

No longer a sleepy seashore

Kuakata, a remote seafront village, is transforming fast into a buzzing resort, writes Farid Hossain

ITS still an hour for the sun to rise from the womb of the quiet sea. Dense fog compounds the re-dawn darkness that blankets the fishing boats anchored near the shore. The coconut trees that line the 16-kilometre Kuakata beach can be seen only in silhouettes against the dark sky.

This does not prevent hundreds of tourists and picnic revellers from converging on the sandy beach. The men, women and children walk along the beach eastward as if they have smelled a gold mine. They hardly can see each other because it's still dark. They brave chilly winds, unusual for an early *Falgun* dawn. They sing and dance. The revellers shout at each other to identify the co-travellers. They have a destination to reach before the sun is up. They have a dream to watch: how the sun rises on the Bay of Bengal.

Tucked away at the southern end of Patuakhali district, Kuakata is only place in Bangladesh from where visitors can watch both sunrise and sunset. Already billed as the Daughter of the Sea, Kuakata was hardly anything but a remote fishing village.

That was until last year when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited the area and opened Parjatan Corporation's Holiday Homes dormitory for the tourists. With this Bangladesh discovered another tourist spot that has potentials to surpass Cox's Bazar and Rangamati in attraction. Today Kuakata lures hun-

dreds of visitors, many of them students in picnic parties. Most of them come to watch the sun coming up and going down the sea. But the unique sight is as rare as seeing a Royal Bengal tiger in the Sundarbans. Most sun-watchers return disappointed. It's either clouds or rains or dense fog that frustrate the tourists.

The same was the case with nearly 1,000 men, women and children who poured into the beach in the early hours of February 18, the first Friday after a three-day hartal. Among the crowd was Justice A K Badrul Huq, whose village home is at Baufal thana in Patuakhali district. He could hardly hide his disappointment.

"I came to Kuakata the day before to watch the sunset. I could not. Now there is no sign of the sun rising," said Justice Huq. "one has to be lucky."

Justice Huq had that luck in 1984 when "I was thrilled to see the sunrise standing in the beach."

The memory of that dawn was still fresh in his mind. "The sun comes up dancing like a table tennis ball. I jumped in joy when that dancing red ball suddenly leapt up the horizon."

Dozens of tourists gathered around Justice Huq to listen to his story. None of them had been as lucky as he was.

"This is my fourth visit in six months. I'm still waiting to see either the sunrise or the sunset," said Rezaul Karim, a college teacher. "I'll not give up. There is no harm to keep trying."

Like Karim many people make repeat visits to Kuakata to watch the sun. However, there is no consensus on a month or a season when the sky will be clear enough for the visitors to see the rare sight. Some believe the month of *Chaitra* is the ideal time. That means tourists should travel down to area during summer. But others will advise tourists to come to the beach during Autumn.

This uncertainty could prove a damper for Kuakata as it strives to attract more tourists and match Cox's Bazar. Journey to Kuakata is not as easy as to Cox's Bazar. Visitors driving from Barisal have to cross six ferries that delay the travel and make it uncomfortable. Those who are travelling from Patuakhali have to cross three ferries. From Patuakhali it takes more than three hours to cover the 70-kilometre route by a private car or microbus. It will take two more hours from Barisal.

Well, there are direct BRTC buses from Dhaka to Kuakata. And how long does it take? Provided there is no disruption, the Dhaka-Kuakata bus ride could take at least 14 hours. One can drive his own car direct from Dhaka to Kuakata. There are tourists who travel by motor launches from Dhaka to either Barisal or Patuakhali en route to Kuakata.

Kuakata is no longer a sleepy fishing village. Apart from the Parjatan's Holiday Homes, a dormitory complex of 30 ordinary single beds and one AC and nine non-AC double beds along with a restaurant the



beach area now boasts of several private guesthouses.

In addition there are guesthouses owned by LGED (six beds) and Zilla Parishad Dakbunglow (six beds). The room rent for the luxurious rooms could go up to Tk 800 with air condition facilities. Food is available at Parjatan restaurant and Zilla Parishad Dakbunglow. The Dakbunglow has

been leased out to three businessmen. But tourists are mostly the picnic party revellers who use the facilities to eat but not to stay overnight. Businessmen and government officials as far as from Dhaka have started a rat race in buying lands in Kuakata.

"The land prices have soared sky high," said Shamsul Alam, a local farmer.



Bird's eye view of the Kuakata shoreline (left); apart from Parjatan's Holiday Homes (above) there are quite a few places in Kuakata for tourists to stay overnight.

