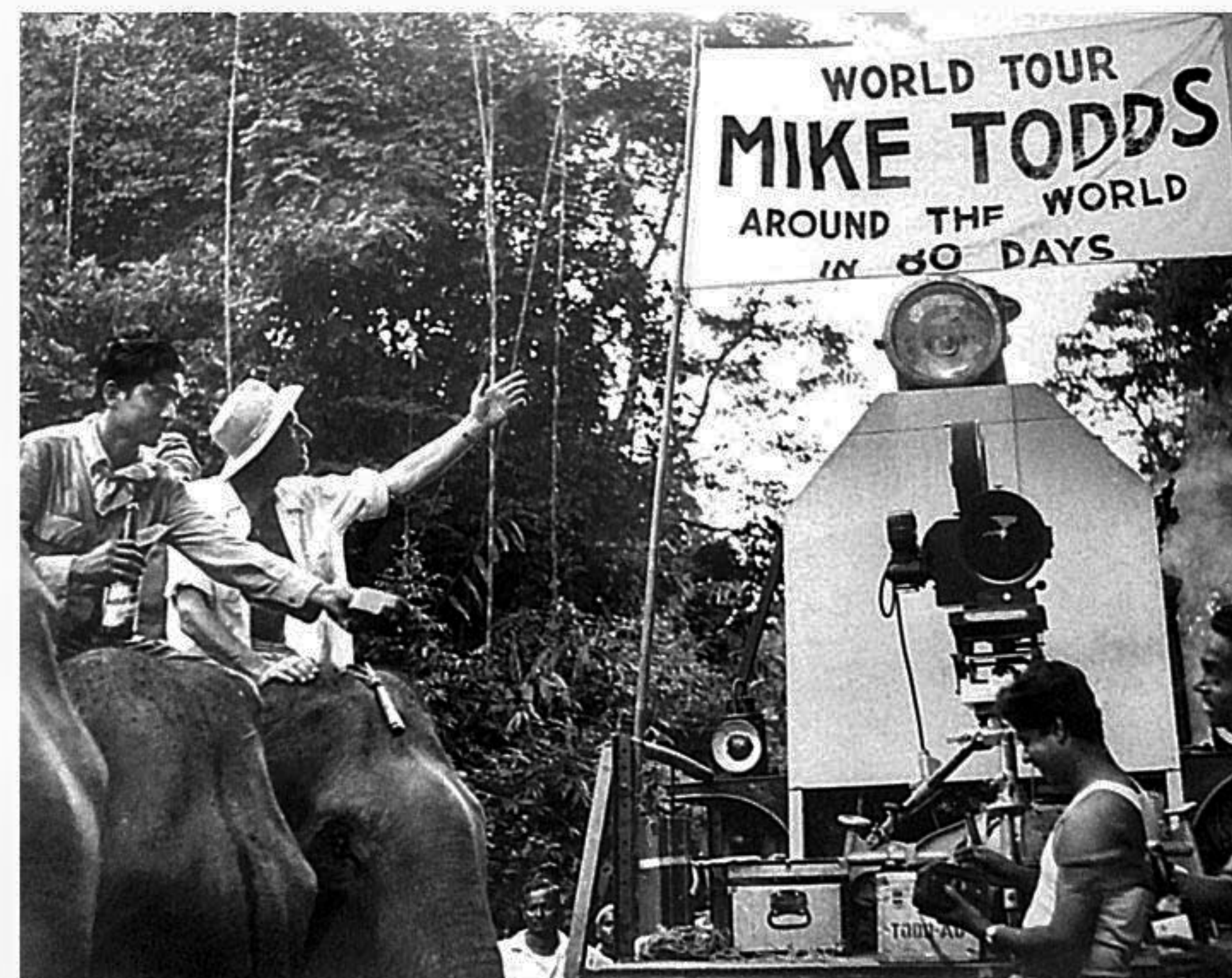
