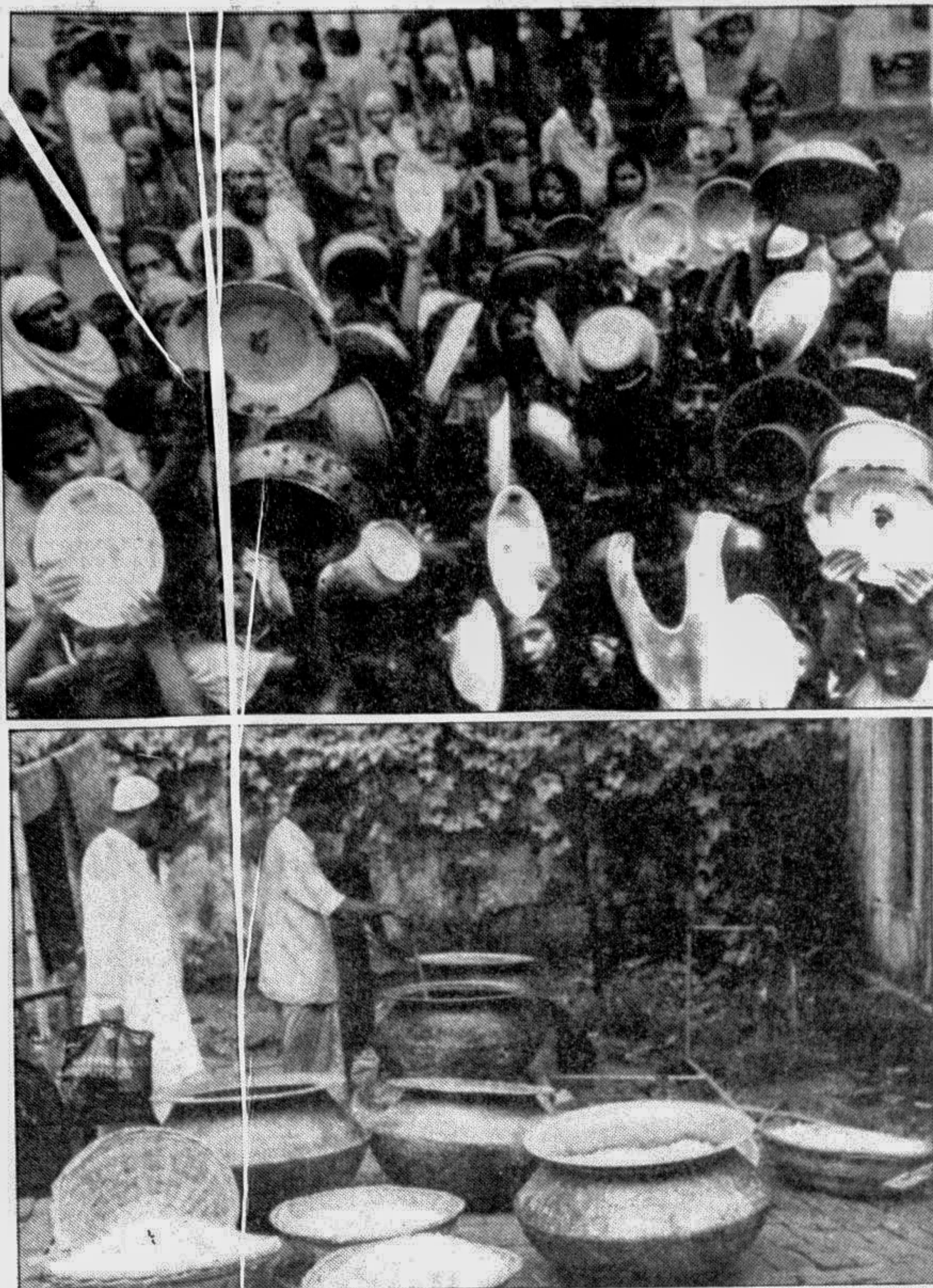


Gruel Kitchen



Whenever there is a calamity affecting a large number of people, government or philanthropic organisations arrange for gruel kitchens to feed them. One such opened at Armanitola High School in the city (left) attracts a sizable crowd (above) while children find a full big bowl (covered by the stooping partakers) to their delight (right). — Star photos by A K M Mohsin.



