# imprint

MARCH 1986 Rs. 6

Pulling Out:
Why Swraj Paul
Is Giving Up

Arjun Singh:
Rajiv Gandhi's
Mr Fixit

Hugh Hefner:
Playboy In Trouble

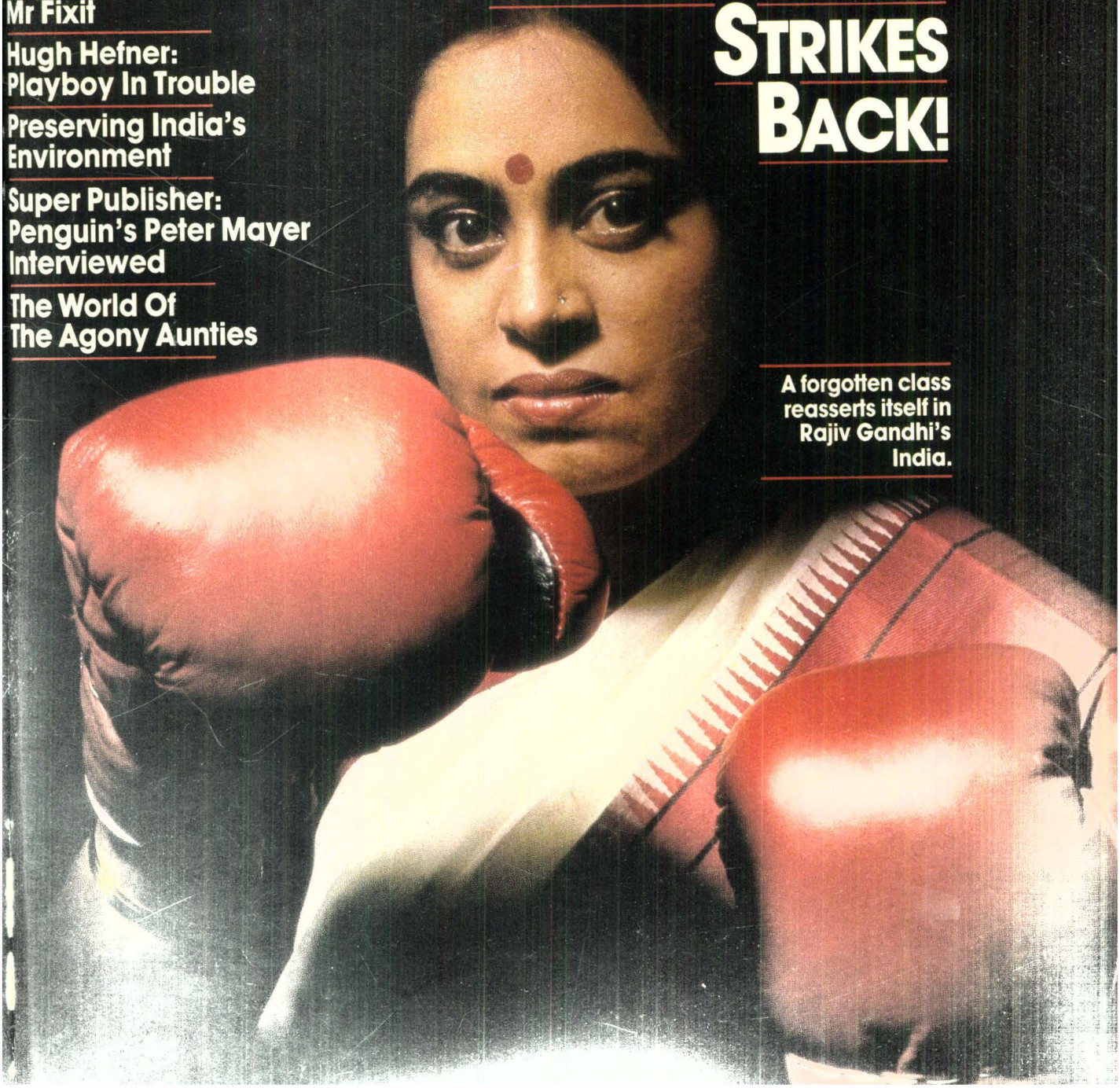
Preserving India's
Environment

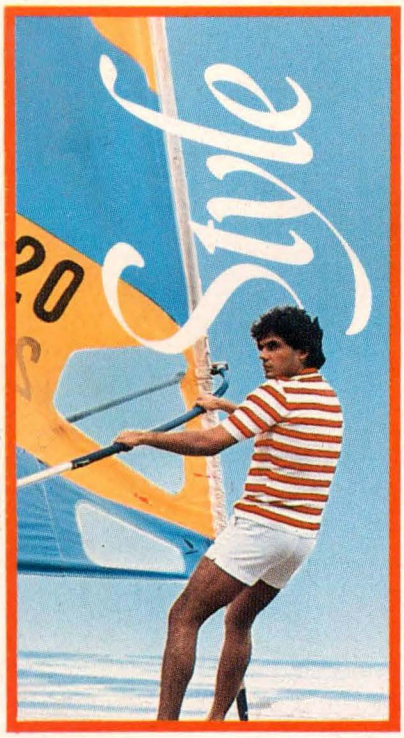
Super Publisher:
Penguin's Peter Mayer
Interviewed

The World Of
The Agony Aunties

## THE MIDDLE CLASS STRIKES BACK!

A forgotten class reasserts itself in Rajiv Gandhi's India.



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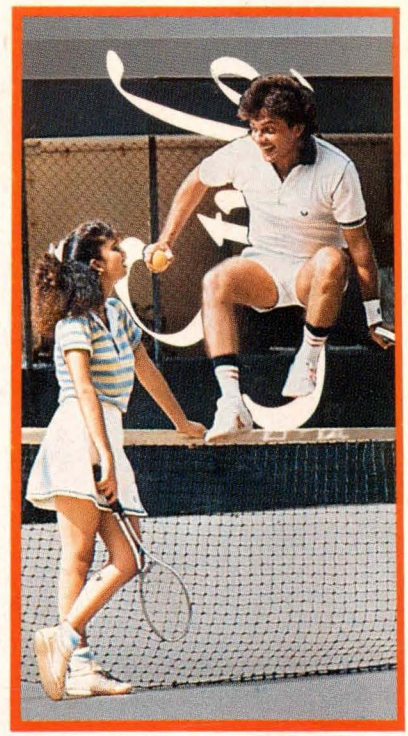

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By R V Pandit

# UNDER ATTACK

**The customary loot, in terms of money and privilege,, which almost any *neta* secured through politics, sometimes for as little as shouting, "So and so *zindabad!*", is under threat of a show cause notice: Mr Gandhi is talking of work and service and publicly rebuking the *netas.***

ARE WE – India – in deeper economic and political trouble than we were, say 20 months ago?

*No.*

Could the overall political and economic situation have been better had Mrs Indira Gandhi still been in the saddle?

*No.*

Could an alternative solution to the Punjab crisis have been worked out in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar?

*No.*

Was there an alternative solution to the Assam problem?

*No.*

Could we have resolved the problem of the Tamils in Sri Lanka by being tough with the Sri Lankan government? More astute in our diplomacy?

*No.*

Have we lost anything by being considerate towards Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan?

*No.*

Have we sold ourselves to the West?

*No.*

A fair, rational answer to any number of similar questions has to be a *No.*

Is the young government of Mr Rajiv Gandhi in trouble?

*Very much so.*

Is the Congress party in trouble?

*Yes, in deeper trouble than ever before.*

Is the Opposition in better shape and form now than in 1984?

*No.*

Is the government of Mr Rajiv Gandhi on the right economic track?

*Mostly.*

Why, then, is the government under attack on so many fronts?

The government is under attack because Mr Gandhi is disturbing far too many arrangements from the past. The customary loot, in terms of money and privilege, which almost every *neta* secured through politics, sometimes for as little as shouting, "So and so *zindabad*!" is under threat of a show cause notice: Mr Gandhi is talking of work and service, and publicly rebuking the *netas*. The cosy arrangement business had for grabbing what it wanted in return for a few crumbs to the politician-bureaucrat axis is threatened: Mr Gandhi is talking of competition and innovation, liberalised imports, and some dismantling of licensing.

After years of painting our politics of ruthless exercise of power, and of self-preservation at any cost, as some divine design for the upliftment of India, and the safeguarding of our freedom from bad wolves all around us, which only a select few – the intelligentsia – could understand and interpret for the rest of us, the select few are upset: Mr Gandhi is so middle class, and yet doing rather well. In the event, it will be surprising if Mr Gandhi and his government were not under attack!

The citizen is angry: Mr Gandhi has raised administered prices of petroleum products. Mr Gandhi and his government deserve what they are getting on the price-hike front. The timing was so bad, and the advance preparation for the jolt, nil. Against a background of irresponsible fiscal goodies of the past, the present government should have used the vast array of media now available to it to tell our people the truth about our cost-price structure, and publicised the economic evil a subsidy is. In the absence of such efforts, old habits and expectations remain.

Mr Gandhi is personally responsible for attracting some of the attacks: he has still done nothing about Mr Jagmohan, the Governor of Jammu & Kashmir against whom the Supreme Court has passed serious strictures. He is allowing his Congress party to keep G M Shah in power in Jammu & Kashmir. He still keeps in his government H R Bhardwaj and Z R Ansari, both of whom have cast slurs on the Supreme Court.

*It was in 1968, from the very first issue of* **Imprint** *under my editorship (and ownership) that I began putting my signature to this column,* On The Marquee. *This was to emphasise that I took responsibility for all that I was writing, and publishing. I believe I was the first publisher to do that – "The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the editor or the owner" was the common refrain then.*

*No such emphasis is necessary now;* **Imprint** *is too well-known for what it stands for. Hence this new format for* On The Marquee.

– R.V.P.

**Even a clerk in Bihar realises that inefficiency, wastage, neglect and pilferage account for a large percentage of India's cost structure. Yet, these vital factors are not projected as they should be — in making people aware of our basic economic problems.**

He has still not fully repaired his relations with the President. Mr Gandhi must realise that in a country, as in a family, the headman must command respect – it comes on account only. A confused or administratively and morally weak person attracts attacks the moment things do not look good.

More than a year has passed since Mr Gandhi got control of the Congress party. Yet, nothing of consequence has been done so far to distinguish it from the corrupt, disorganised and tired organisation he inherited. Even the titles of office-holders are the product of confusion. How can Mr Gandhi command the nation's respect when he cannot find even one person from his people to head the party?

The government is under attack because our basic problems – poverty, corruption, unemployment, lack of housing, illiteracy and superstition, the grind of daily life, inertia, pressure of population – remain as formidable as ever; no effort is made to tell our people that a generation or more will be required to make even a dent in the complex condition. Yet, no effort is made to rouse the people, to inspire or to motivate them towards any national goal aimed at securing redress.

Instead, an impression is allowed to spread that Mr Rajiv Gandhi will somehow propel us into the 21st century. What is this 21st century we want to usher in is not explained, while in reality people see very little new or effective measures being taken to pull us out of the quagmire of the 19th century.

The government is under attack also because, at psychologically crucial moments, it freezes, and does something quite silly. Mr Gandhi has not appreciated the reality that if the bureaucracy is in poor shape today – a slightly exaggerated view in itself – then it was hammered down there by the preceding governments, and particularly by his mother and brother. Mr Gandhi needs to sit down with the bureaucrats, listen to them, bear with them a little, but, above all, inspire and motivate them to act in concert with his ambitions and aspirations for the country to a degree where they feel responsible for all the decisions Mr Gandhi's government takes. In such an atmosphere, any number of experienced bureaucrats could have told him that Justice Mathew was too old to head the delicate Punjab commission, and that in any event, the time-frame allowed was too short.

Then, his government is under attack because he sometimes appears to be making a mockery of the Cabinet form of government. This country has had enough of one-person rule, and its consequences. Because of his youth and inexperience, more than ever before people expect him to head a Cabinet government as spelled out in our Constitution, and as we read of such functioning in other Parliamentary democracies. But Mr Gandhi appears to want to concentrate all power in his own hands. The case of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is a sad, telling example: Who is in charge?

The Prime Minister must demonstrate by example to his colleagues, to the Members of Parliament and to the senior civil servants that he is learning; that he is considerate and fast maturing, as he successfully does on TV and in protocol-oriented gatherings. He must not appear to be shuffling his pack ever so frequently to draw the elusive aces.

**DETERIORATION** in law and order is a world-wide scourge. But citizens of at least metropolitan India have begun to feel that their insecurity is now directly in proportion to the very visible security being provided to ministers. In Delhi, every time the Prime Minister goes to the airport, which in any case is far too often, over 1,000 extra men are deployed on the 14-15 minute drive. This, when citizens who call the police for help are often told: *"Abhi yahan koi afsar nahin hai."* To be really accepted as one among his people, and to lead them, Mr Gandhi must come down to earth. Of course, there are certain risks in any security considerations but, then, that is all part of life. Is it not?

Mr Rajiv Gandhi and his government make sensible statements about what ails the economy, and often take bold decisions. But a central thrust is missing. Even a clerk in Bihar realises that inefficiency, wastage, neglect and pilferage account for a large percentage of India's cost structure. Yet, these vital factors are not projected as they should be in making people aware of our basic economic problems. It is the combination of these human deficiencies which has made our economy sluggish, our products so expensive in the domestic market and so uncompetitive in exports. Remove, even over the next ten years, these impediments and we will be better off, then, economically, even in 1995 terms.

The government is subjected to much criticism on account of the raids on businesses. The government knows that not a single businessman will open his mouth against the raids if the corrupt among the politicians were also raided, and punished. But there is no action in that direction. In the meantime, nobody believes what the Finance Minister has said: that he has no information, no leads, no intelligence on any corrupt politician!

Given the Indian make-up, we promise too much, and we also expect too much, especially of the politicians. And then we protest too much too, without raising even a finger to help secure what we want. Add to all this the general belief among our people that the Bharat Mata is everybody's milch cow, and you will understand the attacks better. ♦

# imprint

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# LETTERS

## The Troubled President

Rajiv Gandhi may have no respect for tradition, but he does have a right to be heard. If **Imprint** could speak to the 'President's friends' and 'Rashtrapati Bhavan sources' (*The Troubled President,* February 1986), surely it could have taken the trouble to ask the Prime Minister's friends and South Block sources to explain his strange behaviour?

*Rani Kripalani*
*New Delhi*

It is an established convention in our country, that the President does not speak to the press. It is the government's duty to protect the dignity attached to his office and to counter suggestions which tend to tarnish it. It is unfortunate that the government chose to keep silent while serious allegations were being made about Giani Zail Singh's role in the Punjab crisis.

By carrying the President's side of the story – for whatever it is worth – **Imprint** has made amends for the government's shameful behaviour. The Prime Minister's behaviour towards the President is unforgivable. Whatever his grievances, he has no excuse for showing total disregard towards the unwritten conventions of our country. Not only does it amount to a humiliation of Giani Zail Singh, it also causes permanent damage to the country's institutions. And such damage must be avoided whatever the cost – for no individual is above the post he holds.

*Ritesh Sharma*
*Bombay*

## Jindal's Diary

*Jindals Diary* (February 1986) dealt with several facets of naturopathy. It was written in good taste and spiced with humour. However, we hasten to add that on page 73, in the second and third columns, grossly misleading information has been published. You will appreciate that the author, who probably stayed at Jindals for only a short while, cannot judge the reason behind the termination of Dr Murthy's (the previous Chief Medical Officer) services and it appears that the author, without verifying the facts from the management, has been prey to the rumours spread by Dr Murthy.

Our Institute is assisting millions, not merely to reduce weight, but also to overcome diseases like asthma, bronchitis, heart ailments, diabetes, acute arthritis, etc. An organisation of this nature has to be run with very high standards. Dr Murthy was given ample opportunity to correct himself and live up to the expectations of the management. However, instead of taking the necessary steps to improve, he started spreading false rumours and also started behaving in an improper manner.

The management has established the Institute not merely to serve the rich, but mainly to serve the poor and middle class people. Instead of living up to the aims and objectives of the Institute, Dr Murthy started spending his time with the rich and influential, totally disregarding poor and middle class patients. Dr Murthy's attitude did not bring credit to an organisation set up solely to serve the suffering and we had no choice but to ask him to leave.

*R C Gupta*
*Chairman*
*Institute of Naturopathy & Yogic Sciences*
*Bangalore*

# LETTERS

## BHOPAL WRANGLES

I was profoundly embarrassed by the extent of the folly and dishonesty in Subramaniam Swamy's column (*Bhopal Wrangles*, January 1986).

Swamy surprises me with this $ 400-million settlement offer, which he alleges the Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) has made, since the Government of India has stated that settlement talks broke down at $ 230 million, payable over 35 years (UCC's insurance cover is around $ 200 million). I would lay greater weight on what the government has claimed than on gossip and rumours. Swamy talks of the Government of India rushing to court. He seems to forget that there were a few victims involved as well.

What is even more amusing is the selective manner in which Swamy deals with the proceedings. Bhopal is not another personal injury case. It has several features which mark it out as a paradigm of corporate and social irresponsibility. It is this issue which the Government of India's plaint has urged and which the UCC has not responded to. The UCC took all the key decisions which led to the disaster and was quite aware of the possible consequences. This irresponsibility and the lax standards pose a challenge to our society. The only way to get at the UCC is through filing the case in the US.

Apart from getting the Government of India's lawyer's name wrong, and accusing the government of treason, Swamy turns prophet by saying that in this litigation, the government is likely to secure a paltry $ 260 million in damages. How does Swamy arrive at this figure, which is less than what Carbide offered in settlement?

*Javed Gaya*
*Bombay*

The Government of India has spent US $ 23 million on legal fees so far. And we have lost considerably in terms of the fallen US dollar. While everybody is arguing about the quantum of compensation, hardly anyone seems to appreciate that long delays are inevitable in litigations and a settlement for a dollar now is worth three dollars in the future – provided, of course, that we genuinely care for the victims who need assistance now.

– Editor

## THE GOD AND I

Allow me to congratulate Amrita Shah for her article *NTR: The God That Failed* (February 1986). I find it incredible that this bombastic thug and bully was ever taken seriously by men like Arun Shourie, V M Tarkunde and Minoo Masani, and even considered a 'champion of democracy and truth'.

Averse though I am to 'I-told-you-so' numbers, I feel NTR merits one. On January 16, 1983, within a week of NTR's victory, I wrote in my column in *The Sunday Observer*: "The election results in the South are nothing to get excited about. They may have been dramatic, but they will change nothing. All elections can do is to replace one set of unprincipled idiots by another." A trifle exaggerated, I concede , but nothing compared to the chastisement I duly received. "As for the Truth, this is really impossible to demonstrate to an aesthete who has read philosophy," Kersy Katrak wrote to the paper the next week. "That Truth is the power that spoke through the people of Andhra two weeks ago. And it will speak again." (The problem is, it never shuts up, not in Hyderabad at least).

I decided to leave my armchair in Bombay and meet NTR. This I did thrice, and the transcript of our conversations was published in *The Illustrated Weekly* (December 18-24, 1983). Anyone interested in the tinpot lunacies of Nandamuri Taraka Ramarao would do well to read this fantastic, but deeply depressing interview. It was on the basis of my meetings with the man that I wrote in the 25th anniversary issue of *Seminar* (January 1984):

> "For many people, NTR is the man of the year. I see justice in this choice."
>
> "NTR is typical of the new breed of men democracy has spawned. He is a child of 1947: one who graduated two months before Independence and took up his first job two months later."
>
> "Today, he is a man who runs a state with a population larger than that of Great Britain and yet he is totally incapable of self-analysis and moral reasoning. . ."

Enough said. If I could be sure it would prevent the purveyors of opinion from going bananas over the next 'messiah', I would xerox Ms Shah's article and send it to every newspaper and magazine in the country. The intelligence of our journalists being what it is, I shall save my money and raise a silent cheer for Ms Shah instead.

*Dhiren Bhagat*
*Bombay*

## Ravi Shastri - A True Champion

Your *Paper Tiger* on Ravi Shastri (February 1986) is entirely unjustified. It is true that Ravi Shastri is a little defensive as a batsman, but he is to our team what Larry Gomes is to the West Indian team – a perfect foil to his other rash team-mates. Also, apart from Kapil Dev, he is the only Indian bowler who can contain the attacking batsmen in a one-day encounter.

His performance in Australia during the world championship was judged by a panel of extremely knowledgeable critics. The 'Champion of Champions' trophy was awarded only after a detailed analysis of all the other players' performances.

The article appears to be an idle exercise in mud-slinging.

*K A S Namboodiripad*
*New Delhi*

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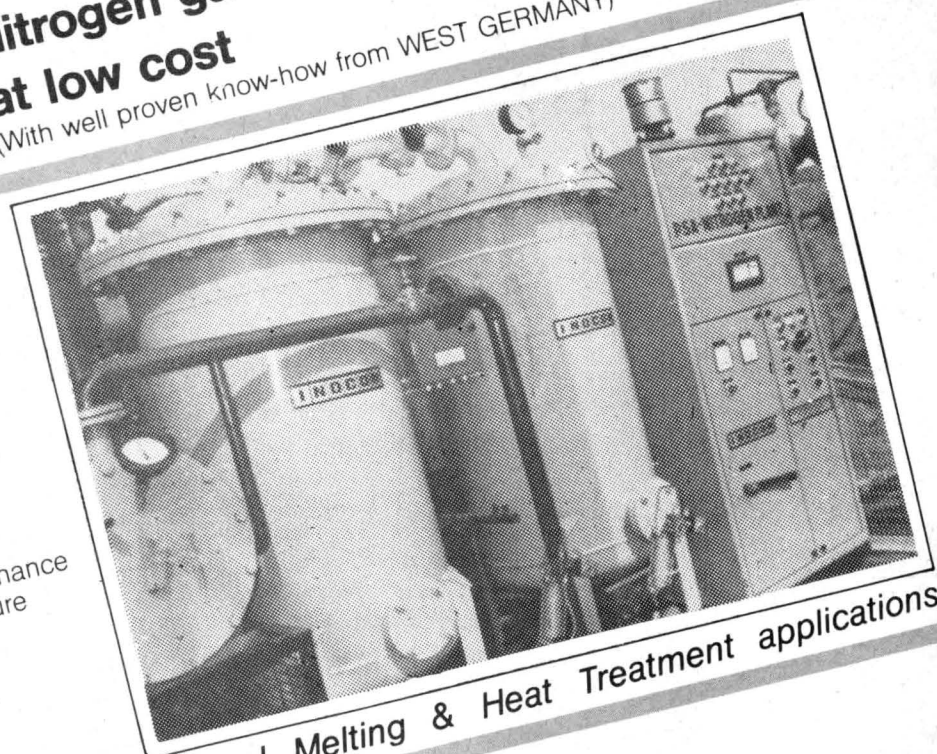


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LONDON DIARY

By Lydia Lewis

# WINTER CHILLS

The Blessed Margaret, an angry Tarzan and a Wapping liar.

**FEBRUARY** is never a good time to be in London, but this February has been even worse than usual. We've had one of the worst winters in memory, the coldest day in 40 years, and what seems like non-stop snow. It's not just the weather. Everything else has been pretty depressing, as well. The political situation is bleak. Mrs Thatcher has got herself embroiled in yet another mess. Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, has proved incapable of making capital out of the Tories' predicament and the SDP-Liberal alliance just chugs along pointlessly with the sinister Dr David Owen overshadowing his Liberal ally, David Steel.

That's not all. The British press goes from bad to worse. All three quality Sunday papers are run by less than wholesome businessmen. *The Sunday Telegraph* has just been bought by a mysterious Canadian magnate; *The Observer* has become no more than a Harrods-bashing tool in the hands of Roland Rowland, its unappealing proprietor; and as for Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, the less said the better.

* * *

**BUT FIRST** things first. I've written before that the three requirements of a good British scandal are sex, royalty and spies. The astonishing thing about the Westland affair is that it has none of these ingredients. Instead, it revolves around the attempts of two competing consortia to take over an ailing helicopter firm (ailing, at least partly because India refused to buy its copters) called Westland. The American consortium had the support of Mrs Thatcher and her then Minister for Trade and Industry, the unlovable Leon Brittan. The European consortium had the support of Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine, an upwardly mobile, Tarzan-like figure. When it became clear that the government was going to push for an American victory, Tarzan got hot under the loincloth and resigned on what he called an issue of principle. A short while later, Brittan, who had been caught leaking letters that damaged Tarzan's case to the press, also resigned on another matter of principle. (The principle in question? If you're caught doing something wrong, you scurry away before the row hurts the Blessed Margaret.)

*Michael Heseltine: Tarzan makes an exit.*

A boring enough affair, you might think. But there's more to it than meets the eye. At stake is the leadership of the Tory party. Attila the Hen has now been PM for nearly seven years. She has won two elections and one war. In the process, she has dismantled the welfare state, trampled on every minority worth trampling on and turned her husband into a national joke. Perhaps the time has come for a new Prime Minister to lead the party into the next election. If she has her way then Norman Tebbit, the ghoulish skinhead who is Chairman of the Tory party, will succeed her. This is not something that Tarzan would be pleased with.

Hence, this silly squabble. Now, Tarzan, who is about as wet as the Sahara desert, is talking about 'caring conservatism' and trying to repackage himself as the candidate of the liberal wing of the party. He feels that when Mrs Thatcher does step down, he will be better placed to take on Tebbit from outside the Cabinet.

All that this machiavellian scheming seems to have done is convince Tories that perhaps the best person to succeed Mrs Thatcher is neither He-

*Lydia Lewis, a frequent* **Imprint** *contributor, is a member of the Hackney Labour Party.*

It is a sign of the times that when Ian Jack won the Journalist Of The Year award, his paper decided not to front-page the news.

# WINTER CHILLS

seltine nor Tebbit. Peter Walker and Douglas Hurd seem to be current favourites.

* * *

**I WROTE** about Robert Maxwell a few months ago. While Maxwell is still somebody you can laugh at, the same cannot be said of Rupert Murdoch, the canny Australian multi-media magnate. At the outset, I should make certain things clear and declare my prejudices. I think that Murdoch is a brilliant businessman. He understands publishing. He works hard. And he is very rich. Unfortunately, he is also a complete Philistine. A man with no commitment to anything other than himself. An unscrupulous user of people and power. And in my opinion, not the sort of man who should be allowed to run a newspaper.

Unfortunately, Murdoch owns rather a lot of newspapers. In Britain he owns the bestselling *Sun*, perhaps the most mendacious newspaper in the Western world, and the smutty *News Of The World*. A few years ago, he also bought *The Times* (now best known for its bingo game) and *The Sunday Times* (now best known for its cheap front page self-promotion).

Earlier this month, Murdoch decided that he was going to shift all his papers to a new office and press complex in faraway Wapping. At the time, he was in the middle of negotiations with the unions – negotiations he deliberately sabotaged so that he could fire a chunk of his work-force. He then told the journalists that they, too, had to move. The smut-merchants on the *Sun* and the *News Of The World* (better known as the *Screws Of The World*) caved in at once, but those on *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* held out. Unfortunately, *The Times*'s staff soon went along with Murdoch's decision leaving *The Sunday Times*'s hacks on their own. They held out for days, ignoring the entreaties of the Murdoch clone who has been installed as editor (a former *Economist* hack called Andrew Neil), till finally they, too, agreed to move to Wapping by a vote of 68 to 60. In the process, Claire Tomalin announced that she was leaving *The Sunday Times* and Peter Kellner resigned his column in *The Times*.

Now, both papers are shadows of their pre-Murdoch selves and come out from Wapping. Journalists get to their fortress-like new office under heavy security, nobody answers the phone there (contributor, Miles Kington had to write an article in another paper complaining that he could no longer phone his editor at *The Times*), and *The Sunday Times*, in particular, gets worse and worse. It is symptomatic of the present state of affairs that when Ian Jack – the only man worth reading on Andrew Neil's *Sunday Times* – won the Journalist Of The Year award, the paper chose to break with tradition and not put the news on the front page. No doubt, if Andrew Neil had been declared Cable TV Wonder Of The Year by the Kiwanis Club of Little Rock, Arkansas, this would have made page one.

* * *

**IF YOU ARE ONE** of the few people who hasn't heard of it, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, written by talented expatriate Asian midget Hanif Kureishi, is a film about the Pakistani community in England. What makes it more unusual is that its protagonist, a young Pakistani man, is homosexual and is in love with a white, former-National Front type. It is an unusual story and the film is skilfully made. ♦


**STATEMENT ABOUT THE MAGAZINE IMPRINT**

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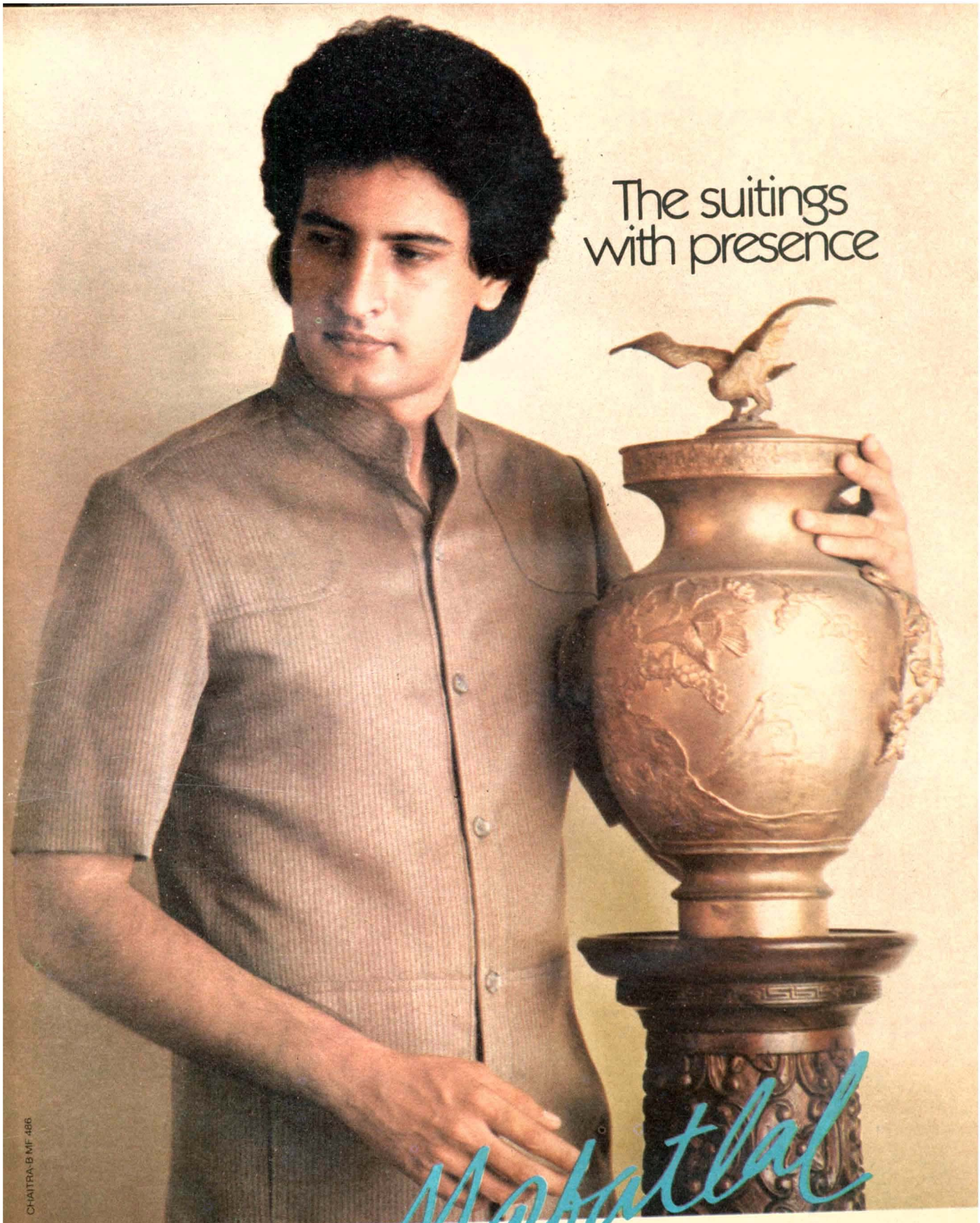
I, Vir Sanghvi, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Dated February 28, 1986. Signed by the publisher, Vir Sanghvi.

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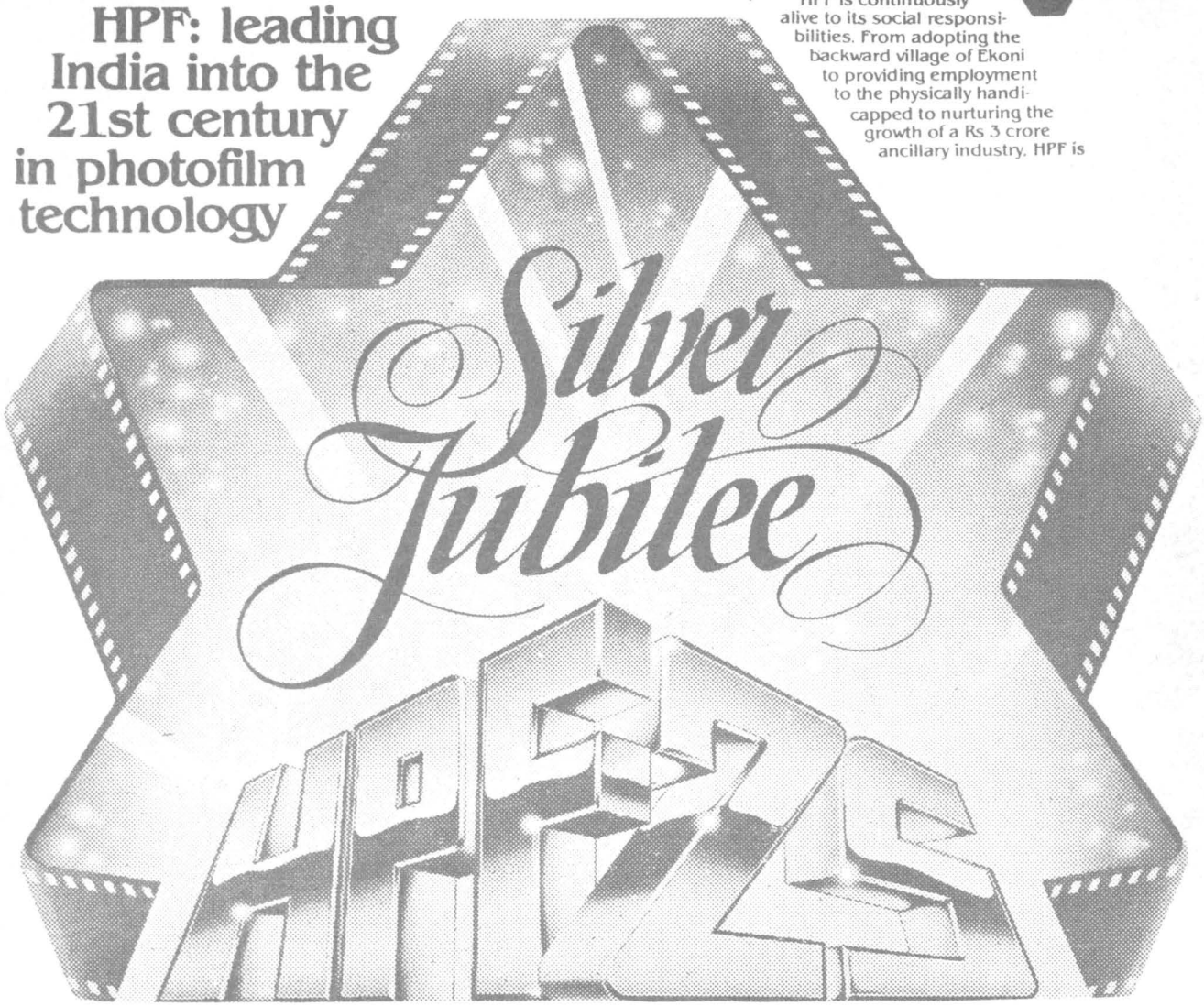



SAA/HPF/3490

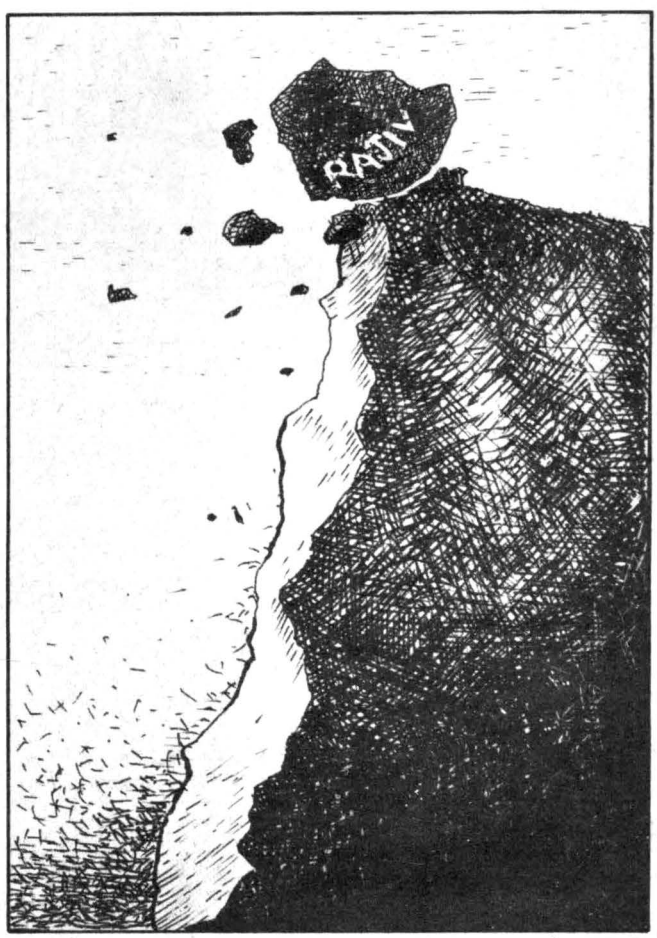
COUNTER-VIEW

By Subramaniam Swamy

# TROUBLED TIMES

It is going to be a long, tough year for Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress party.

