

F·E·A·T·U·R·E

THE city's flood-protection barrier has become home to thousands of mainly rural immigrants. Displaced farmers and their landless families have created a community that lines this great man-made ridge of earth for more than ten miles. A stroll along a small stretch of this now bustling thoroughfare that encircles Dhaka reveals something of life on the embankment.

To reach the embankment proper at Muhammadpur ghat from the head of Saatmasjid Road, a maze of shops, *chaa* stalls, makeshift huts and haphazardly parked trucks has to be negotiated.

Repair shops and mechanics have proliferated around this area taking advantage of the truck stand which waits the delivery of goods by river into the city.

Perhaps the most lucrative of small businesses in this area, however, are the medicine shops selling everything from cheap and out-of-date pharmaceutical drugs to local 'quack' cures. One example of the latter is a slimy extract of a plant known as *ulat kamal*, claimed as a cure for constipation. This particular remedy, in fact, has a long folk tradition (though, these days, the unhygienic conditions under which it is prepared probably add greatly to its purgative effects).

Climbing the dirt road that rises to the elevation of the embankment, you are faced with the backsides of countless *bastis*, leaning one on the other like a line of dusty dominoes, stretching to your left as right as far as the eye can see.

Then, you are standing on the embankment facing the slowly setting sun. But instead of the waters of the Turag which meets the Buriganga about a mile further south, in the middle of this *bashantia* season, the river has fled and land is visible upto the horizon. Here and there, a lake of trapped riverwater glows pink reflecting the sun and contrasting with the green paddy that carpets an area that in the rainy season lies ten feet under the Turag river.

A network of paths and narrow tracks crisscross this land to meet a small road which runs parallel to the embankment before snaking away to connect a string of villages, nestled on high ground among palm and bamboo, to the mainland. When the Turag rises, this road is fully submerged with only the pylons and powerlines that run alongside it visible above the water. The way to commute between the villages and the mainland, then, is to make use of the frequent services of the passenger boats which line the embankment, but which now play the Buriganga further down.

Another feature of the landscape which is particular to this dry season are the numerous brick factories which mushroom during winter from the base of the embankment to the river far beyond sight.

Taking a left turn, in a southerly direction towards Rayerbazar ghat, a wide dusty road lined with huts and stalls on the city side, open to the sunset on your right side, is filled with men, women and children. This road atop the flood-wall is destined to become the main Dhaka bypass road at the end of the second phase of the embankment project, which began in the late eighties.

In its current first phase of construction, the Dhaka flood-protection embankment stretches 67 km, covering an area of 143 sq km, from Tongi Bridge in the north, along the Turag to meet the Buriganga, ending at the Buriganga bridge. Thirty kilometres of its length is little more than earth piled up to an average height of 5 metres. The remaining 37 km is a more structured flood wall.

However, its planned future as a major highway has done little to deter settlers. The thatched bamboo huts, situated behind and a little further down from the small shops which are perched on top of the embankment, hide among sparse vegetation which provides a minimum amount of privacy.

Although it costs between Tk 4000-5000 to buy a plot from those that illegally control the area, to rent a ready-made bamboo-constructed dwelling costs upto Tk 500 a month. Which is almost affordable for most of the previously drifting population who have migrated here.

The inhabitants of the embankment community are these days able to earn a relatively secure, if tough, livelihood from a number of micro-industries that have blossomed in this area. These include transporting goods by cyclecart to markets in the city; brickmaking and brickbreaking; diving to dredge sand for making cement from the riverbottom (using little more equipment than buckets on a rope); and selling home-made *madh* or 'hooch', made from sugar cane or date palm juice.

Each unit of plots — 1/4 mile in length, marked out by red flags, and comprising around 300-400 dwellings — belongs to one of a number of 'landlords', who stand in unofficial local elections for control of this area. Needless to say, the exchange of money represented by each unit is significant enough, but smuggling opportunities (of items such as phensidyl) around this riverside location are an added source of income for many of these wealthy city-based 'landlords'.

This is also a popular area among political activists to

Life on the Embankment



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hide caches of illegal arms — a single hut among a thousand others makes for a safe enough place to store their weapons.

Walking a little further on, another unofficial structure is encountered, this one a little more permanently constructed from concrete. A mosque which, while serving the religious needs of the embankment community, has nevertheless been illegally erected.

As in fact have been all the timber-burning brickfields in sight, belching out smoke which clouds the horizon. Though the burning of timber has been outlawed as an illegal form of pollution, you can easily count at least twenty twin-stacked chimneys of twenty separate brick factories emitting a haze of smog which drifts lazily towards the city. Among the rows of drying bricks are great piles of grey sand, the barrea fruit of hard labour by the dredgers of the Buriganga. Both bricks and sand, along with brick chips, are sold to construction companies in the city.

