourist spot. It is also an ironic example of a colony, run by an ex-colony. Annexed in 1888, a governor, supposedly acting on advice provided by a council of Ancients — drawn from the 50-60 people recognized to be the only pure-blooded Pascuans — administrators it as a part of Chile.

Behind the surface facade, however, the island presents a sad picture. When local Pascuans can be persuaded to talk they admit, without tourism, a relatively recent addition, life would be of a subsistence nature. Yet tourism is not being properly developed. There is no natural harbour and anchorage off Hanga-Roa is suspect; the last cruise ship failed to disembark anybody to general dismay. Only two ships a year bring expensive provisions that add to an already high cost of living. Talk of closing the airport for repairs, the only sure way in, heightens the sense of isolation, of problems being ignored.

All genuine islanders insist they are Pascuans, not Chileans. Resentment against their overlords is strong, though generally hidden. Land is the most contentious issue followed by the lack of official respect shown for the provisions of the Treaty of Annexation. Some 90 per cent of all ancestral land has gradually wound up in the hands of the Chilean — largely military authorities — and people believe the process will not stop until there is nothing left in indigenous ownership.

Native Pascuans, proud of their extraordinary recorded oral histories going back 32 generations, thus feel second class citizens in the only homeland they know. Resentments are long held. Of the period in the early sixties when they were not allowed to leave the limits of the only town. Of forced vaccinations against leprosy. Of the way in which entranced fees to their National Parks largely benefit such parks in Chile. Of the way, in contrast to what the Americans did during their short stay for NASA space-shuttle purposes (building the longest runway in the world; introducing electricity; a hospital and a reservoir), all Chilean tutelage can show is two all-weather roads and petrol storage tanks for the military. Finally, Pascuans resent Chilean control of 90 per cent of all commercial activities; now that no foreign ships are allowed to offload provisions, this domination appears unbreakable.

A widely attested story clearly encapsulates these feelings. In 1988 a Chilean submarine suddenly emerged offshore and was seen to be

landing cases of pisco, a well-known Chilean fire-water, although the Chilean navy is not allowed to drink on board. Since then — whether the story is true or not — alcoholism has become the social problem. Those Pascuans who can be persuaded to talk of the future seem to want two things. That UNESCO recognizes Easter Island as a World Heritage site — something Chile refuses to countenance saying it is already sufficiently protected under Chilean environmental provisions. Secondly, as Easter Island is the stepping stone to Tahiti and French Polynesia, many Pascuans look at the high degree of local administrative control the French allow Polynesians as a possible model for their island.

But Rapa-Nui has the misfortune to remain one of the authoritarian enclaves bequeathed to Chile by the previous Pinochet dictatorship. As long as the military — a law unto themselves — value Easter Island and, as long as Chile believes that the island's strategic importance will grow in the 21st century when the Pacific hemisphere, including Antarctica, is expected to develop, such Pascuan hopes will remain as sightless as the stone eyes that have surveyed their island home for so long.

For all this Easter Island is worth the long detour. Apart from the indescribable impact of seeing the long-eared statues close-up, Rapa-Nui is a microcosm of some of the world's leading social problems. Problems that were subject to debate at the UN Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen last year. Though not discussed, Pascuans fight to ward off the weakening of social solidarity, the social consequences of alcohol and their struggle to combat an insidious undermining of their identity, all deserve greater outside scrutiny and concern. It is not so much that Pascuans want to be given things, they just do not want what they have taken away!

However, for those who remain indifferent, or cannot risk Lan Chile's notorious overbooking, there is a surrogate: Kevin Costner's 'Rapa-Nui' entirely filmed on video. While it does not touch on the underlying issues, it does justice to the scenic beauty and, especially, the dramatic island myths. It also brought a much appreciated injection of cash into the pockets of all locals who acted as more than willing extras. A sufficient reason for buying the video! — ND

The author is a former Senior Economist, GATT Secretariat, currently working with the UNHCR in Cox's Bazar