Star photo: A K M Mohsin

Kuakata is different in many ways from the Cox's Bazar resort that boasts the world's longest unbroken sand beach. The sea along Cox's Bazar beach is choppy with waves of waves breaking into the beach. Bathing at Cox's Bazar beach is both fun and risky. It's just the opposite on the Kuakata beach where the sea is as quiet as a pond. The waters are muddy

and unfit for swimming. But what sets Kuakata apart from Cox's Bazar is that visitors can stroll through the beach late into the night.

"This is a safe beach. There is no mugger. There is no one to tease or harass the women. Go ahead," volunteered Abdus Sabur, who runs a tea stall near the beach. His assurance came for a group of journalists, in-

cluding women, who were at Kuakata in February on a trip sponsored by the News Network. The journalists found the tea man right as they strolled along the beach late into the night.

A tip for the connoisseurs of sweets. Make sure you stop at Kalapara and buy Jaga's rasgullas that come hot and fresh from curd. — News Network

Thinking garbage disposal the right way

DHAKA, the capital of Bangladesh, is considered as one of the most populated megacities in the world (World Bank Development Report, Feb. 1999). After its birth in 1971, the national economy is now termed as "booming" by many economists in the country and worldwide. This boom is a major factor in its astounding growth rate for the last eight to nine years. And with early industrialisation of any country comes the by-product of this process - waste. There can be industrial or daily domestic waste, produced by the city. If this waste is not disposed of properly or treated before disposal, it could cause serious environmental and social problems. Waste management is a vital factor in sustaining the economy and strengthening the national development effort.

The amount and impact of waste produced in Dhaka daily is somewhat magnified by the loopholes in the waste management policies of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), a division of the local government operating in the city. Since the waste generated is both organic and inorganic in nature, and the average waste analysis on any particular day can reveal numerous categories, it demands quick and efficient disposal. It does not accommodate

storage or accumulation. Managing waste anywhere in the world requires some sort of established method of collection and removal. In the metropolis, the system normally comprises of garbage bins, depots or collection points, so that people can empty the refuse there, a mechanism to transport the garbage to a secondary accumulation point, and finally from there it goes to the waste dumping grounds. Treatable waste is separated and taken to facilities where it is acted upon by chemicals to make it harmless.

The overall development of Dhaka was the responsibility of the former Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) which was established in 1959. After Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the DIT was styled the Rajdhani Unnayan Katiripakkha (RAJUK), and this is the organisation which now takes care of the capital's planning, housing and some environmental and social issues. After independence, Dhaka catered to about five million people in business, trade and a staggering 78 per cent illiteracy rate (Bureau of Statistics, 1971 Census). Proper waste control came much later, only after the country settled down to bureaucratic normalcy. Then suddenly Dhaka had to combat this serious environmental issue to sustain itself into the 1990s.

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Obnoxious yet quite a familiar sight for the city-dwellers. Star photo: Zahidul I Khan

At present waste management in Dhaka is in a sorry state. Insufficient resources, poor co-ordination and corruption are among many of the impediments to a smooth system. Collection has become a problem with half of the 160 garbage trucks of the Dhaka City Corporation out of order or in need of repair to at least ply safely on the roads. Sources have further revealed that discarded trucks have been secretly leased out to private parties for a fee.

Cleaners of the DCC, the sweepers, garbage collectors and helping hands employed by the corporation, about 5000 at present. This figure is way too short for any sort of effective action. The corporation has reportedly taken initiatives to increase its manpower, but implementation is still a long way. The average amount of garbage produced per day amounts to 3000 tonnes. But only 2000 tonnes/day is removed or transported with the existing resources. Ironically, it was the Dhaka

WASA who did take a step towards resolving the waste management problem. WASA probably came into the picture because of an incident in the model town of Uttara, on the suburbs north of the capital. The town's sewerage system became blocked by floating waste which was dumped into open manholes and drains leading to a diverting underground tank. The situation quickly turned into a serious one with many residents complaining of "green and black water". WASA then proposed a 218 crore taka (44,375,000 US dollars) to the Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) Ministry, but unfortunately the LGRD, being short of funds, began looking for a donor.

This field has also attracted academicians and indeed they may be an important part of a long-term solution. Speakers at a recent seminar have somewhat frowned on the capital's exponential growth, especially in the business sector, over the last seven years. Professor Nazrul Islam of the Department of Geography, Dhaka University, has pointed out that with an almost six per cent growth for the last ten years, the country could be in for a socio-economic collapse.