Despite the smog and the dust of the road, which swirls up when an occasional loaded truck rumbles by, this walk is a partial escape from the real dirt and grime of the city. Cows and goats graze close by and provide meat and milk to sell. Often the local landlords provide the money to buy these animals, the embankment dwellers raise and rear them, and the profits are shared.

Another few hundred yards ahead, and you are lucky if you don't miss a small granite marker, in front of a large brickpile at the base of the embankment. The words inscribed read: 'Have you said what you had to say, Bangladesh?'. This small stone structure marks the spot behind the present brickfield where Pakistani soldiers took the intellectuals of the liberation movement, shot them, and dumped their bodies (in what was at that time also a brickfield). This area, recently inaugurated by the prime minister, is therefore under a government scheme to build a *shaheed minar* and memorial park commemorating those martyrs to Bangladesh's independence.

As you approach Rayerbazar ghat and Hazaribag, great mounds of earthenware pot-



tery appear, made in the surrounding villages of Vikrampur, and destined to be filled with yoghurt by sweet shops in the city. Bicycle carts loaded with vegetables are pushed and pulled up the steep incline to the embankment from the road below.

The newly built ZH Sikder Women's Medical College and Hospital, fortunately located for our embankment dwellers, marks the end of our walk.

As does a hellish smell rising from the stagnant bilge that has collected in the low-lying area inside the embankment. This disgusting purple-black mire is the result of highly toxic waste water illegally released from the Hazaribag tanneries. When this area floods the poisoned water enters hundreds of homes, and is often drained through trenches dug by locals, or pumped over the embankment, to pollute the Turag

river. Although the many small NGOs who work this area have provided a number of tube-wells, the main source of water for most embankment dwellers is this river.

To get from the embankment ghat to Rayerbazar, this water has to be crossed along a raised path. You will not notice any corrugated tin roofs in the area, because, say locals, they disintegrate in this atmosphere; even jewellery does not last, according to the women. The rotting, chemical stench literally takes your breath away, making you cough and choke even after covering your mouth and face with whatever is at hand.

A regretful end to a fascinating journey through the world of the embankment dwellers. A home to thousands, this city surrounding a city; their presence may appear to be established, but the future is insecure.



E·D·U·C·A·T·I·O·N

Tanvir Mokammel

AS TS Elliot once wrote, "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" It seems that we the Bengalees, once known to be a nation with intellectual curiosity, are fast losing grip on the world scenario of human knowledge and day-by-day, getting bogged down in the quagmire of sterile hartal-culture.

While preparing my manuscript on Antonio Gramsci and his concept of civil society, I came to learn, and soon became curious about a social-thinker from Scandinavia — NFS Grundtvig (1783-1872). If you can visualise the combination in one person an educator, a hymn-writer, a parliamentarian, a man with manifold gifts, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, steeped in the true renaissance spirit, was a rebel with a cause, and for the social development of his country — a prophetic visionary.

A prophetic writer (it is said that no Dane has ever read all his pieces), Grundtvig the cleric was not at all the brooding melancholic Christian, burdened by the conflict of body and soul. Grundtvig's Christianity was essentially a joyful Christianity. According

to him, religion's task is not to free man "from" this life, rather to liberate mankind "for" this life here on this every earth. He had almost his own version of theology and used Christian idioms to convey secular ideas. A great enthusiast of teaching through mother-tongue, and with deep aversion towards pedantic Latin and German, Grundtvig, propagated the idea that ancient myths can be rejuvenated, and himself used Nordic mythology for contemporary patriotic purposes. Grundtvig had the remarkable ability to transpose his personal experiences into poetry and wrote more than fifteen hundred hymns and his unique gift as a lyricist and composer was almost the Tagorean.

But the greatest contribution by Grundtvig to Danish culture was his idea of enlightenment of the subaltern classes, especially the peasantry. To him education should not be a means for material well-being only, it should also be the end to reach the ever-increasing boundary of human development. And to achieve that goal Grundtvig enunciated an unique solution, that is the Folk High School, or as it is called in Danish *Folkehøjskole*. It is a kind of a school where people gather for quest of knowledge only. The school has no examination no test. Text books and classnotes are not at all important. What is important is 'the living word', dialogue among equal, self-respecting individuals with no hierarchy. Literature, history, philosophy, ecology, music, drama, art-appreciation, film

Grundtvig, Tagore and in the Land of the Living

physical education, gymnastics, name any subject under the sun and there is a folk high school in Denmark to take care of it.

