

Splendour at the End of the Line

IT'S difficult to be very meticulous when your heart is stirred by natural beauty. The feeling is like sheer magic when your imagination seems to surf over the hill-tops. The serpentine road — which starts soon as you cross Rangunia — to Rangamati and a very affecting innocence in the air are enough to make you mesmerised, if not to feed your robust travelling appetite.

There were three of us on a field-visit, going to inspect the activities of nationwide Vitamin A Week campaign in some of the villages of Rangamati. Though on duty, we wanted to, specially me, squeeze as much pleasure as possible out of it. I was wide awake — perhaps the impact of nine O'clock sun was too

of Rai Ban off from his eyes. Possibly, he was enjoying it in his own way.

As we approached Rangamati, there were more and more of hills, and the inner feeling was that of going back to the times of creation on a 'time capsule'. The hilly horizon kept on changing — some times it was like one of those television documentary snap-shots, the next moment, it seemed that we were right on an Old West trail with red-coloured hills those passed by. And then

jeep who was steering the vehicle when I saw a double-peaked bushy hill on the left horizon. Animesh Da said, it was called *Fuamoun* in local dialect meaning 'sky-high hill', which he said was approximately 1800 feet high — next to Keocradang of Bangladesh, well, Chittagong Hill Tracts to be specific.

There was another one with lesser height than *Fuamoun* called *Bonrupa* (forest beauty). But in this case, beauty got deemed against mighty. In the middle

Ekram Kabir spends a day in Rangamati

ang and Murang.

The lagoon-like Rangamati Lake — a result of building Kaptai Dam — has now become one of the tourist attractions in the country. For the visitors the lake has a calm as well as seductive impact. But, Sabir Bhai didn't seem to want much time by the man-made lake. Same was the case with me; we wanted to talk to the local people, specially in the villages. It was possibly because

changing. In 1960, they say, the construction of the hydro-electric dam at Kaptai district within the Rangamati district was completed. A vast reservoir of some 550 square miles came into being, inundating most of the fertile Karnaphuli valley and large parts of the Changl, Kassalong and Maini valleys containing lush paddy fields and vegetable gardens.

During the construction of the dam, government officials held a number of meetings with the Chakma Raja (king) — whose palace is now under the water of the lake — and the Headmen of the area on various aspects of the project. Although it was told that there would be flooding and an area would go under water permanently. At the time it wasn't ascertained exactly how much land would be affected or how high the water level would be. But there it is — a tourists' delight.

Health Department revealed that more than five tons of human excrement and other wastes flow into the lake everyday.

Estimates show that a staggering 85 per cent of the total population living around the lake depend on its water for household necessities like drinking, cooking and cleaning. The villagers and the lakesiders, where there is a lack of tubewells, big *kutchas* wells — or just holes — to procure drinking water that originate from the lake. The water supply for Rangamati town also depend on the lake.

The wild beasts that once freely roamed these hilly jungles were elephants, sambers, monkeys, wild boars and dogs, black leopards, Royal Bengal Tigers, various species of birds and reptiles, but most of these animals and beasts, according to the lakesiders, are now extinct.

While reminiscing about the wild animals of the past, the old folks of Rangamati town almost invariably tell a tale: "One day, a Royal Bengal Tiger was all of a sudden found roaming in the nearby areas of newly-developed locality. People of the area, in fright, started running helter-skelter. As the news spread, a local gallant embarked on a hunt for the beast in a boat along the river Karnaphuli. He finally found the tiger and shot it dead."

What is interesting was that on hearing the news of the kill, the then deputy commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts district rushed to the spot and donning the dress of a hunter with a gun on his shoulder, he got himself photographed with one of his legs resting on the dead beast. The tale is still told by the elders of the region with measure of sarcastic humour — as the funny behaviour of the DC — and of course, with the sense of pride of the real hunter who belonged to them.