PHOTO FEATURE ON FLOOD

Flood 1998: Austerity Measures Must be Taken Now

Dr Khalilur Rahman writes from Geneva

While we should strive for garnering foreign assistance for post-flood rehabilitation programmes, we should also try to initiate necessary austerity measures in the country immediately.

SITTING around 6000 miles away from the country is possible to get the real picture of the situation the ongoing devastating flood has caused in our country only by watching flood on the television or gathering information on that from the news media. Still I tend to realise that this devastating flood in our recent time has put the country in a vulnerable economic situation.

The decision by the Prime Minister not to go to South Africa to participate in the NAM Summit is a very wise one. Her presence in the country will not only encourage the affected people to face this menacing situation arising out of this flood; but it will also ensure better management of the situation by the administration.

We should, however, first of all appreciate the fact that the ongoing flood in Bangladesh is not an isolated case; nor is it happening because of any specific reason or specific act of anybody. The whole region including Japan, China, India are also equally and in some cases more affected by this unprecedented spell of flood. One may perhaps conclude from this year's flood that whenever there are floods in China, there are floods in Bangladesh.

In 1988 too, there was flood in China. This fact perhaps our flood control authority should have appreciated well in advance and undertook whatso-

ever possible precautionary and other appropriate measures. In this short write-up I am, however, not going to look for the reasons of this flood. My only objective is just to offer some suggestion that the Government may consider to undertake immediately in order to save the most required foreign currency at this moment and use this money in the post-flood rehabilitation programmes and activities.

While we should strive for garnering foreign assistance for post-flood rehabilitation programmes, we should also try to initiate necessary austerity measures in the country immediately. Compared to the estimated amount of money that would be required for post-flood rehabilitation programmes, the suggestion I am making, may perhaps enable the Government to save only a negligible amount of that total required money. Still I strongly feel that the Government can save some amount of money by undertaking some practical austerity measures.

1. The Government has to spend a fair amount of money in foreign currency every year to ensure our country's representation in various interna-

tional meetings and conferences. The season of the international meetings in the international organisations including the UN, usually starts from September. It will continue till mid-December. After recession of one or two months, it will again start in full swing from February and will continue until mid-July. A fair amount of money in foreign currency may be saved by restricting travel from the country by Government officials, law makers, social workers and others for participation in international meetings at Government's cost.

Representing our country in international meetings could well be ensured by officers posted in our Missions. The Government may also consider imposing temporary ban on travel to be undertaken by officers of the Missions in third country unless it is very important and really needed. The frequency and number of such travels (to third countries) should also be greatly reduced. All other avoidable travels may be postponed for six months. The size of the delegation to various international meetings should be greatly reduced. Only the essential officers and staff should form the government

delegation.
2. Unnecessary local staff in our Missions abroad should be retrenched. In an era of computer technology, officers can very well do without any staff.
3. Budgeted money for office equipment, furniture and contingencies could be withdrawn from all the Ministries and the Departments of the Government for this year.
4. All budgeted money for recurrent expenditures may be reduced at least by fifty per cent in all Government offices.
5. Restrictions should also be imposed on using government telephone for overseas calls.

The Government may immediately issue necessary executive orders in above mentioned and other areas wherever applicable, aiming at reducing government expenditures to a great extent. A few million US dollars could well be saved by undertaking such measures.

The country is really having a menacing situation from this ongoing devastating flood. While commenting on the Government's appeal for international assistance, many foreigners said that the Government was obliged to seek for in-

ternational assistance. They are of the view that the Government did it only when it understood that it was not possible for an LDC like her to cope up with the situation caused by this flood. Unlike in the past, the Government did not ask for international assistance from the day one of the flood to exploit it. They are also of the view that the late appeal by the Government for international assistance is reflective of self-dignity of a poor country like Bangladesh.

