

Re-inventing Night Life

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

Nights of Discontent

By Ekram Kabir

A trend of health consciousness is rising among today's youth - who are not at all interested in boozing and drugs. This good sign must not be overlooked. If adequate measures to establish health clubs at a lower cost are taken up, there would be many people making their evening pilgrimage to health clubs, instead of wasting money in bars.

DAYBREAK, for Dhaka city dwellers, is a tale of caustic struggle that begins with inhaling acid smoke in the balloon-before-the-bust traffic jams. One would feel like cursing the policy-personnel of city authority. They have been unerringly turning deaf ear to all our "civic woes". The more metropolitan Dhaka becomes, the more hardship is experienced by the people who live in the city.

Workplace is busy time, and the day passes with usual -- and unexpected -- professional and household chores. But when the evening nears, the clock doesn't tick for the majority.

After work -- including household -- you have no place to go, either with your family, boyfriend or by yourself. Coming back from workplace, begins the Eliotic evening for the entire city. There's no fun (that of course is not to imitate western ways), laughter, recreation -- absolutely nothing. City life, by international standards, doesn't really look for difference between days and nights. In other cities around the world -- even in neighbouring Mumbai -- there are chirpy, blithesome evenings when the folks can shake off all somberness of their groovy lives which in turn can be inspiring to carry on the duties and encounter the troubles on the next day. In contrast, Dhaka has evening blues which in fact is evening phobia -- a strange but true feeling of captivity in your living room and kitchen.

Urbanites, these days, are forced to live practically like "patients etherised upon a table" in the evening. The twilight culture did not -- actually, could not -- grow of which the elder citizens are very nostalgic and proud. The tedious nights end only waking up in the morning -- that too may be uncertain one to pass. At moonrise there's no place where you can walk around or sit down with you family or friends, because the fear of muggers, hookers and the "inevitable police" would keep you indoors.

So here we are in a fix: there's no night life in Dhaka. But for a rising number of people, the definition of night life seems to have changed. The

character of being a metropolis -- in an unplanned way -- is taking its toll on Dhaka-dwellers who are increasingly becoming inclined to activities beyond self-discipline. This trend is directly putting various negative impacts in our social life. Anyone simply cares to visit the bars in the city is bound to feel the heck of it. The way a huge number of middle- and upper-class youths, businessmen with modest income, mid-career professionals, and so-called creative-minded people are wasting money after alcohol consumption is scary and doesn't give a constructive signal for the societal improvement. Bars in Dhaka are playing havoc to the very young. Since parents can still pull the strings of these school and college boys and these boys have a compulsion to go back home early, they come to bars in early hours of the evening; buy some bears or a bottle of whisky and buzz off to an empty field or neighbourhood lawn, and have good time. (Fast-food joints and ice-cream parlours are of no help for these youngsters.) But for others, students of the autonomous educational institutions, the night is always young. *Mal Khaoa* (drinking) almost all night long is fun for this stock of Dhaka-dwellers.

The taxi-cab services -- which is considerably a new addition in the city life -- have added newer dimension to have more fun. Stoned, the boozers would then hire a cab and roam around the entire city, while their parents, wives and loved ones wait at home -- distressed to death, apart from their squandering cash. Just imagine the extent of their anguish!

For another stream, night time is the best time for taking drugs. After some rounds of, say heroin inhalation, their pockets are flat, and that's when they resort to mugging, sometimes killing the person they are snatching money from. The same is the case who take fancy in *dail* (pseudonym).

Political pawns, however, maintain a different style in their night time delights. Since money is no problem for them, arranging *saki* and *sura* in expensive hotel rooms is like a piece of cake. The amoral perversion in these things would send chill down any body's

spine. And on the other hand, there are the unfortunate *sakis* on the streets who sell their bodies in order to eke out a living are all for truck-drivers and labourers. Perhaps the hope to bring these depraved people back to decent way of living is lost, but the number of innocent people -- who are being infected under their influence and are leading the same ways of recreation -- can certainly be stopped. The question now is: how?

