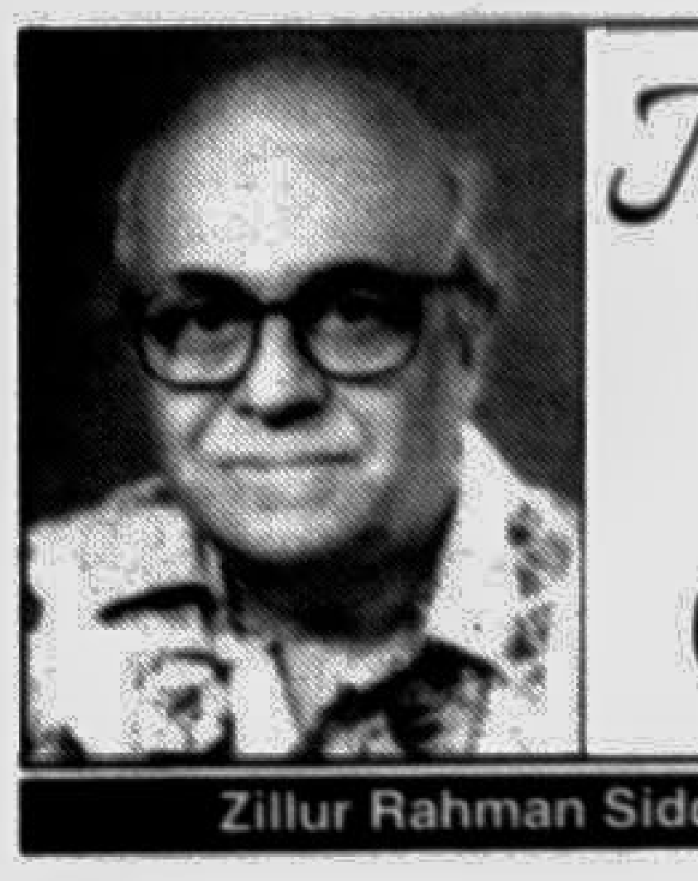
Star Literature

DHAKA, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1996



Myself and Others

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

JOURNALS COME AND GO BUT editors go on for ever. This would apply to journalists, too, as a professional class. Journalists in our country are a specially mobile lot. I have met some who are hardly forty, and who have been in the profession for about fifteen years or so and who have already been in and out of at least six or seven papers. These papers, in their turn, cover the entire range of periodicals, dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies, etc. The journalists seem to flit, butterfly like, from paper to paper. The case of editors is slightly different. They are not a wandering lot. They do not change places. They keep changing their mistresses, the periodicals that they, Pygmalion like, create and fashion with a loving imagination and then follows a period of doting. The story often has an end bordering on the tragic. Sooner or later, the mistress withers and fades away.

There are differences and exceptions but the pattern I have outlined above will be true of many. And certainly it is true of me. Twice in my life I tried and I failed in becoming an editor, by which I mean, somebody who will be distinguished by that name.

One winter morning at Rajshahi, thirty-five years ago, PURBAMEGA was conceived, in the lawns of Bholanath Bishsheswara Hindu Academy, as we, a few teachers of the university, made a circle there, and bemoaned the absence of a literary journal. Sikander Abu Jafar's Samakal notwithstanding, we felt the absence. Samakal was a Dhaka thing, somewhat remote from Rajshahi and we wanted a periodical that we could call our own and one with which we could be more intimately involved.

Purbamegha had a chequered career of about ten years. It was a quarterly 'devoted to arts and letters', a self-description that sounded like bragging, but that held the essential truth. Ten years should have produced forty issues of the quarterly but in fact there were only twenty-three. We were two joint editors, — myself and Mustafa Nurul Islam of the Bengali department. Our roles were complementary to each other and the collaboration worked. Mr. Islam was particularly good at what I may call literary scouting. Every time he visited Dhaka, he brought either some material or some commitment from Dhaka-based writers, who co-operated fully with our mofassil venture. None was too high for Purbamegha, though some were too busy to oblige us. All contributions were given gratis. That was the order of the day. If we made any payment any time to any body, I will be grateful for that precious information.

I know that Purbamegha is often mentioned approvingly by those who make a survey of the literary scene of the sixties. The editors draw comfort not only from the fact that so many of our writers who have since matured into established writers wrote for Purbamegha when they were young — among the Rajshahi contingent were, Badruddin Umar and Hasan Azizul Huq — but also from the fact that the formidable Governor Monem Khan took note of the mischief that we were doing. He showed his impatience in some of his public speeches and his intelligence services were able to so frighten our printers that he found an excuse not to work for us.