At this moment of emergency, another aspect we should also take into our due account. The Prime Minister has rightly said that this is the time to sink all of our differences and to work together. It is really the time to work hands in hands, shoulder with shoulder to once again prove that we can face the challenges unitedly, together and firmly. It would be most unethical, unwise, unfair and inhuman to engage in politics by using this flood. All citizens, all classes of people have role to play in overcoming the damages caused by this flood and to put forward the ongoing pace of economic development of the country.

I conclude by citing one ex-

ample. The economic sanction on Pakistan following her nuclear bomb explosion invoked many austerity measures by the Government of Pakistan. The purpose is to save their foreign currency. This is known to all. What perhaps is not known to many of us is that even much before the imposition of economic sanction following the nuclear explosion, the present Government of Pakistan undertook some concrete austerity measures to save their hard earned foreign currency to recover from their deteriorating economic situation. One of the said measures was imposition of ban on wide foreign travel at Government's cost.

According to one Pakistan Finance Ministry official, they are saving a few millions dollars each year out of this ban. We are witness to the fact that even without large participation from the Pakistani capital, Pakistan is being well represented in all the international meetings by their diplomats posted in their Missions. Our diplomats posted in Missions have also the capability and potentials to adequately and properly represent our country in international meetings. If Pakistan Government can undertake such austerity measures, why cannot we?

Views expressed in this write-up do not reflect any Government's position.

India Now Just a Mouse-click Away

by Durga Ray

ITCHING to get some scholarly analysis of Indian filmstar Govinda's acting, or the latest stock prices on the Bombay Stock Exchange? Want to know where Tirupati is, or the various ways in which an Indian classical dance is performed? No more rushing off to the nearest library or a scholarly Indophile. Just browse for Khoj.com on the Internet, or any of the 30-odd search engines that provide information on and links to India-related web sites.

With the Internet fast becoming the pet platform for everyone, from corporate bigwigs to humble vendors, there has been a proliferation of India-dedicated search engines in the past two years. Among the more popular ones, it seems, are Khoj.com, Jadoo.com, Iloveindia.com, 123india.com and Indiamart.com.

Each of these search engines lists thousands of sites which deal with every subject under the Indian sun, be it food, religion, entertainment, education, business or the latest news. Search engines are to the Net what yellow pages are to a city.

Indian companies have to list their web pages with these search engines, a facility which most search engines provide free of cost, to be accessible to their clientele. While Indian

society, geography and culture have been documented extensively on the Net, business news and e-commerce are beginning to pick up now.

"Our mission is to improve the business activity in the Indian subcontinent and to give sufficient exposure to India-related sites," reads the home page of the search engine Jadoo.com. "Our search engine is going to be the reference library of the Internet with information on all kinds of subjects," says Amrita Budhwar, general manager, sales and marketing, of Delhi-based Netlink Internet Solutions. "It will offer content and searchable features in localised format," Budhwar says their search engine has taken seven months in the making and is expected to take another year before it is completed with fully Indianised content.

Says K.R. Mani, marketing manager of the Mumbai-based India World: "We started Khoj.com two years ago as there was a need for a regional, functional and product-focused search engine." The India World network of 11 web sites receives over 250,000 hits from more than 60,000 visitors daily, Mani claimed.

India World now plans to develop a search engine exclusively listing companies into the business of exports, Mani said, adding that the next step for India-dedicated search engines would be to focus on specific subjects. Since most search engines list web sites free of cost, they generate revenues by selling ad space on their site.

"Companies that get business queries after we list them on our engine sometimes approach us for designing web pages," says Rakesh Mohan Sherry of Indiamart.com. Al-most all claim to be either India's "first" or "official", "great" or "premier" search engines. To make themselves more visible to the global Net surfer, especially the rich foreign tourist or non-resident Indian (NRI), these engines list themselves with bigger ones providing a guide to sites from all countries.