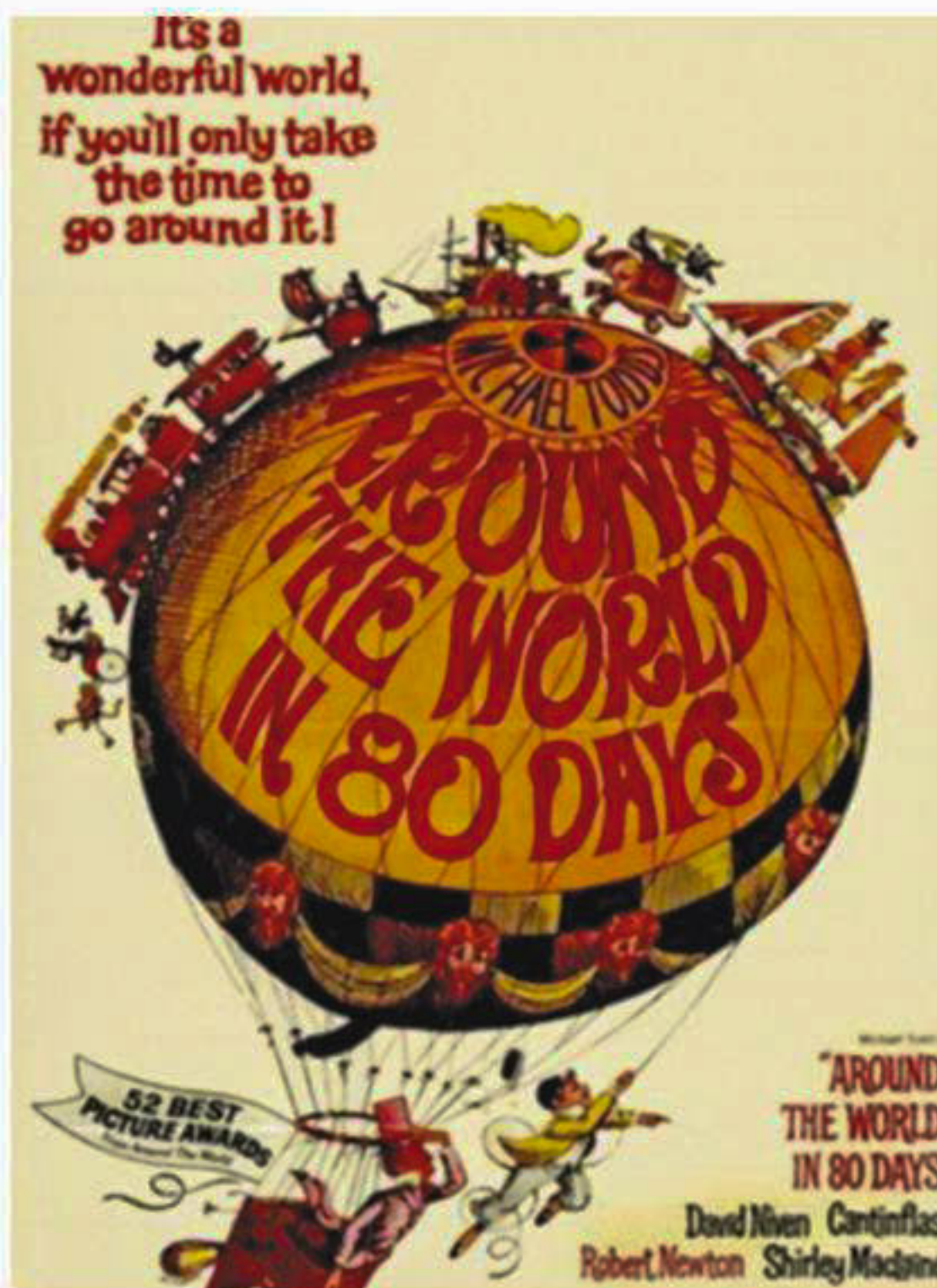