JANUARY 26, 1986 will be an important milestone on the road downhill for the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. By failing to transfer Chandigarh to Punjab on that day as he was obliged to, according to the Rajiv-Longowal accord, Mr Gandhi has proved himself weak, faltering, and incapable of living up to his commitment. It does not matter if Chandigarh is given to Punjab later, or that Haryana is being mollified, but the stature of Mr Gandhi as Mr Clean, who means what he says, has been substantially diminished. On January 13, major newspapers, quoting the Prime Minister, carried banner headlines to the effect that Chandigarh would be transferred to Punjab on Republic Day. Two weeks later, nothing of the sort has happened.




Six months ago, I wrote in this column that the Prime Minister's honeymoon with the people was over, and that his electoral marriage would be on the rocks if he did not deliver on his promises. Well, he didn't, and the marriage, too, is shaky now. The indications are visible to all but those living on Malabar Hill in Bombay (incidentally, I too, live in that area, but there can be exceptions).

The clearest indication that support for Mr Gandhi is waning, is the result of the Assam Assembly elections which the Congress (I) lost, despite the Prime Minister's own hard sell campaign. Several Parliamentary and Assembly by-elections held simultaneously were also lost. Even in the by-elections which the Congress (I) won, the margins were vastly reduced as compared to the December 1984 and February 1985 results. These defeats came on the heels of the loss of the Bombay and Calcutta municipal corporations. And I predict that more defeats are around the corner. In February next year, Haryana, Bengal and Kerala will go to the polls, and the Congress (I) is bound to lose those states too. If that happens, the Congress (I) will be tempted to elect a new leader in place of Rajiv Gandhi, and Giani Zail Singh, whose term expires in August 1987, is bound to oblige.

So, 1986 is crucial for the survival of Mr Gandhi, but he has begun very badly. The delay in handing over Chandigarh is a blow to his credibility, but I wonder whether he realises this. And credibility is the key to Mr Gandhi's survival because he has been building up his image at the cost of the party. When the Congress (I) lost the Punjab elections, he said: "Bharat Mata has won." When the Congress (I) was badly defeated in Assam, he told his partymen that in the national interest, electoral defeats do not matter. Well, they do for the Congress (I), because the party is dominated by crooks, smugglers, *dalals* and gangsters. This is not just my opinion. If you want confirmation of what I have said, just read Mr Gandhi's speech to his party workers at the Congress Centenary convention. And all these antisocials need to have the Congress (I) in power to earn commissions and stave off the police and, therefore, to hell with national interests. This is not to say that the Opposition parties are any different. In fact, I can give you a long list of prominent leaders of the Janata party and the BJP who would justifiably adorn the rogues' gallery in any police station. The Congress (I)'s disease is contagious and has spread to other parties as well.

One would not object to Rajiv

*Subramaniam Swamy, a former member of the Lok Sabha, is a regular contributor to* Imprint.

ILLUSTRATION BY APARNA SINGH

# From six to sixtee – everyone loves

# *ENERGEE*

MAFCO

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The gloss is wearing off. The foreign trips and press conferences have lost their appeal. But it is not just the press. He has alienated industrialists as well. The poor, of course, remain suspicious of the 21st century.

# TROUBLED TIMES

Gandhi's efforts to build his image at the cost of his party if he were courageous and determined. He is neither, and events prove that. To begin with, take the way he assumed office on October 31, 1984. It was literally at the point of a gun. I don't mean Mrs Gandhi's assassination at all, but the pointless short-circuiting of the democratic procedure of calling a Parliamentary party meeting and properly electing a leader. This short-circuit was arranged by his aides who threatened everybody, from the President downwards, of the serious consequences of not nominating Rajiv Gandhi Prime Minister right away. The news of Mrs Gandhi's demise was withheld from the public for this reason. (Even Rajiv told *Sunday* that he had tuned in to the BBC to learn about his mother's death!) If Rajiv's instincts had been democratic and he had the courage of his convictions, then he would have refused to accept the Prime Ministership that day. Instead, he would have asked for an adherence to the traditional practice as at the time of Nehru's death, and Shastri's. But he placed himself above the party in the wrong way, further weakening it.

The next event is the horrible killing of the Delhi Sikhs. There was the immediate suspicion that his close aides in the Council of Ministers had a hand in this. The obvious democratic and courageous step would have been to order a judicial inquiry. But Rajiv Gandhi stoutly refused, prompting the suspicion that he was afraid that the evidence may point towards his tacit support for the ministers' heinous deeds. He ultimately agreed to the inquiry, but that was like Marcos agreeing to inquire into Aquino's murder. No one has any faith in the Mishra Commission. One pointer to the validity of this belief is the reaction of the Prime Minister to the Citizens For Democracy's report on Punjab in September 1985. The report was confiscated, and the authors were arrested! Again, what was the Prime Minister afraid of? In such a climate, how can the Mishra Commission come up with anything that points to even minor lapses of the government?

Even the signing of the accord with Sant Harchand Singh Longowal and the subsequent elections to the Punjab Assembly showed up the Prime Minister in a poor light. In a democracy, accountability is crucial. And determined and courageous democrats should volunteer accounts of themselves. Throughout the 1984 Lok Sabha election campaign, the Prime Minister referred to Longowal as a terrorist and to the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as anti-national. Suddenly, in July 1985, they were not. Why? Mr Gandhi has to explain that to the country. People like me, who had said that the government could reach a negotiated settlement with Longowal and that the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, while not acceptable, was nevertheless not seditious, were not taken seriously. Now Mr Gandhi has joined our ranks!

Some think that Rajiv is the conciliatory type, while his mother was the confrontationist. On the question of Punjab, the reality is that Mrs Gandhi hesitated, while her son was the hard-liner, the catalyst, and precipitator, who drove his mother to take the most foolish step of the century, namely, to send the army into the Golden Temple. Therefore, if in July 1985, Rajiv had changed his attitude on Punjab, then the courageous thing to do would have been to own up. But instead, the entire blame for the Punjab fiasco was put on Mrs Gandhi. And during the Punjab elections, no Congress (I) posters with Mrs Gandhi's photograph were allowed to be put up! In stating this, I am not expressing sympathy for Mrs Gandhi, but only emphasising that the glossed up image of Rajiv Gandhi, as presented by the media, does not square with the facts.

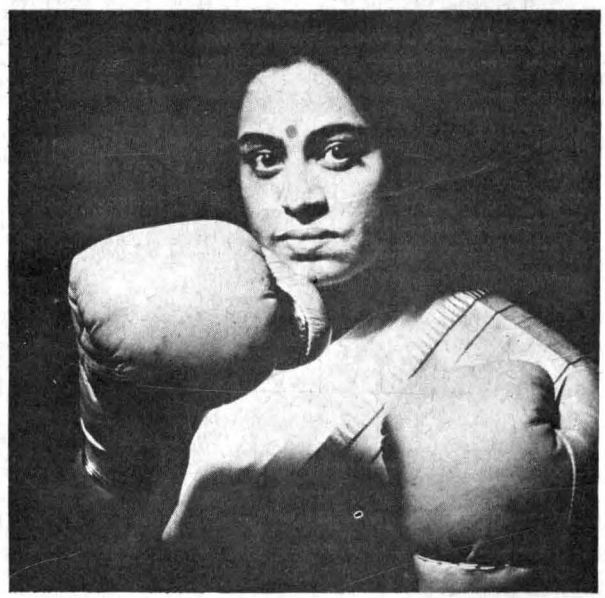
The whole problem with Mr Gandhi is that his image is totally synthetic and, as time passes, the gloss will wear out. The common perception is that he wants a market economy, but except for a small dose of direct tax reduction and a meaningless import liberalisation, he has done nothing to warrant that claim. His desire to keep India independent of the Soviet Union has been publicised. But his stand on Afghanistan is worse than Indira's. He is projected as steady, courageous and determined. His handling of Punjab and the way in which he has pandered to Bhajan Lal does not show that. He is said to be Mr Clean. Well, I will write about that some day.

Images and luck can take Rajiv Gandhi only so far. Already, his earlier public relations exercises – foreign trips and press conferences – have lost their appeal. These days, pressmen are not so kind to Mr Gandhi and he, in turn, snaps at them.

If it were just journalists and cartoonists who were showing signs of antagonism towards the young Prime Minister, he could probably have dealt with them as his mother did – by ignoring them. Unfortunately, his list of enemies has grown to include industrialists, and Congress (I) men. The poor, of course, have always been suspicious of Mr Gandhi's 21st century rhetoric. Obviously, all that glitters. . . ◆

# THE MIDDLE CLASS

**Over the last five years, the Indian middle class has come into its own. It is now more assertive and confident, particularly after Rajiv Gandhi – who it sees as one of its own – became Prime Minister.**



For most of the '70s, it was the forgotten class. Neglected by politicians, crippled by cruel tax imposts, buffeted by inflation, faced with a paucity of consumer goods, and bereft of any popular culture of its own, the Indian middle class struggled fitfully with the hassles of survival. Nothing seemed to go right. The *dhoti-kurtawallahs,* who controlled the political system, ignored middle class aspirations. The oil price hike of 1973 created an inflationary spiral that eroded its earning power. The real value of take-home salaries shrank in the face of unreasonably high tax rates. Even the most basic consumer goods – a mixer-grinder, let alone a video recorder – were either unavailable or too expensive. Faced with this situation, the Indian middle class grew poorer and more dispirited. Its identity seem-



PHOTOGRAPH BY ASHOK GUPTA

ed to crumble and it resigned itself to accepting that things could only get worse.

Then, in the '80s, the tide turned. Tax rates were rationalised, inflation eased up, the production of consumer goods increased, a new middle class culture centred on television, developed and middle class heroines like Rajani captured the urban imagination. Added to all this was the emergence of Rajiv Gandhi – India's first middle class Prime Minister. He understood the aspirations of the white-collar worker, introduced his own middle class buddies to politics, and served notice to the *dhoti-kurtawallahs* that a new era was dawning.

Suddenly, the middle class struck back. India took on Bharat. The old biases in favour of the rural sector were questioned. Economic measures that hurt it were opposed.

# STRIKES BACK

**DEFINITIONS** of 'middle class' vary. One way of looking at it would be to use income as a criterion. Market research agencies regard those with a household income between Rs 1,000 and Rs 2,500 as middle class. Anything above that counts as upper class. At first sight, the income thresholds may seem too low. In some large metropolitan areas, industrial workers earn Rs 1,000 or more. In the national context, however, the number of such people is not large. Even so, it seems best to define middle class in terms of income *and* occupation. Anyone earning over Rs Rs 1,000 *and* holding a white-collar job can be called middle class.

If you use this definition, then roughly 29 per cent of the population of urban India is middle class. That means an astonishing 56 million people – more than the population of France or of Britain. If you take just the top end of this class, defined as those who speak English, that amounts to an equally staggering 15.2 million, three times the population of Denmark, twice the population of Austria and, roughly the entire population of Australia.

It is well-known that urban India, with its 185 million people, would be – judged on the basis of population alone – the fourth-largest country in the world. What is less known is that the middle class component of urban India is so substantial. It is these 56 million people who have now begun to assert themselves, to take control of their own lives. For the wealthiest among them, things have got even better in the '80s. A surprisingly large number of them not only identify with, but are also linked somehow, to those in power today. This class, fed up of the manner in which India has been run for years by semi-educated politicians with rural origins, now feels that it is, at last, in control. And ready to guide the country into the 21st century.

**PERHAPS** the most striking aspect of this new middle class consciousness has been the consumer boom. Partly, it is that the middle class now spends more money on consumer goods. In 1984-85, consumer expenditure went up by 12 per cent (in real terms) over 1982-83 – from Rs 1,11,326 crore to Rs 1,44,108 crore. More than that, it is the fact that many new consumer products have entered the market in the '80s, and it is their availability (more than an increase in demand) that has spurred the consumer revolution on. Liberalised licensing policies have led to this boom and advertising has 'persuaded, manoeuvred and created desires among consumers', to quote Nirmal Goswami, Creative Director of Ulka Advertising.

The marketing blitz and the in-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NEETA BHOSALE

**One can now eat a Wimpy burger, smoke a Rothmans cigarette, drive a Suzuki car, wear FU's jeans, watch a Sony TV and pamper one's skin with Oil of Ulay without ever having to go abroad. This year, Pierre Cardin and Estee Lauder may come to India.**

creased availability have altered middle class aspirations. Notes Sylvester da Cunha, head of the eponymous advertising agency: "The traditional middle class attitude has changed from the conservative, to one of greater receptivity to new ideas and products. Their life-styles are no longer austere and simple or characterised by self-denial."

The figures support the contention that markets are expanding. Take just one area – soaps and detergents. The detergent market has grown by 30 per cent in 1984 from 130,696 tons in 1983 to 169,336 tons in 1984, according to ORG data. In 1984 alone, 13 new brands of premium soaps were introduced in the market and sales increased by an astonishing ten per cent. And last year, Market Research and Advisory Services (MRAS), calculated that 99 per cent of all middle class households in the metros used bathing soap.

The same is true of two-wheelers. In 1955, India made only 952 two-wheelers and three-wheelers. By 1980, this figure had shot up to 417,000 over 25 years. But in just the four-year period from 1980 to 1984 it doubled to 850,000. The production of cars has also shot up dramatically – from 35,000 cars in 1980 to over 100,000 in 1985.

"The consumer revolution," says Pushpita Mathur of Clarion Advertising, "can in a way be called a kitchen revolution. The major successes have been in the area of instant foods, packaged *masalas* and soft drinks as well as in the areas of durables such as mixers, cooking ranges and the like." The sale of mixer-grinders, for instance, has grown from 40,000 in 1970 to over 3,00,000 today. In the urban areas, 34 per cent of all households own refrigerators: production has gone up from 1.08 lakh in 1971 to 5.72 lakh in 1984-85. Similarly, 85 per cent of all middle class households in the four metros own pressure-cookers.

The revolution in packaged foods has been as startling. Instant noodles, pre-packaged *masalas,* dehydrated foods, soft drink mixes and the like are now freely available. A staggering 43 per cent of all advertising on television consists of food advertising and soft drinks are the largest single product group on TV. As Pushpita Mathur notes: "Convenience is the catchword."

THE CONSUMER BOOM hasn't just made life easier for the middle class. It has also allowed it to enjoy itself in a manner which wasn't possible in the '70s. The catering equivalent of the two-minute noodle is the ready-to-eat hamburger or pizza. The expansion in fast food outlets throughout the cities has been phenomenal. Nirula's in Delhi, Open House in Bombay, Pizza King in several cities and many local success stories have created a new intermediate class of restaurants that fits between the traditional Kwality-type places and five-star coffee shops.

The same is true of such hobbies as photography. For years, India made obsolete cameras and it cost an enormous amount to have colour prints made. In the '80s, all of that has changed. A few years ago, Photophone launched its modern Hot Shot camera for amateur use and expected sales of 50,000 units a year. They were double that in the first year itself. Targeted sales for 1985 were 1.75 lakh units, and other manufacturers have launched rivals to Hot Shot. The cost of photographic prints has also tumbled. In the '70s, it cost around Rs 8 to have a colour print by one of the few labs that would undertake such work. Now, with companies like QSS in the market, not only is there no shortage of people willing to make prints but they are ready in a day and can cost as little as Rs 2.25 a print.

Another example of the same sort of phenomenon is the ready-to-wear garment market. In the past, most middle class people used tailors to stitch their clothes for them. Teenagers, frustrated by the antiquated styling of such clothes, would beg relatives and friends abroad to send them jeans and fancy outfits. Now, all of that has changed. Partly, it is the boom in retailing. National chains like Intershoppe now sell world-quality jeans in smart new boutiques and such emporia as Bombay's Benzer and In-Style are stocked with sophisticated ready-to-wear apparel.

Perhaps, as important, is the export surplus market. Thanks to India's flourishing garment export industry, it is now possible to pick up designer garments at pavement stalls for something like one-tenth of the prices

charged for them abroad. In such cities as Bangalore, stores like the Wearhouse chain sell export surplus goods in sophisticated surroundings at throwaway prices. As a consequence, even a teenager on a tight budget can, with a little shopping around, look as though she has stepped out of the pages of *Vogue*.

This phenomenon is in keeping with the general tendency for India to 'catch up' with the rest of the world in the consumer products market. Now, there is less and less that teenagers need ask relatives to send them from abroad. What's more, many of the new products have international brand names. Thus, one can now eat a Wimpy burger, smoke a Rothmans cigarette, drive a Suzuki car, wear an FU's jean, watch a Sony TV and improve one's skin with Oil of Ulay without having to import them from abroad. In 1986, this trend will increase with such up-market brand names as Estee Lauder and Pierre Cardin being attached to Indian products.

**FOR YEARS**, the Indian middle class has been denied any means of entertainment of its own. Theatre has never really taken off, fewer and fewer good English-language films have been imported, the Hindi cinema has been directed primarily at a working class audience in search of escapist fare, and film music has moved so far down-market that few middle class people can bear it.

One of the most significant phenomena of the '80s has been the change in this aspect of middle class life and the growth of a middle class-oriented popular culture. The source of this change is, of course, television.

There are an estimated 6.5 million TV sets in the country today. Most of them belong to the middle class. The National TV Survey, conducted jointly by Doordarshan and MRAS in 40 towns, shows that 90 per cent of all households earning above Rs 2,500 own at least one TV set. The figure is only slightly lower for the households earning between Rs 1,500-2,500: 86 per cent. And, most surprisingly, even among households earning between Rs 750-1,500, 69 per cent owned TV sets. Obviously, television is *the* medium of the middle classes.

The fact that TV ownership is so widespread would not be as significant, were it not for two things. Firstly, Doordarshan has dispensed with its old policy of allowing film-oriented programming to hog the ratings. Now, there are programmes made specially for TV – all of which are expressly directed at the middle class. And secondly, advertising agencies have shifted their attention to TV so that it is now the most significant means of influencing middle class values and aspirations.

"It is the novelty of sponsored programmes," says critic Dolly Thakore, "that has caught the imagination of the middle classes. For years, the Sunday film was the most widely-watched slot on TV. Now, a programme like *Hum Log* has a higher viewership." The difference is that while the Sunday film was usually escapist and gimmick-laden, the new serials are authentic, credible and what's more, deal with middle class homes and middle class problems.

The success of *Hum Log* – a poorly-acted, sloppily-scripted soap opera about a North Indian lower-middle class family – was largely due to the fact that it was the first to address itself to middle class aspirations and predicaments. This gave it a novelty value that more than compensated for its other shortcomings. *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, a better-made situation comedy, succeeded largely because it focussed on a middle class home that many of its viewers could recognise and identify with.

The most notable success of this genre is, of course, Basu Chatterjee's *Rajani* in which the heroine, a middle class housewife, takes on a host of middle class problems from unhelpful taxi-drivers to corrupt school teachers. While the solutions *Rajani* offers at the end of each programme are usually facile, the show is successful because it embodies a rising middle class consciousness and the belief that it is possible to fight back now.

The effect of such middle class-directed serials has been that those Hindi films that used to be made for the middle class market now find few takers. Govind Nihalani had to premiere his *Party* on television and many directors of the 'middle cinema' – such as Basu Chatterjee and Kundan Shah – have now shifted to TV, recognising that this is the best

**Television has been instrumental in bringing about shared experiences among a broad band of people with incomes as low as Rs 1,000 a month to Rs 10,000. It has brought about a levelling of middle class values.**

**At least one million new investors entered the market because of the Rajiv Gandhi euphoria. The middle class has come to look upon the share market as a means of earning much-needed secondary income.**

medium to reach the middle classes.

**ADVERTISERS** have been quick to grasp the importance of TV. Says Ranjit Chib of MRAS, "TV has been the most significant instrument of change in recent years." Doordarshan's advertising revenue for 1985-86 is estimated to touch a staggering Rs 50 crore. Because it is so important for advertisers to reach the middle class – the class with the spending power – they take care to see that the programmes they sponsor are those that reflect middle class tastes and values. Consequently, there is much more middle class-directed entertainment being produced today, than ever before. In the process, a sort of middle class common entertainment denominator has evolved. Says Titoo Ahluwalia of Marketing and Research Group Private Limited (MARG): "Television is the great leveller. It is instrumental in bringing about shared experiences among a broad band of people with incomes ranging from as low as Rs 1,000 a month to Rs 10,000. It has brought about a levelling of middle class values."

**TELEVISION** may be the most important means of middle class entertainment but it is not the only one. Also significant is the role of video. The popularity of video recorders is partly due to government policy. In 1978, when the first few sets began appearing in Bombay and Delhi, they cost (after duty) nearly Rs 40,000 and were difficult to import. Now, they can be brought in by any passenger as part of his baggage and cost (after duty) between Rs 9,000 and Rs 12,000. Moreover, after the Asiad, prices of colour TV sets have crashed, and now, it is possible to buy a good unit for less than Rs 10,000.

The importance of video at the lower end of the middle class scale, lies in the fact that it emphasises the distinction between the classes. Now, a middle class person who wishes to see the latest Amitabh Bachchan blockbuster need no longer rub shoulders with industrial workers in the same cinema hall. He can simply rent a (usually pirated) video print and watch it in the privacy of his own home. As a result, the average frequency of cinema going has halved from 1.8 per month, in the pre-TV era, to only 0.9 per month in the four metros, reveals an ORG survey.

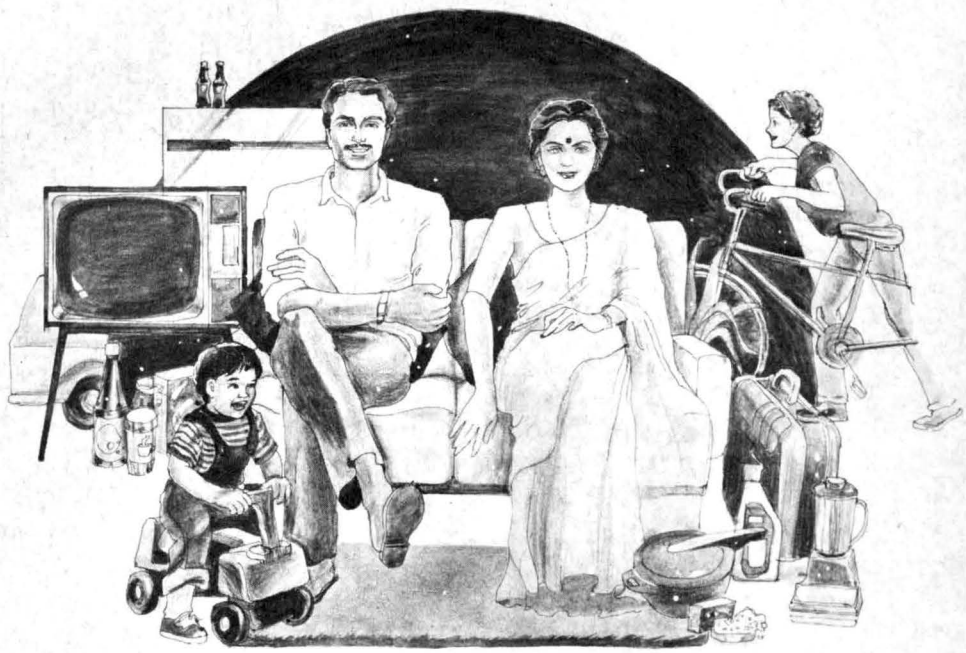
At the top end of the scale, video has had an even more significant effect. No longer are English-speaking urban dwellers dependent on the few films that the Hollywood companies import into India. Now, they can see what they like only a few weeks after the film has been released in Los Angeles. (Admits M F Sidhwa, the manager of Bombay's Regal cinema, "Middle class viewership has fallen.") Moreover, they also have access to a wide variety of American and British televison programmes ranging from *Dallas* and *Dynasty* to *Top Of The Pops*. In the more affluent areas of Bombay, cable TV (available for a small fee) feeds a steady diet of transatlantic pap onto local TV screens. Consequently, conversations at upper crust cocktail parties frequently have more to do with *Miami Vice* than with *Karamchand*.

Nowhere is the influence of foreign TV programming felt stronger than in the area of rock music. It is no longer necessary for the three record companies to release records for singers like Laura Brannigan and Madonna to become stars. It's the videos of them in performance that do the job. In the '60s and '70s, those young people who listened to rock felt isolated from the actual performances. Now, *Top Of The Pops* feels as real in Bombay as it does in Birmingham.

The new middle class consciousness is reflected in the growth of a new indigenous popular music. As Hindi film music has gone further down-market, so middle class people have looked for a middle-of-the-road music of their own. They have found it in *ghazals* and *bhajans*. Explains the Commercial Manager of Music India: "Ghazals have been simplified so that even the common man can understand them. Therefore, they have begun to rival Hindi film music." The sales figures prove his point. In 1981, 60 per cent of Music India's total turnover came from film music and 40 per cent from other kinds. In 1985, that situation has been reversed. Now, 60 per cent of their turnover comes from non-film music and even

the 40 per cent attributable to soundtracks is expected to shrink.

A new breed of indigenous, middle-of-the-road singing stars has emerged; Anup Jalota, each of whose records manage to sell at least 3,00,000 units, has become the Julio Iglesias of the *pan-bahaar* set, and others like Pankaj Udhas and Jagjit and Chitra Singh sell as many records as Lata Mangeshkar or Kishore Kumar used to.



**THE '70s** were not a good time for the Indian middle class. Not only did they not exist for the government's economic planners but circumstances also conspired against them. The oil price hike of 1973 set off spiralling inflation which crippled the middle class's spending powers. Salaries went up only marginally and tax rates remained high.

That has changed in the '80s. Says Manu Shroff, editor of *The Economic Times*: "There is a feeling among the middle class that it is better off. In real terms, the prices of most consumer durables have fallen and this has made life easier for the middle class." Inflation, for instance, has levelled off. In 1975, it was running at over 25 per cent. In 1985, it is expected to be under six per cent. Tax rates, too, have been reduced. In the '70s, the highest tax rate for individuals was 97 per cent; now it's 50 per cent.

Much of the middle class's recent optimism has come not so much from any tangible economic benefits, but from the policies of Rajiv Gandhi's government. Says economist D R Pendse: "With the government coming down with a heavy hand on the corrupt, with the black money raids, the middle class no longer feels that honesty does not pay. There is now a welcome feeling of optimism, a boost to the morale of the middle class."

In real terms also, there have been some benefits for the middle class. In the last budget, the number of slabs was reduced from seven to four and with the statutory deduction of Rs 6,000, salary earners with an income of Rs 25,000 a year are able to stay out of the tax net. With tax-shelters, it is easily possible for somebody with an annual income of Rs 30,000 to pay no tax at all. Moreover, the hated Compulsory Deposit Scheme has also been abolished. There has also been a reduction in the excise and customs duties on two-wheelers, cars, refrigerators, TV sets and consumer electronic goods. All these reductions have benefited the middle class.

On the other hand, the middle class has suffered because of the hikes in the administrative price of petrol in 1985 and again in 1986. It is a symbol of heightened middle class awareness that whereas, throughout the '70s, it took such hikes for granted, it complained vociferously in 1985. At that time, though Finance Minister V P Singh conceded that the criticism had some merit, he stood by his decision. After the second hike, the government bowed to the wishes of middle class commuters and housewives and reduced the extent of the hike.

**THE INTERESTING FEA**ture of middle class economic behaviour over the last five years has been the reduced dependence on salaries as the only means of earning money. In the '70s, the stock market began to attract a new kind of investor. In the mid '70s, came the first FERA issues and they aroused some interest. In 1975, the 12 per cent ceiling on dividends was lifted. These measures had a slightly delayed effect, but by 1980, at least a million new investors began to buy stocks.

By 1983-84, other investors realised that there was big money to be made in the market. The obvious instance is Reliance: anyone who invested Rs 1,000 in Reliance in 1977 could own shares worth Rs 1.5 lakh today. But other shares have also shown phenomenal increases. Colgate-Palmolive, issued at Rs 25 in 1976, sells for Rs 230 today plus there have been two bonus issues and dividends.

This realisation was assisted by other factors. In 1983-84, dividends up to a limit of Rs 7,000 a year were exempted from tax. In 1984-85, this limit was raised to Rs 10,000. There was also the Rajiv Gandhi factor. When the new Prime Minister took office, investors felt certain that he would give the private sector a much-needed boost and, so, investor confidence soared.

This led to one of the biggest booms the Indian stock market has ever seen. Says investment counsellor Nusli Davar, "At least one million new investors entered the market because of the Rajiv Gandhi euphoria. The middle class has come to look upon the share market as a means of earning much needed secondary income. And there is money to be made. Over the last two years, a careful investor, with an initial capital of Rs 20,000 could have multiplied his investment several times."

**This high-tech vision of a computerised India may sit uneasily with the reality of rural poverty, but it appeals to the middle class belief that India has been left behind and needs to catch up with the rest of the world.**

Adds J H Deewan, a reputed investment advisor: "In the '70s, there were a mere 10-12 lakh shareholders in India. Today, by any estimate, they have increased considerably. Just the other day, I talked to a cab driver who has shares in shipping companies like Great Eastern and Garware Shipping. I estimate that he's probably worth a lot of money. Lots of people are making money on the stock exchange."

Deewan's cab-driver is probably atypical but more and more middle class persons are reading the financial pages of the daily papers, and such new publications as *Money* and make a tidy little packet on the market. The manner in which issues are over-subscribed demonstrates this. In 1977, the Reliance issue of Rs 6 crore was over-subscribed seven times. Contrast this with two recent issues worth around Rs 2.5 crore each: Atash Leasing was over-subscribed 25 times; and Kinetic Honda, 165 times.

The significance of the stock market lies in the hope it holds out to salaried people. They now feel that there are ways in which they, too, can earn money and share in the prosperity promised by Rajiv Gandhi's India. Small wonder then that an Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) survey showed that the number of salaried investors is now far greater than those who are self-employed or in business for themselves.

"ONE TENDS to forget," Rajiv Gandhi told *The Sunday Times* "that India today has a very substantial middle class which didn't exist 30 years ago." Gandhi, himself, has not forgotten about the middle class. The first Indian Prime Minister to have been a salaried employee in independent India, and one of the few politicians to have paid income tax and CDS (the Compulsory Deposit Scheme), he has some idea of what it is like to be employed in this country. His tastes, too, are overwhelmingly yuppie: video cameras, hi-fi systems, jazz and cars. His friends through the years have been (with some obvious exceptions like Amitabh Bachchan) upper middle class types: executives and managers.

The significance of the fact that the new Prime Minister – despite being a member of the ruling dynasty – is, in some crucial sense, one of them, has not been lost on the Indian middle classes. And so, when he was hastily sworn in after his mother's assassination, none of the old middle class objections about dynastic rule or a lack of respect for conventions was raised: the usually voluble Indian middle class was too pleased to have one of its own in charge to worry about democratic traditions and the like.

After becoming Prime Minster, Rajiv Gandhi has not let his natural constituency down. Even before he succeeded his mother, he had already set in motion several trends that benefited the middle class – the TV expansion, for instance, was largely his idea. Once he took over, he accelerated the process. His first budget was welcomed by the middle class and he abolished the hated CDS. His rhetoric, too, was of a kind that only middle class people would appreciate: "We have missed the industrial revolution. Let's not miss the electronic revolution"; "We need to prepare for the 21st century."

This high-tech vision of a computerised India may sit uneasily with the reality of rural poverty, but it appeals greatly to the middle class belief that India has been left behind and needs to catch up. Liberalised import policies that have made it easier to buy computers, electronic typewriters, video recorders and colour television sets have helped keep this high-tech dream alive.

In addition to the futuristic rhetoric, there is also Rajiv's own appeal. He came to power by playing on the middle class fear of instability. In his first year, he managed to neutralise the two situations (Punjab and Assam) that could cause this instability. Next, he used television brilliantly to enhance his image as a simple, decent person who cared. Never did the government's media machine suggest that he was a genius or a great leader. As far as the middle class was concerned, it was enough that he was one of them.

Rajiv fed this belief by publicly expressing his contempt for the old *dhoti-kurta* political structure. Before he became Prime Minister, he announced: "There is a feeling in India that no decent person should enter politics." At the end of his first

year in office, he hadn't changed his mind. In his speech at Bombay's Congress Centenary celebrations, he tore into the party's power brokers: "They are self-perpetuating cliques who thrive by invoking the slogans of caste and religion and by enmeshing the living body of the Congress in their net of avarice. For such persons, the masses do not count. Their life-styles, their thinking – or lack of it – their self-aggrandisement, their corrupt ways and their sanctimonious posturings are wholly incompatible with work among the people."

The middle class is delighted by such statements and continues to regard Rajiv as sharing its disdain of politics and politicians. It is also encouraged by the kind of people he has brought into politics. Arun Singh, his closest aide, has no political background and was a marketing executive with a Calcutta company. Even Arun Nehru, who serves as his strategist and political advisor, has a commercial background: he was an executive with a paint firm. Gandhi's Secretariat is staffed by bright civil servants like Sarla Grewal, Gopi Arora and Mani Shankar Aiyar. There is less room for the R K Dhawan-Yashpal Kapoor kind of intriguer.

The new breed of Congress (I) MPs is also similar in background. Most are young, well-educated and have some job experience. Throughout Rajiv Gandhi's administration, there is a sense of change: a feeling that a new post-Independence generation of urban middle class persons is taking over. While this has bred enormous resentment within the Congress old guard and considerable bewilderment in the villages where the government's urban bias is giving cause for concern, it has given the middle class the impression that it has finally entered the political mainstream and that the *dhoti-kurta* era is over.

**THE RISE** in middle class consciousness has also created a new set of middle class attitudes. Interestingly, this is truer of women that it is of men. Says Meena Kaushik of Quest, the qualitative research arm of MARG: "There's definitely been a change in the way in which women see their roles. There's a greater awareness of the world and there's much more confidence."

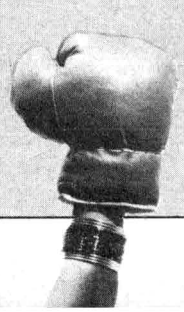
The change in consumer behaviour is the most apparent. At one stage, advertisers would appeal to a certain kind of submissive female consumer. Today's middle class woman does not fit that description at all. Says Kaushik: "Women are much more in control. They want control over money. They want to shop around and they want to get the best deal for themselves. They are much more aggressive." One measure of the advertising response to this new woman is the Lalitaji character introduced by Hindustan Lever to replace the stereotypical happy housewife who used Surf.

Tied up with this new confidence is a determination to make up their own minds. Most research shows that more middle class women voted for Rajiv Gandhi than did their husbands. Predictably, attitudes towards jobs are also changing. A MARG survey of 12 large cities showed that the number of housewives who also held jobs had shot up by 20 per cent between 1980 and 1985.