Among the hundreds of such global search engines that have mushroomed in the past few years, only five or six are popular. Yahoo!, through which 60 per cent of the traffic flows, leads the pack of Excite, Lycos, Infoseek, Webcrawler, Hotbot and Altavista.

— News Network

— India Abroad News Service

Devastated by Marriage

by Shamima Chowdhury

Bangladesh girls are married too young. Divorces among poor families are too many. Young mothers die early. Brides are killed for dowry. And women face another menace: marriage cheat.

SUNDARI is a shadow of her past. Known for her beauty the village dame was married at the age of nine. Since then she was married and divorced four times. With four children from her failed marriages Sundari is now a lonely woman and too weak to work. She looks older than her 27 years.

A girl from a poor family Sundari's first husband was 36 years older to her — a man with three wives and old enough to be her grand father. Too young for sex and ever reluctant to share her husband's bed Sundari was soon sent back to her parents like they return a rejected purchase back to the store. Three years later Sundari's parents thought she had grown enough to satisfy her husband.

So, she was sent back to her in-laws. Misfortune befell her soon as the husband died of multiple diseases. Sundari, the

fourth widow left by the man, began a losing battle with the older widows and their sons for a share of the man's property. Once again she returned to her family.

This time she was 15 years old. Her family married her off with a young man from her neighboring village. She was happy. But her happiness did not last long as the new husband divorced her months after she gave birth to a girl. The husband and his family wanted a boy and the birth of the girl child was blamed on Sundari. She was divorced.

Once again the young woman returned to her family — this time it was ruled by her brothers. Her parents had both died. The brothers were angry with Sundari and offered no help. She was asked to fend for herself and for the baby girl. So, Sundari migrated to one city where most like her go in

search of food or jobs; the Dhaka city, the eternal lure for the homeless poor. In Dhaka she got a job of cooking at a mess. She got a shelter and food to survive.

Just when Sundari thought her ordeal was over she confronted a problem. The problem was that she was still young and pretty enough to attract marriage proposals or sexual advances. She crossed her path with a construction worker who married her only to escape with whatever little money she saved from her job.

"I've decided no more marriages. Men are nothing but beasts. Nothing except a wom-

an's body matters to them," said Sundari, her sweaty face red from the oven's flame. Sundari is no exception. She is just one of the thousands of women who have been abandoned by their husbands and the in-laws. Many of the tales go untold.

Consider the plight of another woman. Shefall Begum. She is 25 years old and works at a garment factory in Dhaka. Twice she was married and the men left her because she or her family failed to meet their dowry demands. Both her marriages were unregistered and the divorces too were illegal. So, she received no alimony nor any other benefits.

nesses are considered enough for legalising a marriage, which is not permitted by the country's laws.

According to one dependable report, a total of 20,000 marriages were performed in Cox's Bazar district during 1990-95, but only 6,000 of them were registered. In just one year more than 4,000 marriages collapsed. Sigma Huda explained that people in rural areas take less interest in registering marriages to ward off taxes and legal obligations. There are instances of men marrying women for purpose of trafficking.

In Bangladesh as many as 19 lakh marriages take place every year, but the number of registration is very low. And more than 10 per cent of these marriages should not have occurred because the girls are underage. Early marriage is said to be one of the main reasons why di-

orce rate is high. While girls are as young as nine or ten, their husbands are above 30 years old. This age gap creates a big problem in marriages.

As many as 1.73 lakh cases of divorces were reported in Sirajganj, Manikganj, Sherpur, Mymensingh, Jamalpur and Netrokona districts in just one recent year. Sixty-three per cent of them took place because men wanted the divorce. Men determine the women's destiny in this country. But nearly 80 per cent of these divorces take place illegally, according to Dr. Malika Khatun, a noted author. "A section of clerics capitalise on the innocent rural people and they impose their own edicts on the society," she said. Women's rights activists are also worried about fake marriages that take place when men want to use the women either for sex business or trafficking.

— News Network

Garfield®



by Jim Davis



James Bond