My next venture was DIPANKAR. Another story of unsuccess and of a shorter life. The idea was that the journal would fill a void in the field of literary journalism, and at a time when the literary page of the dailies were the last resorts of our writers. Literature has been reduced to ephemera, food for a day's reading, and destined for a most ignoble end. I failed, and Dipankar, promising light, flickered and finally ended in smoke. As an editor, I failed in one vital respect: scouting for writers and their contributions. It is a special talent and my Purbamegha co-editor, Mustafa Nurul Islam, is making full use of it. His SUNDARAM has had a successful career as a journal that eschews both poetry and fiction, and thrives on a protein-rich diet of essays and reviews. Hats off to a valient editor.

No moral need be drawn from my misadventures as an editor of a literary journal. The field is less empty now and a few brave warriors I can see still holding the flag high. Some of them are more fortunate in respect of logistic support. One can still be an editor without being much of a literary figure himself, but without steady and adequate logistic support there is hardly any hope of a literary journal avoiding premature death. But even with this support, the chances of a pure-bred are slim. Cross-breds have a better chance.

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ways of seeing

The Photographic Message

by James R Killingsworth

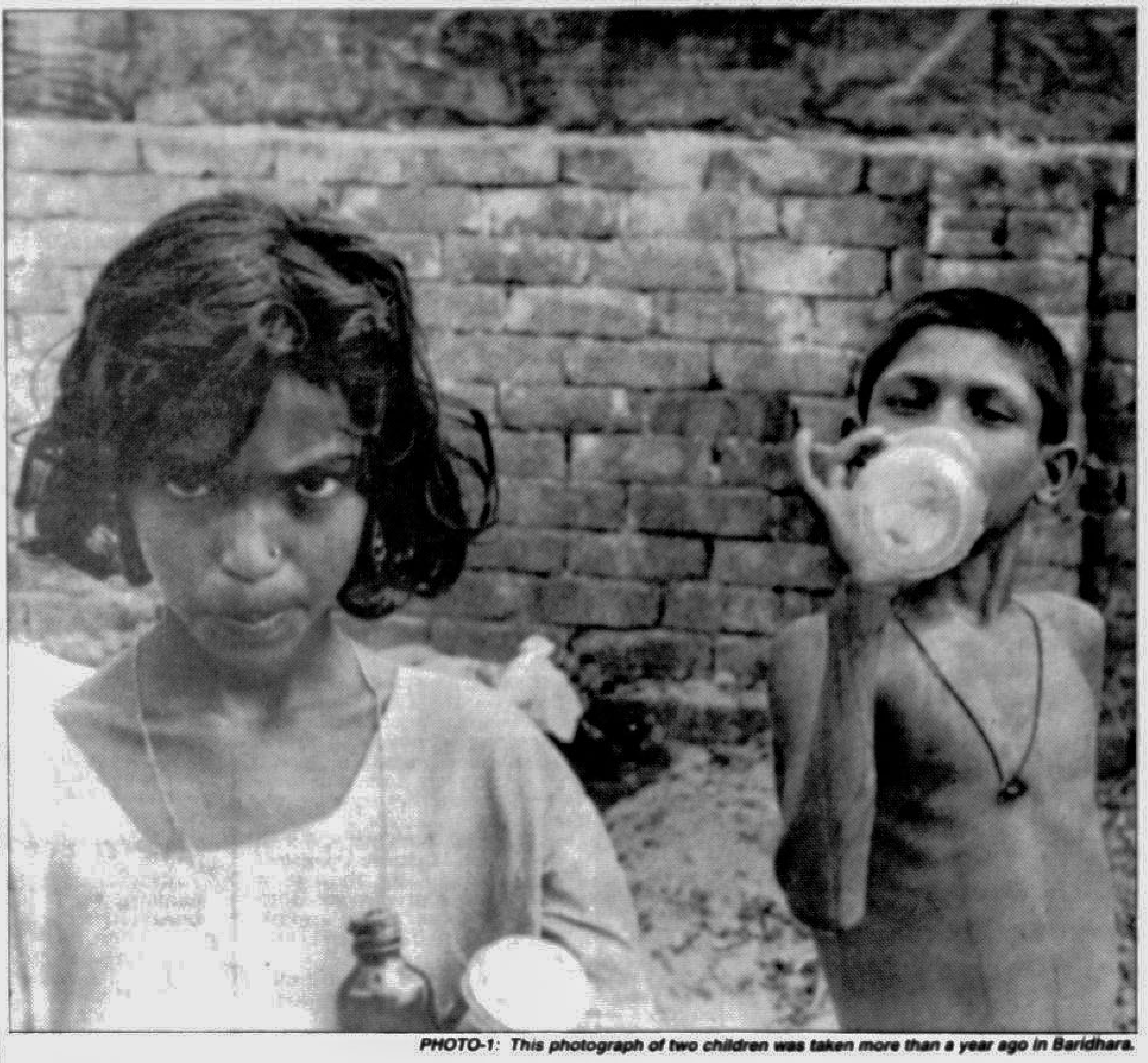

PHOTO-1: This photograph of two children was taken more than a year ago in Baridhara.