"Women are now much more conscious of the need to give themselves pleasure," adds Kaushik. "They are no longer self-sacrificing or self-denying. They want, for instance, more sexual pleasure for themselves. They are more willing to spend money on themselves and are readier to use convenience foods or to spend money on gadgets if it will make their lives easier." There is, of course, a chicken and egg question here. Did the consumer goods boom lead to this? Or, was the kitchen products boom a response to this new desire for gadgets? Nobody is quite sure.

**HOWEVER MUCH** the Indian middle class has benefited from the events and the government policies of the last few years, some unpleasant facts do remain. Compared to middle classes elsewhere in the world, it does not have such a good deal. Housing remains a major problem. Rare is the middle class person who can, in 1986, afford a house of his own of the kind that his company would give him. In Bombay, managing directors of multi-crore companies live in fear of the day when they will have to retire and

**The change has been most striking in the case of middle class women. They are now much more assertive than they were in the past. They also want greater pleasure for themselves. Many more of them are working.**



**Over the last five years, the gulf between Bharat and India has widened. While the middle class has grown in confidence, it has also become more insular and less concerned about the India of the villages.**

move out of their company apartments. Worse still, most of them would have difficulty scraping together the Rs 1 lakh or so that a new car will cost next year. Few can afford to take their families on holiday, and many can only eat well at restaurants when they are on expense accounts.

If this is the lot of chief executives of major corporations, then what of those lower down the ladder? In many ways, the great middle class boom is something of an illusion. Much of the increased spending on gadgets and video recorders comes from those who have accepted that, however much they save, they will never be able to afford the things they really need: a flat, a car and the like. At the lower end of the scale, the impression of middle class prosperity can also be misleading, some of it being based on remittances from the Gulf.

Many of the more thoughtful advertising professionals have reservations about the present middle class boom. Says Sylvester da Cunha: "Advertising serves only to raise aspirations and causes dissatisfaction where the capacity to buy does not exist."

Da Cunha argues that talk of a consumer boom is misleading. There may well be more products in the market, he says, but disposable incomes have not gone up enough for there to be that much extra demand in the market. From the point of view of the manufacturer, therefore, the situation is a cannabalistic one with the new products eating into each other's sales.

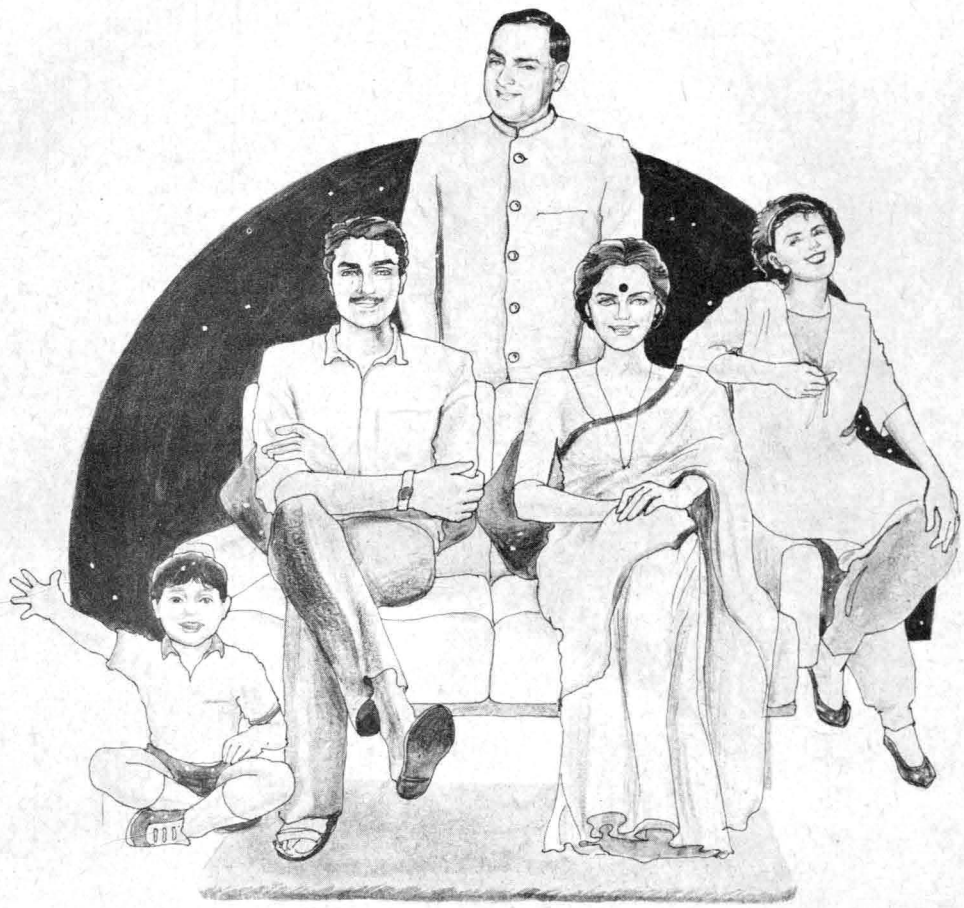
Da Cunha's scepticism relates to another important point. If Indian industry is to really take off, then there must be a spurt in demand for products. This demand can only come from the urban middle classes – India's biggest consumers. But the government has not done enough to create this additional demand. In fact, with the recent rise in the prices of petroleum products, middle class spending power has been reduced. Unless this situation changes and until the middle class feel that they can afford to spend more, the consumer goods industry is never going to really take off. The new products will simply compete for a static market and the boom may well halt within a year or two.

"PEOPLE quite frequently underestimate the importance of the total numbers of the middle class," says Professor Ashis Nandy, a sociologist at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. "Pakistan and Sri Lanka may have larger middle classes as proportions of their population, but because of India's size, our total numbers are greater. So, things that could not be sustained in most Third World countries can be sustained in India by our middle class. For instance, a magazine boom, or an indigenous intellectual effort."

To Nandy, the importance of the Indian middle class also lies in the fact that it is intellectually active and aware. This makes it difficult for the government to stifle dissent or to manage opinion: there's always some journalist somewhere who blows the whistle. Moreover, he argues, the middle class also sets the tone for the rest of the country. The last few elections, he feels, were decided on the basis of waves that could only have originated in the urban areas. Bank nationalisation and the pursuit of socialist economic policies – the issues of the 1971 poll – meant nothing to the rural person. In 1977, says Nandy, democracy versus dynasty was also a largely urban concern. In 1980, the villagers were unaware of the squabbles between the Janata ministers: it was the urban voter who found them offensive. And, in 1984, Rajiv Gandhi's new India and the fear of Punjab getting out of hand were issues that went down best in the urban areas.

Consequently, argues Nandy, if a government wants to manage dissent (given that it can't stifle it) then it needs to appeal to the urban middle class. In a sense, this is what Rajiv Gandhi's government is doing now. In itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing but there is a danger that in trying to fulfil the ever-soaring expectations of the urban middle class the state will ignore those on the periphery: Adivasis, landless labourers, religious minorities and the like. If the government can give the urban middle class the impression of progress with stability, says Nandy, then it doesn't need the minorities for electoral purposes and need pay no

attention to their interests. Nor does it need to worry too much about the rural poor – at election time, they will anyway be swept along by the wave that originates in the cities.



**THERE IS SOMETHING** in this thesis. Over the last five years, the gulf between Bharat and India has widened. While the middle class has grown in confidence, it has also become more insular and less concerned about the India of the villages: a sort of country within a country. As Meena Kaushik says, "There is less and less identification with rural India. Even the gap between the urban middle and working classes is growing."

The danger with middle class revivalism of the sort that we have witnessed recently is that it operates on the assumption that the middle class exists in a vacuum. It is a source of constant annoyance to most of the 15.2 million Indians who speak English that they should be part of a country in which the overwhelming majority of people live in conditions of poverty and deprivation. For the upper middle classes – and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the middle class as well – their education, their intelligence and their skills should place them on par with citizens of any developed country. After all, the argument goes, when Indians emigrate to England or America, they do even better than the indigenous population. Why, then, should they be discriminated against in their own country, be made to pay high taxes and be denied consumer comforts?

Consequently, this class attempts to follow a Western model of development, with its love of consumer goods, television serials, articulate politicians and the like. Technology becomes a Holy Grail and consumerism becomes a credo. The costs of this philosophy are played down. A disaster like Bhopal becomes a necessary sacrifice in the pursuit of industrialisation. The damage done to local industry by large-scale imports is minimised on the grounds that India needs world class products and technology.

All of this would be all right if the middle class did, in fact, exist in a vacuum. The problem is that it doesn't. In the final analysis it is no more than a small minority in an extremely poor country, where most of the population has never even heard of two-minute noodles. But because the middle class is the class with access to media, and because its members have now become extremely conscious of their rights and grievances, there is always the temptation for a government to tailor its politics towards fulfilling the aspirations of this small, but influential, segment of Indian society.

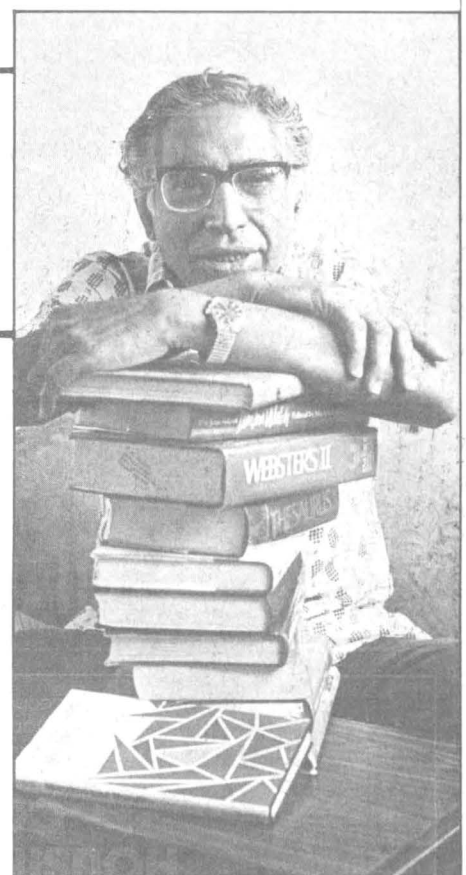
In a sense, this is what has happened to Rajiv Gandhi and his government. Partly because he and his friends are members of this class, and partly because it is so easy to win popularity among the middle classes by offering them TV sets and tax reliefs, he fell into the trap of fulfilling their expectations. In recent months, however, there have been signs that he is now rethinking that approach. He is spending less time in foreign countries and more time in the backward areas. Whenever he talks about the 21st century, he is careful to add that the concept is meaningless if it doesn't include the villages.

The trouble is it might be too late. His image as an urban Prime Minister is too firmly established to change easily. And while he seems to have realised that the Prime Minister of a country like India cannot afford to be a yuppie, his middle class supporters still haven't recognised this. Consequently, their expectations are frighteningly high. A single slip-up is enough for the middle class to react as though it has been kicked in the teeth – for instance, the recent hike in petrol and gas prices.

The middle class may well be striking back against the old policy compulsions and biases. But can Bharat defeat India? This government has led the middle class to believe it can. It has fed this belief with pap – sponsored TV and kitchen gadgets. The substantive measures – cheaper housing, more spending power and the like – are, however, missing. As the middle class wearies of the pap and looks for the substance, this euphoria may turn very sour indeed in the near future. ♦

Guest Column/by Iqbal Masud

# VULGARISATION OF THE BOURGEOISIE




**VULGARISATION** is defined by Webster as: 'lack of discrimination, coherence or selection; shaped by no unifying viewpoint or conception; flashy, congested, extravagant, coarsening, debasing'. The illustration he furnishes is a quote from J C Powys: "Written and repeated brutalities hit the mind more deeply and vulgarise the spirit more grossly than those that we see in real life."

I think that is a good description of our middle class culture. A film like *Love 86* or *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, a television serial like *Khandaan*, exposés by 'analytical' journalists of vulnerable communities (religious or ideological) in the name of 'integration' – these are all different facets of the 'vulgarisation'.

Was our middle class always so calculating, so manipulative, so mean-spirited? I do not believe in golden ages. But, as I grow older and see history in perspective, I feel the British conquest of India was the greatest disaster that ever befell our land. I do not merely mean the loss of political freedom or their 'divide and rule' policy. I mean the destruction and degradation of our culture in its widest sense. Take the purely physical destruction of our natural leadership. Among those who fought the British before the 1857 uprising, the most prominent were the Marathas, the Sikhs, Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan. They were beaten in a series of great battles. It's no exaggeration to say that the flower of the nation perished in such battles and in the 1857 war. That generation would have provided an unbroken link of vitality, a continuing cadre to connect our past and present. The hiatus caused by the British broke the back of our middle class – soldiers, literati, gentlemen, merchants – and brought it to its knees. When I call this class 'middle', I may not be on strong ground by today's exacting academic standards. But, after all, great poets, saints and soldiers come from this class – which does not exclude upward mobility from the poor.

*Iqbal Masud, the distinguished critic and commentator, wrote a column on this subject at the suggestion of* **Imprint.**

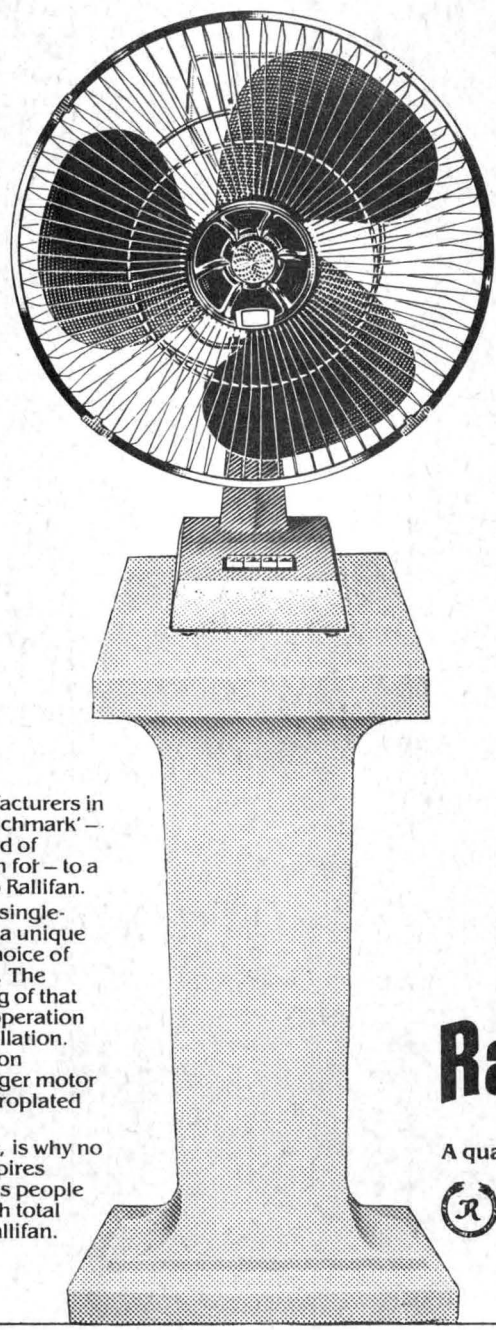
In the 19th and early 20th centuries, our middle class survived – like Talleyrand. Various Indian middle class groups made their 'separate peace' with the British. What, after all, was the great Indian Renaissance? An accommodation pact with the rulers. We learnt English and sold our souls, our essence. We gained a lot – jobs, international approbation, a few Nobel prizes – but we lost ourselves. The 'translated from English' dialogue of *Khandaan* has its perfect counterpart in the 'breast-beating' speech of the Prime Minister at the Bombay Congress Centenary – as Anglicised in thought and speech as any of our clever columnists' fulminations. There was a surface 'self-condemnation' and questioning in that speech. But no real questing, self-doubt, no raising of basic questions which characterised the most pedestrian article by Gandhiji in *Harijan*.

**THE REFERENCE** to Gandhiji prompts the memory of a happy, wholesome time for the Indian middle class – the time between the two World Wars. The middle class then consisted mainly of civil servants, landlords, doctors, lawyers and a sprinkling of businessmen and industrialists. We did not have much money, but had enough to live on. We were, perhaps, rather serious, but not solemn. My mother, for instance, would read out bits of *Talash-i-Haq* (the Urdu version of Gandhiji's *My Experiments With Truth*) in the day, my father would read out and translate either Scott or (going down a few steps) Sexton Blake, at night. My uncle went to jail during the Khilafat movement, and gave up studies. How far away, how innocent all that seems. We did not have to envy others their colour television sets, VCRs or their new cars. I know a lot of Indians starved then, and the middle class heartlessly took that for granted. But ignorance and heartlessness are not the same as vulgarisation. There was genuine understanding and respect for Indian culture, an inner contempt for the *Angrez*, though our men, our breadwinners, had to kowtow to them.

World War II is a watershed event

PHOTOGRAPH BY GAUTAM PATOLE

# Rallifan
# the table fan even competitors put on a pedestal



When fan-manufacturers in India seek a 'benchmark' – that is, a standard of excellence to aim for – to a man they look to Rallifan.

Its trend-setting single-piece blade with a unique contour... in a choice of cheerful colours. The minute balancing of that blade for silent operation and smooth oscillation. The high-precision gearbox, the longer motor life and the electroplated guard.

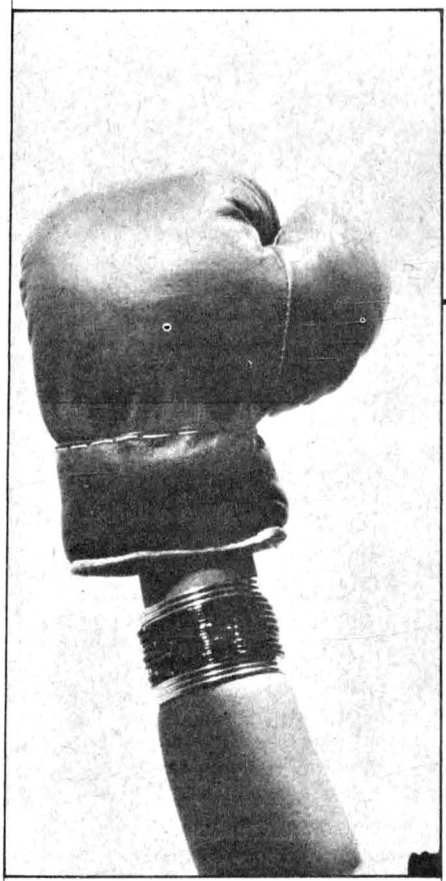
Which, of course, is why no name in fans inspires quality-conscious people like you with such total confidence as Rallifan.

**Rallifan**

A quality product from

RALLIS
Multi-Technology Group

*Creative Unit 6246*



**Five years ago, I laughed at the things V S Naipaul said about Argentina. They had no relevance to India. Today, I'm not so sure. Mediocrity breeds vulgarisation.**

in the history of the Indian middle class and specially in its vulgarisation. I do not think students of the Indian middle class have paid sufficient attention to this phenomenon. The War practically destroyed the old middle class. The *nouveau riche* and the *arrivistes* began dumping themselves on the Indian historical scene with a rapidity which has reached its climax today.

A further spur to vulgarisation was the generation of 'black money' – specifically attributable to the War. I knew a man who resembled Premchand of *Khandaan*. He was a clerk at Rs 35 per month in the early '40s. He made a crore in two years in an unstable speculation market. He then retired to a small city and doubled his black hoard by 'black' loans. After Independence, he was caught. It took me two years to break him.

I studied that man as closely as a lepidopterist studies butterflies. He was utterly ruthless, conscienceless – and a perfect gentleman in the club. Also, he was a lecher. This is not a copy book portrait of a 'reactionary'. That man and thousands like him are responsible for the degradation of the middle class today. That degradation lay not only in themselves. It was, more powerfully, in the admiration they inspired. "Chander," (let's call him that) club members would say, "is as brilliant in bridge as he is in the market or bed."

At this point, a terrible doubt surfaces. Are today's 'Chanders' – the fanatical revivalists, the landlords who keep private armies – the inevitable descendants of that pre-War middle class which I idealised a few paras ago?

**THE VULGARISATION** of the middle class in the post-Independence era can be broken down into four segments – politics, the bureaucracy, business and culture.

There's a symbiotic relationship between the first three segments which has degraded all three. The common charge is that politics have degraded the civil service. The reverse is true. Politics and business, too, have been bureaucratised. In other words, instead of being responsive to public or market pressures, politics and business have been infected by bureaucratic evasion, hypocrisy and doublethink. That's why there has not been a single original idea in Indian politics since Gandhiji's satyagraha. That's why, in spite of their antics and personal profiling in business magazines, few of our business tycoons have shown the largeness of thinking – even of spirit – of their American or European counterparts.

Take the catchphrase, 'a hundred million middle class Indians' beloved of *Newsweek* and *India Today*. Dr Graubard, Editor of the American scholarly journal *Daedalus* who I met last week, laughed at it: "Typical *Newsweek* slogan," he said. The whole concept behind that phrase, the ebullience of the Prime Minister and Finance Minister at the buoyancy of shares, betrays a mediocrity which has become a hallmark of the Indian middle class.

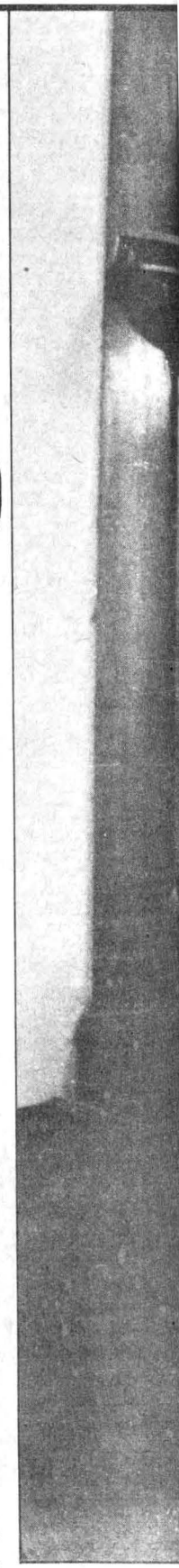
Currently, the dream of 100 million Indians is collapsing under the 'resource crunch'. Their prosperity is sought to be extracted from the poor by hiking the price of kerosene. In a TV discussion (on February 16), Kewal Verma, L K Jha, D G Tandon, and A K Bagchi admitted as much. Only, they sugar-coated it with the phrase 'need for sacrifice'. On whose part? The five-star buffets and dinners are packed. And they will be, right through 1986, despite all 'austerity'.

There is a link between vulgarisation and mediocrity. One is the cause, the other the result. 'Vulgarity' in political and economic thinking leads to mediocrity in culture. Our awful TV ads and serials, our terrible films, our tabloids which churn out junk, have a direct relation with our incoherent and flashy economic and political thinking.

"It is as if all the energy of the State now goes into holding the State together. Law and order has become an end in itself; it is part of the sterility and waste. People are tortured and they die. . . . But there is no movement forward. The nation seems to be playing a game with itself; political life is like the life of an ant community – full of events, full of crises and deaths. But life is only cyclical, and the year ends as it begins."

Even five years ago, I would have laughed if these words of V S Naipaul about Argentina had been applied to India. Today I am not so sure. ♦

# THE THAKUR RISES



**Arjun Singh is one of the few nationally known leaders in the Congress (I). Six years ago, he came out of nowhere to become Chief Minister of MP. A year ago, he confounded the sceptics by his work in Punjab. What happens now?**

A YOUNG MAN from Madhya Pradesh once wrote an impassioned letter to Jawaharlal Nehru pleading that the sins of the father are not necessarily the sins of the son. The man's father, Rao Shiva Bahadur Singh, had served a three-year prison sentence for taking a bribe while serving as Minister in the Congress government of the then Vindhya Pradesh.

But the outpouring of guilt and penitence in that letter to the Prime Minister reached back into the writer's childhood. There was an account of the anguish suffered because, as a boy, his family had prevented him from participating in the freedom struggle. At the age of 12, this artificial restraint had left him 'hanging precariously by a thread at the abyss of insanity'.

Watching the birth of a nation from the galleries of the Constituent Assembly in 1947, this boy had sworn to 'dedicate my life to the country under your (Nehru's) leadership'. When he finally wrote about this to his hero in 1960, Arjun Singh was asking for an opportunity to fulfil that promise.

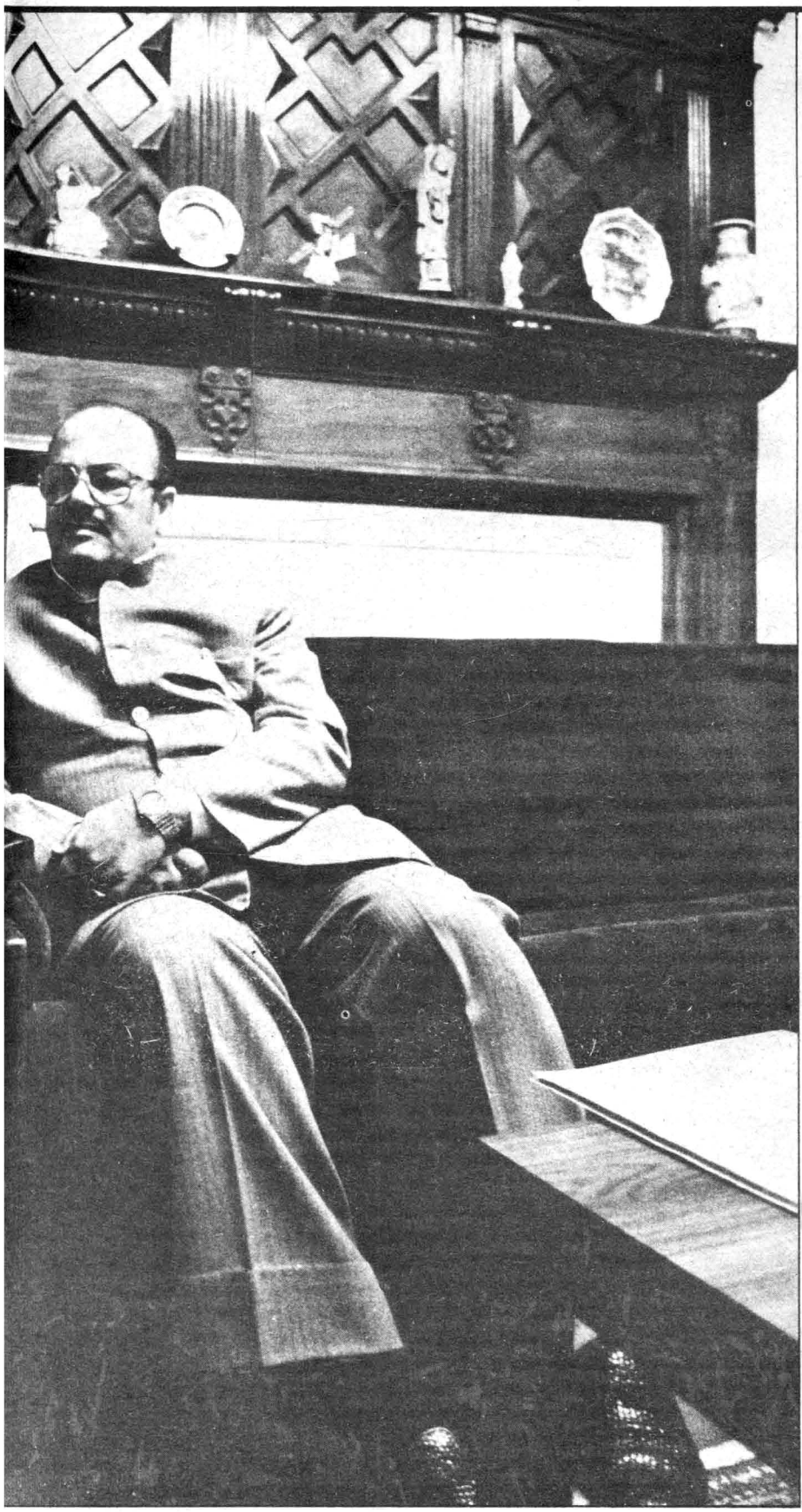
Over 25 years later, Arjun Singh is Vice-President of the party which claims Nehru's legacy. So, when he shows a yellowing, tattered copy of that old letter to a journalist, a complex set of emotions and motivations are at work.

"This is very personal," he murmurs. "I've never shown it to any journalist before. . . . I don't want to make political capital out of it." And yet there it is – as much a confession of soiled lineage as proof of old and deeply felt loyalties. And after all, there is high premium on loyalty – not only to the Nehru family but to its vision of a brave new India – these days.

But the man who wrote that letter was sincere. The 30-year-old Arjun Singh visualised a future for this

*Rajni Bakshi is a freelance journalist and a frequent contributor to* **Imprint.**

BY RAJNI BAKSHI



country and for himself only in the context of Nehru and the Congress party shaped by Nehru. A quarter of a century later, that has not changed. Arjun Singh's central reference point in politics remains a single individual – Nehru's grandson.

These convictions have carried the man far. When he travels back to his home state now, flowers and adulation are abundantly showered on him. But ask him if he is happy and Arjun Singh's naturally impassive expression changes only marginally, to a wry smile.

It is of great tasks performed and still greater tasks performed and still greater aspirations, that Arjun Singh wants to talk about. Queries about happiness have no relevance in the context of party building and nation building. In the process Arjun building must be underplayed.

The man credited with facilitating an agreement which has supposedly saved the nation's threatened unity, zealously attempts to minimise his own role. "It is dangerous to believe that you are the initiator and accomplisher of ideas and deeds," Arjun Singh argues in his sharply articulate manner. "It's sufficient that according to your own perceptions you are able to help events in some direction and allow other factors to shape them. If you begin with these modest aims then you are not likely to go wrong."

But anyone who knows him says that Arjun Singh is not a man of modest aims. Certainly, it takes a highly skilled and ambitious man to survive as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh for five consecutive years. Arjun Singh is one of only three Chief Ministers in Congress (I)-ruled states who survived their full tenure in the last six years.

As Governor of Punjab, and a key figure in the making of the Punjab Accord, Arjun Singh has acquired a new and more powerful claim to fame. In a culture of highly personalised politics he enjoys the enviable advantage of apparent proximity to the top. 'Rajiv Gandhi's Man on the Spot' was Arjun Singh's chief selling-point in the by-election for the South

PHOTOGRAPH BY GAUTAM PATOLE

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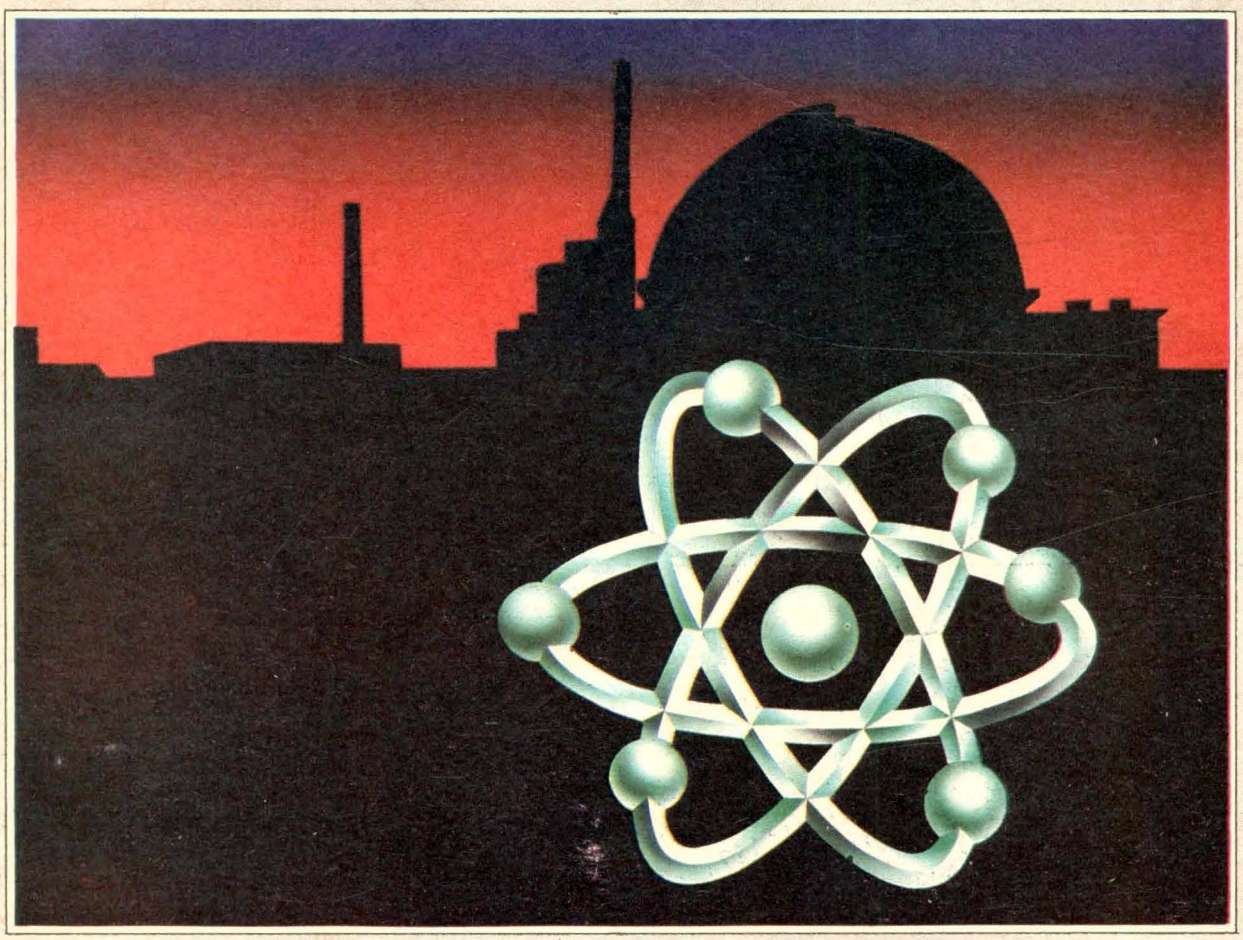

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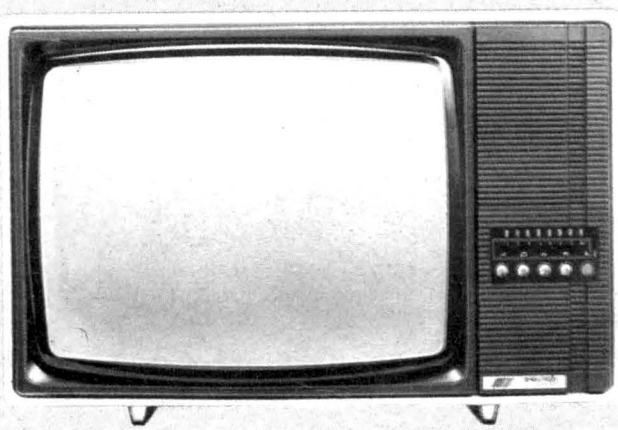

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Delhi Lok Sabha seat, last December.

Where does he go from here? By any standards the success in Punjab is a tough act to follow. The post of Commerce Minister was seen by some of Arjun Singh's followers as an under-utilisation of his multifarious skills. As they see it, the omnipotent 'High Command' soon realised this and made amends. But within and outside Arjun Singh's immediate orbit, speculation now centres around whether being made Vice-President of the Congress (I) is a promotion or a demotion.

Consequently, in some circles, political survival is seen as being Arjun Singh's paramount concern at the moment. But, on Delhi's political grape-vine, attention invariably remains focussed on how personal fortunes are affected by different developments.

Beyond these short-term concerns is the story of a man who pulled himself out of the mire of a potentially crippling family scandal. His rise to power provides insights into the staying power of the Congress (I) and the characteristics of its political culture. Perhaps, it is only inevitable then that this man should be closely linked with the much-publicised task of revitalising the Congress (I).

**SO WE JOURNEY** with Arjun Singh, now 55, to a Congress (I) training camp in the forests of Madhya Pradesh. It is his first major tour out of Delhi since becoming Vice-President and the familiar territory of his home state seems an obvious place to start. He may have been virtually a non-entity in Madhya Pradesh politics six years ago. But, today, he is the undisputed king of this realm.