Interestingly, when about the possible steps to tackle the problems of waste, very few suggested a narrowed and precise

solution. A broader perspective was always the preliminary step, focusing on the administrative ethics and policies in the bureaucratic hierarchy instead of at the field level. Nevertheless, a few distinct answers were deduced.

Waste management had to semi-privatise. The government alone could not bear all the administrative and financial responsibilities, and privatising would throw the field wide open for newer technologies and controlling systems. The government would still have full authority over monitoring and policy decisions. Training of cleaners, sweepers and the DCC personnel involved have to be more comprehensive, otherwise new methods cannot be introduced; it was found that the technical know-how of these people was amazingly low.

Apart from multiplying resources, which would gradually come with privatising, mass awareness was needed and tougher exemplary laws would be needed for fighting corruption. Because many pointed out that if everything went well inside the offices, outside assistance could be just an additional need. But maybe the best thing so far is the fact that many leaders are now coming out of the shadows to act on this tabooed subject of cleaning another's rubbish the right way.

New tussle over trade in tusks

A recent accusation of a Western conspiracy behind an outbreak of poaching indicates a hardening of positions ahead of the next round of wrangling over the best way to preserve Africa's elephants.

The charge was made by Zimbabwe's National Parks Service, which admitted that 84 elephants were killed for their tusks in Chiwore National Park last year, but claimed that the deaths were masterminded by countries and environmental groups opposed to the lifting of a world ban on trading in ivory.

A captured poacher reportedly confessed that he and others were sponsored by Western governments, wildlife and environmental groups, and by some West African states. He said the motives of these countries and organisations - none of which were named - was to use an increase in poaching to justify maintenance of the ban.

The halt to trading was imposed in 1990 in an attempt to stem the decimation of African elephant populations, which plummeted from an estimated 1.3 million in 1979 to about 625,000 in 1989.

A handful of southern African countries have since been allowed to make one-off sales from their ivory stockpiles, after arguing that they should be rewarded for their successful elephant conserva-

Southern African countries continue to argue that a total ban on the international ivory trade is unnecessary and counterproductive, because their elephant conservation measures have been so successful. Opponents, led by Western environmentalists, warn that removal of the ban will encourage poaching and smuggling. Barrack Otieno of Gemini News Service watches the battle-lines being drawn up ahead of the CITES meeting, scheduled to be held in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi from April 10 to 20

tion measures. They are pressing for permission to hold more auctions.

Most wildlife specialists conceded the sales ban, negotiated under the 134-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES), has stemmed the slaughter of Africa's elephant herds.

Numbers have increased in several countries, including Zimbabwe (home to 70,000 elephants), Namibia (close to 100,000) and Botswana (80,000-100,000).

CITES itself admitted in 1997 that elephants were no longer under immediate threat in these countries.

As a result, ivory stockpiles began to grow, through legal culls and controlled hunting. CITES estimates that more than 470 metric tonnes of legal ivory is held by governments or individuals in Africa.

After much debate, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe were each allowed to hold an ivory

auction.

CITES said it would closely monitor the effects of the sales - all to Japan - and that earnings would be used for conservation projects and to help the rural poor. Opponents fear, however, that renewal of the legal trade will provide a cover for illegal transactions.

"There are just not enough safeguards to stop illegal ivory infiltrating the legal trade," warned the World Wildlife Fund.

"No matter what safeguards and limitations are placed on the ivory sale, the ivory poachers of Africa and Asia would see the sale, after 10 years of banned trade, as a signal to resume the slaughter," says V A Sackey, a member of Ghana's delegation to a CITES meeting last year.

The temperature of the debate has now been raised by a South African application for permission to sell 28 tonnes of ivory, worth 2.7 million US dollars, from its stockpile.

The request will be considered at the next CITES meeting, to be held at the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi on April 10-20.

South Africa, which has an excellent elephant conservation record, promises that earnings from the sale will be used for conservation projects including the demarcation of additional land to re-locate elephants from the Kruger National Park. There are 9,000 elephants in the park, 2,000 more than is considered environmentally sound.

South Africa is confident that its application will be granted, but Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, backed by several West African countries, as well as by India and by conservation groups, have been crusading against a resumption of the trade.

Kenya reports an upsurge in poaching in the last year. Kenya

Wildlife Service officials warn that the country's 28,000 elephant population is now endangered.