History was definitely created on 7th November 1844 when eighteen Khetmajors gathered at a farmhouse in the small town of Rodding in South Jutland to enlist themselves as the world's first folk high school students. Today there are more than a hundred folk high schools functioning all over Denmark and quite a few dozens more in the other Nordic countries, especially in Sweden and Norway. Most folk high schools run courses of four to eight months long. Some offer short summer courses as well. Average attendance at Danish folk high schools now is around sixty thousand per year and each year about 2 per cent of Denmark's entire adult population go to some folk high school. Grundtvig was contemporary of two other Danes much more known internationally — Hans Christian Anderson and Soren Kierkegaard, but perhaps it was Grundtvig, who with his idea of enlightenment of the people through folk high schools, had the most indelible mark on Danish culture.

Regarding imparting education to the peasantry, Grundtvig used to say, "What sunlight is the dark soil? Is the light of truth to the soil's friends?" Formation of the folk high schools, which caused a cultural awakening in the rural areas, further resulted in community hall meetings, and especially, agricultural cooperatives which impressed Nehru so much. With this cooperatives, the once downtrodden Danish peasantry soon emerged as a strong pressure group in the polity of the country. And the most significant aspect of these cooperatives were their democratic character: "votes were per head, not heads of cattle. Democracy began to take firm footing at the grass-root of rural Denmark."

Regarding development of the peasantries Tagore also had some ideas quite similar to Grundtvig, which he had tried, first in Sheldah, and later in Sriniketan. During my research work I stayed a few days with a farming family in Jutland. The history of the family, in microcosm, provided me an insight how deeply Grundtvig's ideas influenced Danish farmers, both culturally and materially in their upliftment.

There are all different types of folk schools as there could

be interpretations of Grundtvig. But they all have one thing in common — Folkehøjskole Songbook. The folk high school Songbook, of which the major contribution is of Grundtvig, and which most Danish families do have one, functions as Tagore's Geetabitan, does to the Bengalees.

Influenced by Grundtvig's ideas, The International People's College (IPC) was founded in 1921 in Helsingore by Peter Manniche, a peace-visionary. This unique institution is almost like Shantiniketan as envisaged by Tagore during its pristine days. Since its inception, more than fifty thousand students from all over the world have participated in the courses offered by this International Folk High School. Peter Manniche (1889-1981) the first principal and the founder of the institution was greatly influenced by Ruskin, particularly Ruskin's desire for a close connection, between education and manual labour, ideas which were to alien to Gandhi too.

Peter Manniche's aim was to found an institution where students from all over the world could live and work together to promote international understanding and peace. And such was the suc-

cess of the school that in 1988 the institution was designated as a "Peace Messenger" by the United Nations.

Tagore himself went to IPC in 1933 and stayed there for three days as a guest lecturer. Representatives of seventeen nationalities listened to Tagore's lectures and several university men and folk high school organisers came to meet the Nobel-laureate from the Orient. At Borup Folk High School in Copenhagen, in front of a large number of artists and critics, Tagore spoke on The Principles of Art. At the Knight's Hall at Kronberg, Hamlet's castle, Tagore delivered his exquisitely beautiful and oft-quoted lecture, "My Religion." Yes, IPC is close to the centre of Helsingore (Shakespeare's Elsinore), the hometown of his sullen prince, Hamlet.

To stay in Elsinore and to study together with students from thirty-two countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America, was itself a fascinating experience for me. And between the classes, or when one just wanted to be alone, feeling nostalgic about the hustle-bustle of our dear old Dhaka or the lush green countryside of Bengal, I used to sit silently on the terraces of Hamlet's castle, watching the beautiful blue strait of the Sound.

The world of academic these days is becoming highly internationalised. I, a Bangladeshi, was taught by an Australian professor about a Danish author, and my research-guide was an American Professor Steven Borish from



Stanford University, who himself has an incisive research work on Grundtvig titled as The Land of the Living, was my guide to help me to understand Grundtvig's pedagogic ideas and his concept of 'folkelighed'. As a prelude to that, the social history of Denmark, and especially the land-reforms of the 19th century, which ushered in the modern democratic Denmark, figured prominently in our research discussions.

It seems that the Bangladesh society, which is now under the shadow of conservative Islam, can learn a few things from Grundtvig's idea of enlightenment. It was immensely interesting for me to observe how the democratic values operated in the Danish institutions, especially at the grassroots level. By watching the way the Danish civil society functioned, my notion got reaffirmed that to enlighten the teeming millions of our peasantry, the most essential prerequisite is non-formal education. For the much required mission of enlightenment of the downtrodden, and to establish democracy at the grassroots level in rural Bangladesh, Grundtvig can be a very positive beacon for us. A beacon towards the path which Tagore also dreamt of.