After a hectic day on the road, speeding through the forests in the dim light of dusk, Arjun Singh reflects on his own history. That crucial letter to Nehru is mentioned only in passing and only in the context of the suggestion it contained. In 1960, Arjun Singh was an independent MLA in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly. He had suggested in the Assembly that all

**When he was appointed Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh was hardly a household name in the state. He was imposed from above and had to work to create his own base in state politics. He succeeded admirably.**

elected members should file their property and income returns in public. Since he was strongly opposed by the Congress-controlled treasury benches, Arjun Singh made his suggestion directly to Nehru in the otherwise confessional letter. It also helped to make the point that this young politician intended to distance himself from his father's past and fight for honesty in public life.

It is ironic that, many years later, when Arjun Singh was Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, his government refused to disclose details about property owned by him and his family members on the grounds that this was not in the 'public interest'.

But to return to the story, as Arjun Singh tells it. Nehru called him for an interview and asked him to join the Congress party. However, what he recalls more vividly is the first meeting with Indira Gandhi. Feroze Gandhi had just died and Nehru was at his family's ancestoral home, Anand Bhavan, in Allahabad. Arjun Singh and his wife happened to be in town and decided to make a courtesy call. Nehru "spontaneously asked if we had ever met Indira. Then he called Indira, Rajiv and Sanjay out and I took pictures of them. . . I was so nervous. Panditji told Indiraji: 'This young man has joined the party and will work with you.' And I was ever devoted to Mrs Gandhi. That scene touched me since she had just been widowed. . . . Since then, I was consistently with her, even though in politics many say that consistency is the virtue of asses."

Apart from instinctively appreciating the importance of being in Mrs Gandhi's orbit, Arjun Singh also ensured his own proximity to the relevant figures in Madhya Pradesh politics. By 1962, when he formally joined the Congress, Arjun Singh was already a protégé of Dwarka Prasad Mishra, then a leading heavyweight of Madhya Pradesh politics. Mishra's machinations, much more than Nehru's actions, were probably responsible for Arjun Singh's entry into the Congress. Mentors like Mishra, and later P C Sethi, ensured that Arjun Singh became Minister of State for Agriculture and, later Education Minister of Madhya Pradesh.

In 1977, Arjun Singh was one of the few Congressmen to survive the Janata wave. Zealously consistent in his devotion to Mrs Gandhi, Arjun Singh stood by her and served as leader of the Opposition in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly. With his innate ability to choose the most lucrative orbit, he identified himself with Sanjay Gandhi. As an all-powerful patron, Sanjay elevated Arjun Singh to the post of Chief Minister, in spite of minimal to negligible support from the Congress (I) MLAs.

A political non-entity, compared to the likes of V C Shukla and P C Sethi, Singh then set about compensating for his lack of a mass base. In this, he was no different from most of the Congress (I) ministers who came to power in 1980. Apart from some popular support in his own area, Rewa in eastern Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh was not a household name in that state. He was 'appointed' Chief Minister from above and had to manipulate the power hierarchy to survive.

In this task, he displayed unique skills. While the likes of A R Antulay and Gundu Rao, bullied and bulldozed their way through numerous controversies in their states, Arjun Singh worked quietly to neutralise all opposition. He encouraged all Congress (I) MLAs to consider themselves members of the government. Consequently, by 1983, 120 Congress MLAs were either ministers or enjoyed ministerial rank, as chairmen of various boards and committees. In September 1982, N K Singh of the *Indian Express* reported that each of these chairmen cost the state exchequer Rs 3 lakh every year.

But the benefits were not limited to ruling party MLAs alone. The salaries of all MLAs were raised from Rs 800 per month to Rs 1,500 and they were also given a dearness allowance of Rs 51 per day during the Assembly sessions, regardless of attendance. Free medical facilities and medicines were sanctioned for MLAs, their families and effectively their *chamchas*. According to one report, the 320 MLAs of Madhya Pradesh consumed free medicines worth Rs 32 lakh in 1982 alone. The Economic Offences wing of the Madhya Pradesh police suspected that some of the costlier medicines had been sold by the beneficiaries in the open market. In addition, MLAs were given housing plots at throwaway prices.

Since Arjun Singh, like most of his contemporary Chief Ministers, centralised administration in his own hands, all MLAs had to seek his favour to get work done. Unlike A R Antulay, who antagonised people in this process, Arjun Singh created an image of undiscriminating benevolence. His was a durbar from which virtually no one returned empty-handed.

But Arjun Singh's struggle for survival as the Chief Minister was also directly aided by the High Command in Delhi. The 'once powerful' Shyama Charan Shukla had opposed Mrs Gandhi in the 1979 Congress split and Arjun Singh made optimum capital out of this. Similarly, V C Shukla, who never quite recovered his place within the party after the Emergency, further damaged his standing by making ineffectual attempts to dislodge Arjun Singh.

**The salaries of all MLAs were raised from Rs 800 per month to Rs 1,500. By 1983, 120 Congress MLAs were either ministers or enjoyed ministerial rank as chairmen of various boards or committees.**

P L Khandelwal, a BJP MP from Madhya Pradesh, says that Arjun Singh's large-scale distribution of patronage played a central role in his ability to break the dissidents in Madhya Pradesh. That he simultaneously kept the High Command happy and retained its support, was an equally critical factor in Arjun Singh's favour. He was able to do this partly, by giving the impression that, at least tactically, he had a complete hold over the state. This control was also facilitated by a systematic effort to 'win over' the press. "Arjun Singh made the press more corrupt than any Chief Minister anywhere," claims Khandelwal.

The control over the press was again a result of widely distributed patronage, in the form of housing and funds to start new publications. Madhya Pradesh witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of small weekly and fortnightly journals, during Arjun Singh's tenure as Chief Minister. As one senior journalist in Bhopal says: "Arjun Singh knew everyone's price and fancies and catered to them. Apart from providing money and advertising he also gave easy access to yellow journalists."

Consequently, even while various potential scandals surfaced, none were able to gather force in a manner that could threaten Arjun Singh's position as Chief Minister.

This distribution of patronage was matched by several legislative measures which Arjun Singh projected as egalitarian and his critics dismissed as populist gestures. The most notable of these is the Slum Dwellers Act, an unprecedented piece of legislation which gave lease hold rights to those living on encroached lands. Another measure returned to tribals all lands wrongly wrested from them over the last 20 years.

So, while he catered to the demands of MLAs and worked to keep the High Command happy, Arjun Singh also tried to build popular support among the masses through such measures. He even lent support to segments of the voluntary sector and to the ambitious art and culture project of Bharat Bhavan.

**WHAT KIND OF MAN** is capable of operating successfully on so many different fronts? Suave, sophisticated, shrewd, highly intelligent and articulate are the most common terms used to describe Arjun Singh. It has been said that he practises a 'politics of culture, conspiracy and courtesy'. And yet, even this does not capture the multi-dimensional functioning and multi-faceted personality of Arjun Singh. He relies on more than just native political cunning and is a well-read man. Among the more notable features in his private quarters, at his residence as Chief Minister, were sets of encyclopaedias and books. When he travels, by air or road, Arjun Singh is rarely without a book, usually a biography or novels on political themes.

These literate qualities, combined with the grace and unobtrusive superiority lent by his feudal though not quite blueblooded background, gives

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GAUTAM PATOLE

Arjun Singh a distinct edge over many rivals. Arjun Singh's ancestors migrated from Gujarat some 36 generations ago and settled in, what is today, the Rewa district of Madhya Pradesh. Arjun Singh's family is a branch of the royal family of Rewa and still controls many acres of what was once its fiefdom – the Churhat zamindari.

This feudal background is deliberately underplayed, mostly with the aid of a congenial manner. An overt benevolence, rooted surely in some form of *noblesse oblige*, is a distinctive feature of his style. He is given to extravagant displays of affection and concern which can disarm opponents and deepen the devotion of followers. He is known to personally go to trouble spots and confront protesters, speak to them with sympathy, promise help and diffuse the situation, without necessarily solving the problem. He is, above all, a superb and natural public relations man.

"He is machiavellian, but with a flair. He has a certain dignity," says one observer. "His moves are analytical, he keeps himself superbly informed and uses his information brilliantly."

In addition to this, he is a master tactician. For instance, he is widely considered to have used and then destroyed BJP's Sunderlal Patwa, a former Chief Minister and leader of the Opposition in the last Assembly. Arjun Singh is said to have created the impression that Patwa was accepting favours from him. The BJP leader was even laughingly known as the 40th man in Arjun Singh's 39-member cabinet. Similarly, Arjun Singh is also said to have patronised Rama Shankar Singh, who had the distinction of being the sole Lok Dal MLA in the last Madhya Pradesh Assembly. Subsequently, Rama Shankar Singh – who is in his early 30s and highly ambitious – was absorbed into the Congress (I). He fought the 1985 Assembly elections on a ticket given to him by Arjun Singh.

Patwa, however, met a different fate. Just as the last elections approached, a murky scandal linking

**He is a master tactician. Says one observer, "He is machiavellian, but with a flair and dignity." Despite having started out with so little, he has emerged as one of the few national figures in the Congress (I).**

him with opium smugglers suddenly erupted. Several well-informed affidavits were filed with the office of the Lok Ayukta, accusing Patwa of misusing his position and influence to secure undue benefits for a man described as the Haji Mastaan of Madhya Pradesh. While it has never been substantiated, the impression has persisted in the political circles of Bhopal that Arjun Singh was associated with the compilation and release of the documents incriminating Patwa.

Arjun Singh has also been accused of wheeling-dealing in some cases, mostly to do with property. But, somehow, the mud has never stuck. When his opponents and the press began asking questions about a large plot of land he purchased at the Kerwa Dam site near Bhopal, Arjun Singh himself filed papers with the Lok Ayukta to clear doubts. Similarly there have been rumours about money-spinning ventures by his sons. But, again, since nothing has been officially substantiated, Arjun Singh passes for 'clean'.

These special skills in *realpolitik* must have contributed to the selection of Arjun Singh for the Punjab assignment. Given the still mysterious ways in which Rajiv Gandhi's Secretariat functions, it is difficult to pin down precisely why Arjun Singh was selected. But it is possible to understand how and why he succeeded. The Punjab Accord is not, in itself, a solution. But since Arjun Singh's task was to break the impasse to enable elections to be held, his success was unquestioned.

This was due to a mixture of his special public relations skills and shrewd analytical abilities. Arjun Singh did not begin the job with much of an advantage. The manner of his appointment did nothing to help either his or the Central government's credibility. He was first sworn in as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and then, in less than 48 hours, made Governor of Punjab. His supporters argue that this was necessary because, to be effective, he had to go to Punjab from a position of strength. Thus, it was essential that he once again be sworn in as Chief Minister and then be made Governor.

With the Akalis and the press reacting negatively to his appointment, Arjun Singh seemed a bad choice for the post. But the man on the spot quickly got to work in tackling the situation. His staff was instructed to keep track of local language papers in order to feel the pulse of the people. They also relied on many different sources for feedback, apart from the formal Intelligence network.

Alive to the power of public gestures, Arjun Singh arranged a visit by the Prime Minister to Hussainiwala, a town in Punjab near the Pakistan border, where Bhagat Singh was executed. According to an aide of Arjun Singh, this action had vital symbolic value for it showed that the Prime Minister was able to move in Punjab, which had, till then, been virtually out of bounds to him.

A series of such actions, of varying degrees of importance, followed. The state level communal harmony committee was also revived. The special Arjun Singh touch was visible in other small but highly-publicised actions.

In some cases, the Governor's staff was instructed to monitor newspaper reports of atrocities on Sikhs, procure further details and then get in touch with some of the affected individuals. In a few cases the victims were given an audience with Arjun Singh who heard their tales of woe and provided some material assistance. The main objective of such efforts was the generation of publicity which countered the impression of a heartless government.

The ploy worked. A combination of clever behind the scenes dialogues with the Akalis and such public gestures helped the move towards an accord. The hour was right and Arjun Singh was in the right place at the right time. For him, the Punjab interlude is already history. He has moved on to new pastures in search of other opportunities to prove that his life is dedicated to the country.

**A more moderate view of the situation holds that while Arjun Singh is far from finished, there has been a curtailment of his powers. But those who know Singh assert that he will manage to come out on top.**

**THE SEVA DAL LEADER** shouts orders to his tiny team: "*Vandemataram shuroo*" (start singing Vandematram). The dozen or so Seva Dal volunteers standing at attention before Arjun Singh begin a dispirited rendition of the old national song. Their new super chief softly joins in. The small crowd gathered around the ramrod volunteers, stands silent. But just as the song ends, the unruly-looking young men at the fringes of the crowd break into loud and spirited cheers in praise of Arjun Singh.

It is a modest function for the ground-breaking ceremony of a new district level Congress (I) office in one corner of Bhopal. It is also an occasion for celebration, as many a speaker at the function points out. Their very own Arjun Singhji is among them as Vice-President of the Congress (I). In some vicarious way, there is a sense of shared honour and importance. And so, virtually the entire congregation of local Congress officials, functionaries and lesser beings, trips over each other to garland the great man.

Speaker after speaker hails Arjun Singh as the man who saved the country's unity. Some implying that they now hope he can pull off a similar miracle for the party. Chief Minister, Motilal Vora, seems to provide reassurance and allay doubts when he says that Arjun Singh's appointment as Vice-President of the Congress (I) is an event of national significance and the job of the party is vital.

Arjun Singh, sits through the garlanding and speech-making with the shadow of a supercilious smile on his face and a mildly disinterested expression in his eyes. When it is time to speak, he gets right down to business. In his slow, soft-spoken style – which is just short of being a monotone – he lectures the gathering on the great significance of Rajiv Gandhi's presidential address at the Congress Centenary celebrations. That was a speech, Arjun Singh declares, that could not have been made just by a Prime Minister or even a party President. It was the speech of a revolutionary youth.

But many in and out of the party are not sure if Arjun Singh hasn't fallen victim to this revolutionary youth. Some see him as a victim of his own vaulting ambition, which is as much a cardinal sin in Rajiv's Congress as it was in Indira's Congress. Before the appointment, the many small papers and magazines in Madhya Pradesh, which support him and in many cases owe their existence to him, had begun making grand future projections for Arjun Singh. Some even suggested that Arjun was Prime Ministerial material. Thus, his relegation to an organisational post may seem like an effective demotion. In this, as in much else that happens in government, Arun Nehru is believed to have played a role.

That a high level party post should be considered a demotion at all, is as much a commentary on the state of the Congress (I) as it is an indictment of contemporary politics itself. The functioning of the All-India Congress Committee (I), over the last decade, has been at best puppet-like and, at worst, farcical. Since seeing is, indeed, believing in Delhi politics, all but the most devoted fans are not taking Rajiv's pronouncements about greater party autonomy very seriously. The sequence of events and delegation of duties has not particularly helped Arjun Singh's credibility.

Babulal Jain, a veteran Congress worker in Bhopal, articulates a fairly common view when he says: "At first people were very happy because the Vice-President is a very important post. But then, Arjun Singh has been assigned only three states, so how is he different from any of the General Secretaries? This has caused critics to say that, politically, Arjun Singh is finished."

A more moderate view of the situation holds that, while Arjun Singh is far from finished, there has been a curtailment of his powers and position within the ruling hierarchy. Those who know Singh also assert that he will probably mould the position to his advantage and come out on top. If Rajiv Gandhi is as serious as he seems about revitalising the party, this may well be possible.

The man, himself, is totally dismissive about talk of demotion or promotion. The division of duties, Arjun Singh explains, does not mean that

he is not going to give inputs in other areas. Kerala, West Bengal and Jammu & Kashmir require special attention, since elections are next due in these states. He will also be directly in charge of Mahila Congress and Youth Congress affairs. While he will not be able to distribute patronage of the kind which a Union minister can, the impression that he has a central role to play in organisational matters could be an important and potent source of power. As he jets about the country to different states, this is the impression he must try to create and then strengthen.

**ARJUN SINGH** is visiting a Congress (I) training camp. The camp 'commander' introduces the 'soldiers of the Supreme Commander' (Rajiv Gandhi) to the vice-chief of the party, the Congress (I). The 'soldiers' are a diverse set of trainees from 45 districts of Madhya Pradesh and 30 districts of Uttar Pradesh. The monotony of the Congress uniform, white khadi-kurta pyjama, is broken by the odd *sherwani* and even raw silk shirts and jeans.

These are the new recruits to the army Rajiv Gandhi has set out to build. The two-week training camp at Tawa, an obscure village in the forest some two hours drive out of Bhopal, is the first of many such efforts being planned. The camp commander speaks forcefully about 'Supreme Commander' Rajiv Gandhi's message at the Centenary celebrations. There is a new India to be built and only the Congress (I) can build it.

"This message will be conveyed by these boys to the masses," the camp commander continues, addressing Vice-President Arjun Singh, who is seated on a stage along with the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Motilal Vora. These soldiers, their commander promised, will never be found grabbing power, because they will be busy working for the implementation of the party programme and for the uplift of the poor.

The vice-chief's address to these soldiers is a modest version of the kind of speech the Supreme Commander is now famous for making. This calls for acknowledging the ills of the party but adding that they are the inevitable by-products of having power. The stress is on the unparalleled 100-year history and the need to, once again, transform the party much as Gandhi did over 60 years ago. For this, the new soldiers must go down to the poor and deprived and work for their welfare. Sticking to the militaristic terminology of the whole exercise, Arjun Singh ends by promising to try and march in step with all the foot soldiers.

**Like most of his colleagues in the Congress (I), Arjun Singh exists in a different reality. In his world, inflation has been halted and all possible assistance given to victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy.**

While the party rhetoric and praise of the Nehru-Gandhi family are the predominant concerns of all speakers, not a single tangible issue is even mentioned. For the few local residents who had gathered to watch the function, it is not much more than a road show of minimal entertainment value.

The show over, Arjun Singh heads back for Bhopal, confident of the utility of more such efforts. The intricate complexities of ground level politics in India are something he is not willing to acknowledge in an interview. Or has he, like Supreme Commander Rajiv Gandhi, begun to believe his own rhetoric? So he can talk earnestly about just finding two good men in each village to identify and weed out corruption and claim that these men will simultaneously function as Congress (I) workers.

He can talk about eliminating power brokers and laughingly deny that he is himself a super power broker. He can, with all apparent sincerity, call for debate within the party and simultaneously preach the message of Rajiv Gandhi's Centenary speech as unquestionable gospel. "Certain aspects of it are so patently desirable that for those you don't have to have a debate for a consensus," he explains.

Arjun Singh, like most of his contemporaries in the Congress (I) exists in a different reality. In their world, inflation has been halted while lesser beings in another world pay more for everything. Similarly, Arjun Singh can speak with anguish about a sense of responsibility for the worst industrial disaster in history which occurred while he was the Chief Minister. Yet, he insists that all possible assistance has been given to the Bhopal gas victims, when the reverse is widely known and acknowledged.

It is with reason, then, that to Babu Khan, a cart-puller and gas victim in Bhopal, Arjun Singh's fate as a politician and the future of the Congress (I) as a party, are irrelevant. The rhetoric about poverty alleviation does not reach him.

The man who once pleaded with Nehru to be able to make amends for his father's sins and to be allowed to serve the nation under the Congress flag, cannot publicly acknowledge this and still remain a member of this *avatar* of the Congress. So, Arjun Singh concentrates on the chaotic world of Pradesh Congress Committee politics and worries about the nuisance value of 'dissident' factions. Party elections and a code of conduct, which may be impossible to implement, become central concerns. And keeping the High Command happy remains a matter of paramount importance. Somewhere in all this, service to the nation apparently continues. ♦

# "I'm Not A Power Broker"

**What exactly *is* Arjun Singh's job? Does he have any strong views on what should be done to the Congress party? RAJNI BAKSHI was able to pin him down and get replies to some of these important questions.**

### *On the scope of his job as Vice-President:*

If you want to work, the sky is the limit – so much work needs to be done. At the block and panchayat level some responsibility should be assumed by Congressmen. Before Independence, the Congressman in any village or small town was like a tribune of the people. We have to do something similar to that. I concede the point that there is a world of difference between the pre-Independence days and now. It was easier to focus efforts and objectives then.

### *On whether Rajiv is trying to create a new Congress the way Mrs Gandhi did with the split of 1969:*

Rajiv Gandhi's statement at the Congress Centenary is not an effort to deride and condemn everyone. He wants to make us aware of what's gone wrong and how to put it right. Otherwise, we won't put in so much effort.

### *On what is a power broker:*

Power brokers are those who influence decision-making on policy or its implementation and who, then, try to derive maximum advantage – even by bending things. Over a time, they assume invincibility. They are not difficult to identify. But dealing with them will be a tough issue.

### *On himself being a power broker and distributor of patronage:*

Am I a super power broker? I am glad you brought it up. How I began is still being debated. I think I had a majority (in the Assembly) – maybe a very slight majority – when I became the leader of the house. Within the party itself, I certainly had to create stability if I was to function for the purpose I wanted to function. I would rather be judged on that. I can say, without the slightest fear of being contradicted, that in this process of consultation within the

**"It is not difficult to identify power brokers. They are those who influence decision-making and then derive maximum advantage. The problem is in dealing with them."**

party I may have given some perks to some of my colleagues, and given them some offices. But I would like to see one example where I allowed any one of these people, whom I put in positions of responsibility, to attempt to do something against the interests of the state, the common man, the weaker sections....

Secondly, what was the purpose for which I used this consultation in the party? For the policies and programmes which were taken up for implementation between 1980 and 1985. I would request anyone to go through the list and then come to the conclusion whether I was a power broker or the nemesis of the power brokers in Madhya Pradesh. I know that many power brokers would like me to be out of the scene. But I am not going out of the scene as a power broker. I may fall by the wayside fighting the power brokers.

### On the goon power in the party:

That is an opinion or criticism which some people make rather harshly. It is certainly not a party of goons or criminals. One cannot vouchsafe for some such elements having infiltrated into any place – it can be said of any other party. But that we, in any way, promote and protect such elements – I would not accept that charge.

### On the chain of command within the AICC now:

As the Prime Minister has now put it in black and white, he has retained two specific powers with himself. Firstly, the appointment and supersession of the Pradesh Congress Committees. Secondly, the appointment of the all-India frontal organisation heads, e g Youth Congress President. Apart from that all the functions that come under the scope of the AICC, are being dealt with at my level. But, in this process of functioning, the advice of the acting president, Punditji (Kamlapati Tripathi) is available to me as and when it is required. Or when he feels he needs to tell me that this is something that should be looked into. After that, it is between me and the General Secretaries. I don't have to check with the Prime Minister on everything that falls outside these two things. It is another matter that I have access to the Prime Minister and that, off and on, I do consult with him – at least twice a week. After all, I cannot be acting in total ignorance of his views. But I am not inhibited in any way in doing something. On a major issue that has to be decided by me why should I not take his counsel? After all, he is the AICC (I) President and the Prime Minister, also. But that I am not able to do it unless I talk to him, that is not the situation.

### On the division of labour within the AICC:

I am looking after three states (specifically West Bengal, Kerala and Jammu & Kashmir) but my responsibilities so far as the other states are concerned are no less. The General Secretaries who are looking after the other states directly have all been consulting me. All the General Secretaries have been given a very large amount of autonomy in their functioning, but the overall responsibility is mine. That is the situation. There is no question of my being a glorified General Secretary.

### On Rajiv Gandhi's economic policies:

He has not made any major departure from our industrial policy. The public sector still remains at commanding heights. Liberalisation has come about in the sphere where constraints, licensing, etc, had become inhibiting factors in the growth of the sector. Now, unless you decide to totally do away with the private sector altogether, I see no basic departure from the principles, if the limitations that have developed – the expansion and improper working of that sector – are removed. So far as modernisation is concerned, there is no use in shutting our eyes to all that is around us. In the public sector, also, the emphasis has been to make them viable because immense resources are invested there. They must perform well: inefficiency cannot be protected or institutionalised.

### On building a cadre for the Congress (I):

We don't need that kind of cadre, we can't cope with that. The common man does not see the Congress that way. People prefer to think of the Congress as an amorphous mass that is responsive to different situations and meets everyone's demands.

### On Congress ideology:

It can't be defined like Marxist ideology or other ideologies. The Congress has grown over a period where adherence to certain principles and performance of certain specific tasks combined to give it the aura of an organisation which was concerned with the general well-being of the people. After Independence, the responsibility to govern fell on the party.

### On how to activate the party at the grass roots:

We need two or three people in each village to monitor the implementation of the anti-poverty programmes of the state and Central governments. These people should catch the corruption, identify the victimisation. If these people can establish themselves as Congressmen, it serves a purpose.

### On closer monitoring within the party. Is Big Brother watching with the help of computers?

I think that's more propaganda than reality. I haven't seen the face of a computer till now. I see no objection to using modern means of management – the computer is not the devil incarnate.

After all, what does a computer do? It gives you access to information at short notice, collects information which is relevant to policy-making, decision-making and policy implementation. What's the harm in that? That Big Brother is watching – I don't think it's that.

Stricter monitoring means that we are able to have a feedback on what is happening at the grass roots level. Much of it is still being done by the District Congress Committees, etc. Monitoring within the party does not have an ominous meaning apart from the meaning that the word has.

### On dealing with dissidents and possibly weeding them out through the election process:

I don't think that is my responsibility. All shades of opinion exist in the party and there should be a fair opportunity for everyone to get elected. Elections are not being held to put down someone or make somebody go above.

### On party elections:

Membership enrolment ends on March 31, then the various stages of the election begin. Towards the end of July we should be able to hold the election of the President. The voting rights belong to the active members. They elect people for the block level: block office-bearers. They elect the block committee and then, the block committees individually elect block level office-bearers and the district level office-bearers.

At the district level, they also elect members to the state level committee, then the PCC chief and then the AICC chief.

### On the failure of the Congress party in alleviating poverty:

It's not possible for me to answer for everything that happened in this country from 1947 to 1986. But broadly speaking, I think the Congress party selected the priorities that had to be attended to on the economic front: a sound foundation for heavy industries, essential needs of the country, steel, power, fertilisers, etc. At the same time, social justice, which is a concomitant to economic development, was also not lost sight of. Congress was able, in a democratic way, without chopping off heads, to do away with a system of exploitation, represented by the zamindari system, where the tiller of the soil was not the owner of the soil. The satisfaction that that one single policy brought about in the length and breadth of India, according to me, is the single most important factor for India achieving self-sufficiency in food. Apart from the other factors which were certainly there. Similarly, in other areas of economic existence of the country. I think policies and programmes initiated to give greater resources to the weaker sections of society and also to the under-privileged have had their impact.

**"It is certainly not a party of goons or criminals. Such elements may have infiltrated. But we do not, in any way, promote or protect such people. I don't accept that charge."**

### On inexperience in party organisational matters being a handicap:

It sometimes could be a handicap, but most of the time it is an asset. Because, I think, whether it's an organisation or government, the basic thing is human management. I don't think there's much of a difference, except that in the government you have an army of officers at your beck and call. Here, there's no question of any one being inferior or superior, or anyone taking orders. Here, you have to take people along and I don't see any difficulty in that. The problem is not one of orders being carried out. If we have a common identity, I don't think there's any difficulty.

### On supremacy of the party, what it means:

Too literal a meaning is being taken of this. The roles of the various organs of government are well-defined. There is no question of the party interceding or going into that area which is well within the scope of the political executive in the government. The party should now become more visible in evolving policies. ♦

# PULLING OUT?

**After a see-sawing three-year battle with the Indian business establishment, Swraj Paul has finally decided to devote his energies to something else. What went wrong? *Imprint* recapitulates the saga.**

**LONDON : February 11, 1986**

IT IS **SWRAJ PAUL'S** big night. The ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel has been taken over by his Indo-British Association for its annual dinner. At the high table are some of Britain's best-known politicians. The Chief Guest is Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, and several other government ministers are present, too: the Minister for Health, the Minister for Overseas Development, a Minister of State at the Home Office, among others. There are also some leading lights from the Labour Party: Michael Foot, Denis Healey and Peter Shore. India's Industry Minister, N D Tiwari, has flown in specially for this evening. P C Alexander, the High Commissioner, is also in attendance as is Eldon Grifiths, a Tory MP and Vice-President of the Indo-British Association.

Among the other guests are such British corporate heavyweights as Roland Smith of the House of Fraser, many well-known journalists and the UK's most distinguished expatriate Indians. Paul's Indo-British Association has always managed big-name turnouts. Guests at previous dinners have included Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Michael Heseltine. This year, too, that record seems unbroken.

But there is a difference and both Paul and his guests know it. After the four-course meal (with two wines) is finished, the speeches begin. Hurd is expected to announce his government's willingness to consider new measures to combat Sikh terrorism (he does), and Tiwari is expected to sing the praises of Rajiv Gandhi's economic policies (he does, too), but what of Paul? What will he say this year?

To begin with, his speech seems predictable. He thanks his guests for having come, talks about the ties that bind India to the UK, and outlines the achievements of Rajiv Gandhi's government. Then, his tone changes slightly. "Some of you may have read reports that I am pulling out of India," he begins. The audience stiffens, ears alert. "I have decided not to spend so much time on my investment in India. . ." As Paul continues, it is clear that he is, indeed, pulling out, or at least beating a tactical retreat. He no longer intends to pursue the confrontationary policies that he has followed with regard to the Indian business establishment over the last three years. He is not going to worry too much abut his investments in Escorts and DCM. He is not even going to be involved with the actual running of the fertiliser plant that his Caparo group has just been awarded. (His brothers will handle it, instead.) No, Swraj Paul is clearly pulling out.

**THE WAY PAUL** tells it, the story began in the First Class cabin of a Jumbo jet bound for Delhi. It was December 1982 and Paul was going home for his annual holiday. Also on the flight was L K Jha. The two men got talking. Had Paul heard about the new policies designed to attract non-resident investment? asked Jha. Paul said he had but, somehow, never really wanted to invest in India. Why not? asked Jha. After all, if friends of India did not invest, then who would?

When Paul got to Delhi, he thought

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAMAL SAHAI

about what Jha had said. It seemed reasonable. On the other hand, he was not interested in setting up an industrial unit and waiting till it became profitable. Portfolio investment seemed like a much better idea. So, he asked somebody to recommend a broker and came up with the name of Harish Bhasin. He asked Bhasin which companies he thought represented good investment opportunities. Escorts and DCM, said Bhasin. Very well, said Paul, buy some shares.

And there the matter would have rested if Paul had not decided to do some digging around about the two companies. He picked up the balance sheets on his way back to London and collected information about the ownership of both companies. It seemed like a good idea to know more about the people one was entrusting one's money to.

The first chapter of the story ends as it began: in the First Class cabin of another Jumbo jet. On the flight back to London, Paul sat and looked at all the information he had gathered. "All the balance sheets had," he recalls now, "was lots of PR stuff. There was no real information. But what surprised me was something else. These fellows didn't really own the companies at all. Mr Nanda owned only 4.5 per cent of Escorts. And Mr Bharat Ram and Mr Charat Ram owned only 10 per cent." He resolved to call Bhasin and to ask him to step up the share purchases.

**TILL APRIL 1983**, both Paul and Bhasin kept a low profile. Then, as speculation about the spurt in purchases of Escorts and DCM shares grew, it was no longer possible to remain in the background. Who, the papers wanted to know, was buying the shares? Was it a consortium of expatriate Indians? Was a take-over on the cards?

Paul decided to come clean. Yes, he told an interviewer in London, I'm buying the shares. It was a dramatic disclosure and Paul must have expected some reaction. Even so, he

**THE PROBLEM was that people in India only remembered that he had played Sancho Panza to Indira Gandhi's Don Quixote during the Janata era. They forgot about his industrial credentials.**

was totally unprepared for the storm that erupted. Part of the problem was that he had no real image in India. All people remembered was that he had played Sancho Panza to Indira Gandhi's Don Quixote in the Janata era. He was seen, therefore, as a political wheeler-dealer, not as an industrialist. And so, the speculation centred around three questions:

Firstly, was Paul recycling the money Mrs Gandhi had stashed away in some Swiss bank? Secondly, did he intend to oust the existing management of the companies? And thirdly, how much government backing did he *really* have?

The answers seemed obvious. His Caparo group had net assets of £ 10-12 million. Yet, by his own admission, he had invested £ 8.5 million in India. Clearly, the money had come from elsewhere and perhaps, he was laundering the Gandhi fortune. Considering the relatively small returns to be made on Escorts and DCM shares, Paul's purpose had to be more than mere investment, and given his record in Britain, management take-overs seemed the most likely motive. And, in view of the fact that he was a close friend, not just of the Gandhis but also of her Special Assistant, R K Dhawan and of Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, it seemed more than likely that the government would back him to the hilt.

For the managements of Escorts and DCM, the situation must have seemed very dismal indeed. An apprehensive Hari Nanda, the Chairman of Escorts, expressed his misgivings to an interviewer: "One of Swraj Paul's brothers is a director of IDBI, which is the leader of the financial institutions. This gives the feeling of a little heart-beat missing." Within industrial circles, speculation that Nanda and the Shrirams of DCM would lose their companies grew. The key to control lay with the financial institutions that Nanda was so worried about. They owned the bulk of the shares in DCM and Escorts. If they decided that Paul, who owned more shares than the present managements, was better qualified to run the company, then they could simply shift their support to him. And that would be the end of Nanda and Bharat Ram.

**BOMBAY : August 1983**

**SWRAJ PAUL** is paying a rare visit to India's commercial capital. Over the last three months, he has suddenly become one of the most talked about people in India. To begin with, there has been the reaction of the business community. Predictably, Nanda and Bharat Ram have been extreme in their criticisms of Paul's background. But even other industrialists – among them JRD Tata – have gone on record opposing Paul's apparent plans to take over Indian companies. Worse still, has been the attitude of the press. Both, *The Times Of India* and the *Indian Express* have viciously attacked Paul. *The Statesman* has printed an investigative article suggesting that Paul's Caparo group cannot have been the source of the funds he has invested in India.

Paul has tried to fight back in his own inimitable style. He has more than matched all the abuse directed at him. Mr Bharat Ram, he says, is incompetent. Mr Nanda is competent but dishonest. Indian industry is full of crooks. JRD Tata is no better than the rest. The Indian newspapers are in the pay of the industrial establishment.

He is in Bombay to address the first meeting of the Investors Association. The themes of his speech are those that he will develop in later speeches. Most Indian public companies, he says, are run by dishonest men who own only a small percentage of the equity. Over half the equity is in the hands of financial institutions owned by the government. The rest of the equity is offered to small investors about whom the companies don't really care. His crusade is to obtain for these small shareholders the rights that are truly theirs. Take Mr Nanda, for instance. He has made his sons Managing Directors of Escorts. The Bharat Rams have done the same. They act like they own the companies. Actually they are no more than employees of shareholders. And so on.

The attack has gone down better than Paul had dared hope. The newspapers still hate him, but a surprisingly large number of young journalists and magazine writers have begun to echo Paul's themes. Partly, it is his own accessibility to all interviewers and his hearty, Punjabi manner. Partly, it is that what he says makes some sense. As one journalist says to him: "I agree with everything you are saying. I just wish you weren't the person saying it."

Unfortunately for Paul, everything has not gone according to plan. He still maintains that his only motive was to make a portfolio investment, but nobody believes this. According to most people, his strategy is as follows:

Step One: Buy shares. Step Two: Establish that you have more shares than the existing managements. Step Three: Discredit the present managements. Step Four: Ask the institutions to put a few of your nominees on the boards of these companies. Step Five: Make life tough for the managements at board meetings. Step Six: Press for control with the backing of the institutions.

**NOBODY believed Paul when he said that he did not want to take over Escorts and DCM. Why else would he invest in the companies, considering that he could get a high return elsewhere?**

This has gone wrong mainly because both Escorts and DCM have refused to register his shares. Paul is appalled. "In England, Mr Nanda would have gone to jail for doing this!" he thunders. It does seem odd for the companies to refuse to register shares that have been bought on the stock-market but there's nothing that Paul can do. His political contacts can't ask Nanda and Bharat Ram to make the first move towards relinquishing control of their companies – that's asking for too much. And the institutions do not have enough directors on the boards of the companies to press for registration.

There is also the nebulous role of Rajiv Gandhi. Does he share his mother's fondness for Paul? Everyone in Delhi wants to know. Wasn't he at school with one of the Bharat Rams? The speculation heightens when Rajiv makes a speech in the Lok Sabha calling for a five per cent ceiling on non-resident investment. It is well-known by now that Rajiv Gandhi does not like either R K Dhawan or Pranab Mukherjee, Paul's two influential friends. So, just how strong is Paul, really?