The Shahbagh Hotel, Ramna, Dhaka, 1955.



Karim and Kelly atop elephants with the film unit of Mike Todd's "Around the World in 80 Days", at Sreemangal, Sylhet, 1955.

# WHEN HOLLYWOOD CAME CALLING!

WAQAR A KHAN

This fascinating story needs retelling, particularly for the younger generations in Bangladesh, who would take pride in knowing that a fairly sizable portion of one of the most successful, Academy Award (Oscar) winning, block-buster epic movies of Hollywood of the 1950s, "Around the World in 80 Days" (1956), was filmed at selected locations of Sreemangal, in Sylhet and Barabkunda, in Chittagong. And that, in those immensely difficult days of road communication and a host of other logistical problems, an indefatigable gentleman from Dhaka, G M M E Karim, rose to the occasion and volunteered his fulltime services to render shooting of the film possible on schedule. A hugely resourceful and multifaceted personality, Karim, besides being an accomplished professional, was also a big game hunter in his younger days—he had shot his first full grown tiger in 1941, in the United Provinces of British India—knew the jungle lore by heart, was an avid photographer, documentary filmmaker

the Lawachara forest and Chittagong, was averse to taking any credit for himself. While recounting his own unique experiences, he had reminisced thus in his personal papers: "It was thrilling to see a great classic being filmed and myself being a part of it. You can well imagine the odds against the task in those days. The communication was so bad and the places where we chose to shoot were so inaccessible. But we had it all done in 22 days—the scene of the train stopped by a herd of wild elephants going across the track, the *Satidaha* (Suttee) and the sacred cow—all that was supposed to be happening elsewhere in British India. Well, as for myself, I did not tell anyone and there were no film magazine during that time."

It is interesting to note that for the full duration of shooting of the movie, the entire cast and crew were booked at the Shahbagh Hotel in Dhaka, then a spanking new modern hotel in the city, built in the early 1950s. It was a six-

also responsible for regular dusting, sweeping, swabbing and bed-making, in addition to draping and un-draping the mosquito nets when the guests went to sleep or woke up.

All the meals at the hotel had to be taken in a banquet-sized dining hall on the ground floor, with large overhead whirling fans. A person of short stature dressed in a white uniform with a fanciful turban, dutifully opened the doors to guests with a polite grin. He would bow low while giving a *salaam* (greetings). His courteous overtures were adequately reciprocated by the diners with a generous tip. In the dining room there was a raised platform at the front, where an aged Anglo-Indian man played the same melodies on alternate evenings on an old piano. On other days, during lunch and dinner a Goan orchestra from Calcutta played "ancient" Western tunes, on decrepit musical instruments. One ate meals to bygone musical hits of the 1920s like: "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue", "Melancholy Rose", "West End Blues"

illusion, was the noble eminence of the historic Ramna Kalibari, beside the placid serpentine lake.

Now a word about the novel and the movie: "Around the World in 80 Days", is an American epic adventure-comedy film, produced by the Michael Todd Company and released by United Artists in 1956. The picture was directed by Michael Anderson with Kevin McClory and William Cameron Menzies as associate producers. The screenplay was written by James Poe, John Farrow, and S J Perelman based on the classic adventure novel of the same name by the French writer Jules Verne, published in 1873. It is Verne's most acclaimed work.

The story begins in Victorian London of 1872, when an English gentleman Phileas Fogg (David Niven) claims he can navigate around the world in eighty days. He makes a 20,000-pound bet with four sceptical fellow members of the exclusive private "Reform Club", in central London (each of whom contributed 5,000 pounds towards the wager), that he can arrive back at the Reform Club, eighty days from exactly 8:45 pm that evening.

Together with his able valet, Passepartout (Cantinflas), Fogg goes around the globe liberally spending money to encourage others to help him get to his destinations faster so he can maintain his tight steamship schedules. They forcibly set out on the journey from Paris by a hydrogen filled gas balloon named "La Coquette" upon learning that the mountain train tunnel was blocked. However, the two accidentally end up in Spain, where Passepartout engages in a comic bullfight. Next, they arrive at Brindisi, in southern Italy. Meanwhile, suspicion grows amongst the members of the Reform Club who had betted that Fogg has stolen 55,000 pounds from the Bank of England. Therefore, a Police Inspector named Fix (Robert Newton) is sent out by Scotland Yard to trail him (starting in Suez) and keeps waiting for a warrant to arrive so he can arrest Fogg in any of the British ports of call he visits en-route. While in India, Fogg and Passepartout rescue a young Hindu widow the Indian Princess Aouda (Shirley MacLaine) from being forced into a funeral pyre with her late husband. The three (Fogg, Aouda and Passepartout) next visit Hong Kong, Yokohama, San Francisco, and the Wild West (USA). After sailing across the Atlantic, and only hours short of winning his bet, Fogg is arrested upon arrival at Liverpool, by the persevering yet misguided Inspector Fix.