Them? Yes, the people of a different culture. On the cultural front, they are

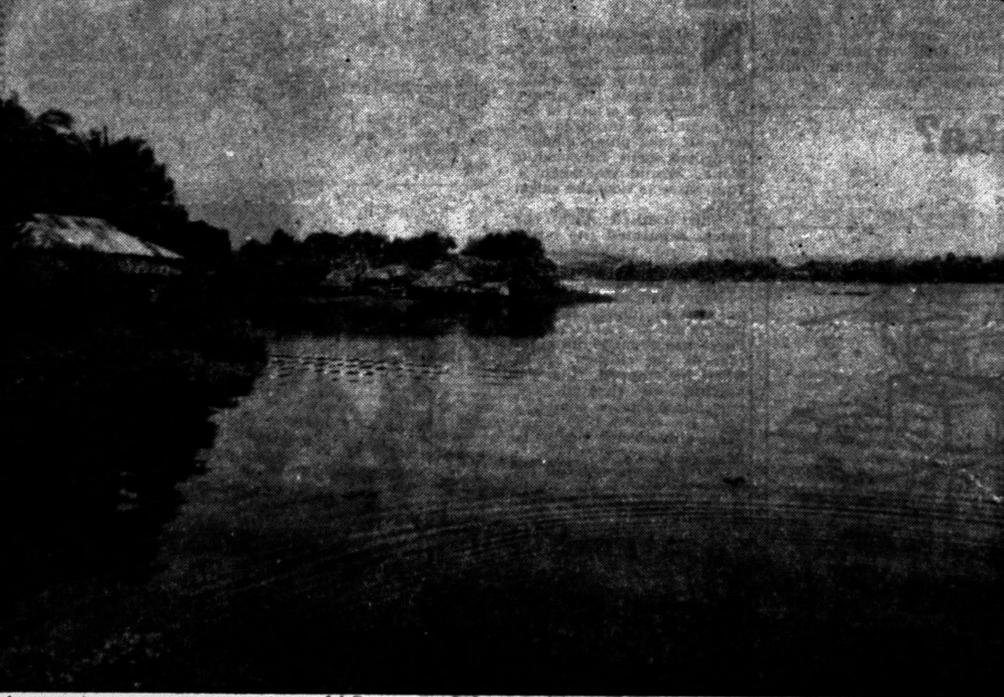
much much below both sides of the road over the valleys, there was a thick sheet of mist through which we could hardly see the bamboo-made huts and farmers returning home from work. And in the eastern sky, there was the mauve orchid-like moon — felt so near to be touched, yet so far.

in Rangamati. Particularly because of their substantial contribution to their family economy. While the uneducated women work both within the household and out in the fields in the rural areas, the educated section undertakes jobs in the urban areas.

Well, on the way back to Chittagong, we insisted Animesh Da to stop the jeep at Kalpataru Shilpaniketan which is an ivory handicraft centre owned by Bijoy Ketan Chakma and his wife Nilima Rani Chakma. We didn't find Bijoy Ketan at home, but spoke to his wife, Sabir Bhai was so inspired by the ivory handworks that we became indecisive what to buy.

Asking whether ivory trade was banned or not, Nilima Rani Chakma said: "We've acquired special permission from the DC". However, I wasn't convinced.

Returning to Chittagong,



A view of the huts beside the beautiful Rangamati Lake, which made the natives homeless long ago - photo by Ekram Kabir

perfect-kept asking all sorts of questions to Animesh Dewan, a UNICEF official, who comes from Rangamati district, and to whom the spell-binding surrounding was not alien and surprising as it was to us. But I couldn't fathom why Sabir Mustafa, a journalist from *The Financial Express*, was not taking his pair

there was darkness — the hills were so high that the sky could hardly be seen; coming out of that shadow, there was a mighty sprouting earth covered with trees whose leaves reflected the celestial lights all over.

Ten miles off the Rangamati town, I couldn't stop asking the man to stop the

of Rangamati town, the majestic lake and the people aside, there's nothing much you can be inspired about. But the district itself is the biggest among the three hill districts with an area of 6089 square kilometres. The tribes of this district include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tangchanga, Lusa, Fankoo, Khi-

of the fact that the lake after it came into being made thousands of local people or *adivasis* — and landless, most of whom reportedly fled to neighbouring India during the '60s.

The skyline which was essentially dominated by the hills and forests are now, to the people's sorrow, is

The area of present Rangamati town where the densely-populated 'Reserve Bazar' is located was once a deep jungle and a part of it was a government reserve forest. The forest was turned into a human habitation following the emergence of the lake that swallowed a remarkable number of homesteads, there by developing Reserve Bazar in the process.