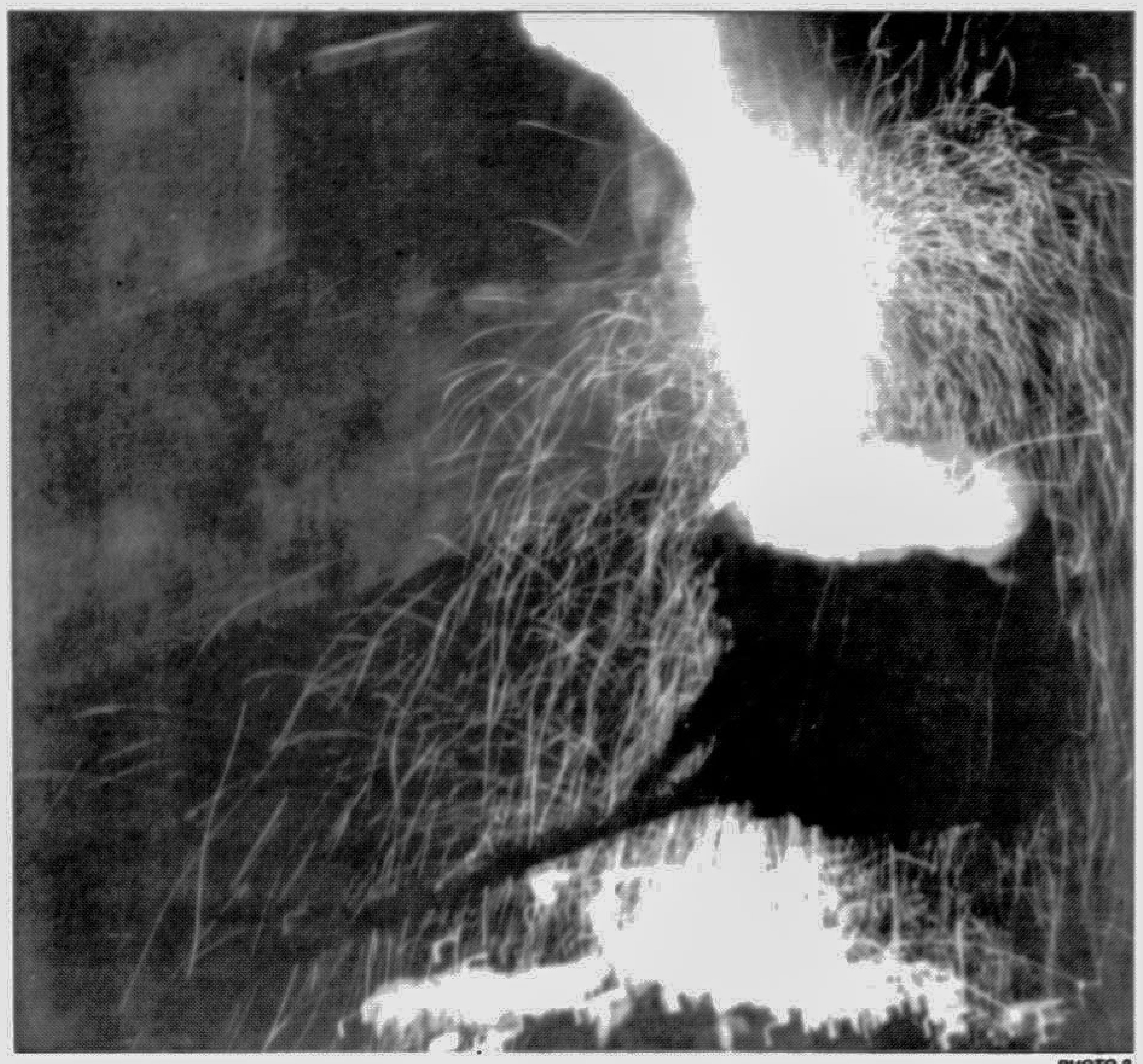

PHOTO-2

Question 1: Does it have a message, a story behind it? What is the story here? Do all photographs have a message? Is the story the same as the message?