Meanwhile, at the jail the humiliated Fix sheepishly informs Fogg that the real culprit has actually been caught in Brighton. And, although Fogg is exonerated, he has insufficient time to reach London before his deadline and thus has lost everything, except for the love of beautiful Aouda. However, by an act of providence upon returning to London, Passepartout buys a newspaper to find that it is still Saturday. Fogg then realises that by travelling east towards the rising sun and by crossing the international date-line, he has actually gained a day. Thus there was still time to reach the Reform Club and win the bet. Fogg arrives at the club just before the 8:45 pm chime. Soon, Aouda and Passepartout also arrive together, surprising everyone, as no woman has

ever been allowed to enter the strictly all-male Reform Club, in London before.

The movie has a star-studded cast, with David Niven and the famous Mexican-comedian Cantinflas in the lead roles of Fogg and Passepartout. A plethora of more than forty performers made cameo appearances in the movie, an all-time record for any Hollywood movie. It made a US screen actors guild representative cry out in amazement: "Good heavens Todd, you've made extras out of all stars in Hollywood".

Actor David Niven portrays Fogg as the epitome of a Victorian gentleman—fastidious to a fault, immaculately attired, always proper, well-spoken, and very punctual, whereas, his side-kick or aide Passepartout (with a roving eye for the ladies) provides much of the comic relief as the resourceful "jack of all trades" in the film in contrast to his master's strict formality. Actress Shirley MacLaine plays the role of the exotic Aouda, an Indo-European Indian princess, the daughter of a Bombay Parsi merchant who was married against her will to the Hindu ruler of Bundelkhand, an Indian princely state. Robert Newton deftly plays the role of the redoubtable sleuth, Inspector Fix.

The role of Passepartout was greatly expanded from the novel to accommodate Cantinflas, the most famous Latin-American comedian at the time, who steals the show in the film by his conspicuous brinksmanship. Charlie Chaplin once called him, "the world's greatest clown". There is a hilarious bullfighting sequence especially created for Cantinflas in the movie that is not in the Verne novel. Some 10,000 extras were used for the bullfight scene alone in Spain, with Cantinflas as the bumbling matador.

The filming of the movie took place in late 1955, from August 9 to December 20. The picture cost just under USD 6 million to make, employing 112 locations in 13 countries and 140 sets. The film premiered on October 17, 1956 at the Rivoli Theater in New York City. By the time of Todd's accidental death eighteen months later in a private plane crash, it had grossed an astronomical sum of USD 33 million, unprecedented for those days. With much fanfare the movie was shown in Dhaka in 1962, at the most popular Cinema Hall called Gulistan, to great success. It was a memorable event and the city was agog with talks of it for months afterwards.

The film was nominated for eight Oscars, of which it was awarded five, including the Best Picture, beating out critically acclaimed, publicly praised films, such as: "Friendly Persuasion", "The Ten Commandments", "Giant", and "The King and I". The film was also nominated for three Golden Globes, of which it effortlessly bagged two.

Epilogue: "Around the World in 80 Days", made it into the annals of international filmdom history, as an all time iconic classic. G M M E Karim passed away in 1999. I am grateful to his son, Ambassador (ret'd) Iftikharul Karim, for sharing these rare photographs and documents with us, which has visually enriched this feature article manifold.

Waqar A Khan is the founder of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies.