To avoid the afternoon crowd — in fact, to have a hunch — we walked over the Parjatan's Karnaphuli Bridge beside the BPC motel, about three-and-a-half miles off the Reserve Bazar. The upstating aspect was the motel's restaurant which is a cage-like rectangular room without any view of the lake though the lake is about 50 metres away.

On the other hand, the blue beauty with its greens in the middle is increasingly becoming polluted for many reasons, excluding engine-driven boats used for tourists' cruises. Contamination by chemical fertilisers and pesticides that are used in the adjacent cropfields (formerly *Jhum* lands) the man wastes into the lake, other wastes carried down by rain water as well as the dumping of animal carcasses are reported to be the main problems. A survey carried out by the Rangamati District

some of these traditional beliefs and superstitions, but still retain the rest while going through a change in every sphere of life. In the course of this transformation the



Kalpataru - where ivory ornaments are on display

day Mother Earth attains fertility and becomes stronger

ing in the fields and don't go anywhere as hired labourer.

Women, with their fluttering butterfly charm and straight jet-black hair, enjoy equal status as men do here

Travel Briefs

Sonargaon News: Dewan Nasim-ur Rahman, Ashrafuzzaman and Mirza Akbar Ali have been elected President, General Secretary and Treasurer respectively of the 14-member Executive Committee of Sonargaon Hotel Employees and Workers Union for a two-year term.

The election of the office-bearers was contested by the candidates from two panels. — *Sonargaon Tattler*

Agreement betⁿ Thai firm & Myanmar: A Thai company has signed a joint venture agreement with state-run Myanmar Airways to provide domestic airline flights in Myanmar.

The agreement, calls for the new airline, called Yangon Airways Ltd, to be operational within May. The new airline will open more destinations in Myanmar to foreign visitors, who will have three carriers to choose from.

Myanmar has designated 1996 "Visit Myanmar Year." Yangon Airways will initially fly two Fokker 50 aircraft to southern and northern destinations in the country. — *BD Shipping Times*

DHL in Moscow: DHL Worldwide Express has opened new facilities in Moscow — a new head office for the CIS in the city and a sorting and handling centre at Sheremetyevo airport.

DHL can now put consignments through customs there 24 hours a day. — *BD Shipping Times*

Business traffic surge in India: A year after a plague prompted thousands of travellers to cancel trips to India, the border are back, filling rooms and stimulating investors' interest in hotel stocks.

The peak travel season has just started and will stretch until March. — *Monitor*

Sri Lankan air cargo grows: Air cargo volumes out of Sri Lanka's only international airport are projected to grow at about 12 per cent annually. Colombo handles about 70,000 tonnes — both imports and exports — from all airlines each year.

Currently 18 carriers operate through Colombo whose location makes it ideal for the island to tap the huge flow of cargo between Europe and fast-growing Asian region. — *Monitor*

New K-Line schedule: Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha Limited (K-Line) and Yangming Marine Transport Corporation recently announced their new service schedules for trans-Pacific Service and Asia-Europe Service, which will commence from January, this year.

The new service is based on the agreement between K-Line, and Yangming to pursue the highest quality of service to meet their customer requirements. — *BD Shipping Times*

Bangladesh will buy rly coaches: Bangladesh will buy 60 railway coaches from Iran and there are other important proposals for further cooperation in transport sector.

The Iranian Foreign Minister said that he would discuss the possibilities of further cooperation during his forthcoming visit to Bangladesh. — *BD Shipping Times*

Best employee of October: Feroza Begum, manager assistant of the Housekeeping Department of Hotel Sonargaon has been selected as the best employee of October 1995. — *Sonargaon Tattler*

THE Boeing 747 was flying high over the Indian Ocean. Dark clouds flew ominously below. The weather was getting worse. Occasionally, the ocean became visible glittering like a dark blue diamond. We, a group of Bangladeshi media-men and security personnel were on our way to Maldives on a regular PIA flight to cover an official programme on the islands. My companions were BTN News Producer Mahbulul Alam, Lt Col Roomi, Major Morshed and Major Haasib.