As he addresses the Investors Association, Paul seems totally confident. To hear him talk, it would seem as though this is a battle he cannot fail to win.

**DELHI : August 1984**

SWRAJ PAUL has just written a book. A lavish paean of praise for Indira Gandhi, it does include the interesting revelation that she asked him to be India's High Commissioner to the UK in 1980. Paul, who holds a British passport, turned her down.

Paul is in Delhi to attend the ceremony for the release of the book by the President of India. At the Rashtrapati Bhavan function, it seems almost as though Paul and his brothers are the ones who are most at home there and Zail Singh is their guest. At the tea party that follows the release, Paul is mobbed by his friends and admirers. The Giani wanders around aimlessly looking for people to talk to.

Afterwards, relaxing in his suite at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Paul is optimistic about his battle with Escorts and DCM. Oddly enough, though, it is now being seen as a Paul-Nanda battle and nobody has much to say about DCM. "Well," says Paul, "that's because most Indian industrialists don't like Mr Nanda. They would rather push him into the forefront. Mr Bharat Ram is much more popular."

But hasn't something gone badly wrong? It is now nearly 20 months since Paul first started investing in the two companies and over a year since he revealed his identity. And yet, his shares are not registered, he is still calling Indian industrialists names. Why are things taking so long? Paul seems to agree that the delay is

excessive, but he is still optimistic. These things take time, he claims.

Meanwhile, there have been other controversies. Several financial writers have suggested that Paul purchased his shares in a manner that was contrary to the law. Mr Nanda seems to agree. Moreover, the press has also discovered that the major shareholder of Caparo is a Swiss bank: Bank Hoffman of Zurich. The old speculation about laundering Gandhi family money has been revived.

Paul is livid. It is, he says, a fairly common practice in England for those with substantial shareholdings in companies to ask a bank to hold them in their name. He produces letters from Bank Hoffman confirming that he owns the shares. He is upset also about suggestions that the recent raids on Escorts are part of a strategy directed at scaring Nanda into registering Paul's shares. "My information," he says, "is that there was a lot of *gol-maal* in Escorts with regard to excise. If one wanted to bring pressure on Mr Nanda, don't you think there are better ways?"

Such as?

"All the shares of Mr Nanda are hypothecated to banks. He is in a non-sustainable position."

**DELHI : November 1984**

SWRAJ PAUL is shattered. He is bleary-eyed from lack of sleep and looks worn and tired. Indira Gandhi has just been assassinated. Paul got the news early one morning in London, drove straight to the airport and took the first Air-India flight to Delhi.

He is among the VIPs lining up to pay their homage to Mrs Gandhi as she lies in state. Rajiv Gandhi has succeeded his mother and R K Dhawan and Pranab Mukherjee are still in place, so Paul's influence seems intact. But he seems not to care about his own position. His attachment to Mrs Gandhi was deep and genuine and now, he behaves as though he has lost a member of his family. Friends say they have never seen him so upset.

**WHY DID things take so long? Surely, given that Paul was so close to the Gandhis and that R K Dhawan and Pranab Mukherjee were his friends, he should have got his way at once?**

**LONDON : April 1985**

SWRAJ PAUL'S WORLD has changed a little in the last six months. His British companies continue to do well, he has just shifted to a brand new Caparo House in Baker Street and announced higher profits for the last year.

Back in India, however, things are not going so well. In 1984, the financial institutions finally decided to step in on Paul's behalf. They tried to replace the Escorts board with their own nominees. Nanda took them to court and the Bombay High Court ruled in his favour. After two years of defeat and defeat, he had finally won one battle.

Paul is disappointed by the judgment but he is not worried. "The Supreme Court will overturn the judgment," he says confidently. "And even if it doesn't, I can sue the Punjab National Bank and recover the money it transferred on my behalf." Nevertheless, it seems clear that he's no longer pressing for control of the companies. All he wants now is to get his shares registered. "I'm losing so much in interest," he concedes.

There have been little pinpricks throughout the last six months. His friends Dhawan and Mukherjee have been fired. ("It makes no difference to me," says Paul, "because I have never considered my position as being based on individuals.") The press has continued to attack him though now there is a new viciousness in the articles. One report links him with a spy scandal. Another refers to his meddling in Sri Lankan affairs. There is constant speculation that he is now Out; that Rajiv refuses to see him. According to a *Sunday Observer* story, he was told by Rajiv's secretary that he shouldn't expect to see the PM each time he was in town.

So, is he no longer in favour? Will he go the way of Dhawan and Mukherjee? Paul refuses to say. "I am as strong an admirer of the Gandhis as I was earlier and will do anything for them," is as far as he will go. But did he meet Rajiv the last time he was in Delhi? "One newspaper said I met him, another said I didn't. Let them contradict each other. It is better if people think I'm out."

**CALCUTTA : December 19, 1985**

SWRAJ PAUL is jubilant. The Supreme Court has overturned the High Court judgment in the Escorts case. The LIC can now have its own directors appointed on the board of Escorts. "The Supreme Court has vindicated my position and if the Nandas had any shame, they would have resigned by now," he tells the press. "I hope this is an end to the long-drawn out controversy. I am happiest that the great amount of mischief, created by Mr Nanda and his cronies by maligning Mrs Gandhi, has been stopped."

Now, the new directors are expected to register his shares and the two-and-a-half year battle seems to have ended. What has made Paul nearly as happy is the fact that the speculation about him being Out has ended. Earlier in the year, his Caparo group has been awarded a Rs 700-crore fertiliser

project in Shajahanpur in Uttar Pradesh. It is a prestigious project and one that was hotly contested.

Moreover, despite the best attempts of P C Alexander, the new High Commissioner to London, to sideline him, Paul is still a power to reckon with in the UK. When the Prime Minister visited London, Paul was at the airport to receive him and Sonia is reported to have dropped in on him and his family during her stay there.

Paul is back. Very much In.

## SO, SWRAJ

**Paul is pulling out. Or, at least, beating a tactical retreat. He is not turning his back on India – his ties are too strong for that. But this particular battle seems to have been abandoned.**

**LONDON : February 12, 1986**

"WHY AM I pulling out of India? Very simple. I don't have that much time." Swraj Paul is back behind his desk at the Baker Street headquarters of his Caparo group. He is more subdued than usual: perhaps recent developments have taken him by surprise. Just when it seemed that he was back In, and had finally won his battle, things went wrong.

The financial institutions did get their directors on to the board of Escorts. They did have a meeting. But at this meeting, they did not say anything about registering Paul's shares. Instead, they granted Hari Nanda and his son Rajan, five-year terms as Chairman and Managing Director, respectively.

But, why, if this was all they wanted to do, did the financial institutions waste so much time and money, fighting Mr Nanda? "Exactly." Swraj Paul is agitated. "That is exactly what I want to know. The whole thing makes no sense at all."

What about the story doing the rounds in Delhi that the Nandas' won their continuance not through Rajan Nanda's friendship with Rajiv (the two are *not* close) but because Hari Nanda managed to convince L K Jha of the need for stable managements? And that Jha asked the institutions to give him a five-year term without consulting the Prime Minister?

Paul is non-committal. "I don't know. Ask them."

What happens to the fertiliser plant?

"I really don't want to get involved in running it. We will contribute the equity that we are committed to. But my brothers can handle the project."

And what happens to the money he has invested in Escorts and DCM?

"Well, I think I will get it back but I can no longer afford to devote my time and energy to fighting the Indian business establishment. I would rather do something abroad."

So, is he giving up?

"No, I have very strong links with India. It is just that, at this time, I'm quite fed up. And I would rather do something else."

What went wrong? How did things come to this pass?

"In a personal sense, things may not have worked out for me, but I think in a larger sense, I have won. What were the things I was saying? I said: firstly, that Indian industrialists are bleeding their companies and breaking the laws. And I also said that one must look after the interests of the small shareholders.

"Look what has happened over the last year. Mr V P Singh's raids have proved that I was right about the dishonesty of Indian industrialists. And the new small-shareholder consciousness has contributed to the stock-market boom."

Was it all worth it?

"Yes. Just look at the way the same newspapers that attacked me are now attacking V P Singh. It is the same link-up between business and the press. They will oppose anybody who stands up for honesty.

"And there is one more thing I have brought up. The government, through the institutions, owns 54 per cent of Escorts. It is really a government company. Now, why should the Chairman of Escorts be treated so differently from the chairman of any other public sector company? Which public sector manager earns so much, gets so many perks, runs businesses on the side, and gets a five-year term? This is the important question."

So, have we seen the last of Swraj Paul?

"No, my brothers are in India. I'll be there in August. Only in my business affairs is there a change."

Would things have been very different if Mrs Gandhi had been alive?

Paul pauses for a couple of seconds. "No. Why should they have been? If I really had so much support from her, I would have got my shares registered immediately. You know Mrs Gandhi only mentioned the matter to me once. I was in Norway, waiting at the airport to receive her. She got off the plane and said, 'Swraj, your colleagues are very frightened of you.' I laughed and replied, 'No, they are frightened of their wives.'

"She was startled. 'You are never serious,' she said. I said, 'No madam, I'm quite serious. You see all these fellows have been telling their wives that they own their companies. Now, I have come along and shown that they only own around four per cent or five per cent and exposed them.' "

Paul pauses again. "You know," he says, "at least, they can't lie to their wives any longer." ♦

Peter Mayer talks about why Penguin is coming to India, and

# THE KING PENGUIN

By Alok Chatterjee

*Peter Mayer, 50, has always been hard to slot. He's been a villain in a movie, a taxi-driver in New York, a pacifist writer, an engine-wiper on Spanish ships, a graduate from Columbia University, New York and Oxford University, UK, a messenger at* The New York Times. . . *But what does the publishing world think of him and his track record?*

*Introducing him at a publishing course in Harvard (of which, incidentally, Mayer was the keynote speaker) the Director called him 'one of the world's greatest living publishers and certainly one of the most exciting'.* Time, Newsweek, The Sunday Times *and* Publisher's Weekly, *have all glorified his name in print. Why? A look at his track record is illuminating. But to start at the beginning.*

*Born of German Jewish parents in England, Peter Mayer moved to New York with his family at a young age and, after a colourful adolescence, quickly began making a mark on the American publishing scene. He rose quickly to head both Pocket Books and Avon Books in the States and soon established a reputation as a resourceful publisher with a genius for resuscitating ailing publishing houses. His biggest triumph, however, was not in the country he'd adopted, but in the one he'd left.*

*In 1978, Penguin Books, the UK publishing giant, was ailing. The company that had, for all intents and purposes, begun paperback publishing when Sir Allen Lane had launched the first batch of Penguins in 1935, now found that its profits had virtually disappeared. Enter Peter Mayer at a record six-figure salary and operation clean-up began. First, 100 jobs went (though there were only 36 forced redundancies); next, 800 heavy-as-lead books were trimmed from the 5,000-book backlist; then, 'quickie' books, of little literary merit but enormous profit-making potential, like Shirley Conran's* Lace *and Audrey Eyton's* 7 Plan Diet *were acquired; finally, the musty, stuffy image that Penguin had acquired was slowly dispelled through the introduction of pictorial covers (Allen Lane never published a single Penguin with a four-colour pictorial cover) and marketing extravaganzas. Naturally,*

his own style.

*there were protests from the traditionalists, who dubbed Mayer a brash American boor, with no thought to the more gentlemanly aspects of publishing.*

*Unfazed, Mayer continued his programme of cutting, polishing and restoring Penguin. That his efforts have paid off can be seen from a number of things – in 1985, Penguin's trading profit was up 23 per cent at £ 11.3 million on £ 70 million, continuing the upward trend the company's fortunes had shown over the last few years. In addition, Penguin bought five new companies in UK – Hamish Hamilton (hard cover), Michael Joseph (hard cover), Sphere (paperback), Frederick Warne (children's books) and Rainbird (book packaging).*

*Peter Mayer – large, dishevelled, chain-smoking, very American in his mannerisms and speech – now runs an empire that in 1984 alone had world-wide sales of 50 million copies. That means somebody bought a Penguin every one-and-a-half seconds. There are now Penguin companies in nine countries – UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Holland, Spain and India. Peter Mayer has been responsible for much of this expansion; indeed, as one observer put it, "He intends to colonise the world with Penguins."*

**Imprint:** ***Under you, Penguin has become enormous, like some of the massive publishing corporations in the US. Does that mean the company has moved away from the old gentlemanly days of publishing, when small companies with impeccable antecedents produced good, literary books?***

**Peter Mayer:** That's a long question. But look, sheer size has nothing, really, to do with the business of publishing good books. I'm not even sure it can do very much for your profitability. Sure, size can give you some economies of scale, but each book still has to sell on its merit. That's why our creative people are so important to us.

***That doesn't explain fully why you put out over £ 20 million to buy the Thomson companies – Hamish Hamilton, Michael Joseph etc.***

Well, Hamish Hamilton and Michael Joseph are excellent hard back companies and Sphere has published some very good books. We saw good



reason to make new and larger associations; I'm sure it will benefit all the companies concerned, and the companies we've acquired will certainly have a bright future. I certainly don't see the new acquisition of five companies as spelling the end of anything. No changes are envisaged at present and the philosophy is to have a range, perhaps sometimes overlapping, of distinct creative input. We now have a very large group – but it's large and credible.

***There are many large publishing houses in the world today. And these large houses go after the books they think will sell well, which they then market aggressively in order to sell by the million. Isn't this coercion of the customer to buy a big book (which is usually pulp fiction) disastrous, as far as the publishing of good literary books is concerned?***
Yes, you do like asking long questions. But, as I've said earlier, size has nothing to do with publishing good books and Penguin does publish a lot of good books. But the times are changing, especially where retailing is concerned, and we need to be willing to serve and service this new retailing, which, when you come down to it, reflects the demands of the customer.

I am not especially worried about this debate about whether or not to publish popular, really popular, fiction; it has always been read, and why not? If great numbers of people want to be entertained, so be it. I am glad to say that many of these same people also read more serious books. Do we only watch the most serious TV programmes, or don't we ever flip channels for a silly break too? My view is that perhaps all of us publishers ought to be less interested in image and more interested in providing reading for the market. The real issue before us as publishers is how best we can serve others. And it would do us well to remember that many of the historic publishers, those who made the greatest contributions, understood that with commercial success, with a reaching-out to the community, it became more possible to publish good books, if the will and staff were there to do so.

***Is that the philosophy you follow at Penguin?***
Sure.

***When you took over Penguin, let's see, about seven years ago, your measures to revive the company's fortunes were severely criticised by the press, the publishing establishment and Penguin traditionalists. How do you justify what you did?***
When I came to Penguin there were several things that had to be worked out virtually simultaneously. It was a terrible time for everyone at Penguin in human terms. But in publishing terms, the so-called crisis of 1979-80 was Penguin reorganising itself, getting its act together, setting out on new paths, and going down old ones with a different step.

And you must remember that books like *Lace* helped take some of the frost off Penguin's aloof image. Publishing such books went far to make Penguin accessible as a concept again, and not forbidding to large chunks of the population. You know Penguin had become known as that kind of good medicine that was always forced on you either at school or at home, but which you didn't actually want to choose yourself. We had to loosen up that image a little bit and not everybody was pleased with that. But as you can see for yourself, publishing the *7 Plan Diet* hasn't put a stop to publishing the classics or any of our other backlist titles or serious fiction. And, if you come to that, even Allen Lane (the founder of Penguin Books) put chocolate ads in his books and still preserved his standards.

***Publishing houses all over the world are integrating vertically (that is, having both hard cover and paperback arms) in order to keep in-house valuable authors (and copyrights). You've said yourself, in interviews and papers, that the most valuable thing a publishing house owns is copyright. Though you've said that the Thomson companies you've acquired will maintain their separate identities, does the fact that Hamish Hamilton and Michael Joseph now belong to Penguin mean their books will automatically be published in paperback by Penguin?***
You know, we have our own hard back imprint, Viking. And when I said that the Thomson companies would maintain their separate identities, I mean exactly what I said: their current contractual arrangements, editorial independence, and so on.

***But surely Penguin will be preferred when they (the hard cover Thomson companies) auction paperback rights?***
Maybe. But then virtually every publisher has arrangements now. And the reasoning behind the acquiring of the companies has essentially to do with the changing configuration of trade publishing all over the world, especially paperback publishing. All paperback publishers, except for those like Penguin which has done a lot of paperback originals, have had

to rely for a large portion of their licences on hard cover publishers.

Over the last few years, for a variety of reasons – the principal one, of course, being the author's desire to have larger royalty payments through paperbacks selling in large quantities – publishing houses started acquiring a hard-soft configuration, so that they could give authors a better deal. You must understand the business of publishing is copyright. And for paperback houses to have an uninterrupted flow of copyrights, in order to continue publishing, they had to have arrangements, or own hard cover houses that had plenty of copyrights.

***I've read that when you took over Penguin you had a 16-point programme to get the company back on its feet. Is this correct?***
I did a great number of things that someone else added up to 16. But what I did, largely, was to redirect the company towards a more normal relationship with the readership in this country (UK) and elsewhere. It affected the books we published and the way we published them. It meant we took less of an *a priori* view of the books we published.

***So, are you satisfied with the way the company has functioned since you took over?***
I will say this: Nothing that has happened at Penguin has been the result of solely mine or anyone else's efforts. We have done it together. *(Penguin's strike team, the people Mayer consults most closely, includes Peter Carson, Editorial Director; Patrick Wright, Sales & Marketing Director; John Rolfe, Print Control Director and John Webster, Finance Director.)*

***But has the basic character of the house changed since you took over?***

**"We are hoping that Penguin's first Indian list will be published in early 1981. The company hopes to publish 24 books a year, both fiction and non-fiction."**

We've become a risk-taking company. I like to stretch people and I like people who like to be stretched. People here recognise that it's better to try, and fail – though not to fail regularly, of course – than to do everything that's safe. A larger Penguin Group is an example of risk-taking. It wasn't taken for short-term advantages. The demands on all will be great in the next few years. But Penguin accepted risks with an eye to the day after tomorrow.

***Yes, you have a reputation for pushing your people hard, but are ruthless about dispensing with those who fail. . .***
That's not true, I mean about being tough on those who fail. We all make mistakes. I have made many mistakes. But Penguin must be competitive. I do push people hard, but in a way I hope that brings out the best in them.

***Was the setting up of your new company in India part of this penchant of yours for risk-taking?***
I'm not sure what you mean, but I've always felt Asia has had exciting new writing.

***If that's true, why hasn't more been published in the West?***
There are a number of factors that have prevented much more literature from your part of the world being published here – cultural and social factors, political events. . . Also, we have always felt that we ought not to be in the business to export other countries' culture to them. By this, of course, I do not mean that the practice of publishing Indian writers, to take just one example, in the West, is necessarily a bad thing, but why shouldn't they be published properly in their own country and then come to the West? It's a natural process, a kind of two-way street. We've always felt that we should put our time and energy into such projects. India's market and publishing can definitely be developed further and Penguin would like to be part of that development.

***So, how is Penguin India organised and what will its targets be?***
Our Indian partners are Ananda Bazar Patrika, who are already in the publishing business. Our Associate Editor, and his Advisory Editor, Khushwant Singh, will be in New Delhi. The company hopes to publish 24 books a year, both fiction and non-fiction.

***Will all aspects of the publishing operation be carried out in India?***
Yes. We will commission, edit and print the books in India.

***How many of the books produced by Penguin India will be published or sold in the other countries Penguin is represented in?***
Whichever books will travel. But the initial projections we've made assume that at least 60 per cent of the books the company publishes will be of interest here.

***Was the formation of the new company accelerated by the high incidence of piracy in India of Penguin titles?***
Well, as you know, we have cases

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# INTERVIEW

pending in Indian courts against various copyright violations.

***But isn't it a waste of time and money, taking get-rich-quick, small-time operators to court?***
Penguin will always go to the courts to defend its contracts. Especially against a lot of crooked people who, while they maintain that Western companies' price levels are too high, don't donate any of their monies or profits to the customer they are ostensibly interested in helping by publishing cheap books. Penguin's books are of a uniformly high standard and in India they only sell at normal price levels.

***When will the first books from Penguin India be available?***
We're hoping our first list will be published in early 1987.

***Do you think Asia, Africa and Latin America represent the areas where the freshest, most original writing will come from in the future? To put it differently, do you think the veins of creativity in the West are exhausted?***
No country is exhausted nor does any country have a monopoly on exciting new writing. It's just that every now and then you get an amazing bunch of new writers from some part of the world or the other and the world sits up and takes notice.

***You've been a successful publisher on both sides of the Atlantic. What are the major differences between publishing in USA and publishing in UK?***
The Americans are the better merchants, while the British are better theoretical businessmen.

***In which direction is world publishing heading?***
The direction it's always been. Publishers, as I've said before, need to serve their market, the community, properly. As long as they're doing that they are good publishers. We need to stop regarding ourselves as unapproachable deities. We desperately need a public that thinks of books as utterly normal, without sacred attributes. Radio, television, movies, records of every sort, are utterly normal. What is special about a book is what is inside it, not the physical object itself.

***What you've just said seems to me a kind of premonition of doom as far as 'literary publishing' is concerned. What will happen to, say, a first novel or biography or volume of poetry as publishing becomes, as you say, increasingly geared to the needs of the consumer?***
I don't know, but whatever does happen, frankly, cannot be much worse than the difficulties such books face under the present system. And if a publisher finds he is printing fewer copies of such books, then prices will, and should, go up. But what I do know and what I believe in implicitly is that all of us will continue to publish such books because we want to.

***Are there any other changes you envisage?***
Publishers the world over will have to learn to play better on the keyboard of publishing variables. This is exactly what I told a conference of booksellers a couple of months ago. We will have to work out a better and more effective combination of hard-soft publishing, give perishable books the kind of paper they deserve, work out even finer-tuned royalty schemes that give publishers a break on the low end and authors much more money on the high end, introduce more new technology, the list can go on endlessly. The bottom line is: we shall all have to be very much better at this business.

***What are the areas Penguin is planning to expand into in the future?***
Frederick Warne taught us merchandising and licensing, which we are doing more of. Retailing is something we're already doing through the Penguin and Puffin bookshops; this will continue expanding. Also, things like audio cassettes could be examined.

***A couple of more personal questions. What would you really like to do next, now that Penguin is such a successful company?***
Things haven't stopped happening at Penguin and they never will. But if you want to know what I'm really trying to do, well I've always considered myself an old-fashioned trade publisher and so I'm trying to fight my way back to publishing books, which is all I want to do.

***What is the most fulfilling thing you've done?***
The most fulfilling thing I've done, at least over the last few years, has been to put together a group of people who work together well and competitively.

***Which book gave you the most literary and personal satisfaction to publish?***
D M Thomas's *The White Hotel.*

***Can you prophesy the future?***
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ZODIAC

# A HELPING HAND:

## They cope with all kinds of problems, from lonely hearts to How do the women who write the agony columns manage?

MRS X, an average middle class housewife, seemed to have little to worry about. With a comfortable home and two healthy children what more could she want? But she had a problem. Her husband would not talk to her. All her questions were met with insults. For three years, she suffered in silence. Then, losing all hope, she turned to the *Eve's Weekly's Take Our Counsel* page and addressed a letter to its consultant marital counsellor, Dr Mabel Fonseca, explaining her problem.

"I feel terribly lonely and depressed," she wrote, "for want of a little companionship to share my feelings."

Dr Fonseca mulled over the letter. In her 16-year stint as the *Eve's Weekly* agony aunt she had come across similar complaints before. But how should she phrase her reply? "Apparently there is some hurt in the relationship," she wrote finally. "Talk to a counsellor or a senior member of the family – and if both of you are willing, consult a good marriage counsellor."

Ms C V, a successful working woman, had a different kind of problem. A recent hike in her salary had resulted in her earning more than her husband, a fact that was causing a great deal of distress to the latter. Unable to cope with the situation, she wrote to *Helpline*, a column on emotional problems in *Savvy*, a new, glossy women's magazine. Shabana Azmi, *Helpline*'s glamorous consultant, took a firm stand. A self-confessed women's libber, she wrote unhesitatingly: "Don't you DARE give up your job, dear lady. . . All that has happened is that the male ego is hurt; don't poke fingers at him or quarrel with him. It will only make matters worse."

ILLUSTRATION BY ELLEN LEBOW

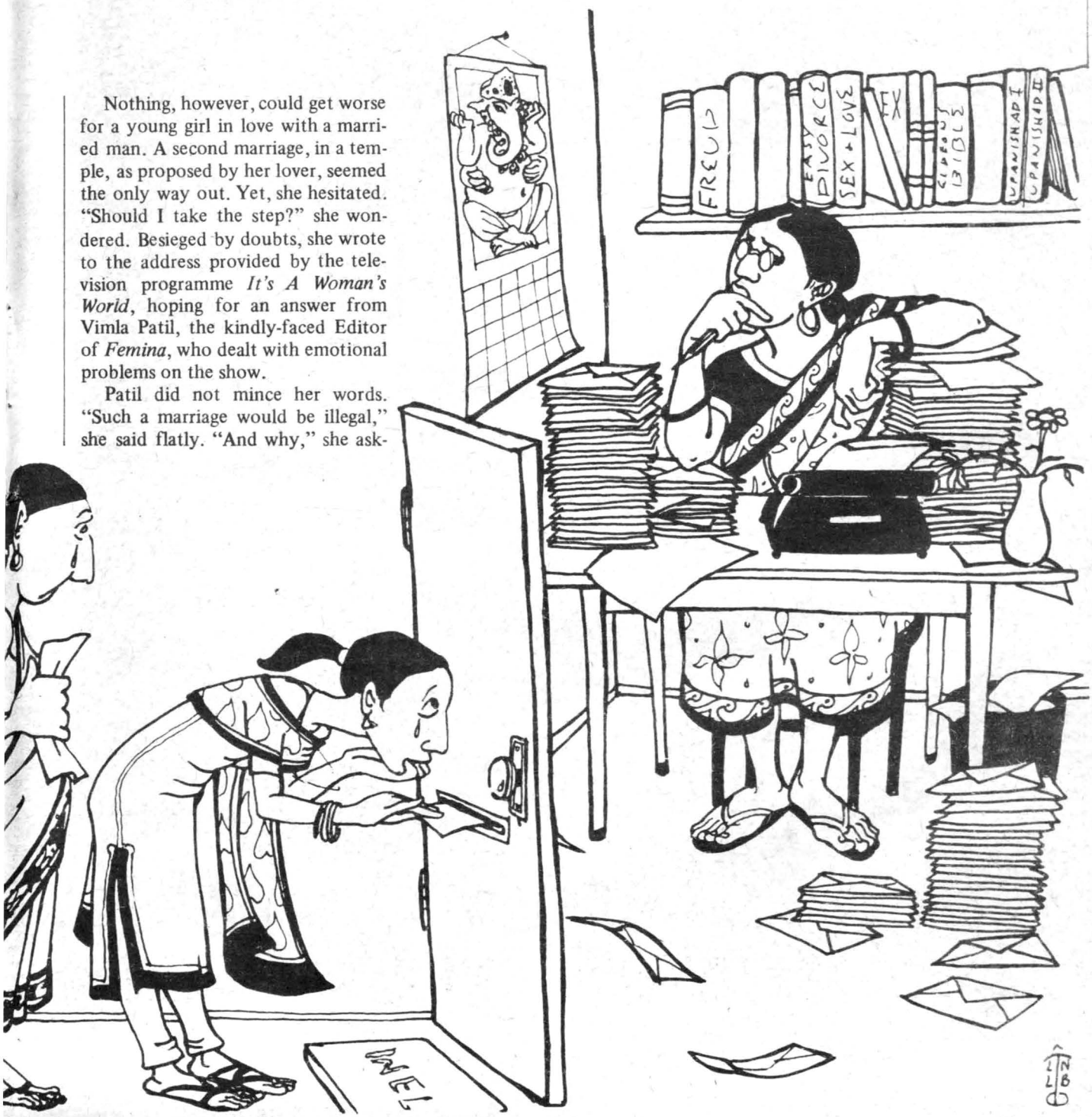
BY AMRITA SHAH

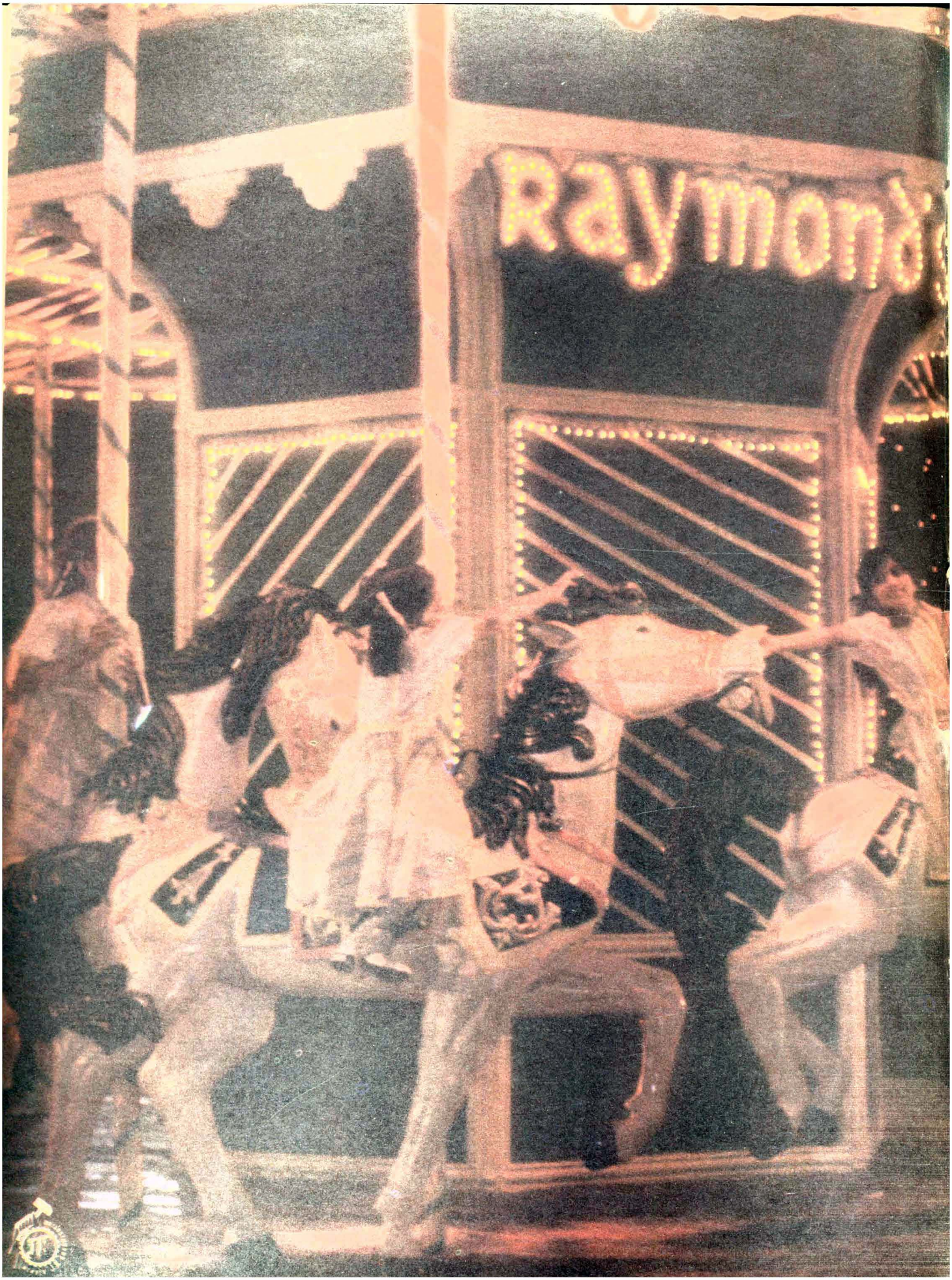
# THE AGONY AUNTS

## adulterous wives.

Nothing, however, could get worse for a young girl in love with a married man. A second marriage, in a temple, as proposed by her lover, seemed the only way out. Yet, she hesitated. "Should I take the step?" she wondered. Besieged by doubts, she wrote to the address provided by the television programme *It's A Woman's World*, hoping for an answer from Vimla Patil, the kindly-faced Editor of *Femina*, who dealt with emotional problems on the show.

Patil did not mince her words. "Such a marriage would be illegal," she said flatly. "And why," she ask-




Raymond

ed the anxious letter-writer, "do you want to be the second in somebody's life?" leaving no doubt as to her views on the subject.

**AGONY COLUMNS** – the name by which columns dealing with such queries have come to be known – is an appellation that is disliked by the magazines which carry them and the people who write them. Nevertheless, the tone of most of the queries makes it an apt description for a feature that is extremely popular, especially amongst women's magazines.

"People like reading about other people's problems," explains Gulshan Ewing, Editor of *Eve's Weekly*, which has had an agony column for over 20 years. "Also," she continues, "readers sometimes find problems they can identify with." Undoubtedly, many of the problems mirror the concerns of not just one agonised individual but of several people thrust into similar situations. This letter from a 23-year-old girl carried in *Eve's Weekly* last November, for instance, expressed an anxiety felt by many unmarried girls in India. Apparently, the girl's parents had found a suitable match for her. She liked the boy, but he was undecided and wanted to wait till December to make up his mind. She was willing to wait. "At the same time," she wrote, "anxiety grips me and I am suffering from tremendous mental tension on this issue. Suppose the proposal does not work out in December?"

If this seems like the trivial preoccupation of overstrung females, take another letter, this time from a 43-year-old married man and father of two children. A chance meeting with a 30-year-old mother of two, had resulted in an 'involvement'. Now, he wrote, "she wants to leave her husband and marry me. I, too, am absolutely certain we will be very happy together. I can provide for four children. How long will divorce take?" With the divorce rate rapidly rising, such situations are probably all too common.

"Everybody has a problem," sighs Fonseca, raising a red-sleeved arm to point at the letters lying on her writing-table. More letters are enclosed in files that lie between paintings of the Virgin Mary and books on sex and marriage. "Of course," she clarifies, "the dimensions and degrees of the problems felt by various people differ."

**"My husband does not talk to me. Whenever I make an effort to talk, he gives me cynical and insulting replies. I feel terribly lonely for want of a little companionship..."**

*"Apparently there is some hurt in the relationship. Talk to a counsellor or a senior member of the family."*

So do the motives of the letter-writers. "For some people, it is a form of catharsis," says Fonseca. For others, it is a desperate plea for help. Especially in cases where the individual is faced with a totally incomprehensible situation. As this particular housewife was, when she discovered that her husband had a predilection for dressing up as a woman. Understandably bewildered by this strange behaviour, she wrote: "On a few occasions we had sex when he was dressed up in female attire and I found him powerful in sex. Though I do not hate his odd fancy, I do not like it either."

Such cases are exceptional. The majority of problems arise not from sexual deviations as much as sexual ignorance. Fears about masturbation are perennial fodder for agony columns. Typical examples are letters sent by these two young girls, one engaged and one married. "My fiancé and I both masturbate," wrote the first. "Will I lose my virginity? Can I still bear a child? We don't want to spoil our future life and parents' names." The second letter is even more pathetic. "My husband wants a baby," she wrote. "But I am scared of giving birth to a deformed baby as I have been masturbating since I was 18. How do I tell him?" "Problems arise because parents are still too embarrassed to talk openly to their children about sex," Fonseca concludes.

**ALTHOUGH ONE FINDS** men confiding in agony aunts, the columns are usually restricted to women's magazines. "Men do not have as many problems," says Ewing, analysing the phenomenon. "And if they do, they are solved in a sort of men's club fashion."

Now, however, things seem to be changing. Homosexuals, for one, need help to cope with their predicament, as do Gulf *émigrés* separated for long periods from their families.

Women's problems, too, have changed. "Earlier, the complaints were generally related to the mother-in-law and to joint families," says Fonseca. "Now they are far more individualistic." The letters received by *Helpline* and *It's A Woman's World* – both being more recent products than *Eve's Weekly* – mirror this trend. The television programme



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GAUTAM PATOLE

received several letters from middle-aged women, dissatisfied with playing the traditional roles of wife and mother. And *Savvy*'s *Helpline* was flooded with letters from married women wanting to have extra-marital affairs. Though none of them wished to break up their marriages, they all felt the injustice of a society that allowed men to have affairs but did not extend the same privilege to women. "I don't think any of them would really have that affair," says Azmi who replied to them. "For most, it was a fantasy, and writing that letter partly fulfilled the fantasy."