THE MICHAEL TODD COMPANY, INC.  
1700 BROADWAY, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.  
CABLE ADDRESS: MIKETOOD, NEW YORK

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Shah Bagh Hotel,  
Dacca,  
East Pakistan.

Dec. 1st. 1955.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

Before filming the East Bengal sequences of our production 'Around the World in eighty days' we were lucky enough to obtain the services of Mr. G.M.M.E.Karim who acted as assistant director, location arranger, interpreter and adviser, during our stay here.

His knowledge of the jungle, gained through many tiger shooting expeditions, and his amateur but better than average 8m.m. colour film records of his trips, gave him the ability to understand a film unit's problems and requirements better than almost anyone I have met outside the professional motion picture field, and quite a few inside it.

Karim's many local connections, his competence and his permanent good humour, under the most trying conditions, saved us a great deal of time and money.

I therefore thoroughly recommend Mr. Karim to any film company working in this part of the World in the certain knowledge that they will appreciate his help as much as we did.

G.W.Kelly  
Cameraman (Asiatic sequences)

PRITHIMPASSA ESTATE.

P.O. & T.O. PRITHIMPASSA.  
DT. SYLHET. B.P.

Dated 22. 10. 1955.

Dear Mr. Karim,

For some urgent and unavoidable reasons Nawab Ali Haidar Khan Sahib is quite unable to meet you all at Bhanugach today and he regrets his inability. Last night we sent four elephants from here and expecting two from Bhanugach side may join the party this morning. We are prepared to receive Mr. Kelley on Sunday 6th November next early morning. Kindly speak to Mr. McLorry and other friends to excuse inability of Nawab Sahib and they we hope will not mind his absence.

With kindest regards and salams to you all from Nawab Sahib and myself.

Yours sincerely,

D.N.Acherjee  
Manager.

and a pioneer nature and wildlife conservationist of the country, so much so, that "The World Wild Life Fund" appointed him as its first, "Honorary Consultant for Conservation in Bangladesh", in 1973. He was also an early exponent of tourism in the country.

It should also be mentioned here that it was Karim's untiring efforts which made it possible to arrange for a herd of elephants, with the assistance of the former zamindar estate of Prithimpassa, in Sylhet, and the requisitioning of a passenger train drawn by a vintage hooting, chugging, smoke-belching steam-locomotive from the railway authorities, for filming of the East Bengal sequences of the movie, "Around the World in 80 Days".

Karim, unassuming and of a shy demeanour, especially, when it came to talking of his role as the main facilitator during the exacting filming expeditions of the Hollywood movie in the winter of 1955, in remote areas of Sylhet including

storied building without elevators, which was otherwise spacious, airy and clean. And, what were the initial impressions of foreign visitors to the new hotel in Dhaka? At first look, it seemed something out of a Graham Greene novel. The Art-Deco entry portico led into a foyer with a high-ceiling supported at intervals by tall, monolithic, rounded columns. Most of the available rooms on the topmost floors with long shaded verandas were reserved for Todd, Kelly, David Niven, McClory and others of the film unit. Although every room had an attached bathroom with modern sanitary fittings, there was no running hot water. On order, bearers had to haul hot water up the staircase in metal buckets for the guests to take a bath. The double bedrooms with twin four-poster beds looked almost regal draped in white mosquito netting. A bearer was attached to each room to take orders from guests and run errands. He was

and "Swanee". The hotel also boasted of having the best delicatessen in the city. In particular its pastries, cakes, patties, biscuits and breads were delicious.

From the commanding height of their hotel rooms, especially from the rooftop, the Hollywood film crew had an expansive view of Ramna with the quaint red-brick colonial bungalows on Minto road, set amidst a vast stretch of verdant foliage, all very beguilingly picturesque, serene and sublime. They were enchanted by the pristine, entrancing beauty all around. The nearby Dhaka club, just a brisk walk away was an added attraction, where the crew would often go for a quick drink. Needless to say, their august presence enlivened the club's atmosphere. Across from the languorous ambience of the club, one could espy the smooth golf links of the Ramna Green and its white-fenced horseracing turf. Also, visible through the shimmering wintry haze, as if in an