Suddenly, we could see oval-shaped green gems floating like a garland on the ocean. An announcement boomed through the ether: "We are approaching Male International Airport on the Hulhule Island! Please fasten your seat belts." As the plane prepared for the landing, I felt a bit jittery about the impending contact of the Boeing with the runway. The difference between an Emirates and a PIA flight was evident. The Emirates flight from Dhaka to Karachi was so comfortable that after a few minutes I just forgot that I was on a plane and got fully absorbed in movies and music that was on offer.

The runway was almost empty with two small Airport buildings standing gloomily in front of us. We could see that the entire island at Hulhule was occupied by the runway, Airport Buildings and the jetty. The runway stretched from one corner of the island to another, which is unique in the world. The Airport itself was a recent phenomenon, opened only in 1977.

At the jetty, a mechanized traditional boat (locally called *Dheani*) awaited us. The weather was really rough, with a gloomy overcast sky. Our escort told us that the monsoon was not over yet, so the possibility of rains remained.

After a short journey through the dark blue waters of the Indian Ocean, we approached Male — capital of the Republic of Maldives. A few more small islands were scattered around the place. The boat passed through a coral stone breakwater and touched the shore of Male. After stepping into a marine drive, we took a taxi to Nasandhura Palace Hotel, our designated place of stay.

Located in the main shipping route of the Indian Ocean, Maldives has been known to seafarers for centuries. Locally it is called 'Dhivehi Raajee', the 'island kingdom'. The inhabitants

call themselves *Dhivehin* (islanders) and speak a unique language *Dhivehi*. *Dhivehi* belongs to the Indo-Iranian group of languages and resembles ancient Sinhala with Tamil roots. The Indian traders called the islands 'Maladiv' or a 'garland of islands'. It certainly looks like a festoon of green flowers strewn across the blue velvet of the Indian Ocean. Its closest neighbours are India — 600 kilometres to the north, and Sri Lanka — 670 kilometres to the east.

Lying on the equator, the archipelago is 823 kilometres long and 130 kilometres at the widest point. The islands are scattered over 90,000 square kilometres of the sea. There are about 1190 islands, of which only 200 are inhabited. The islands form 26 natural atolls, each enclosed by coral reef. For administrative purposes, these atolls are divided into 19 divisions. Surrounded by protective coral reefs and shallow lagoons, the islands are no more than two metres above sea-level and none more than five square kilometres in area.

Their most common features are tall palms, white sandy beaches, turquoise lagoons, and crystal clear waters. Some islands in the south are covered by lush green vegetation. The most common plant is coconut.

Life in a maritime environment has all along been difficult for the inhabitants of Maldives. But recent archaeological findings indicate that the islands were inhabited at least 4000 years ago. The first Dravidian settlers were followed by the Aryan immigrants around 500 B.C. Today, around a quarter million Maldivians display a diverse mixture of African, South and South East Asian, and Arabic influence in their features.

Throughout its known history, Maldives has remained independent except for a fifteen-year spell of Portuguese rule. Converted to Islam in the twelfth century, the population today is 100 per cent Sunni Muslim.

The economy of Maldives has long been based on fishing. Poor soil and limited land restricts farming. Consequently, staple food rice has to be imported. Traditional industry consists of boat building and handicrafts such as matweaving and jewellery.

Shipping occupies an im-

portant place in the economy. Social sectors such as education, health and infrastructure are looked after by the government. Although there are a handful of modern specialised hospitals, primary health care facilities are extended throughout the atolls. The literacy rate is an astounding 98 per cent, although the highest level of education on offer is Higher Secondary or GCE-A level.

The most remarkable success of the Maldives economy in recent years has been in the field of tourism. From a mere thousand tourists in 1972, tourist arrivals have increased to more than 2 lakh in 1993. The number of

Bangladeshes were also serving in various resort islands. Even some Bangladeshi women were working at a garments factory located in the Special Economic Zone on Ari atoll.