In another interesting development, *wild parties* every night are now a common phenomenon. These are mostly promoted by people of the affluent neighbourhoods. Witnesses say, apartment-owners in these areas are renting their flats solely for party purpose. And what happens in those parties are sheer innuendoes. To house owners, it's a wonderful way of making some quick bucks. But for frolickers, being there is simply a means to exhale life's boredom.

True, all these means may waive and ventilate night time blues for the time-being. But for how long and what cost? Whether we like it or not, this way of recreation slowly leads to social and moral degradation. And in the process finer values of life disappear.

Where are we heading, with this trend -- rising faster than we can think of. So, where do we go from here?

Experiences of elders suggest that once there used to be coffee parlours, community clubs and gymnasiums which bred "community concept" and bound individuals with a feeling of togetherness -- unlike today's modern "beings" who live like distant islands. But that's history and a topic of reminiscence. Isn't it possible to revive the community centres as places for communion? The city authority has built a number of community centres in different wards of the city. Apart from holding only wedding feasts, we urge the administration -- to make arrangements by providing reading facilities, indoor games etc., so that citizens can pass time in a decent manner.

A trend of health consciousness is rising among today's youth -- who are not at all interested in boozing and drugs. This good sign must not be

overlooked by the authority. If adequate measures to establish health clubs at a lower cost are taken up, there would be many people making their evening pilgrimage to health clubs instead of wasting money in bars. The non-governmental organisations can certainly play an effective role in this regard. They should seriously take it up on their agenda.

As far as entertainment is concerned, an ambitious initiative would do wonders while weeding out boredom from among people's minds. Take India's Red Fort, for example, where spectators from home and abroad enjoy light-and-sound performances, which has a spellbound effect on the audience. Can we not star the same with out Lalbagh Fort? The idea is to have fun and being educated about our ancestral past at the same time.

The Bailey Road has come a long way in projecting decent thinking for a section of citizens. This is one area in the city where people -- especially women -- can feel safe after sundown. Since this area has all the potentials to attract visitors, the entire road may be a walkway by stopping normal flow of traffic in the evening, using the Circuit House Road as a possible by-pass. The same can be done at some points of Kamal Ataturk Avenue and near the University of Dhaka. Take the streets adjacent to Dhaka University, starting from Shahbagh to Dhaka Medical College, ending in front of the High Court. Would it be too much to expect that the entire area be turned into an esplanade with proper street-light and security arrangements? It certainly is an idea, and not a bad one, to think over.

So, there are places to go, right here in our city which can be -- with good and sincere management and some infrastructural changes -- ways out of dismal evenings of our city life. The city authority must formulate a well thought-out plan and initiate something. No initiative, no twilight culture and therefore more nights of discontent.

The author, a Daily Star staffer, is a member of Centre for Alternatives.

Night in the Slums

By Sadia Sharmin

The NGO's and government have to take some initiatives. Moreover the rich people of our society may also come forward and contribute monetarily. Small businesses may also be arranged for them. If the NGO's and the affluent people come forward to help them then many a people can be saved from the curse of poverty and the pains and horrors associated with it. This may also free many addicts. Let us put some light into the darkness of night.

THE creations of God are all wonderful. Night is one of the most wonderful creations of God. For the optimist and creative people each night is a new day. Perhaps for this reason the great poet of nature William Wordsworth and the greatest English poet Shakespeare took the night and the night sky as a theme for their literary creation. But for those who live in pain, sorrows and utmost poverty night is just another hole of darkness in which to sleep over their agonies. In this write up I would like to write something on the sporadic events of night life that takes place in the slums.

Night in the Slums

I went to some places to know how people living in the slums spend their night. I visited the Bihari camps, Ring road Basti, and a slum close to Kathal Bagan. The night scenario of these places is almost the same. At night people come back to their shelter places. These places are abnormally polluted but still for them these are their sweet homes. During night the women of these places get some time to sit gossip and chat after finishing their evening cooking. This is their main relaxation, during these chats they share each others sorrows and joys. The labourers come back after their hard day job. It is also a time for family reunion. But this is not all, the slums have their own activities and problems as well, these are:

Lack of Physical Security:

During the nights the women and children in the slums have to face lots of problem. All through these places anti-social activities like women and children abuse, drug addiction, acid throwing, teasing the young girls take place. One hears about development and women and children rights all the time, but

a look at these slums only deny the slogans. It appears that there is no need for the slums and their inmates to be developed, though some NGOs are working there, development is not taking place. I talked to some women and young girls of the slum area and asked them about their problems at night. The answers are the same. The main problem is primarily security especially physical security. When it gets dark they think that they're dropping into the hell where men take them as playing materials. And sometimes women have to please the powerful mastans of the slums bodily. In the same way the minor girls are also victimized here. They too have to please the men physically. Another problem arises when they go to sleep. The sleeping place is so stuffy that they have to huddle up which is physically uncomfortable and also unhygienic. Here is an instance of physical and mental insecurity endured by slum girls.

Salma (15) is an inhabitant of Halishahar (Chittagong) Bihari camp. Two years ago one local young boy came to their house and proposed to marry her. But her parents objected on the ground that her elder sister was still unmarried and they also asked the boy to send his parents with a proper marriage proposal. This argument turned into a minor conflict and two days later the boy beat up her brother. Now Salma has to endure teasing and threat from the boy. And she is afraid of the boy. She is particularly scared of nights and says that when the night starts she feels that the boy would harm her and even might throw acid on her. The nights are like nightmares for her.

Lack of Basic Necessities

In the slum area during the nights women and girls have to

face water management problem. When they go outside the slums for collecting water they have to endure teasing from the dissipated boys and men who often make obscene gestures at them.

Another problem is the use of common toilet and open bathroom. These are far from their living places and it is very difficult for women to go there at night. Sometimes around these toilets of the slums addicts take drugs and pass unpleasant remarks towards the girls. The girls of these areas have to pass very doleful situation at night.

Night Activities in the Camps

I have observed that wherever there is a Bihari camp, there are eateries like 'Kabab' shop/Biriani shop. These get crowded since the evening. It makes the places very congested and stuffy by the time night starts. These shops around Mohammadpur or Mirpur are actually quite popular among the gastronomes. People from around the city go there at night to enjoy the delicious 'Boti kabab', 'Meat Chop', 'Biriani' etc.

At night Bihari camp dwellers specially women and children do embroidery work with threads of gold and silver into dresses or sarees, men and women also weave Benarashi Sarees. In some slum areas close to the road people also make 'Pitha' 'Fuhca' 'Chatpoti'.

But there is a darker side to it as well. I got a chance to know some people, they have addiction to 'Marijuana'. They think there is endless beauty in night, it is as if the night beckons them into its arms. To go into that state of ecstasy they take drugs at night. They also pointed out that they take drugs at night to forget their pains and failures, the night gives them a tranquil environment for that.

By speaking to the people of the Bihari camp and some slum areas I found that they are living in the darkness of knowledge. Most of the people specially women and children are illiterate. They have no ideas about fundamental education, health care, water, food, and sanitation. They are also ignorant about their legal rights. The following measures are suggested to help them come out of this situation.

Firstly: Doctors can take some initiatives. They can educate them about basic health care and hygiene. They can teach them about food value, which can be taken from cheap but nourishing food. They can also impart the knowledge about first aid or primary treatment of diseases. These can help broaden the mental horizons of the people living in the slums.

Secondly: Teachers, students and social workers can spend some of their time at night on teaching them the basic and fundamental education of daily life, so that they are cheated by bad people.

Thirdly: The lawyers can play an important role for the helpless people. They can teach them about their legitimate rights affect of crimes etc. This would help raise awareness among these people about the general law and order situation.

Finally: The NGO's and government have to take some initiatives. Moreover the rich people of our society may also come forward and contribute monetarily. Small businesses may also be arranged for them. If the NGO's and the affluent people come forward to help them then many a people can be saved from the curse of poverty and the pains and horrors associated with it. This may also free many addicts. Let us put some light into the darkness of night.