A contributory factor in the transformation of social attitudes has been the change in the nature of women's magazines. Gone are the days when magazines only taught women how to cook, stitch and fall in love.

"Now we keep telling our readers, 'You are a person in your own right. Nobody owns you,' " says Ewing. "And that kind of advice plays on their minds."

Despite change, certain traditional institutions, like marriage, retain their importance. Which is why pre-marital and extra-marital sexual activity amongst Indian women generally lead to outpourings of regret. A letter written by an 18-year-old girl a decade back is revealing. Recounting an eventful love life, she wrote: "I find life unbearable now. How will my future husband treat me if he comes to know all this?"

The remorseful plaint finds an echo in a more recent letter in *Savvy*. "I have had 48 men by now," a divorcee recounted, "and am sick to the core." How would she now find a husband to be a father to her daughters? she wondered.

Does the agony column find a way out for her? Do such columns serve a purpose? Do they help anyone – the unhappy divorcee, the love-struck teenager, or the anxious wife? Yes, says Patil. "It is amazing how much you can help people merely by saying, 'Everything will be all right!' " And usually, the advice given in agony columns offers hope. Rarely is it pedantic or disapproving. In fact, Fonseca – a Roman Catholic– has often had to tread on dangerous ground by advising abortion (despite the church's prohibition) and approving oral sex (an act frowned upon in the *Bible*). "I am a progressive counsellor," Fonseca claims. "I look at things scientifically."

**"I divorced my husband three years ago. I have had 48 men by now and am sick to the core. I need a father for my daughters. What do I do?"**

*"I am not saying you're loose, but if you're sick to the core, don't play the game any more."*

Even so, personal biases are bound to creep in. Fonseca tries to avoid subjectivity by basing her advice on the principle that it should not hurt anybody. "It should be right on moral grounds," she stresses. Of course, there are times when she is at a loss for an answer. At such times, she consults her 'panel' – professionals whose judgement she values – for advice. "I take my column very seriously," she says.

Azmi's approach to *Helpline* – the column now deals with general, rather than emotional, problems – was identical. Unlike most film stars, who allow sub-editors to ghost-write their column, Azmi would send in her answers regularly even when shooting on location outside Bombay. The cancellations on her handwritten copy reveal the amount of thought that probably went into every answer. "She would constantly ask me if I thought she was being too extreme on particular issues," recalls *Savvy*'s Editor, Ingrid Albuquerque. "She would say, 'After all, we are dealing with a person's life.' "

Patil, on the other hand, claims that her aim on the short-lived programme *It's A Woman's World* was to give advice that was right – 'at least legally right'. While this principle could be applied to questions on bigamy, for instance, there were others where Patil could only point out the pros and cons of the situation and leave the decision to the complainant. "It is basically advice any fool would give," says Patil. The need to advise at all arises because she feels that 'everyone cannot think rationally under all circumstances'.

According to her, the paucity of counselling centres in the country makes the agony column an important forum for women to air their problems. "Many women have no one to talk to in a house full of people," she says. "In the West, there would be a centre for every kind of problem."

Probably. But the West still cannot deal with its emotional problems. The *Cosmopolitan*'s agony columns are replete with cases of broken marriages, lesbianism and adolescent fears. In ten years, we will probably face a similar scenario. But do away with the column? Impossible. After all, agony is a fact of life. ♦

# ISLAM AND THE

BY JAVED GAYA

# INDIAN PRESS

**In the aftermath of the Shahbano judgment, the press has focussed on Indian Muslims. Unfortunately, it has oversimplified the issues by regarding those who want a uniform civil code as secularists and all others as backward fundamentalists. Such oversimplifications can be dangerous.**

**ISLAM IS SUDDENLY** in the news. The Supreme Court judgment in the Shahbano case has sparked off a lot of interest in Muslim politics, the *Koran* and 'fundamentalism'. This interest has culminated in several major stories, including a cover story in *India Today* by Shekhar Gupta titled *The Muslims – A Community In Turmoil* and a major 20-page article examining the Shariat, by Arun Shourie in *The Illustrated Weekly Of India.*

The spark which set off the blaze of controversy was the courage and stubbornness of the 71-year-old Shahbano who took her wealthy ex-husband, a lawyer, to court for maintenance after he divorced her in 1978. A Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court heard the matter and directed Shahbano's husband to pay her Rs 179 per month under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), applicable for deciding maintenance to a divorced Muslim wife.

The judgment evoked widespread protests from Muslims which the press saw as a vindication of the belief that Indian Muslims are fundamentalists who wish to retain their barbaric laws, whereby they could mistreat their women without interference from the democratic institutions of the country. The saga had all the elements of high drama: an old woman thrown out mercilessly by her wealthy husband, fighting for her rights.

In the circumstances, the Muslim reaction seemed chauvinistic and inhuman. At the same time, this extreme reaction was surprising, as this was not the first time the Supreme Court had awarded maintenance to a divorced Muslim wife. The Court had done so in the cases of Bai Tahira versus Ali Hussain Fidaali Chothia (AIR 1979 SC 362) and in Fazlunbi versus K Khadervali (AIR 1980, SC 1730) without stirring up a storm.

What made the Shahbano case different? The facts of the case, for one. In its insistence on creating a good story, the press overlooked the fact that Shahbano was not left destitute by her husband but had the support of her three wealthy sons – a leading transporter in Indore, a bank manager and a technical supervisor at a local mill. The case itself was born out of animosity between the father and one of the sons who encouraged Shahbano to take him to court. Ironically, Shahbano's husband was, at the time of the trial, appearing in his legal capacity for three divorced Muslim women demanding maintenance from their husbands.

Clearly, Shahbano was able to maintain herself. But assuming that

*Javed Gaya is a practising advocate at the Bombay High Court.*

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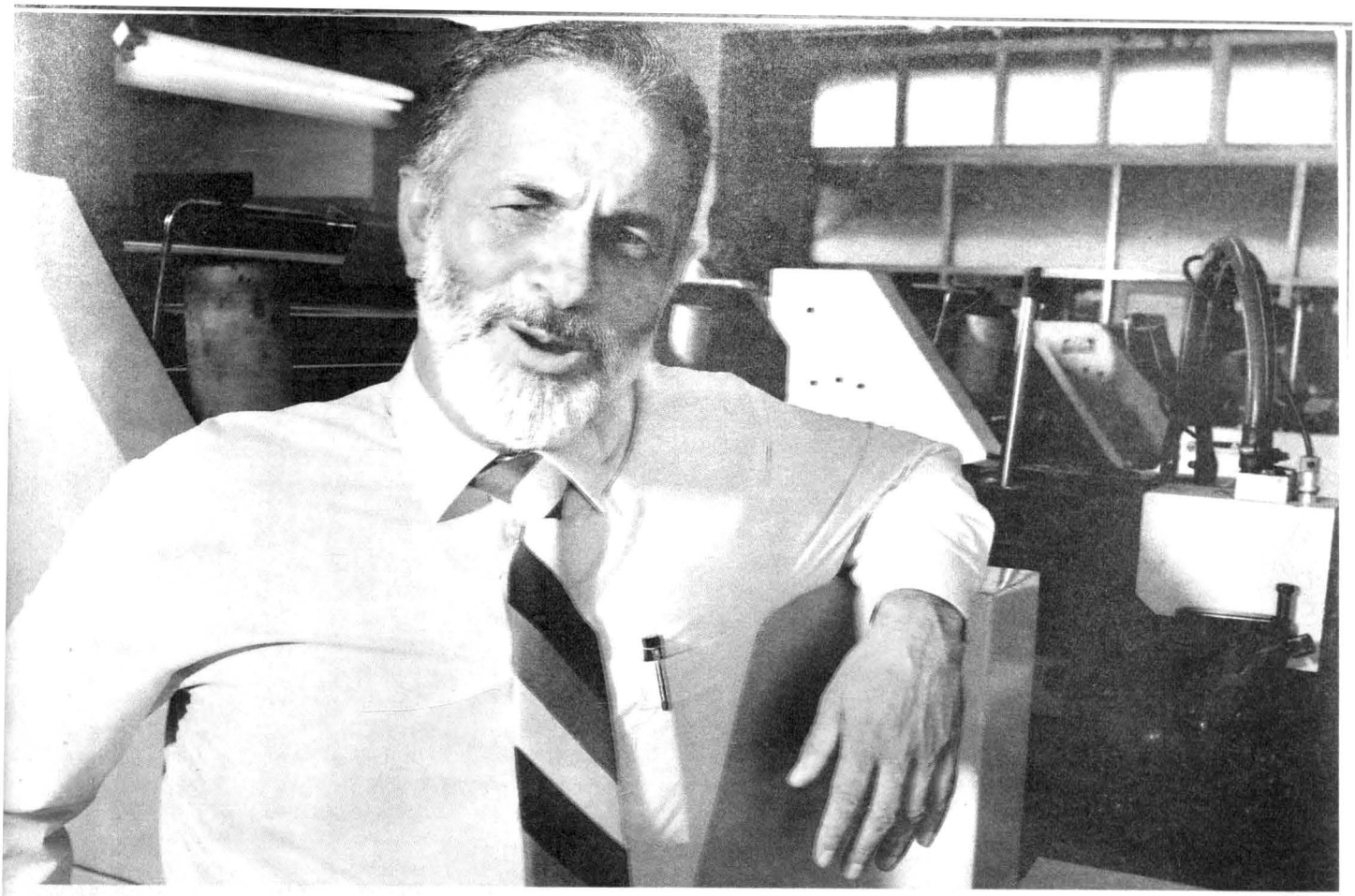

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Cancer Insurance, Personal Accident, Hospitalisation and Domiciliary Hospitalisation Policy, Domestic Package Policy, All Risks Insurance, Burglary and House Breaking, Fire Insurance, Combined Fire and Theft, Passenger Flight, Public Liability, Carrier's Liability, Horse Insurance, Engineering Insurance, Professional Indemnity, Workmen's Compensation, Multi Perils, Fidelity Guarantee, Plate Glass, Business Interruption, Cash in Transit, Marine, New Well Insurance, Bullock Cart, Pump Set, Pedal Cycle and many more.

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she wasn't, how far could a sum of Rs 179 per month enable her to maintain herself? The very fact that the court decided on such a trifling sum, especially for a wealthy lawyer who could afford much more, indicates that the judgment was meant to implement a principle rather than serve a practical purpose. But if the Court wished to underscore a principle, why do it with such a bad example? In its judgment, the Court observed that though Section 127 of the CrPC exempted Muslims from Section 125 – which provided for maintenance to divorced women – the latter Section was still applicable in cases of divorced women 'unable to maintain themselves'. If this clause was applicable to Shahbano – and the facts show that it was not – then Rs 179 was an unrealistic sum to award.

Apart from the facts of the case, what really incensed Muslims all over the country was the Court's observation that a uniform civil code as envisaged under Article 44 of the Constitution should be enacted. "A beginning has to be made if the Constitution has to have any meaning," the Court suggested. "Inevitably, the role of a reformer has to be assumed by the courts, because it is beyond the endurance of sensitive minds to allow injustice to be suffered when it is so palpable."

Significantly, the present controversy is not just a battle between Muslim fundamentalists and their Hindu counterparts. The Muslim intelligentsia, too, expressed its reservations about the inoperative part of the judgment. The press, however, saw the issue in black and white terms. Those who opposed it, were dubbed 'fundamentalists' and those who approved of it, 'reformists'. No attempt was made to explain the insecurity of Indian Muslims – fundamentalist or otherwise – which drives them to vehemently oppose suggestions of a uniform civil code.

**THERE IS** a political dimension to this entire debate, which is hardly discussed. In any discussion, we have to take into account the precarious economic condition of many Muslims, the falling percentages of Muslims in government service, the reluctance of banks and the co-operative sector to finance Muslim businesses, and the decline in the traditional arts and crafts which provide employment to Muslim artisans. This economic condition has serious social implications as well, but the ghetto mentality is, unfortunately, exacerbated by the history of communal riots and the way in which the flourishing Muslim communities in Moradabad and Bhiwandi have faced the onslaught of Hindu communalism, aided and abetted by the State.

But, even more important than the economic problems which afflict the Muslims, are the politics of secularism which have sought to politicise traditional symbols and institutions of the Muslim identity. Many Muslim leaders, who risk being branded fundamentalists, maintain that the Nehrus played around with the Muslim leadership, trying to promote a particular type of minority politician, the *sarkari* Muslim, one whose career was contingent on his secularism, which meant a cultivated unconcern for the interests of his co-religionists. In a polity full of pressure groups of one sort or another – religious, regional, linguistic, communal – the Muslims are considered anti-national if they press their case as Muslims. And so, over the years, the Congress party has managed to get 'secular' men appointed to positions of power in Muslim institutions, such as the prestigious Waqf Board (which controls the wealth of the community) and at the Aligarh Muslim University.

***THE* INDIA TODAY *story is distinguished by the trite observation that backwardness breeds 'fundamentalism'. It then goes on to classify a whole variety of fairly unpleasant people as fundamentalists.***

Few of the journalists who discuss and talk with such unconcealed contempt of minority vote banks, ever discuss the way the Congress party has betrayed the Muslims over the Urdu question in Uttar Pradesh. The point that seems to have been missed by most writers, is that it is not enough to talk of the danger of obscurantism; one has to isolate the facts responsible for this. Because of a succession of government policies which seek to obliterate important elements of an identity, it is not surprising that an element, which would otherwise be marginal, will be over-emphasised. The assumption that the Muslim choice regarding his identity in a secular state is guided by rationality does not square with reality – that there is little choice. Rational or irrational, the Muslim community has decided to make the retention of their Personal Law their Akal Takht.

**THE ASSUMPTION** that reform in Muslim Law can only come through a uniform civil code runs through most discussions in the press on this subject. Let us begin by examining the *India Today* cover story, *The Muslims – A Community In Turmoil* by Shekhar Gupta. The author, to be fair, does touch upon the social plight of the Muslims, but does not develop any relationship between the gravity of that plight and the agitation over Shahbano other than the trite observation that backwardness breeds 'fundamentalism'. In fact, Mr Gupta is overly fond of the term 'fundamentalism', since it enables him to classify a whole variety of fairly unpleasant people and phenomena as fundamentalist. It also provides the gist of his article: that the Shahbano case is somehow being used by 'fundamentalists', and that mixing religion and politics is dangerous.

A similar view is expressed, in an

interview, by Arif Mohammed Khan, the minister who supported Shahbano's claim. When asked what he thought of the case, the minister nonchalantly replied: "It actually is much ado about nothing. The courts have made a progressive and correct interpretation of our religious law and yet the whole lot of fundamentalists has got angry about it." When asked whether the agitation had any connection with the social and economic condition of the Muslims, the young minister replied that he was unaware of any problems peculiar to Muslims. Mr Gupta's own conclusion was that 'the process (presumably of reform) would be slow and bumpy, particularly in the case of a dogmatic faith where the prophet's word is considered absolute instruction'. This dogmatism is the basis, presumably, for 'fundamentalism', which we all know and which, Mr Gupta is particularly anxious to tell us, is the monopoly of Muslims. Yet, the burden of the article is precisely the opposite. It mentions the very significant fact that there are seven different schools of Islamic jurisprudence; that many Islamic countries, which we otherwise denounce as backward and barbaric, have instituted reforms precisely in the areas of marriage and divorce favouring women and yet consistent with what they see as the Shariat; that Islamic law in India itself has changed remarkably over the years, but has somehow remained fossilised since Independence.

This was precisely the point raised by M V Kamath in an article in the *Indian Express*. He wrote: "But why so much hullabaloo over the issue of Muslim Personal Law, when neither Muslim history nor any theological doctrine suggests that Islamic laws have been immutable or rigid?"

Why, indeed? It is rarely noted that much before the Shahbano case, Justice Bahrul Islam of the Supreme Court delivered an important judgment on the validity of *talaq* (divorce) which contained several progressive implications, without antagonising Muslim opinion.

*The Times Of India* editorial dated January 11, 1986, points out that opposition to a uniform civil code does not necessarily mean opposition to reform. "Though the Muslim community, by and large, seems sharply hostile to a uniform civil code and wishes to preserve the separate Muslim Personal Law," it reads, "not all opponents of a common civil code are opposed to reform of Muslim Personal Law, especially where women's rights are concerned. In fact, many Muslims opposed to the common civil code claim that not only is the Muslim Personal Law, as practised in India, grotesquely unfair to women, but also contrary to the basic tenets of Islam, as understood and observed in a host of Muslim countries." This editorial stands out for the manner in which it seeks to analyse the Muslim reaction and hints that it is not necessarily those who are modern or progressive-thinking who find much of what we know as Muslim Personal Law repugnant and outdated. It may also be the reaction of a number of theologians who feel that the Personal Law is more a product of judicial interference by the Privy Council and piecemeal legislative measures.

***THE DEMAND FOR a common civil code has arisen not so much out of concern for the plight of Muslim women as much as the determination of a resurgent Hindu nationalism to impose its will on minorities.***

Expounding on the scope for reform in Muslim Personal Law, especially on the point of maintenance, Salman Khurshid in *Maulvis, Maintenance and Ministers - II (The Hindustan Times*, December 5, 1985) argues that though Islamic law makes the practice of *zakat* (charity) compulsory, it does not prohibit the payment of income tax to the State. Similarly, whatever rules the Shariat may contain with regard to marriage, it does not prohibit the payment of maintenance to a divorced wife. The Shariat provides for change.

Unfortunately, much of the popular press, notably newspapers like *The Daily*, has tried to portray the reaction to the judgment as an anti-Constitutional movement. Bal Thakeray summarises this position by drawing a parallel with what the Sikhs sought to do in the Golden Temple. While one can dismiss Thakeray as a communalist, it is not as easy to dismiss the views of a former Supreme Court judge, Justice V Krishna Iyer who, at a meeting of the Bharatiya Vichara Kendra, announced that "a common civil code is now a command of the Constitution binding on the nation. To oppose it is to act contra-Constitutionally."

In this light, to say that the secular State has not enacted a common civil code because of a minority vote bank, seems trite. On all the issues where a choice has to be made between the interests of Hindus and Muslims – say Urdu as an official language in Uttar Pradesh – the secular polity has shown no hesitation in overriding Muslim sentiments. In the most personal and private aspects, where Hindus and other communities do not necessarily have an interest which is materially prejudiced, the secular polity has shown no determination to intervene, until now. The issue of Article 44 – the need to frame a common civil code – has arisen not out of concern for the plight of Muslim women as much as the determination of a resurgent Hindu nationalism to impose its will on minorities. This attitude has acquired a new respectability after the Punjab embroilment, and its purpose is to strengthen the nation by obliterating all contrary identities and imposing uniformity as the new strength of India.

The problem is that many liberal Hindus, who realise the folly of pursuing policies which seek to impose uniformity regardless of the conse-

quences, are reluctant to enter the fray on behalf of the Muslims because of the alleged obscurantism of the Muslim Personal Law and its alleged immutability. In fact, most discussions on the subject contain references to unjust atrocities committed on women as if this were an integral part of Islamic religion and practice. Salman Khurshid in *Maulvis, Maintenance and Ministers - I* (*The Hindustan Times*, December 4, 1985) counters this common notion: "Firstly, no sociologically sound evidence has been made available to show that any aspect of Islamic law is causing a serious social aberration or being used in a manner reprehensible to the conscience of a rational and liberal person. Indeed, if at all, there is ample evidence that the usual aspects of Islamic law, whose validity and purpose can only be understood in the historical context, are rapidly falling into disuse. Secondly, one might well ask why a uniform civil code is considered imperative for national unity or a functioning democracy?" Continuing the argument, Syed Shahabuddin argues that the State must first implement principles which touch common questions and purposes such as education, health, nutrition and livelihood, rather than take up emotional and divisive issues.

With many of the Constitution's Directive Principles still unimplemented, it seems strange that the press and public attention should focus only on Article 44.

BUT as the implementation of Article 44 has been made out to be the need of the hour, let us examine the arguments against Muslim Personal Law, and for a uniform civil code. Since Arun Shourie, in his series on the Shariat in *The Illustrated Weekly* covers these arguments comprehensively, a detailed discussion of his propositions would be useful.

To begin with, Shourie refers to the reasons for Hindu anxiety about the Muslims' insistence on retaining their Personal Law. According to him, there is a feeling amongst Hindus that Muslims are being pandered to, with the country allowing them 'special privileges'. It is proof positive to them that Muslims owe primary loyalty to Islam rather than to the country. And it is proof conclusive that behind the defence of the Shariat is the design to retain polygamy and behind that, is a conspiracy to outstrip the Hindus by producing more children. . . Let us ignore the first two points, since anyone who is acquainted with the actual social and economic condition of the Muslims and is aware of the statistics, will immediately dismiss any proposition that they are being unduly pampered. Instead, let us look at the bogey of polygamy. According to the latest statistics (1981), the Muslims are much less polygamous than the caste Hindus, the Jains, and the tribals. Apart from this, there are few who are so naive as to believe that legislation automatically abolishes a social practice which many may consider outdated and discriminatory. In fact, the history of our legislation (and acts, such as the Anti-Dowry Act, typify this) demonstrates in no uncertain terms, the futility of expecting change simply through legislation and not through activating social reform.

***THERE IS NO EVIDENCE to suggest that any aspect of Islamic law is causing a serious social aberration. So why is it so urgent to impose a common civil code? Surely, there are other, more serious problems that need to be solved?***

But Shourie implicitly believes that Muslim Personal Law is not merely an anachronism which has persisted in our modern 'secular' society by political accident, but has the potential for causing grave social disruption. He quotes the tonsuring of Sulekha Bivi as an example of what religion and 'fundamentalism' can do.

Now, undoubtedly, the incident is deeply disturbing and a cause for concern. That this concern, however, is not just the monopoly of the liberal English language media is easily demonstrated by the punishments meted out by the Jamat to the people responsible for harming Sulekha Bivi. This is never mentioned. The point is that sadists, thugs and bigots exist in every community and it is a standard excuse for such people to try and legitimise their actions with reference to religion or ideology. To argue, as Shourie seems to do, that these thugs were inspired to carry out their actions by divine injunction, calls not merely for removing the Personal Law, it also implies a call for the removal of all religion.

But Shourie persists in his argument. Now in his element, the master of selective quotation refers to a passage in the *Koran* which describes jihad as the noblest of professions by restating Allah's injunction: "Slay the infidels and recourse the prophet's words, war is permanently established till the day of judgment." From such examples, Shourie concludes that the very fact of separate personal laws will lead to 'bitterness, recrimination, riots and murder'.

Taken to its logical conclusion, Shourie's argument assumes that there cannot exist such a creature as a reformer. There would only exist amongst Muslims, fundamentalists (who adhere to an entirely untenable set of propositions) and those who urge a common civil code. Yet, such an assessment is hardly merited by the fact that few reputable Muslim intellectuals and political leaders support the implementation of Article 44. There are many Muslims – the kind you could invite home to dinner without harbouring the least suspicion that in a fit of religious zeal they will carry out a jihad – such as Kamilla Tyabjee, Dr Tahir Mahmood, and Iqbal Masud, who prefer to see a reform of the Personal Law rather than

the enactment of a civil code. How does Shourie explain this? Though Shourie admits that the *Koran* has acquired many false accretions through the ages, his thesis is that these accretions somehow detract from the legitimacy of the message. It is here that alarm bells must ring. It is one thing to argue that a particular practice, within the context of a tradition of change and interpretation, is not justified by any clear religious or moral sanction. It is quite another to seek to discredit whole tracts of religious scholarship and commentary. The fact is that no religion has remained pristine, divinely ordained: all religious texts get changed, distorted, receive interpolations and acquire accretions over the years. And if it is Shourie's case that this has occurred in Islam, it seems, from the outset, that he is stating the obvious. But the danger, and it is a danger which is very ominous, is that by cloaking the argument with a Constitutional flavour, namely Article 44, the author may be seeking to attack a fundamental right entrenched in the basic structure of the Constitution – minority rights and religious freedom.

If Shourie's negative argument that the retention of Muslim Personal Law will lead to political unrest and fundamentalism is without foundation, then let us examine the positive argument for a common civil code. Shourie suggests that the enactment of a common civil code will bring about national integration: the corollary to the reasoning that the retention of personal laws amounts to a 'badge of separateness' which encourages others to assert their separateness, too.

Justice S A Masud, former Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, disagrees. In an interview with *The Telegraph* he says: "When the government is giving importance to rituals and religious laws, when one finds religion playing such an important role in politics, especially electoral politics, then what is the use of opting for a common civil code? It will only lead to further animosity and misunderstanding."

Kamilla Tyabjee, in a letter to the *Indian Express*, points out that in several societies which are far more homogenous than ours, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, laws of succession, marriage and divorce differ markedly, according to territory.

The international trend, in fact, with the notable exception of the Soviet Union, is to move away from centralisation and defining cultural and social traditions on some Procrustean bed of secularism and to move towards encouraging regional and linguistic diversity. Diversity and separateness, need not be a sign of weakness; it can be one of strength. In fact, the attempt to foist a new religion of secularism based on these elite values, no matter how liberal, is bound to fail and, indeed, cause social disruption if it has no basis in society.

***FEW SENSIBLE PEOPLE would dispute that there is a need to re-examine Muslim Personal Law and that there is ample scope for reform. But it is wrong to believe that a common civil code is the only answer.***

**WHAT IS THE SUM** of all this? Where does it take us? For those Muslims who are anxious that the Personal Law should be reformed, articles like Arun Shourie's and Shekhar Gupta's indubitably cast an adverse influence on the reformist tendencies. There is an air of wish-fulfilment in most of the prophecies by various commentators, the exaggeration of violence or impending violence, the attempt to stress the disloyalty of the Muslims to the Constitution, their barbarism. And, as if to add more fuel to the fire, there are gratuitous and insulting references to the *Koran*. Shourie's articles are replete with the symbols and motifs of Islamic oppression of burkha-clad women, of medieval punishment, of references to jihad, to Aurangzeb. All this can only serve to widen the rift between the Muslims and the rest, and so strengthen the hands of the Muslim communalists. I venture the opinion that there is a connection between the kind of press coverage and the growing solidarity, militancy and truculence of the Muslim masses. Mr Gupta's article is designed only to buffet the complacencies of the Hindu middle class. Shourie's goes one step further. His articles positively pander and satiate the worst Hindu prejudices.

The danger with the instant judgments of the media is that they can only, on the one hand, increase a minority's feelings of alienation and, on the other, encourage the majority community's self-righteousness. Few sensible people would dispute that there is a need to re-examine the Personal Law, and that there is ample scope for social reform. But this is not the same as insisting that there is no solution other than a uniform civil code. Nor is it fair to caricature all those who advise caution when handling minority sentiments as fundamentalists. To be effective, reform must be a gradual process. Rushing to the sledge-hammer of the legislature is bound to prove counter-productive.

In a country as large and diverse as India, it makes no sense to ram the majority's conception of right and wrong down the throats of every minority. This can only be a prescription for social tension. In such a situation, the media's role is crucial. It has an obligation to perceive the real issues and to understand the background before rushing into print. Simplifying the saga into a newsprint Western, with good guys (the so-called secularists) and baddies (the alleged fundamentalists) helps nobody. It's not just bad journalism. It can be potentially disastrous. ♦

# THE JEWEL AND THE CROWN

## By Rohit Desai

***The jewels are priceless. They lie in six, sealed chests waiting for somebody to claim them. But who really owns them? According to Karan Singh, the former Maharajah of Kashmir, they belong to him and his family. The government disagrees. A special report on the saga of the Kashmir crown jewels.***

THE VALLEY OF KASHMIR draws tourists the way a honey-crammed beehive attracts bears. However, it is more than likely that the tourists and their magnificent Nikons would turn away from the lakes, green hills and snowy slopes if they were allowed into a dark, cool chamber in Srinagar called the *toshakhana.* The word means 'treasury', and there, in six large, sealed chests, lies the treasure of the rulers of Kashmir, the priceless legacy of the kingdom which, in the plump person of Hari Singh, decided to merge with the Indian Union of States in 1947. Collected over two centuries by the Dogras, who took care to remain on the right side of whoever had the upper hand in India, the treasure was brought from the Jammu treasury in late 1951 and, after 30 years of repose, 'discovered' in 1983. Ever since, even as awe-inspiring photographs of the hoard began appearing in magazines here and abroad, the state government and the son of Hari Singh have been jousting, legally speaking, for the spoils. And thereby, as the bard sang, hangs a tale.

The hero of the story is the slim, good-looking aristocrat who was the Congress party's show-piece Education Minister in the days when Emergency was not a dirty word: Karan Singh. Currently a leading figure in the fitfully resurgent Hindu movement, Karan Singh was in his nervous 20s when Shriman Indar Mahandar Rajrajeshwar Maharajadhiraj Shri Harisinghji Jammu & Kashmir Naresh gave up his kingdom to free India on October 27, 1947. Today, his son is fighting tooth and nail for the fabulous *jaidad* and has been reported as saying that he is not willing to

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give up the bejewelled mementoes of his illustrious ancestors to the state government, or for that matter, any government.

A WORD about those illustrious ancestors first. The story begins over a century ago, when the famous Ranjit Singh of the Punjab, in a *sanad* – akin to a certificate in our more prosaic times – officially recognised the sovereignty of Karan Singh's ancestor Gulab Singh, overlord of Jammu & Kashmir, and general in Ranjit Singh's army, over the Kashmir province. In his letter to the Union Home Ministry in 1983, in which he demanded to be recognised as the owner of the *toshakhana* wealth, Karan Singh quoted a section of the *sanad*. According to Ranjit Singh, Gulab Singh and his ancestors "spared no pains to render their services to me promptly and submissively and to give me satisfaction. They have always been found faithful to me and loyal to the state."

When Ranjit Singh's star faded, Gulab Singh took care to be equally submissive to the British. He sold the state of Jammu and Kashmir to them – the protection racket was called the Treaty of Amritsar, 1846 – for the princely sum of Rs 75 lakh.

Ranbir Singh followed Gulab Singh to the throne in 1856 and, in his turn, was succeeded by Pratap Singh in 1885. Hari Singh, the last of the Dogra rulers, came to power in 1925. The dynasty held sway over the picturesque valleys and hills of India's nothernmost province for over 100 years, and in that time accumulated what blasé historians have rather limply called 'vast wealth'. Staying on the right side of whatever power that was, makes for bulging coffers and, by the time Independence came around, Hari Singh was rolling in wealth and his collection of trinkets rivalled that of the curmudgeonly Nizam in Hyderabad.

Such casual opulence could not be long sustained in Gandhi-inspired India, unfortunately, and, after a large portion of his land and some palaces were taken away from him,

**THE VALUES ASCRIBED to the jewels in Amin Chand's valuation are laughably low. For instance, a pearl *kantha* is said to be worth Rs 2,000. The total comes to only Rs 14 lakh. Today, the hoard is worth 10,000 times that amount.**

Hari Singh was left with a comparatively slender privy purse – he started receiving the stipend from November 17, 1951 – of Rs 10 lakh, tax free.

BUT, OF COURSE, the jewels were there, snug in their six chests, and for a while, everybody appeared to have forgotton about them. *Yuvraj* Karan Singh came to terms with democratic India and became one of the more cultured leading lights of Mrs Gandhi's Cabinets, had his image slightly tarnished during the Emergency when he was Family Planning Minister while the excesses were at their height, and finally, found himself a new persona as a Hindu ready to lead his fellow Hindus out of the stagnant pool of sterile faith etc. He did not claim the *toshakhana* wealth, either because he didn't need it or because flaunting it would not have been quite the done thing in democratic India.

Karan Singh kept his cool all through the time that the government of Jammu & Kashmir licked its chops over the 'find' and only when rumours spread that the government was planning to auction off the jewels did he stir himself. His campaign for the Dogra diamonds began with a copious petition to the Union Home Ministry, following a shorter one to the Prime Minister herself, in late 1983. His basic contention was that whereas the various 'immovable properties' handed over by his father to the State were state property, the jewels were personal property handed down through generations – 'heirlooms' was the technical term – and rightfully belonged to Hari Singh's legal heir, Karan Singh.

But the most riveting part of his petition was not the excerpt from Ranjit Singh's congratulatory *sanad*, nor the businesslike provisions of the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, but a simple though exhaustive list of 563 articles from the chests, giving each one's weight – they were weighed in silver rupee coins, annas and paise – and value, in prices that are laughably low as they are the values of a century ago. Examples: pearl *kantha*: Rs 2,000; diamond *serpech*: Rs 16,000; gold *bazuband*: Rs 125; pearl-set velvet coat: Rs 1,500; emerald saddle articles: Rs 18,000; diamond dust: Rs 40; Russian sovereign: Rs 353.50.

And so on and so forth, endlessly and pricelessly. The cheapest items in the roster of riches are two humble copper medals valued at the throwaway price of Rs 2 each; the most expensive item is a pearl and diamond *kantha* – very heavy, because its weight is equivalent to that of 40 silver rupees and seven silver annas – worth, even in those days, Rs 1.02 lakh. In between are strewn rivers of pearls, platinum chains, handfuls of diamonds and even a gold *tooti* (water tap). The entire lot was valued, wooden boxes and iron trunks and all, at Rs 13,91,761.51 – a few rupees short of Rs 14 lakh – by Wazir Amin Chand, Controller, Tawaza, Jammu & Srinagar. Current estimates of the worth of the hoard are 10,000 times that amount.

THE *YUVRAJ* must have fond memories of the time when he romped around the palace in bejewelled *baba*-suits, but the fact remains that, for the moment at least, fond memories are all he has to sustain him in his courtly skirmish. The mandarins in the state government, however, are not only denying that he has the right to the treasure, but are also refusing to let him have a

look at it. Therefore, for the last one-and-a-half years, Karan Singh's efforts have been directed mostly at compelling the authorities to allow him to view the legacy for himself.

Through most of 1984, the Home Ministry considered Karan Singh's December 1983 petition. Meanwhile, he approached the Jammu & Kashmir High Court, asking it to ensure that the state government did not sell off the jewels and, on a court order, the boxes were sealed on July 24, 1984. But the Home Ministry's reply was a blow to his hopes; they rejected his claim because:

- Hari Singh had not included the jewels in his list of private property submitted to the then Union Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, in June 1949.
- Hari Singh had not even applied for exemption from wealth tax in 1958, when the government had said that former princes could claim such exemption for heirloom jewellery; 26 former rulers had seen fit to do so.
- Karan Singh himself, in his autobiography *Heir Apparent*, was quoted as saying: "Again, unlike most rulers, my father made a clear distinction between his private property, including jewellery, and state property. He left family jewellery, shawls, carpets and regalia worth crores with the state *toshakhana* (treasury) which most others would have appropriated without turning a hair."

On the face of it, there would seem to be no answer to such categorical arguments, but Karan Singh was not prepared to take things lying down, considering the crores that were at stake, and shot off a reply the next month, refuting each of the points:

- The heirlooms were not listed by Hari Singh, but this did not imply that they were not part of his private property.
- If Hari Singh did not claim wealth tax exemption, that was his business and, anyway, the rulers filed the lists only to claim such exemption and not to get the government to recognise that the heirlooms were theirs and theirs alone.

**SOME TIME LATER THIS month, Karan Singh's son will be among those peering into the boxes and handling the glitter and the gold. If the family is lucky, then it will regain possession of the priceless jewels that Hari Singh gave away.**

- The paragraph from the autobiography only means that Hari Singh trusted the state enough to keep his private property in its vaults and not that he had gifted it away.

**BUT KARAN SINGH** had lost the first round and he seems to have known this. For, two months later, he came out of his corner again, this time with a partially successful ploy. Twenty-seven years after the government first asked former ruling families to request exemption under the Wealth Tax Act of 1957 for their family heirlooms, Karan Singh's lawyers filed a petition to that effect with the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) on January 7, 1985. Side by side, Karan Singh filed wealth tax returns for three years, from 1978 to 1981, with the Jammu income tax department, showing the total value of his estate as Rs 10 lakh and adding, crucially, that he had not been able to have the estate correctly valued because, simply speaking, he had not been able to get a look at it.

Lady Luck smiled, and the CBDT implicitly acknowledged his claim to the jewellery by accepting and assessing his claim. The *toshakhana* hoard was assessed arbitrarily and provisionally at Rs 22 lakh, and the claim to exemption from wealth tax was rejected for the time being. More to the point, the CBDT wrote him a letter in February 1985 and a reminder in June, asking him to arrange for an inspection and informing him that the CBDT representative was likely to be accompanied by such bigwigs as the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Director of the National Museum. This was the first real break that Karan Singh had had since he started on his lengthy legal odyssey.