Some Bangladeshes were also serving in senior positions in Male including Resident Representative of the UNDP Mr Farash Uddin — an ex-civil servant. The central meeting place for the Bangladeshi community in Male is a dwelling, owned by Saiful Islam, the expatriate who received us at the airport. Amiable and warm-hearted, Mr Islam hailed from Munshiganj and was married to a Maldivian woman. He went to

Male as a teacher but later set up a thriving business. The centre that he set up was possibly done from a philanthropic consideration. Food and residence were provided to visiting Bangladeshes at a nominal cost. Every time we went to Islam's place, we found flocks of Bangladeshes gathered there.

While in Male, we had assignments at TV Male, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dhiraagu Earth Station and the Kurumba Resort Island. What impressed me was the modern values and businesslike approach of the Maldivian people in general. May be because of continuous interac-

tion with a steady stream of western tourists, they have adopted certain work-ethics and a modern outlook which is conducive for socio-economic development.

Male, by the way, has a full-fledged TV station, and through satellite dishes overseas television channels are also available. Bangladesh has a role in the growth of TV Male (TVM), as one of our television experts Syed Siddiq Hossain played a crucial role as a consultant.

Male, by the way, has only brick laid or concrete roads, and bicycle is the most commonly used mode of transport. Motor vehicles are limited in number and the only available public transport is dialled taxi service which charges a uniform rate. In either case, transport can not be a necessity when one can walk around the island in mere twenty minutes.

TVM has one of the few multistoried buildings in Male. It is situated near the UN Building — another multistoried entity. Most of the buildings in Male are single storied or two-storied ones, which is quite consistent with the small size of the island. The whole of Maldives appeared to me like a large market, with shops springing on every road-side. Large modern school buildings, a few hospitals, hotels, guest house and lodges, offices, markets, dwelling houses, other buildings and shops lined up on both sides of the crisscrossing roads in an unbroken strand. There was only one cinema hall showing local and Hindi films, a stadium and an indoor games hall which forms part of the centre for Social Education.

The commodities available in shops were mostly from India, Sri Lanka and South East Asia. All items needed for a modern living were available. Tourists flocked the island mostly on their way to resort islands or while going back home by air.

Male also has a good banking and travel agency network. Both foreign banks as well as the local Bank of Maldives operate. Bank of Maldives, by the way, started its operation in collaboration with a Bangladesh bank. Although Islam and Sharia is the guiding principle of Maldivian society, many liberal attributes are also visible. Women are found to be equal in number both on the streets as well as in offices

and businesses. Free mixing is allowed and women wearing modern dresses as well as traditional varieties can be seen. Men and women prefer to marry within their community. The whole society seems to be an easygoing fun-loving lot. This may have been reflected by the divorce rate, which is highest in the world, even more than the USA. Previously polygamy was quite common, but now it is an exception rather than the rule. When there are two wives, they are kept separately. The parents are responsible for the children only until they grow up. After that they go their separate ways. There is no word in *Dhivehi* for hello or goodbye. The people take deaths of near ones very lightly. They do not mourn openly. Mockery is made of people who cry in the open. Apparent insignificance in the face of a huge ocean as well as an easygoing island-life may be responsible for these attributes.

According to legend, an Arab converted the Buddhist King Theemugey Maha Kalimnija to Islam. When Abu Al-Barakat arrived in 1153 AD, he found a "colony of ignorant idolators". By exorcising the demon god Rannamari, who came from the sea on Male island every full moon to rape and kill a local virgin offered as a sacrifice, Al-Barakat won the gratitude and admiration of all. He did this by dressing as a girl and spending all night reading aloud the Quran. It was all too much for the sea monster, who departed forever. The Maldivian ruler was so impressed that he converted to Islam and persuaded his subjects to do the same.

The famous Arab traveller Ibn Battuta also came to Maldives in 1344 during the reign of Sultan Khadeeja Rashedi. His writings provide the earliest descriptive account of Maldives and its inhabitants. He commented that the islands were the most agreeable he had seen and "one of the wonders of the world", quite a statement from a man who had visited ninety-two countries. Battuta stayed on Male for about ten months, but within that short period he took four temporary wives, and was made a Gazi or chief enforcer of Islamic law by the Sultan. He left a detailed record about the country, its government, customs and religion — painting a favourable picture.

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Maldives: Miracle in the Ocean

by Helal Uddin Ahmed

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Enjoying the sun on a Maldivian beach

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