(The author is a free lance researcher)

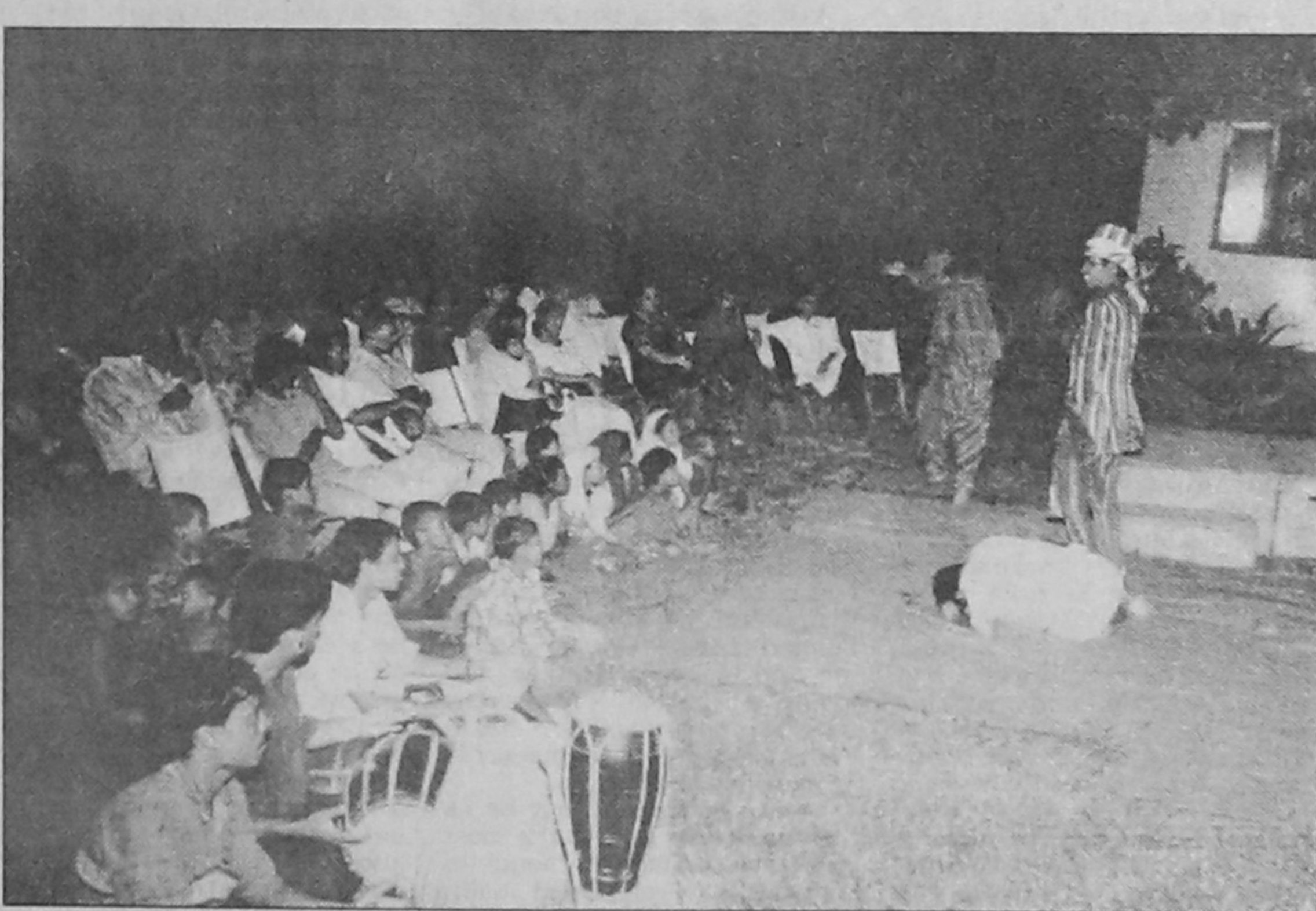
When Night Falls...