Question 2: Another kind of questions is about what is "right there" in a photograph? What draws us in for a close look at some photographs? How do we regard photographs? Why do we flick through a pile of photos in a matter of minutes, picking out only a few to come back to later but yet keeping so many "to look at later"? What are we doing with these bits of paper?

Question 3: Still another kind of question is about photographic images in general. Some people do not even speak of photographs, preferring merely to speak of images. Are they images like the images of a poem? What are they like? What are they?

Response to Question 1: There is a story about the photograph of the children. The little girl approached me, wanting her picture taken. Until her little brother showed-up to annoy her, she had a radiant smile. I like to call this photograph: "Little Brother." But is this story the photograph's message? There are reasonably accepted and settled opinions about this question, namely that the story is not the message. The French essayist Roland Barthes contended that news photos and even some "art photographs" do provide a message or sign structure. He called it an analogy-message expressed in "non-code" (Barthes, Image, Music, Text). A caption, headline or other story [text] serves to anchor a photographic message such as the one in the photo of the children, but the text is a second sign structure, not the originary photographic message.

By giving the photograph of the children the caption "Little Brother," we can partly test Barthes ideas. According to Barthes, "Little Brother" should act as, "a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating...." The caption-text will add a "change of structures and signifies something different to what is shown." It manages to harness the wild pony. When a text accompanies a photograph — even if the text is a mere headline — it adds fresh information to the chain of "signifieds" released by the photograph. The function of photo-text is not just to help us "identify" with the non-linear field of signs present in the "picture." Rather, Barthes says that the text counters "the terror of uncertain signs" of which the photographic image largely consists.

Let us assume that Barthes is correct. If so, then the process of changing structures by adding a caption will necessarily create a difference or distance between the understandable code and signification of the text, on the one hand, and the indescribable non-code and signification of the photograph on the other. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein stated the core of the text-photograph matter: "In certain circumstances, I describe a photograph in order to describe the thing it is a photograph of" (Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations) A text — even a caption — helps us select what to describe and also provides what we call a "description." But, according to Barthes, the code for this description and the source of distance from the non-code of the photograph's message is the text, not the photograph.

Barthes also thought it quite important that today the text "illustrates" the photograph. Before photographs became so dense in our environment, pictures illustrated text. Now, something which is "literally impossible" to describe [the task of the photographic non-code and its significant analogies] is illustrated by text [a linguistic code and its significance]. Such an inversion, to the extent that it characterizes a culture, is worth thinking about. The vice of language is important but its importance becomes secondary and dependent upon the indescribable photographic message, not the other way round. If the only description is, logically speaking, from the text to the photograph, then how can we understand the connection between the message and ourselves? Particularly perplexing is the claim that the message is not the description of the story. And still we are left to wonder about the photo-centric preferences in the marketplace cultures of our day.

Response to Question 2: Answers are not so very clear for the second question. Since there are many possible choices where there are many possible answers, it is wise to show a proper humility about what is right there in a photograph, about why we collect and keep these little bits of paper.

One answer is this: "What is there is what we regard as there." If we read a verse from Gitanjali, we regard the verse as a meaningful literary unit — perhaps one composed of "poetic" images accompanied by an admonition operating on at least two levels:

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Pluck this little flower and take it, delay
not! I fear lest it droop and drop into the dust.

How do we regard a photograph? What do we regard as there? Whether the photograph-message and text-message are clear to us, we see something there — obviously, the thing photographed.

To be contined

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The Dark and the Dry : Two Novelistic Views of Colonialism

by Serajul Islam Chowdhury

Continued from the last week

THE MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP in Conrad and Forster is one of colonial subjugation. What Kurtz does creates for him and in him is a kind of alienation; and it is only to be expected that he should have no creative relationship with either of the two women he is personally connected with. To speak positively, Kurtz, the colonialist, treats both women not as subjects, but as objects, exercising his will in the typical manner of an exploiter and betraying them both without scruples or sentiments. The intended as well as the African woman is majestic; the African female walks with measure steps draped in striped and fringed cloths, treating the earth proudly, carrying her head high. Her face is tragic, her sorrow wild, pain dumb. She is royal in everything she does. The intended lives in a very impressive house. Her parents are rich; there was some objection from the family to the union between her and Kurtz.