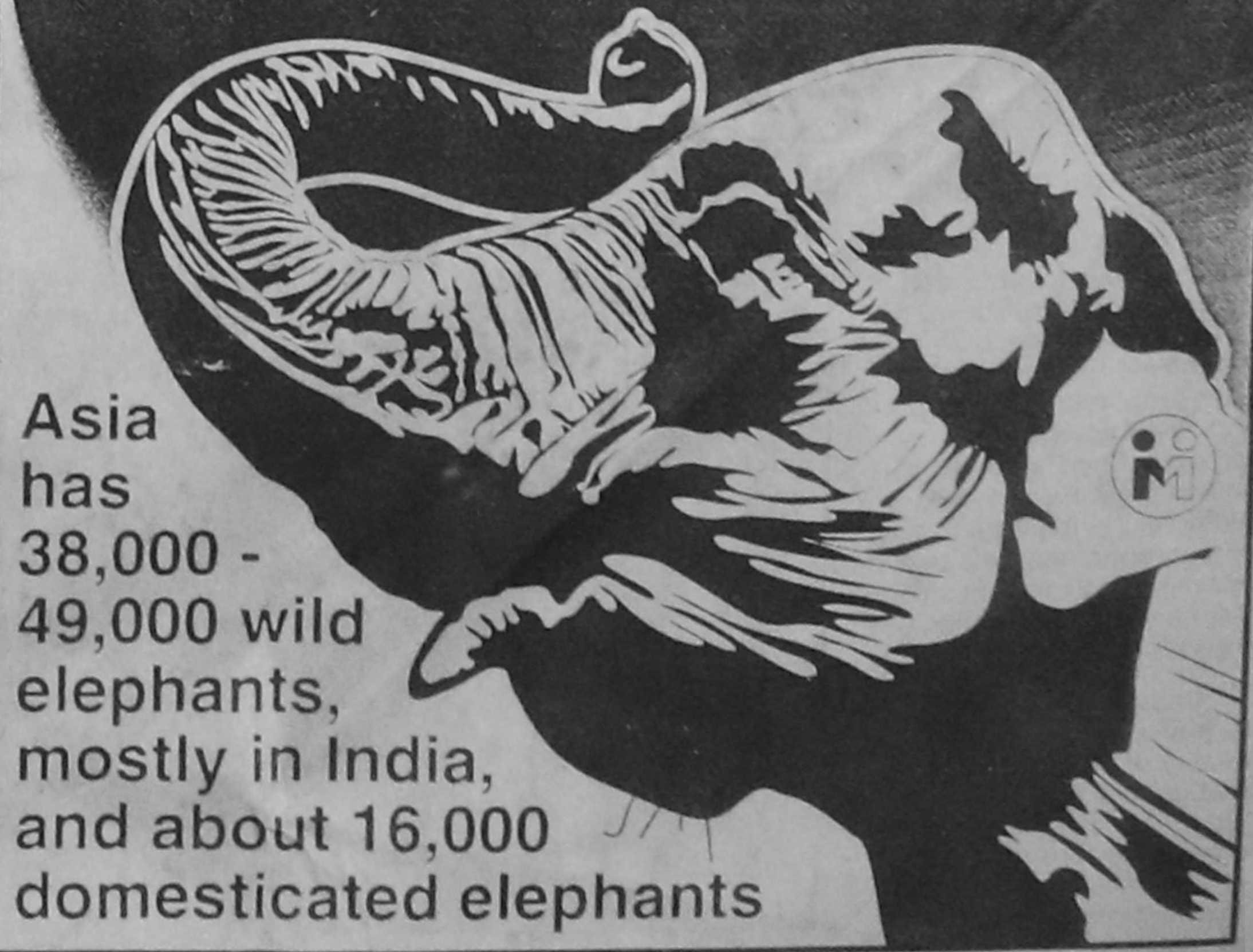
Supporters of the ban cite the Kenyan example as support for their case that the auctions have indeed sparked a fresh round of poaching.

"Lifting the ivory ban was the biggest conservation blunder of the 1990s," says Allan Thornton, chairman of the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency. "The sale of ivory to Japan was supposed to be preceded by implementation of international safeguards in the form of a monitoring system to detect increased poaching. The system was not established and now elephants are paying the price."

The author is a Kenyan journalist who was formerly sports editor of Kenya's *The Daily Nation*, and currently works for the *Family Guardian*.

Threatened giant

Africa's elephant population fell from 2m in 1970 to 625,000 in 1989. It now stands at between 286,000 and 543,000



Asia has 38,000 - 49,000 wild elephants, mostly in India, and about 16,000 domesticated elephants