But there were still some obstacles to overcome, in the shape of the Jammu & Kashmir High Court's verdict of July 20, 1985, that there was no need for an inspection. The court apparently heeded the state government's argument that allowing the inspection would be tantamount to recognising that the jewels belonged to Karan Singh. Not deterred, the *yuvraj* strapped on his gloves once again and fired off another petition to the Supreme Court. The petition ran into about 400 pages and gave a detailed history of his claim as well as the case.

This time around, the son broke through the clouds. Justices V D Tulzapurkar and R S Pathak explained that there were basically two issues at stake: whether Karan Singh was the owner of the jewellery in question, and whether it was exempt from wealth tax. To clarify both issues, inspection was necessary. The assessment orders now turned out to be the trump card, as they 'clearly show that the wealth tax authorities and the CBDT, Revenue Department, Ministry of Finance, Government of India are treating the estate lying in the Srinagar *toshakhana* as property belonging to the appellant's family'. Thus, the boxes were directed to be opened for inspection in the presence of representatives from both sides.

A not-so-lowly wealth tax form had won the day. Some time later this month, Karan Singh's son will be among those peering into the boxes and handling the glitter and the gold. Of course, Karan Singh is a long way away from finally getting the jewels – there is, after all, a wise and cynical old adage about possession being nine-tenths of the law – but he's won one round of what promises to be a long, tiring encounter. ♦

# PROTECTING INDIA'S ENVIRONMENT

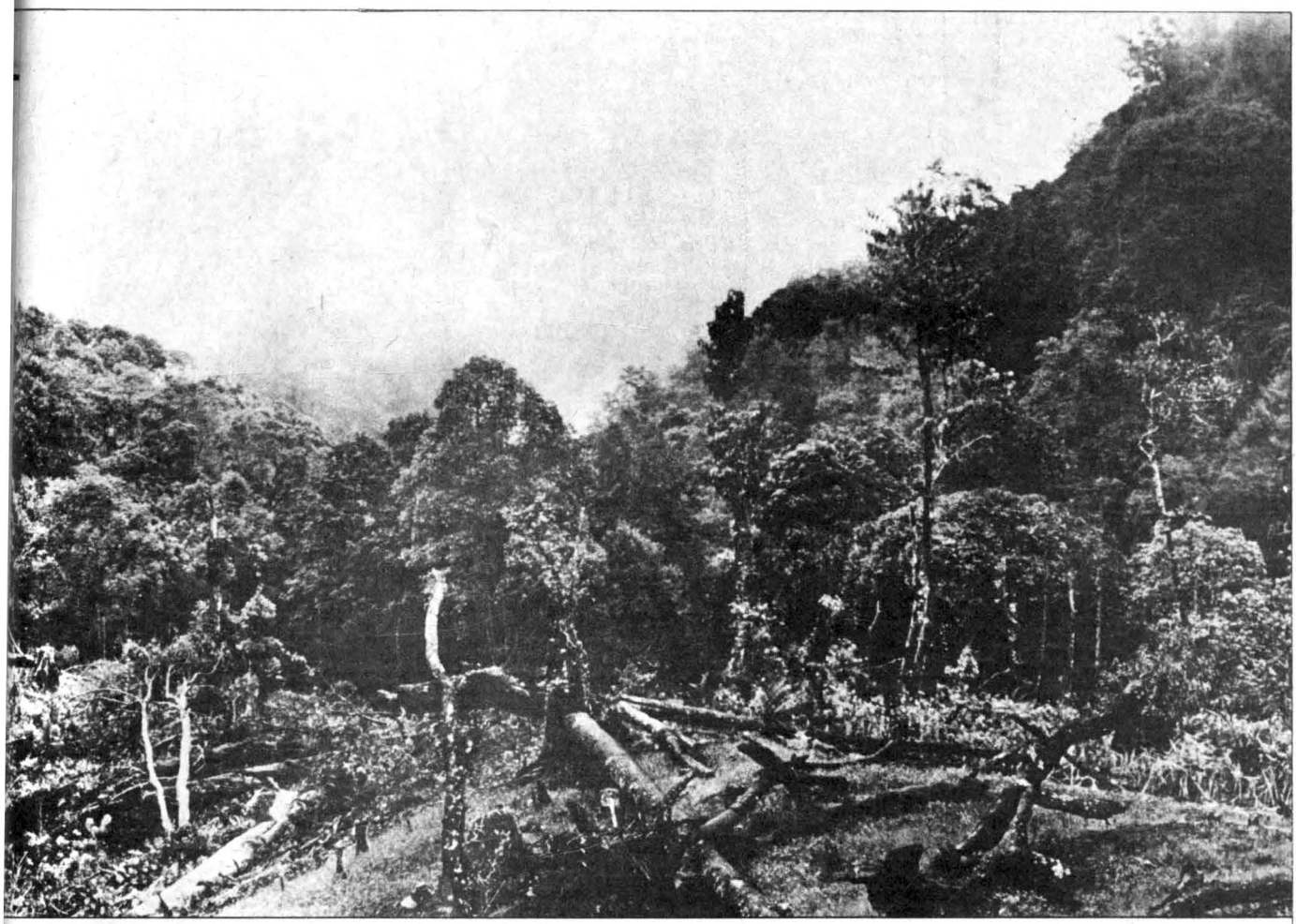
***Environmentalists are increasingly criticising the pattern of development in India, since many of the government's development projects – like the Green Revolution and large dams – have boomeranged on the environment.***

***By Hutokshi Doctor***

**EVERYBODY'S** talking about the environment these days. Especially after Bhopal. But the reactions to our environmental problems have been somewhat varied. In Bhopal itself, the Chief Minister, Motilal Vora, and his government decided it was high time the atmosphere of Bhopal was purified. So, one day in January, the people of Bhopal took a half-holiday, and the state government, Swami Swaroopchand Saraswati of Dwarka and 500 other pundits, organised a *yagna*. Eight hundred kilograms of *ghee*, 30 quintals of rice, 15 quintals of sesame seeds, 375 kilograms of sugar, plus a number of herbs, were burnt in what they claimed was a 'scientific' *yagna* which could even destroy radioactivity. And conch shells were blown, morning and evening, for ten days thereafter, to keep the spirits of the dead at bay.

Then there are all the proclamations of doomsday theories: In ten years, 'gut-wrenching' famines will sweep the country; in 50 years, the desert of Rajasthan will extend all the way across the country to Burma. And the high-profile environmentalist, Dr Rashmi Mayur, prophesies that if the current rate of fossil fuel use and deforestation continues, the carbon dioxide component of the atmosphere will double by the middle of the next century, causing irreversible changes in climate. Temperatures will shoot up, ice-caps will melt, ocean levels will rise, coastal areas will be flooded and evaporation will increase, causing floods in some areas, desertification in others.

At another level, environmental problems are capturing the imagination of literary figures. A Jnanpith award-winner published a story about a group of students who stare goggle-eyed at a stuffed lion-tailed macaque from Silent Valley. The valley, of course, is long since destroyed by a hydel power plant and this, the last of the extinct macaques, mistook an electricity pole for a tree, jumped onto it and so, significantly, electrocuted itself.



But, stripped of all the dramatisation, the facts, in themselves, are startling.

- Satellite data has revealed that India is losing 1.3 million hectares of forests every year (eight times more than the official figure released by the forestry department). Even at the current rate of afforestation, 0.4 million hectares annually, the country is losing over one million hectares of forests. The forest cover is down to 14 per cent of the total land mass (the government's figure is 23 per cent) and the targeted forest cover is 33 per cent.
- The reduction in forest cover has caused climatic changes which have, in turn, led to famine and drought in eight states over the past two years. Unprecedented areas are now subject to drought. For example, Kerala, which usually receives an annual 3,200 millimetres of rainfall but where the forest cover has been reduced to just 13 per cent of the state's area, lost approximately Rs 1,000 crore in 1982-83, as crops failed and industries closed down.
- A hundred million hectares, one-third of India's land mass, are classified as wastelands – areas seriously affected by salinity, wind and water erosion. Eight thousand hectares are lost to ravines every year.
- As vegetation is destroyed and the run-off increases, one-tenth of the annual rainfall, or 160 billion hectare metres of water, flow, unharnessed, into the sea every year.
- Seventy per cent of our water resources are polluted, principally as a result of the effluents from mines and industries and municipal wastes, which are dumped into them.
- Atmospheric pollution in cities is worsening. Bombay emits 1,500 tons of pollutants every day, and Calcutta 1,300 tons. Acid rain (emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxide, which are transformed into nitric and sulphuric acids and are washed down by rain), which has destroyed forests and aquatic ecosystems across Europe and America, is becoming a serious threat in India, too. Total sulphur dioxide emissions from industries, power plants and automobiles, increased by 21 per cent between 1966 and 1979, double the rate of increase of sulphur dioxide emissions in USA in the same period.

**THE LAST TEN** years have seen the rise of several environmental movements and activists. "Environmental protection *per se* is of least concern to most of these groups," writes Anil Agarwal, one of the editors of the comprehensive *The State Of India's Environment 1984-85*, published by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). "Their main concern is about the use of the environment: how should the environment be used and who should benefit from it."

The thrust of the environmentalists' argument is on sustainability – on development that is based on a sustainable use of natural resources. The conflict in India, according to Agarwal, is the conflict over the use of natural resources. On one side is

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUNJOY MONGA

the biomass-based subsistence economy, and on the other, the cash economy, 50 per cent of which is dependent on the natural environment – in terms of industries like sugar, paper, soap, cotton textiles, jute, tobacco, etc.

The conflict is, ultimately, between 'development' and the environment, for in stacking up our advantages on the side of development, we are depleting our environment. Environmentalists maintain that many of our development projects have boomeranged on the environment. And, illustrating this trend in the development of agriculture, irrigation and afforestation, they have questioned conventional wisdom.

For one, they have reversed the theory that it is the pressure of population that has caused a misuse of the environment. They argue, instead, that the misuse of environmental resources actually causes poverty, which, in turn, increases population. The argument is based on a survey of the carrying capacity of India's land, conducted by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in 1983. The survey revealed that, despite a low level of inputs – low-yielding varieties of seeds, no fertilisers or pest and weed controls, manual labour and fragmented holdings – India's land could have supported three-and-a-half times India's population in 1975. Even at the current levels of population increase, with an estimated 1036.7 million people in the year 2000, India will be capable of supporting 2,621 million people, two-and-a-half times the projected population. This is possible, the FAO claimed, only if irrigation targets are met, and the soil is well-managed.

"If India's people were to go hungry," the CSE's report notes, "it would not have anything to do with their number but with the callous mismanagement of the country's natural resources. Probably, more than family planning programmes, India needs national 'ecodevelopment' programmes."

In fact, environmentalists are increasingly questioning the benefits of

**India could support a population two-and-a-half times greater than the projected 1036 million in the year 2000, if its soil is well-managed and irrigation targets are met.**

the Green Revolution and the cost-benefit ratios of big dams and large surface irrigation schemes. Between 1976-77 and 1982-83, irrigated area increased at the rate of 5.6 per cent per annum, the number of diesel- and pump-sets by eight per cent, consumption of power for agriculture by 12 per cent, area under high-yielding varieties by seven per cent and fertiliser consumption by 11 per cent. Despite this phenomenal rate of increase in agricultural inputs, agricultural production increased by only 2.3 per cent per annum.

The shortfall in agricultural production is due to soil degradation – erosion, soil loss, salinisation, alkalinity, waterlogging and a depletion of soil nutrients. The last is a major criticism of the Green Revolution since the increased use of high-yielding varieties of seeds, without a corresponding increase in the use of micronutrients, except on land belonging to rich farmers, is causing a major drain of soil nutrients. Ludhiana district in Punjab, the leader in yields of many crops, is also, not surprisingly, the district that records the highest deficiency in micronutrients.

**FOURTEEN PER CENT** of India's expenditure in the course of the Five-Year Plans, or Rs 10,560 crore, has gone towards the construction of 1,550 dams, according to Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard in *The Social & Environmental Effects Of Large Dams.* Nothing illustrates better the Indian belief that 'smoking chimneys are a sign of progress' and that dams, factories and power plants are the 'temples' of today. In fact, the builders of these 'temples' sometimes match the rhetoric of a section of the environmentalists. Rock Poulin, advisor to the Kerala State Electricity Board's (KSEB) Silent Valley hydel project, is quoted in Darryl D'Monte's *Temples Or Tombs?* as saying: "Each valley is like a person. Idukki dam fits into the contours of its valley like someone curls up in the most comfortable position to sleep. If you look at a river and see that some of its water goes to the sea, it's like a strong man who's bleeding; if you have the engineering tools to prevent that loss of blood, do you talk to him about the loss of trees?"

And yet, can you fail to take into account the fact that big river valley projects have, between 1951 and 1976, inundated half a million hectares of forest land, roughly one-tenth the area that benefited from irrigation?

Referring to the cost-benefit ratio of such projects, D R Bhumbla, former Agriculture Commissioner and Vice-Chancellor of Haryana Agriculture University, notes: "It is evident that the benefits (of major and medium irrigation works) in arid areas, though spectacular for the first 10-20 years, gradually get reduced and a considerable portion of the land deteriorates because of waterlogging and salinity. In humid areas, the benefits are doubtful from the beginning and, in many cases, negative. (These) programmes would not only lead to disastrous consequences in degradation of soil and environment, but would also result in reduced agricultural production." In 1983, the Planning Commission, too, recommended better management of existing irrigation potential rather than a concentration on new projects.

In many cases, siltation has filled up the reservoirs, reducing the life of dams, reducing their capacity and cutting down the generation of hydel

power. As the reservoirs fill up, more water has to be discharged from the dams, causing, at times, more flooding.

Nevertheless, the construction of these projects proceeds unhindered. The Nagarjunasagar in Andhra Pradesh and the Kosi in Bihar have been under construction for 15-20 years, with cost overruns exceeding 500 per cent. The mammoth Narmada Basin Development Programme is still to be cleared by the Department of Environment, but if it is, it will submerge 75 lakh hectares, including 85,000 hectares of forest. The estimated cost is Rs 4,000 crore and, ironically, the afforestation grant in the Project Report is just Rs 60 lakh, enough to afforest 3,000 hectares.

**THE SIXTH PLAN** allocated Rs 692.49 crore for afforestation – more than the Rs 483.22 crore for the 30 years preceding the Sixth Plan. According to the government's estimates, 1,000 crore seedlings have been distributed under the social forestry scheme since 1980. An additional $ 600 million project is being negotiated with the World Bank at present. This has been, apparently, 'spectacular progress'. But T L Sankar, former Member-Secretary of the Planning Commission's Working Group on Energy Policy, points out a relevant question: "The forest departments never seem to ask: Wood production for whom or for what?"

The Worldwatch Institute Report on the *State Of The World 1985* claims that over two-thirds of the 3.2 million hectares planted between 1951 and 1980 were industrial plantations, while only 12 per cent of the increased area under forest cover actually provided fuelwood, although there is an acute fuelwood shortage. The social forestry scheme was originally conceived with three components – farm forestry for farmers on their own lands, woodlots planted by the forest departments for village communities and woodlots planted by the communities themselves. But big farmers are clearly emerging as the primary beneficiaries of the subsidies

**The social forestry scheme has, apparently, achieved spectacular progress. But the benefits of the scheme go to industrialists and rich farmers, while the fuel and fodder needs of the poor are still not met.**

offered by the government under the social forestry programme. With the prices of wood shooting up due to the demand from wood-based industries, big farmers are replacing other crops with wood plantations which, as a cash crop, yield higher revenues. Thus, the purpose of the social forestry scheme – which was to meet the fuel and fodder needs of the poor – has been defeated.

Worse, with an eye on short-term yields, the forest departments are mainly encouraging the planting of eucalyptus, fast-growing trees (five to seven years) which are not palatable to animals and, therefore, though providing no fodder at all, are easier to supervise and protect. But a much more serious drawback of eucalyptus is that, with concerted cultivation, it drains the soil of nutrients and depletes underground water resources faster than any other tree.

For the landless, not only does the government's short-sighted policy constitute a loss of fuel and fodder, but also, increases unemployment. A study in the Kolar district revealed that, for each hectare of land shifted from food crops to eucalyptus, there is a loss of 250 man-days per year.

The nature of development in irrigation/dams, agriculture and afforestation, highlights the controversy that now centres around environment/development. But environmentalists are quick to point out that what they are pressing for is not a brake on economic development – simply sustainable development. The CSE's *Statement Of Shared Concern (1982)* states: "The experience gained in the last three decades has convincingly shown that there can be no rational and equitable economic development without environmental conservation. . . In a country like India, with a high population density and high level of poverty, virtually every ecological niche is occupied by some occupational or cultural human group for its sustenance. Each time an ecological niche is degraded, or its resources appropriated by the more powerful in society, the deprived, weaker sections become further impoverished."

**THE STRESS**, then, is not just on preserving tigers and lion-tailed macaques, a common enough misconception, but on the impact of environmental destruction upon the lives of people. However fast India's industrialisation might progress, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the rural areas still have a biomass-based subsistence economy, with a large majority of the rural population still depending on the natural environment for food, fuel, fodder and building material.

The government's policy of controlling the forests, and the proposed Forest Bill – which takes the reservation of forests a step further by claiming that the 'free supply of forest produce to the rural population and their rights and privileges have brought destruction to the forests and so it is necessary to reverse the process' – have deprived these people, especially tribals, of their resources. As a result of the fuelwood shortage, the rural population uses cattle dung as fuel, not fertiliser. This reduces the productivity of land and, together with the felling of trees, means that croplands are extended to grazing and marginal lands. So, there is a fodder shortage, and India's large cattle population moves into the forests, preventing their regeneration. There is certainly a pattern to the destruction of the environment.

Nearly six per cent of India's population still consists of pastoral nomads. With the neglect and destruction of grazing lands, most of these graziers have been forced to work as landless labourers or migrate to the cities. In fact, the fuelwood and fodder crises have become so severe that, in certain areas of North India, landless labourers are paid in terms of crop wastes, not wages. Women are known to spend as much as ten hours a day gathering twigs, small branches and even weeds. With the large-scale male migration, especially in the Himalayan belt, women, left to fend for themselves, have taken to headloading – that is, scrounging around for wood, often in reserved forests, and selling it in the cities. Almost 2.3 million people have reportedly taken up this occupation, to the exasperation of forest officials.

The destruction of the environment has also led to the decline of handicrafts and traditional occupations. Potters have no fuel to bake their pots; in Tamil Nadu, fishermen have no wood to build new catamarans; in Karnataka, wheels for bullock-carts are hard to come by, since the price of timber has increased two-and-a-half times faster than the price of tyres in the '70s; in Maharashtra, 70,000 Adivasis, engaged in the crafting of bamboo mats and baskets, have a bamboo quota fixed by the government (150 bamboo reeds per month at Rs 175), a quota that fluctuates at the bureaucrats' whims. And in the Garhwal hills, the shortage of ash wood led the government to stop supplying wood to the farmers for their ploughs, while diverting the supply to sports goods manufacturers. That was what sparked off the now-famous Chipko movement.

Hardest hit, perhaps, have been the people displaced by dams and reservoirs. The list is long: the KSEB's Munnar dam will displace 5,000 families and leave 8,000 plantation workers jobless. The Tehri dam will submerge the town of Tehri and 23 surrounding villages, affecting, totally, 35,000 people. The Koel-Karo project will affect one lakh people in 100 villages. And the Bhopalpatnam-Inchampalli dams over the Indravati and Godavari rivers will together displace 70,000 people, including 40,000 Madia Gonds whose only occupation is picking and selling *tendu* leaves to *bidi* manufacturers. The government plans to shift the Gonds to a Marathi-speaking district, away from the forests, which control every aspect of their life-style. Baba Amte, who has launched the Manav Bachao, Jungle Bachao campaign, calls this 'cultural ethnocide'.

**Many people prefer to call urban migrants economic refugees from the countryside. But they are really ecological refugees, displaced by dams, by deforestation, by destruction of grazing lands, by floods and drought.**

In places where the affected people have not launched anti-dam campaigns and organised themselves, rehabilitation extends only to inadequate cash compensations for land and houses. Often, this leaves out the landless farmers and those engaged in non-agricultural occupations, like the 700 fishermen near Broach, who will be unemployed after the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam. In the case of the Pong dam, on the Beas in Himachal Pradesh, the 30,000 families to be resettled were whittled down to 16,000, each of them being promised 25-30 acres each, at concessional rates, in the Rajasthan Canal command area. After a series of tussles over the rate of compensation and the accompanying legalese, only 1,200 families were actually resettled. When they did start trickling into Ghadsane, in Rajasthan, they were confronted with a desert without electricity or water supply. There was no school, no public transport, no irrigation. And the nearest *chakki* was 38 kilometres away.

For all of these people, immigration to urban areas is often the only solution. For all these people, as Agarwal writes, "environmental destruction is not an issue related to the quality of life but a question of survival. Many people prefer to call the urban migrants economic refugees from the countryside. But to my mind, many of them are really ecological refugees, displaced by dams, by mines, by deforestation, by destruction of grazing lands, by floods, by droughts, by urban expansion and what not.

"We have today, the world's fourth largest urban population. .if the process of urbanisation continues to create the same kind of demands on our rural environment, it will only accelerate the destruction of the rural environment and in turn make the urban environment impossible to manage. Only a holistic approach to our problems and dedicated political will to solve them, will work."

**POLITICAL WILL** has, of course, been manifested typically – more committees and more allocations of funds. In 1980, the Department of Environment (DOEn) was set up and 18 states followed suit. The DOEn, which saw a succession of Secretaries come and go, proceeded to set up the Environmental Information System (ENVIS) with a national network of computerised information centres, and a National Environmental Monitoring Organisation (NEMO). In 1983-84, the DOEn spent Rs 20 crore on assessing the extent of environmental destruction and in maintaining the National Museum of Natural History. More recently, the National Land Use & Wasteland Development Board was set up, chaired by the Prime Minister, to undertake the afforestation of five million hectares annually. New laws for air and water pollution have been enacted, but these have only succeeded in concentrating the authority to undertake judicial proceedings in vari-

ous state pollution control boards.

Last year, amidst much publicity, the PM joined the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and other non-government organisations in their campaign to clean up the Ganga, and set up the Central Ganga Authority. The initial (Seventh Plan) allocation for the project is Rs 250 crore. Most of this money will be spent, in Phase I of the operation, on the installation of sewage treatment plants in 29 cities. Environmentalists are increasingly sceptical about this project. They claim that 18 of the 29 cities already have sewage treatment facilities which are in disuse. State governments, they argue, are not likely to keep up the expenditure on maintaining the new plants either. Meanwhile, in the year since the Central Ganga Authority was set up, little has been done, besides convening the Ganga Basin Conference & Exposition in Calcutta last November to discuss the problems of industrial waste, and its treatment. Of the 132 industries identified as pollutants of the Ganga, only 18 participated in the conference.

The DOEn, since its inception, has played little more than an advisory role. The reason why it lacks clout is perhaps that it must be in a position to veto and change any projects undertaken by a number of ministries – agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, mining, irrigation – and even the Planning Commission. It has, however, been left out of the fray in most environmental disputes.

Political manoeuvring has long worked to the detriment of the environment. In Himachal Pradesh, the Chief Minister, Ram Lal, had to resign in 1983, when members of his family were implicated in a timber smuggling case. And in Kerala, the coalition government, to maintain the support of various political parties, has sanctioned title deeds to 1.8 lakh encroachers on 50,000 hectares of forest land, simply because they wanted the support of these landless peasants. Besides, in the scramble to get their states 'developed', governments are handing out bamboo forests on

**In many cases political manoeuvring has worked to the detriment of the environment. In 1983, Himachal Pradesh's Chief Minister had to resign when his family members were implicated in a timber smuggling case.**

lease to wood-based industries at ridiculously low rates. In Tamil Nadu, for example, paper mills are paying Rs 15 per ton of bamboo while basket-weavers and other small consumers have to buy it at the market price of Rs 1,200 per ton.

Politics, rather than economics and environmental concern, have also influenced the industrial location policy of the government. One telling example is that of the Thal-Vaishet fertiliser and petrochemical complex, originally sited at Rewas, not far from Bombay. The Bombay Bachao Committee, formed to fight the location of this complex so close to the metropolis – which already has a thermal power plant, two refineries and several chemical industries in the Trombay-Chembur belt – got the government to consider an alternate site. A task force headed by Dr A K Ganguly recommended Tarapur – a stretch of grasslands, where no farmers would be dislocated. The Fertiliser Ministry was not pleased, since this meant that a pipeline would have to be built for the Bombay High gas from Uran to Tarapur, on the Gujarat border. The Maharashtra government, according to D'Monte, was "absolutely paranoid about the possibility that their arch rival, Gujarat, should gain by exploiting a natural resource – gas from Bombay High – which they felt 'rightfully' belonged to them."

The task force, again consulted, stuck to its decision and ruled out Thal-Vaishet, 21 kilometres from Bombay, maintaining that an ammonia leak from the plant would affect thousands of people. Ultimately, the task force met Morarji Desai, then Prime Minister, and discovered that he resented the choice of Tarapur since rumours were already afloat that he had communal leanings towards Gujarat and, therefore, favoured Thal-Vaishet as the ideal location. That clinched it. Thal-Vaishet it was.

**THERE HAS BEEN** no dearth of legislation passed with the intent of preserving the environment. "But it is just not possible to pass legislation and expect laws to make an immediate impact," says environmentalist Shankar Ranganathan. Maharashtra, for example, has implemented a scheme whereby an unemployed person can be granted two hectares of land for the cultivation of mixed forests and Rs 150 per month for five years, plus half the profits of the timber when felled. The scheme is laudable on paper but, between the forest department, which doesn't want to part with the land under its control, and the people, who fail to see the scheme as anything more than a means to acquire a government job paying Rs 150, there has been little progress.

Obviously, legislation is not enough. Environmentalists are increasingly stressing the need for a reorientation of our development policy and the introduction of alternative technology – not to *replace* the present pattern of industrialisation, but to *supplement* it with small, decentralised systems.

Given the extent of the damage done to India's environment already, the CSE poses a relevant question in its *Second Statement Of Shared Concern*: "Do we develop our science to enter the 21st century on the terms of the world technological powers? Or, do we develop our own science, focussing on our land and water resources, on our forests and grazing lands, and on removing the growing environmental imbalances that threaten the survival of millions?" ♦

# THE LESSONS OF BHOPAL

***Bhopal has been all but forgotten by the captains of industry and the regulatory agencies. The point is that it wasn't just an isolated incident. There are lessons in it for everyone.***

**By Darryl D'Monte**

**IT WOULD BE** tempting to conclude, from the rash of reports about gas and chemical leaks around the country since December 1984, that Bhopal has registered in the minds of the captains of industry and official agencies, as the world's biggest industrial disaster – the kind of catastrophe that has to be averted in future at all costs.

One would get an entirely different impression from the deliberations of the Envirotech '86 seminar held in Bombay recently. For the second time, it brought together manufacturers of pollution control equipment, chemical manufacturers and the like; Bhopal figured only on the very last day. What is more, far from an atmosphere of self-recrimination, there was a great deal of complacency in the assembly.

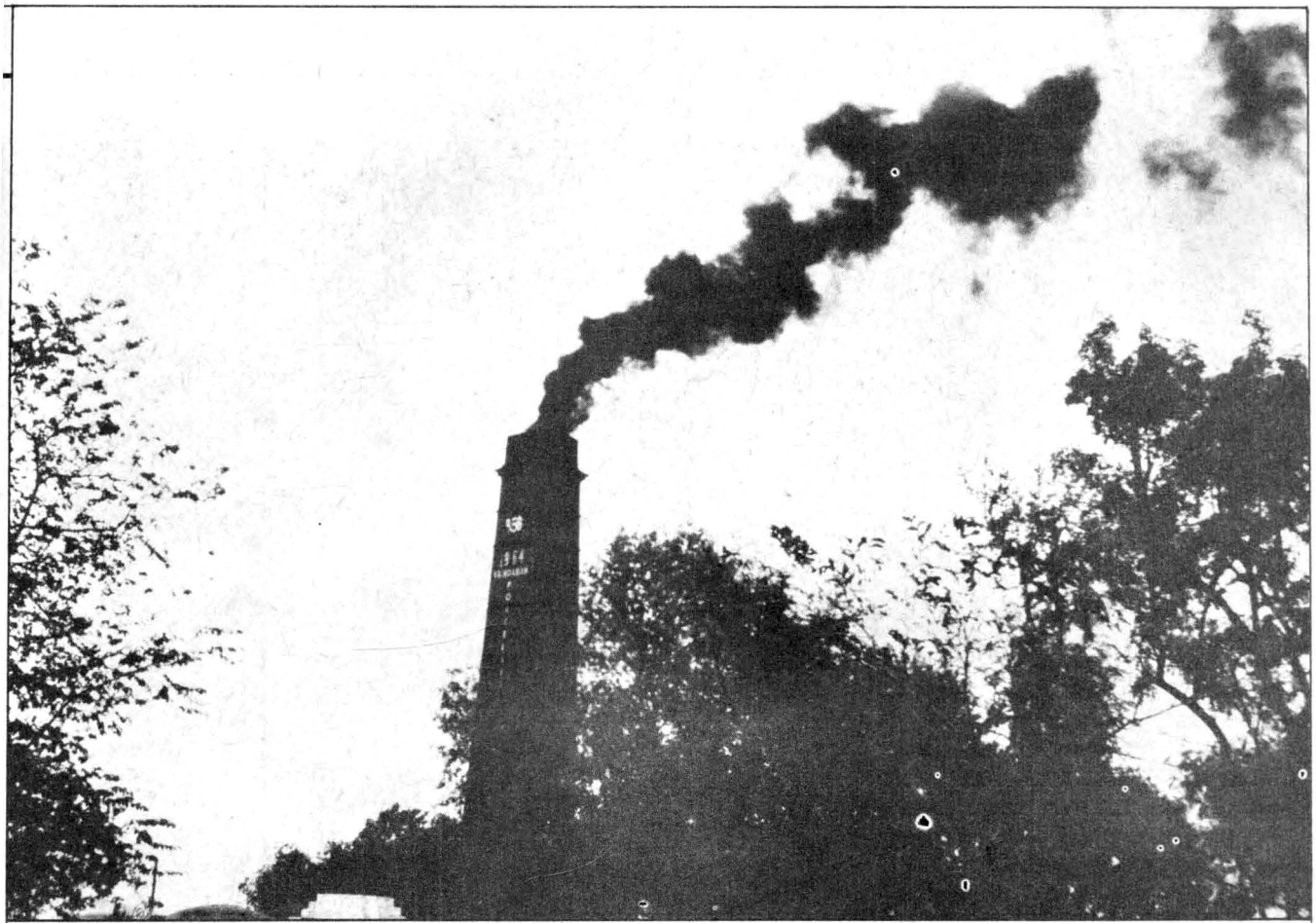
The predominant attitude was: the leak at Union Carbide was a terrible accident, but these things do happen, and there's no need to make too much of a fuss about it. As Praful Bidwai of *The Times Of India*, who presented a paper on Bhopal, emphasised, if he had been sounding the same alarms a little over a year ago, he would have been laughed down by the audience. After all, both in India and the US, Union Carbide had a reputation for being safe and sound.

One of the primary lessons of Bhopal is that chemical manufacturers aren't half as careful about keeping their factories in order as they ought to be. Union Carbide India Ltd (UCIL) had run down their plant to dangerous levels and cut down on their manning. The situation was ripe for disaster. There have been a sufficient number of leaks since Bhopal – in India as well as at Union Carbide in the US – to dispel any notion that safety comes first in the chemical industry. How many of us remember that just days prior to the accident, 450 people lost their lives in a chemical explosion in Mexico City?

What was obviously happening prior to December 1984 is that leaks and explosions were occurring in the country with distressing regularity but no one was taking any notice of them. At Envirotech '86, it was pointed out that the chemical industry has been trying to block a Central government move to lay down norms for safety. Such recalcitrance speaks volumes for the industry's concern for preventing accidents.

Another lesson is that it isn't the much-maligned public sector that is invariably responsible for environmental hazards. Bhopal has uncovered the cloak of respectability that the private sector, with access to far better PR, shelters under. The public sector, it is important to remember, has gone into heavy industry, which

*Darryl D'Monte is a well-known environmentalist and author of the recently published* Temples Or Tombs?



is inevitably more polluting than other units. However, even before Bhopal, the record of private chemical companies had not been very flattering. The Birla-owned Gwalior Rayon has caused havoc to fishermen in the Chaliyar river near Calicut, in Kerala; another plant in Nagda has polluted the Chambal. The Birlas' Zuari Agro-Chemicals in Goa has been one of the worst offenders in the country. A public outcry forced the authorities to close down the plant temporarily till effluent controls were installed.

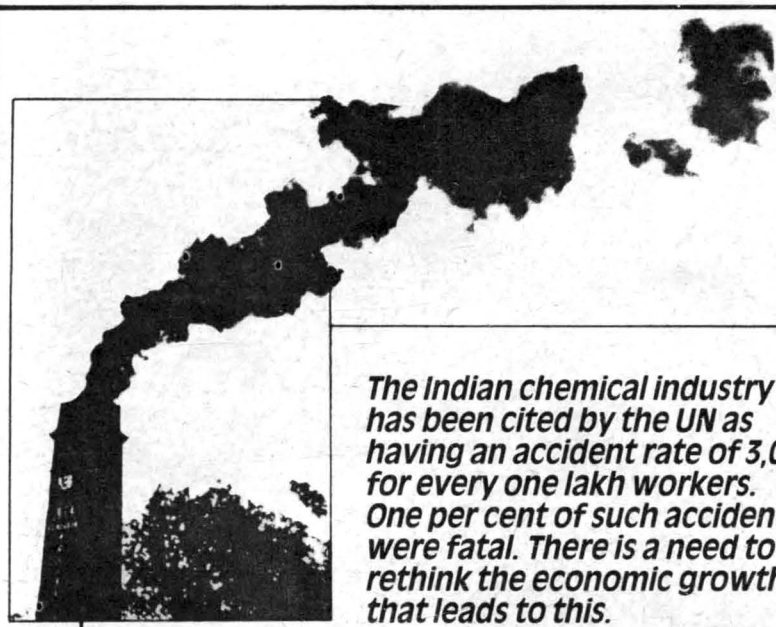
Lest it be construed that the biggest, whether in the public or private sector, are the villains of the piece, one should hasten to add that small units are beyond the pale of the law in nine cases out of ten. In the slate pencil industries of Mandsaur district in MP, for example, workers have been directly exposed to dust which contains silica. There are entire villages in Mandsaur where the number of men over 20 years old can be counted: they have all succumbed to the deadly silicosis.

If companies and small firms have learnt precious little from the horror of Bhopal, most state governments have been almost equally complacent. The exception is Maharashtra, which was the first state to legislate on water pollution. Its Pollution Control Board, too, is better run. Even so, the industrial capital of the country is ill-served by the Board's officials. It only has a strength of 350 officers and, in Bombay alone, it has to oversee the operations of 20 big pharmaceutical companies and seven major chemical manufacturers. In fact, the first petrochemical plant in the entire country – incidentally set up by Union Carbide – was located in Trombay-Chembur, easily one of the worst polluted areas. In addition, there is Calico Chemicals, which has since witnessed a toxic leak, Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilisers Ltd and the Tata Electric Companies' thermal station and oil refineries. With giants of this size to be checked for their air and effluent release, one can well imagine how units in other industrial towns in the state get away with murder. As for the situation in states like Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, industrialists often quip that the price of a pollution board clearance is a lunch for one of its officials!

There are also the cumbersome Insecticides and Factories Acts, which lay down rules regarding the registration and inspection of chemical factories. These rules are honoured more in their breach than in their observance. After Bhopal, Maharashtra has given the lead by setting up the Garg Committee to identify the potentially dangerous plants and what they need to do to put them in order. Every state ought to follow suit and list the potential offenders and, if required, compel them to close down till safety devices are installed. Under present regulations, it is extremely difficult for any board or other authority to order the closure, even temporarily, of a plant.