"She carried her sorrowful head as though she was able to bring two such women under his domination is symptomatic of his genius, and that he had betrayed the intended and lived with the African woman and finally deserted her as well are definitely a measure of the colonialist's moral decline. Marlow is chivalrous. He goes on making observations like, "It is queer how out of touch with truth women are". "They live a world of their own," and "They — the women I mean — are out of it — should be out of it. We must help them to stay in the beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." This is really patronisation, not far away from paternalism. What women need is equality, and equality is what they are denied, by both Marlow and Kurtz, the difference in their outlook is only degree and not of kind. The hairdresser's dummy of an Accountant forces a big black woman to launder clothes from him, allowing him to look like a miracle in an environment where everything else is unclean and disorderly. This exploitation of the labour of an object who is at once a native and a female is typical of what happens in a world characterised by the double subjugation of the coloniser and the male.

Forster's colonial ambiance is equally male dominated. The Indians women are shadowy; they are not seen, and their existence is functional, for they are only wives, mothers, daughters and the like, objects, rather than subjects. The English women move about, but only within a very well-defined circle. If they are worse than men, as the Indians and fielding find them to be, it is because what their male guardians have made them into.

Joseph Conrad

E M Forster

Aziz is enlightened, compared with many of his compatriots; the Anglo-Saxan suspicion that he might have more than one wife angers him; but when he takes a second wife (the first being dead) the event does not become exactly a marriage "although he liked to regard it as one." Aziz's sexual fantasies are not only "hard" and "direct," they are characteristically "brutal." Fielding finds it particularly distasteful that Aziz's sensuality should be "snobbish." Because Aziz thought it disgraceful to have been mentioned in connection with Adela, whom he considered to be nothing more than a "hag." Fielding does not mind sensuality with a mistress (the liberal male that he is) , but is repulsed by Aziz's "derived sensuality," the sort that classes a mistress among motor cars, if she is beautiful. "Fielding is right in recognizing in this attitude the desire for possessions.

What is clear is that the subjugated are, in relation to their women, themselves subjugators. Because of his experiences in colonial India, Aziz changes. He becomes anti-British and a believer in the emancipation of women. "The purdash must go," becomes the burden of his poems on womanhood. But the "we" he is thinking of are men, and not women. Fielding's response is entirely correct when he says "Try it, my lord. Free your own lady in the first place, and see who'll wash Ahmed, Karim and Jamila's face. A nice situation." In his frenzy Aziz does not hear what Fielding is saying. His agenda is different. "Clear out," he says, adding " If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will," yes, but not Jamila. She will remain where she is, even when the English have been driven away. Aziz has the "fantastic" notion that had women as well as men fought at Palassey, Indians would not have been conquered. But India would have remained men's India, nevertheless. Even if free, it could not have changed its character.

The ideology of colonialism is more pervasive and enduring than is generally admitted. In spite of their settings, both novels are European texts. Conrad had always been conservative, but even Forster, the liberal, who believed in completeness of life and tried, continually, to be fair, and was ready to raise two cheers for democracy, if not three. It is a commonplace of literary history that colonialism has contributed significantly too the development of the novel, providing it directly with subjects for fictional treatment and, indirectly, helping the growth of the reading public. Daniel and Samuel Richardson had included colonial materials in their writings, even the gentle Jane Austen had not entirely forgotten the colonies. Dickens found colonies helpful to transport the hopefuls and the intransigent, and Hardy could make use of them in relation to the development of his characters. But at the end of the nineteenth century colonialism had changed, not certainly in character, but unmistakably in its conduct, having become more aggressive, pretentions, all-embracing and unavoidable. Neither Conrad nor Forster could keep it at the periphery, and had to admit it to the center; although Forster was reluctant to do so.

And in dealing with colonialism both novelists showed that the novel as a form of literature is anti-colonial much in the same in which it is anti-feudal. The novel does not believe in the subjugation of man by man or even of the female by male. What it celebrates is the societal instinct of man. What it seeks to do is to bring people together, breaking the confines of both feudalism and capitalism. The novel is more than a bourgeois form; it is socialistic in aspiration.

Both Heart of darkness and A Passage to India are tragic and they are so primarily because of the persistence of an unbridgeable inequality in human relationship. The inequality is largely man-made and is incurable in the Conradian as well as the Forsterian way. For neither personal salvation as in Conrad nor kindness as in Forster would do. The two novels point out the disease but do not suggest a cure, or perhaps they do, in a negative sense, for they display the nature of the malady as well as the need for togetherness, if not happiness. People must come together, the novels suggest. In two different voices, the same announcement is made to the effect that the dwarfing of man by man is unacceptable to the novels. It is indeed unacceptable to the novel itself as a form of literary creation, as it was to the epics in the past. ■