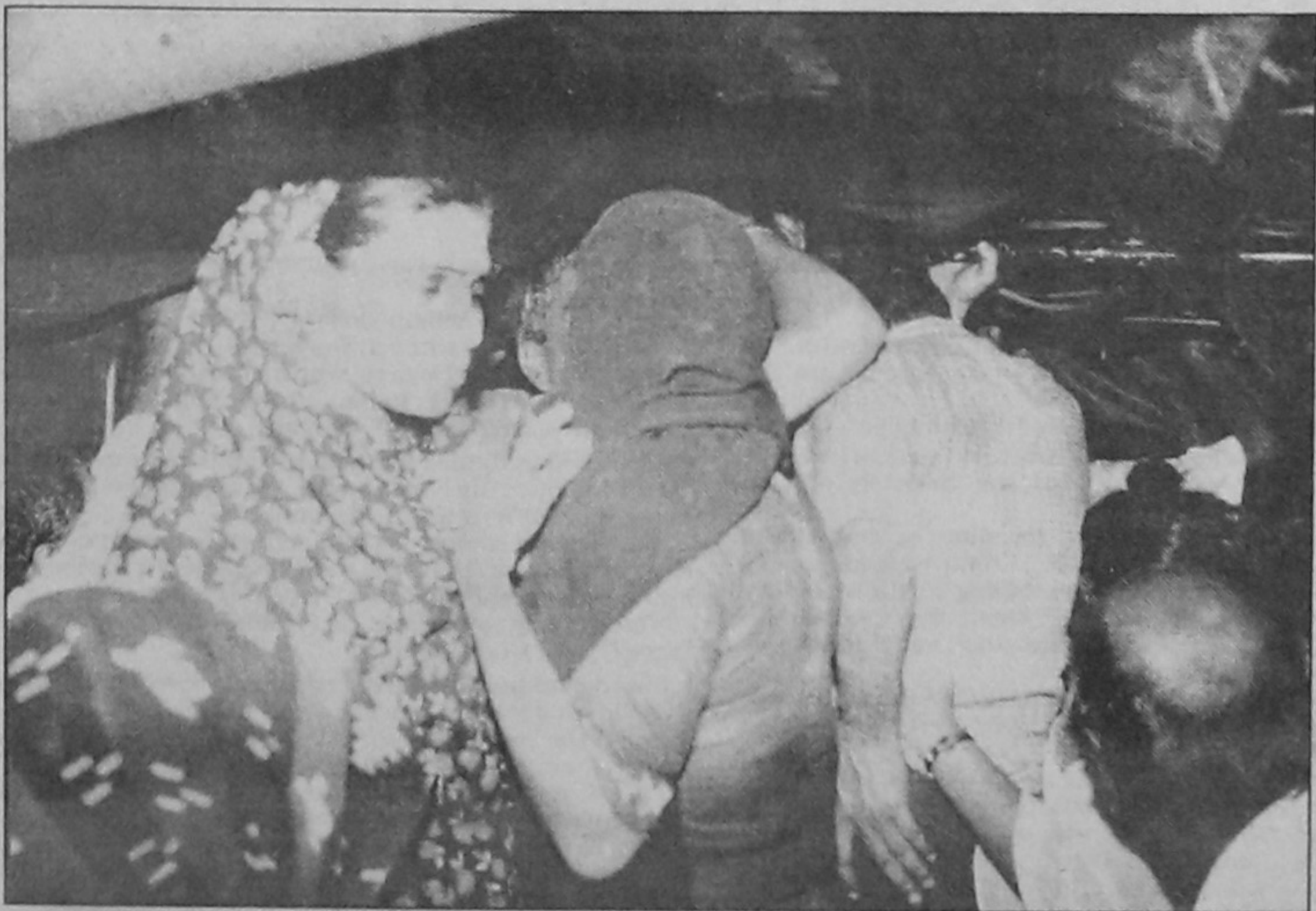
It was on the new year's night that the enthusiasts wanted to create a 'semblance' of the time 'elsewhere' but ultimately compelled the police to intervene.



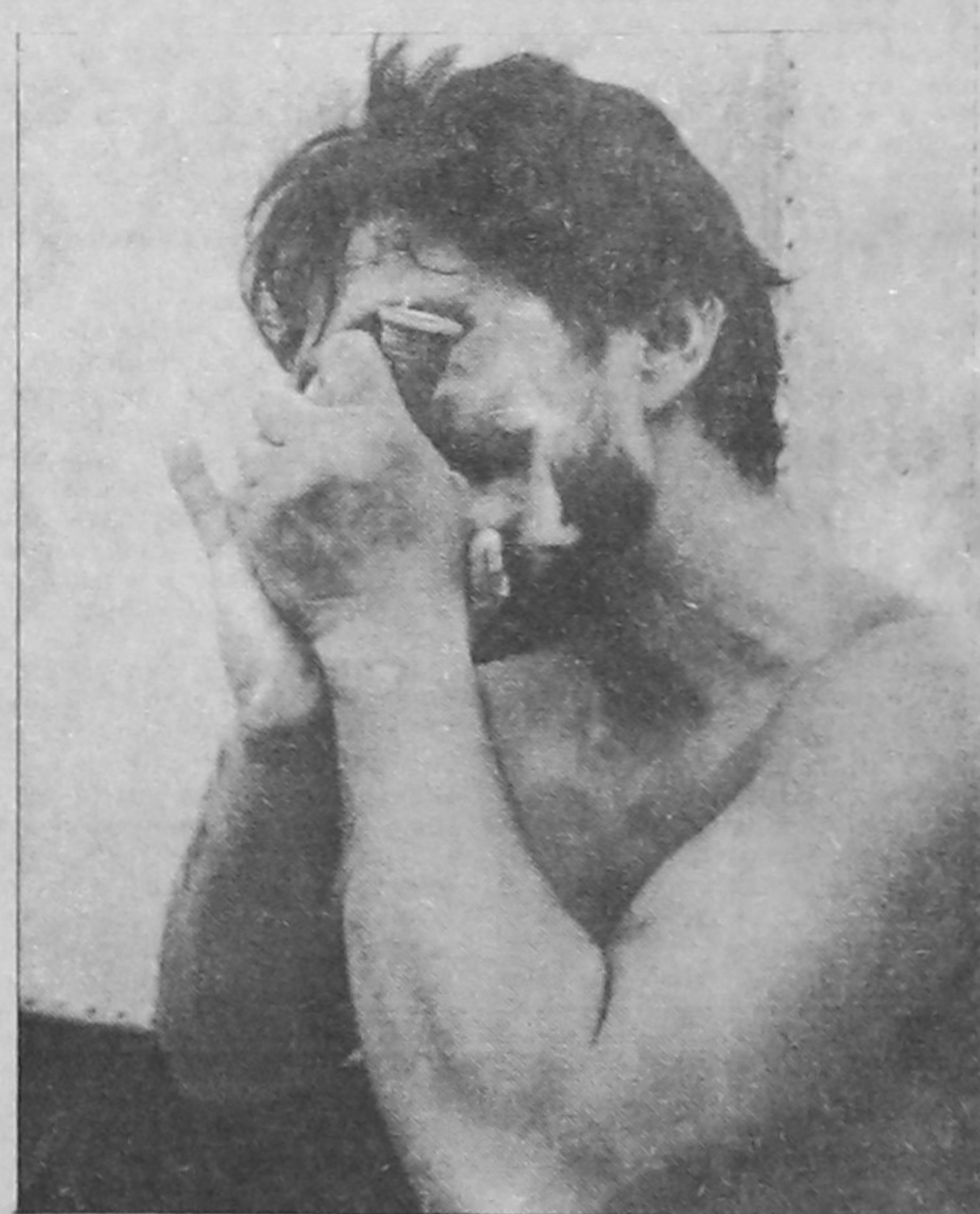
Often a site in the city vibrates with the sound and fury of band music but how many are so fortunate to share the thrill of the stirring evening!



Not all nights are like this -- a rejuvenating play at a pleasant setting. And not attracting much of audience either.



Gay girls they call 'em, and they fare at night but often police come to haul them up instead of 'customers', and they end up the night in tears.



And the frustrated or the ferocious finds a sobering respite in his 'naturalised' narcotics!



But when you go miles before you sleep, you may come across these learners by night ... Not all is lost yet!

The topic of our next issue is: Re-thinking Self-Reliance. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Intiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-17, Ext: 4550, Fax: 488021 8316769, E-mail: intiaz@bangla.net

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