Another issue raised by Bhopal is the question of the location of big chemical and other related industries. It is easy, as in the case of UCIL, to claim that when it was given permis-

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUNJOY MONGA



***The Indian chemical industry has been cited by the UN as having an accident rate of 3,000 for every one lakh workers. One per cent of such accidents were fatal. There is a need to rethink the economic growth that leads to this.***

sion to site its factory on the outskirts of Bhopal in 1975, there wasn't much human habitation around it. However, the consequence of ill-conceived industrial location policies is that shanties invariably crop up around a factory. To cite a recent instance: the Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilisers gas-based unit at Thal-Vaishet, just across Bombay harbour, is already surrounded by *jhopdis*.

This isn't, by any means, a matter of mere aesthetics: it underscores the entire pattern of industrialisation where investment is concentrated in a few pockets of the country, leaving the countryside starved of capital and jobs. It can easily be calculated, for instance, that the Rs 900 crore spent on the fertiliser plant at Thal could have been spent on a wide range of small irrigation and employment works throughout the Konkan, instead. While the Maharashtra government always pressed for the location of the plant within the Bombay Metropolitan Region on the grounds that it would 'develop' the backward Konkan, precisely the reverse could be said to have taken place. Ratnagiri, after all, is one of the most emigration-prone districts in the country. At the very least, if the Thal plant was sited in Ratnagiri, it could have formed the focus of an alternative source of employment, especially with the accompanying Rs 1,200-crore petrochemical complex.

An even more far-reaching question that Bhopal poses is the strategy of the Green Revolution technology in agriculture. For one thing, it was possible to make carbaryl, the pesticide UCIL manufactured in Bhopal, without using the deadly methyl isocynate. Carbide was prompted to do it for cost considerations, with no thought to safety. Still more fundamental, is it either environmentally sound or economically wise to put all one's eggs in one basket and go in for highly energy-intensive agriculture? The reason why factories like the UCIL were set up with so much fanfare in the '60s was that the government believed that by going in for hi-tech farming, we could become self-reliant in foodgrains. Pesticides and fertilisers were essential in such a blueprint. But the present situation shows that it isn't just a matter of producing more and more food, as Punjab, Haryana and western UP have been doing so successfully: we now have food reserves which we don't know what to do with. The Centre is even thinking of exporting them! At the same time, we are facing one of the worst droughts in recent years, with people in the countryside not having the purchasing power to buy the food they need.

Bhopal should show up the predilection for going in for such resource-intensive technology, with no thought to its social implications. Of course, with so much attention centred around the question of compensation for the victims (Union Carbide is reported to be anxious to settle out of court to rid itself of the adverse publicity), such implications are seldom discussed. Since the Indian chemical industry has been cited by the UN as having an accident rate of 3,000 for every one lakh workers – one per cent of which were fatal – this should trigger off a serious reconsideration not just of safety and occupational health measures but of the kind of economic growth we are witnessing.

There are an estimated 4,000 chemical factories in the country with an investment of over Rs 3,000 crore and employing 3.8 million. They account for one-fifth of all the fixed industrial assets in the country and produce more than Rs 6,000 crore worth of goods a year. It may come as a surprise, for instance, to realise that India is the biggest manufacturer of pesticides in the whole of South Asia and Africa. The wholesale 'chemicalisation' of society, as witnessed in the massive boom in synthetic clothing, aerated beverages and fast foods, means that resources are being channelised into meeting the consumer needs of a tiny section of the urban elite. What is more, these are less nutritious than natural foods and drinks and also do irreparable harm to the environment in the course of their manufacture.

The Hindi poet Raghubir Sahay puts it well when he says that what we need is a culture of *anusandhan*, or research and discovery, rather than *anukaran*, or blind and thoughtless imitation. This isn't some abortive Gandhian plea for a halt to the process of industrialisation, but a call to reorient this process to meet the needs of the neediest. ♦

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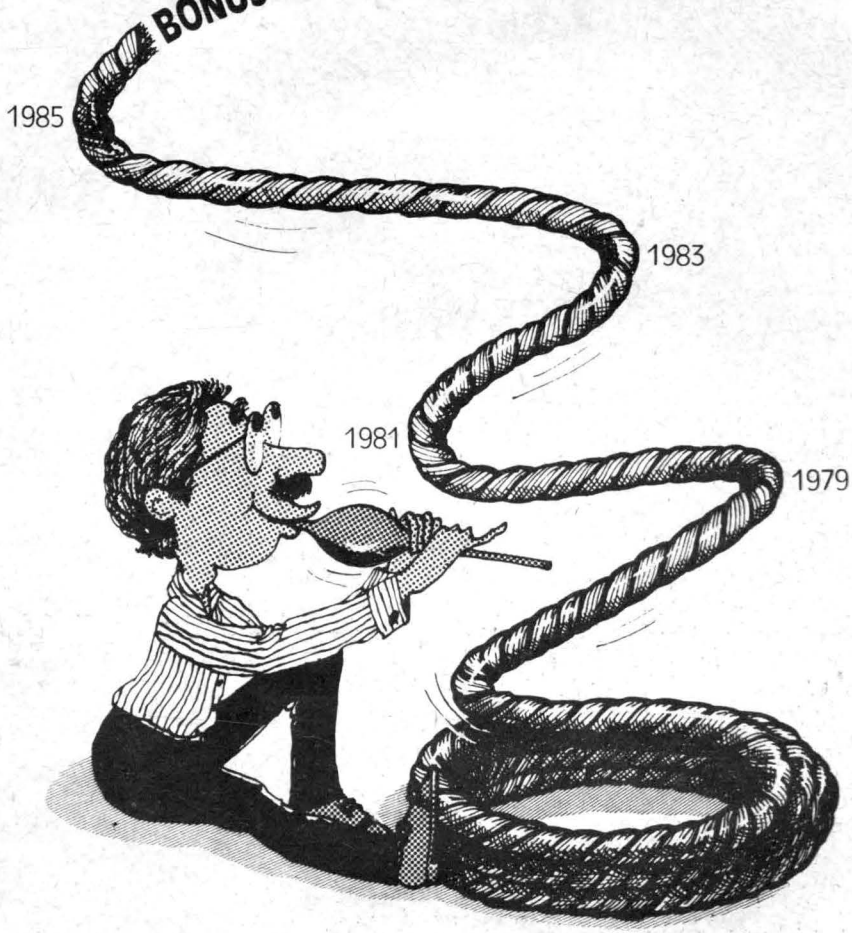


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# DEATH IN THE AIR

***Despite all the talk of environmental consciousness in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster, the situation in India's capital gives cause for grave concern.***

THE DATE: December 4, 1985. The time: between 9 and 9.30 a m.

An oleum tank at the chemical plant of the Sriram Food and Fertilisers Industries (SFFI) collapsed. Tons of acid spilled out, reacted with water, and rapidly turned into a cloud of sulphuric acid mist, sulphur dioxide and sulphur trioxide. Within an hour, the cloud travelled over ten kilometres, causing respiratory difficulties and burning of the eyes, and spreading panic among the people of West and North Delhi. Three people died (two within a few days and one over two months later) and over 700 people were hospitalised. While the long-term health disabilities are not fully known, doctors treating the patients and independent scientists have stated that these could range from impaired breathing capacity to irreversible fibrosis.

Recently, near the industrial township of the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA) on the outskirts of the city of Delhi, an unidentified industrialist dumped two faulty cylinders of chlorine into a canal adjoining New Ashok Nagar. The effect was instantaneous. The gas spread over the area causing severe coughing, vomiting and burning of the eyes. In this case, too, one life was lost and over 150 people were injured.

Delhi's citizens are today exposed to some of the highest levels of air pollution in the country. The two thermal power stations (Indraprastha and Badarpur) together emit 180 tons of fly ash and 70 tons of sulphur dioxide in a day. The Central Pollution Control Board, which in May 1984 undertook the monitoring of the ambient air quality downwind from Badarpur, found the level of suspended particulate matter to be an average of 1,200 micrograms per cubic metre. This is 12 times the limit for residential areas and over twice the permissible limit for industrial areas. The level of sulphur dioxide is also thrice the limit for residential areas. A team of environmentalists belonging to Kalpavriksh, an environmental action group, also conducted an investigation late last year. They discovered a grim situation in the residential colonies downwind from the power station. Layers of fine black dust (coal dust, often mixed with fly ash) were everywhere, 'blackening floors and walls, contaminating food and water, choking the nose and eyes'. While pollution control equipment (electrostatic precipitators, mechanical cyclone separators and water spraying) are meant to control the dust and fly ash, tons of particulate matter and gases escape as either the equipment is inoperative or is operated at low efficiency levels.

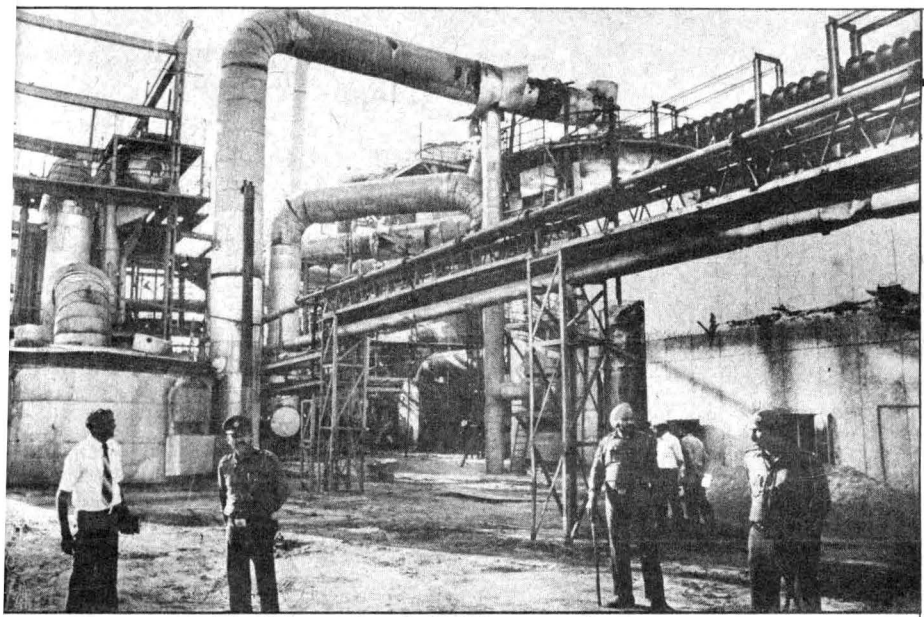
A survey of the health disorders in these areas shows an abnormally high incidence of tuberculosis, constant irritation of the eyes, chronic cough, asthma and stomach disorders due to the ingestion of these pollutants.

Residents of the area have made a number of representations and complaints to the Badarpur management, to the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), which runs the plant, to the Minister for Energy and to the former Prime Minister. There has been almost no action. Even the Central Pollution Control Board, after its study of air pollution in 1984, sent the results to the NTPC and other relevant government departments, strongly asserting the need to implement anti-pollution measures. Even this official 'voice of concern' has drawn little response.

This situation is by no means restricted to the area downwind from a polluting power plant. Over the last decade, the pollution in Delhi has increased by 75 per cent. Industrial units and vehicle exhausts dump over 1,100 tons of pollutants in a day. Professor J M Dave of the School of Environmental Sciences at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, whose team has regularly conducted comprehensive air pollution surveys, states that as far as pollution from vehicles is concerned, Delhi is the worst polluted city in the country, with vehicle exhausts dumping 400 tons of pollutants every day. In some areas, carbon monoxide (which is very toxic) levels were as high as 100 parts per million.

Over 400 kilograms of lead are also released into the atmosphere every day. Lead is an accumulative nerve toxin which can cause debilitating physical and mental effects. There are about 60,000 industries all over Delhi. A survey undertaken by the Central Pollution Control Board in 1976-77 found that, just 359 industries which produce liquid waste, dump 40,000 kilograms of effluents per day.

The Delhi Administration, the NTPC and other government agencies like the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), have carried out numerous surveys of



*The Sriram plant in Delhi: poor safety measures.*

pollution in Delhi. People's organisations, trade unions and newspapers have also cried themselves hoarse. But the situation has continued to get worse. While the dumping of the faulty cylinders at NOIDA reflects the utter lack of social responsibility on the part of some industrialists, the response to the gas leaks at NOIDA or from the Sriram factory underlines not only the continuing indifference of the authorities to public safety, but also the almost total lack of health measures for victims of these leaks.

**THE GAS LEAK** on December 4 last year at the Sriram factory is a case in point. For almost a decade, residents of the colonies around the massive plant have reported frequent gas discharges. In December 1982, 40 children inhaled chlorine near the factory. Many lost consciousness. On September 10, 1985, hundreds of nearby residents experienced severe breathlessness because of a leak from the sulphuric acid plant.

The affected residents were not the only victims of the irresponsible production methods of the Sriram factory. The workers at the factory (members of the Lokhit Congress Union) have been equally affected. A number of government reports and even internal letters of the management have indicated the poor safety measures and maintenance of the chemical plant.

As in Bhopal, it was only the December 4 tragedy that galvanised the Delhi administration into action. Two teams of experts were commissioned by the administration and, after a petition was filed, two teams were appointed by the Supreme Court. All of them indicted the management for the appalling safety measures inside the plant.

The owners of SFFI are among the most powerful industrialists in the city. They have the economic means to minimise hazards in the entire production process. However, appalling conditions were allowed to continue. But the owners are not the only ones who have depicted gross negligence. The Union government, the Inspectorate of Factories and the Delhi administration, all share the final responsibility for the health and safety of Delhi's citizens. In the case of the SFFI, as late as May 1985, the Inspector of Factories had revealed several violations in the sulphuric acid plant. Yet, corrective action was not taken.

In fact, a few months earlier, in response to the recommendation to shift the chlorine unit in the reports of D H Slater, a British chemical expert, and Nita Bali, the then Labour Secretary in the Delhi administration, two Members of Parliament demanded the translocation of the unit. The Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers, Veerendra Patil, flatly refused – a response that was strikingly similar to that of the government of Madhya Pradesh before the Bhopal gas tragedy.

While thousands of other units in the city continue to pollute the environment, and negligence and apathy on the part of the government and the owners continue, what is of equal importance is the lack of social responsibility among the people. In fact, even the plethora of independent groups – civil liberties, environmental, social service, consumer, etc – which could potentially protest for a cleaner Delhi, have failed to make a significant impact.

The only group which has conducted investigations, lobbied with the relevant official organisations, and helped generate public consciousness about these issues is Kalpavriksh.

Also, several weeks before the December 4 gas leak, the Delhi Committee on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy – a coalition of over 20 organisations in Delhi – had held a day-long *dharna* outside the SFFI's gates to highlight the potential danger that the plant posed. As it was, its pamphlet, which referred to the SFFI as a 'Bhopal about to happen' proved prophetic. Both Kalpavriksh, the Delhi Committee and an organisation of concerned scientists – the Delhi Science Forum – have been active in pursuing the case in the Supreme Court.

However, these efforts remain marginal in the context of Delhi's severe pollution problems. With large industrial houses not only remaining apathetic but trying to cover up their negligence, and with even public sector undertakings, like the NTPC, openly violating pollution laws, a major responsibility lies with the Union government to strictly implement pollution control laws. Experience has, however, shown that only a strong movement of concerned citizens can make official agencies act on their social responsibility. Till that time, the current model of 'development' and the fouling of Delhi's air and water will continue. ♦

# THE LOVES OF HEFNER

BY RUSSELL MILLER

**His image suggests that he is the world's greatest playboy, the living embodiment of his magazine. But there was a time when love destroyed Hugh Hefner.**

AS *PLAYBOY AFTER DARK* was due to run for 26 weeks, a $ 35,000 set had been built for the show at the CBS-TV studios in Hollywood. It incorporated a den, a living-room and a rumpus room, all designed to look as if they had been ripped from the pages of the magazine. The idea, as in Hefner's previous television series, was that each show would resemble an impromptu party. Celebrities would drop by to talk or entertain and a handful of young and pretty girls would stand around in the background and pretend they were having fun.

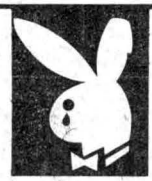
*Playboy After Dark* was trailed, with typical lack of restraint, as a 'gathering of the most attractive, talented, accomplished and involved people in contemporary society'. It was better in every way than Hefner's first foray into television and the ratings were good, but the critics were lukewarm. "As an actor," *Time* magazine reported, "Hefner makes a pretty good magazine publisher."

He was portrayed, predictably, as 'wooden', sitting awkwardly in his tuxedo and clipped-on bow-tie, asking shallow cue-card questions of his guests. Hefner was unabashed. "I know how good the show is," he told *Time*. "It's better than the *Johnny Carson Show* and I do a better job of hosting than Ed Sullivan does."

Amongst the girls hired for the taping of the third show was a fresh-faced UCLA coed, 18 years old, by the name of Barbara Klein. Only five feet three inches tall, Barbi – as she preferred

*Extracted from* Bunny: The Real Story Of Playboy.

to be called – was the epitome of the idealised American teenager, who could always be found grinning from toothpaste advertisements. She had shining, healthy, innocent good looks, clear green eyes, a heart-shaped face and a cute little snub nose, thick curly hair and a pubescent body boys described as 'well stacked'. In her home town of Sacramento, she was a high school cheer-leader and a contestant in the Miss Teenage America contest; as a pre-med student at UCLA, she was soon noticed and offered modelling jobs after school – it was this connection that led her to the *Playboy After Dark* set. The moment Hefner walked onto the studio floor, his eyes alighted on her and his 42-year-old heart went pit-a-pat.



**IT WAS ASSUMED, CORRECTly, that Barbi's virginity was unlikely to withstand a determined assault by Hefner for very long and her resistance to his amorous advances weakened inexorably. Finally, in the summer of 1969, she succumbed on his famous round bed.**

They began talking while the lights and cameras were being set up and Hef asked her if she would like to join him and a few friends at The Candy Store, a local discotheque, after the show. "I already had a date," Hefner confessed, "but that night I had eyes only for Barbi." His ardour did not go unremarked by his friends and one of them asked Barbi, with a wink, if she ever dated older men. "I've never dated anyone older than 24," she replied brightly. "That's okay," said Hef, "neither have I." She laughed and agreed, later, to see him again.

Barbi was a nice, sensible Jewish girl and a virgin. She was not at all sure she wanted to get involved with a man with Hefner's reputation. She was worried what her parents would say if they found out (her father was a doctor), and she had a regular boy-friend at college. But Hefner was charming, considerate, apparently unaffected by his success and his money, and she could not stop herself from liking him.

When he arrived in a chauffeur-driven limousine to pick her up at her college dorm for their first date, Barbi was more embarrassed than she was impressed. Her friends stood giggling helplessly behind the windows as she ran out to meet him, and in future she insisted on driving her own car to see him. Hefner liked that about her, respected her independence and her determination to remain a virgin. She avoided being alone too much with him, fended off his gentle approaches, made it quite clear that sex was out of the question, and allowed him no more than a chaste good night kiss. Hefner, starry-eyed, desired her all the more.

During the taping of *Playboy After Dark*, two shows at a time, Hefner commuted between Chicago and Los Angeles, where he spent all his spare time with Barbi. Inevitably, they were seen out and about together, and Barbi began appearing in Hollywood gossip columns as Hefner's latest 'companion'. Her parents in Sacramento were far from pleased, but by then she was thoroughly enjoying Hefner's attentions and had no intention of breaking off their relationship which was still, at her insistence, purely platonic. Hefner remained a perfect gentleman, although an ardent suitor.

Within the Playboy organisation, word quickly spread that Hef was in love again and that this time it was serious. "You could always tell when Hef was in love," Dick Rosenzweig explained, "because he'd be very bright, very up. You'd get the feeling that he thought life was good and all was right with the world."

It was also common knowledge at all levels of the business – there was an effective grapevine – that Barbi had so far resisted Hefner's advances. When they went to Las Vegas for the weekend, the incredible word was transmitted to Chicago that *separate* rooms had been reserved for them in a hotel. When they went skiing in Aspen, they stayed with Hef's brother, Keith, who had a house in the mountains. It was whispered in Chicago that Barbi had insisted on her own bedroom.

It was assumed, correctly, that Barbi's virginity was unlikely to withstand a determined assault by Hefner for very long and her resistance to his amorous advances weakened inexorably. During the early summer of 1969, Barbi visited Hefner at the Playboy Mansion in Chicago and finally succumbed, on the famous round bed, like so many pretty young things before her. After performing the deed Hefner could not wait to spread the glad tidings. While Barbi was still sleeping, he slipped out of bed and up the spiral staircase to the office suite shared by Bobbie Arnstein and Shirley Hillman.

"He came in his pyjamas, grinning all over his face," Shirley Hillman recalled, "and said, 'I did it! I just made love to Barbi!' Bobbie looked at him and said, 'What do you want me to do? Send up the news on the Goodyear blimp?' "

In the same month that a man landed on the moon, Barbi made her debut in *Playboy* magazine as *Rising Star Barbi Benton* (Hefner decided she needed a new name), the first of many opportunities for readers to examine her nubile body. With their affair now entirely public (she was always described in the magazine as Hefner's 'constant companion'), there was much speculation about the propriety and wisdom of a 42-year-old man romancing a teenager not much older than his own daughter. It was gossip that both mystified and irritated Hefner, particularly when it was suggested that he was frightened of more mature, challenging women.

"I simply find younger women more attractive physically than women of my own age," he explained forlornly. "Maybe it's partly because of the need to be able to escape to an emotional island away from the demands and prob-

# EXTRACT

lems of work. There's also something nice about an affair that's the first serious relationship in a girl's life. It permits you to recapture your own early responses. It's a way of holding onto your youth and the enthusiasm you first felt about love and life.

"Obviously, you're not going to get any real intellectual drive from young girls, but I don't look for the same intellectual stimulation from women as I do from men. And besides, I'm not romantically attracted to the women I find most intellectually exciting."

Gloria Steinem met Barbi when she visited the Playboy Mansion to interview Hefner for a piece in *McCall's*. (Hefner could never bear a grudge for long and soon forgot Steinem's devastating exposé of the Bunnies in the early '60s.) When Barbi left the room, Steinem said, "She's so *young*," and Hefner could not get her remark out of his mind. During the interview, Steinem told Hefner that a woman reading *Playboy* felt a little like a Jew reading a Nazi manual, but that didn't bother him in the slightest. "Why did she have to say that about Barbi?" he repeatedly asked his friends later. "Why couldn't she have said, well, *fresh*?"

**THE INTERIOR OF THE only black jet in the world had been remodelled to include a discotheque, a conference room, a lounge area, a dining room and, of course, a six-by-eight-foot elliptical bed upholstered in black Himalayan goatskin.**

**IN NOVEMBER 1969**, Hefner took delivery of the *Big Bunny*, a stretched DC-9 airliner painted entirely in black, except for a white Bunny logo on the tail. Even by Playboy's Sybaritic standards, this was a wondrous and expensive new toy – it cost $ 5,336,812. Hefner, who recognised the value of facetious understatement, liked to refer to the aircraft, off-handedly, as 'basically, just a convenience'. *Newsweek* begged to differ, describing it as 'the most mind-boggling display of sensual opulence ever assembled in a flying machine'.

The interior of the only black jet in the world had been remodelled at Hefner's behest – and at a cost of $ 510,000 – so that it resembled, insofar as it was possible, an airborne Mansion. "It's got everything," Hefner joked, "except a swimming-pool and a bowling alley." At the front of the aircraft there was a dance floor and discotheque connected to a conference room, lounge area and bar with upholstered seats grouped around tables with inset backgammon and Monopoly boards. The galley was equipped to provide gourmet meals (lobster and roast beef carved at the table were standard fare) and stocked with the finest wines. There was enough silver, china and crystal on board to serve 36 passengers. Seven built-in video screens provided a selection of in-flight movies and there were skyphones throughout the plane to provide communication with the cockpit or the ground.

Hefner's personal quarters were at the rear and included a six-by-eight-foot elliptical bed upholstered in black Himalayan goatskin, covered with white silk bedsheets and a spread of Tasmanian opossum pelts. A belt was strapped across the bed during take-off and landing so that Hef and his companion of the moment need not be unnecessarily roused. Alongside the bed was a control panel which enabled Hefner to talk to the crew, darken the windows to watch a movie, listen to the radio, or play his favourite audio tapes. Leading off the bedroom was a sunken 'Roman' bath and shower and a study with a desk, telephone, tape recorder and lightbox to examine colour transparencies.

Hefner possessed no desire to travel to faraway places; he could see little virtue in visiting countries where he could not understand what people were talking about and the fried chicken was not cooked the way he liked it. But Barbi was different. She was young, adventurous and longed to see the world; it seemed a shame to have the *Big Bunny* and not go anywhere. No more needed to be said. Barbi was Hefner's princess – whatever she wanted was hers.

Thus was the Grand Tour, Playboy-style, conceived. It was to be, Hefner decreed, the trip of a lifetime: a whole month away, hopping in the highest possible style from Hilton to Hilton across Europe and Africa. If Barbi had entertained any hope that they might be travelling as a romantic twosome, she was to be disappointed. Hef invited along all his closest buddies: John Dante, Gene Siskel, the movie critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, Leroy Neiman, Shel Silverstein, Nelson Futch, his brother Keith, the whole damn gang. A *Playboy* photographer, Alexas Urba, was to be there to take pictures of them all having fun and Jodie McRae was to look after the details.

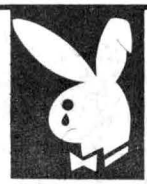
On the morning of Tuesday, July 28, 1970, a fleet of limousines assembled outside the Playboy Mansion to transport the holiday-makers to the *Big Bunny*, waiting at the Butler Aviation terminal at O'Hare airport and stocked by the diligent Jodie McRae with dozens of crates of Pepsi Cola. As the black jet climbed up into the pale blue skies over Illinois and headed east, furious backgammon tournaments were already in progress on board, tournaments that would continue, both in the air and on the ground, for the entire trip. Barbi had brought along a self-improvement book full of interesting new words. "Did you know," she asked Alexas Urba, "that triskaidekaphobia is a phobia about the number 13?"

The first stop was London, where a fidgeting crowd of reporters and photographers was waiting at Heathrow airport to greet them and ogle the *Big Bunny*. From the Hilton in London they flew to the Hilton in Marbella, on Spain's Costa del Sol, where the itinerary allowed them two days 'at leisure', most of which they devoted to noisy

backgammon games played by the hotel swimming-pool. From the Hilton in Marbella they flew to the Hilton in Nairobi, Kenya, where they went on a safari in the Uaso Nyira game reserve.

From the Hilton in Nairobi, they flew to the Hilton in Athens where, the itinerary pointed out, 'typical American breakfasts and hamburgers are available in the hotel's Byzantine coffee shop'. This was a relief to Hefner, who was already vexed by a critical shortage of Wonderloaf for his sandwiches. Urgent messages had been despatched to Chicago to arrange for fresh supplies to be flown over, but the logistical problems involved in flying Wonderloaf across the Atlantic and keeping it fresh had proved insuperable. Three days were allocated to cruising the Greek islands in a chartered yacht, then it was off to Rome, Venice, Munich and the Hilton in Paris.

On August 28, the *Big Bunny* returned to Chicago and the intrepid travellers wound up their backgammon and Monopoly tournaments. Hefner, whose dislike of foreign parts had been amply confirmed, was glad to be home, back in the Playboy Mansion, where the Wonderloaf was always fresh.



**KAREN WAS 19 YEARS OLD, a peroxide blonde with green eyes, buttermilk skin and large, round, firm breasts. She was one of 200 girls who auditioned to be a Bunny. Little did she realise that Hefner would fall in love with her.**

**BARBI**, being a California girl, was not entirely happy in Chicago and harboured ambitions for a career of her own in show business. Doggedly plugged in the magazine as a 'rising star' (she featured on the cover three times), she landed a job as the kissable girl with the sweet breath in a Certs toothpaste commercial ("If he kissed you once, will he kiss you again?") and a bit part in an unsuccessful movie presciently titled *How Did A Nice Girl Like You Get Into This Business?* But she felt that if her career was ever to take off, she needed to be at the centre of things, in Los Angeles.

Hefner was sympathetic. Playboy, awash with corporate funds, had begun to invest in film production, a diversification which provided a convenient, if thin, excuse for Hefner to spend more and more time on the West Coast and thus please Barbi. They always stayed in the penthouse on top of the Playboy Building on Sunset Boulevard, but it was hardly a suitable place to rub shoulders with the stars (which for Hefner was one of Los Angeles's primary attractions) and, early in 1971, Barbi began looking for a house in Beverly Hills where they could entertain in a manner befitting the owner of Playboy.

After several disappointments – Sonny and Cher got Tony Curtis's house in Bel Air and George Hamilton's place was snapped up by Bernie Cornfeld – they found Holmby House, a mock Gothic-Tudor stone mansion with 30 rooms, in five landscaped acres on Charing Cross Road, only a block from Sunset Boulevard. Hefner wanted it the moment he laid eyes on it. The price was $ 1,050,000, a paltry matter. Playboy paid cash, baulking only at the $ 30,000 asked for a collection of rare orchids which filled three greenhouses in the grounds. "Thirty thousand dollars," Hefner expostulated, "for a lot of flowers?"

Hefner's arrival as a part-time resident of Beverly Hills was largely welcomed by the movie community, since the regular parties at the Playboy Mansion West brought back memories of the grand days of Hollywood, when studio moguls and the stars entertained in an extravagant style long since abandoned. Who else but Hefner, or rather Playboy, could afford to throw ritzy parties *twice a week*, invite everyone who mattered, serve the best food and wine and never count the cost? Playboy lifted the tab for all entertaining at the Mansion as a 'promotion' expense: the Friday and Sunday parties usually cost between $ 1,000 and $ 7,000, but the bigger affairs (on New Year's Eve, Hef's birthday and Midsummer's Night) never cost less than $ 25,000, sometimes considerably more.

Although Hefner still felt the need to spend a great deal of time in Chicago, Barbi settled in happily at Playboy Mansion West. When he was away, Hefner telephoned her every day to tell her he loved her and missed her and Barbi was content. What Barbi did not know was that while Hef was in Los Angeles, he telephoned the Playboy Mansion in Chicago every day to tell a girl called Karen Christy how much he loved and missed her.

**HEFNER'S BEST FRIEND**, John Dante, had taken charge of Bunny recruitment for Playboy Clubs, an undemanding job which required him to travel the country on 'Bunny Hunts', interviewing girls who had answered newspaper advertisements offering a glamorous career with Playboy. In May 1971, he was at the Statler-Hilton hotel in Dallas, Texas, and Karen Christy was among the 200 girls in bikinis who paraded before him at the 'audition'.

Karen was 19 years old, a peroxide blonde with green eyes, buttermilk skin and large, round, firm breasts. Orphaned at the age of 13 – her mother died from kidney disease when Karen was only three and her father was shot in a hunting accident – she was brought up by relatives in rural Abilene and was working as a secretary when she decided to apply for a job as a Bunny. Three weeks after her audition, she received a letter telling her she had been accepted. Enclosed in the envelope was an airline ticket to Chicago and an invitation to stay at the Playboy Mansion while she was training.

# EXTRACT

Like hundreds of small town girls before her, Karen arrived at the portals of 1340 North State Street Parkway literally trembling with nerves. A butler took her straight up to the Bunny dormitory on the top floor where she was shocked to see most of the girls walking around with little or no clothing. She was assigned a bunk and a locker and, when she took off her coat, a Bunny painting her fingernails on an adjoining bunk eyed Karen's brassiere and drawled: "We don't wear those around here, honey." Karen smiled and said nothing, convinced that *she* would never walk around without a bra. Such brazen behaviour would never have been tolerated in Abilene.

**HE DEMONSTRATED HIS affection by showering Karen with presents: a diamond-studded watch, a white full-length mink coat, a white Lincoln Continental and a Persian kitten, which Karen, ill-advisedly decided to call Pussy. He was in love.**

Later, Karen and a few of the other girls went downstairs to the ballroom, where almost the first person she saw was John Dante. He remembered her, was friendly and welcoming, got her a drink and asked her if she would be interested in a conducted tour of the Mansion. A lot of the guys liked to show new girls around the place because it was always amusing to see the way they reacted, and it was a chance to get to know them and perhaps stake a claim before someone like Warren Beatty showed up for a party and ruined the chances of lesser mortals.

At the end of the tour, Karen shyly asked if it would be possible to see Hefner's quarters. Dante said he would ask, but warned her that Hefner had only returned from Los Angeles earlier that day and might still be asleep. Telling her to wait in the gallery overlooking the ballroom, Dante disappeared through the double glazed doors leading to Hefner's bedroom and returned after a few minutes to say it was okay; Hef would be glad to see her.

Hefner was sitting in the centre of the round bed, eating a fried chicken, swilling a Pepsi and checking page proofs of the magazine when Dante and Karen walked in. He looked up, swallowed, scrambled immediately from the bed, paced across the white carpet and took her hand. Yes, it was the real thing *again*: pit-a-pat.

Hefner offered to show Karen around personally, starting with a demonstration of how the round bed vibrated and revolved. She was struck by his boyish enthusiasm and pleased that he seemed to like her. When there appeared to be nothing left to show her, he asked her if she would care to join him later when he would be playing pool, with Hugh O'Brian, the actor, and a few of the other guests.

Dante waived any plans he might have had for Karen when he saw that Hefner was interested; competing with Hef for a girl's favours would have been unthinkable. Throughout the evening, Hefner paid exuberant court to the new Bunny, making little jokes for her benefit while he was playing pool, winking at her when he played a good shot. After supper, which the guys devoured from trays in the games room without interrupting their various tussles with the pinball machines, a few of them went down to the underwater bar for drinks. Hef and Karen sat close together, talking quietly, and the others in the party began to drift away, sensing that the pair wanted to be alone.

As the sun rose above the eastern horizon of Lake Michigan and the irritable rush-hour traffic began its inexorable build-up along Lake Shore Drive, in the timeless depths of the Playboy Mansion, Hugh Hefner could be found removing Karen Christy's brassiere and reaching for the Johnson's Baby Oil. Any faint disappointment he might have felt a little later to discover that she was not a virgin was more than compensated by her startling, enthusiastic and uninhibited virtuosity on the round bed. Although only 19 years old, she was as exciting a lover as any woman he had ever known.

Karen never had to face the rigours of being a Bunny; instead, Hefner selected her as a Playmate (she was Miss December 1971) and moved her from a bunk in the Bunny dormitory to her own apartment, safe within the Mansion. Her swift and remarkable elevation in status prompted a great deal of bitchy gossip among the Bunnies, many of whom considered themselves eminently more worthy of her position as Hef's lover. But there was no doubting his genuine affection for her, an affection he demonstrated by showering her with presents: a diamond-studded watch, a white full-length mink coat, a white Lincoln Continental and a Persian kitten, which Karen ill-advisedly decided to call Pussy. She gave Hef a photograph of herself and signed it – 'From Karen and her Pussy' – delicious news that soon travelled the Mansion's corridors, causing considerable hilarity.

Every other week, Hefner kissed Karen goodbye and headed for Los Angeles, where Barbi was anxiously awaiting his arrival. Karen knew all about Barbi; she had read of her relationship with Hefner in the gossip columns long before she arrived in Chicago and Hefner had never made any attempt to conceal the fact that he was involved with another girl in California. Whatever anguish Karen suffered during Hefner's absences was often aggravated by jealous Bunnies who liked to tell Karen that Barbi was Hefner's *real* girl-friend. "You're just someone he fucks," a Bunny once told her bitterly.

Karen was painfully vulnerable to ridicule since she had little taste and less style. Out and about in Chicago in her white mink coat and her white Lincoln Continental and her white candy-floss hair teased into a billowing bouffant,

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# EXTRACT

she looked, someone said, 'like the abominable snowman'.

As Christmas 1972 approached, the luckless Karen tried to discover what Hef was giving Barbi as a present. Hefner's social secretary, Shirley Hillman, knew that Barbi was getting a $ 35,000 Tiffany lamp. "I felt sorry for Karen;" said Hillman, "so when she asked me what Barbi was getting, I told her it was just a lamp. She was thrilled." Karen got a $ 13,500 diamond ring that Christmas. "Do you like it?" she would ask the Bunnies in the Mansion. "It's my Christmas present from Hef. *She* only got a *lamp*."

For all her breathtaking naivety, Karen unquestionably pleased Hefner, and not only between his silk sheets. She was an undemanding, uncritical companion, always eager to please him, a pretty doll he obviously enjoyed having on his arm. When *Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Old Oak Tree* was in the hit parade, Hefner returned from Los Angeles to find that she had tied yellow ribbons round all the trees in North State Street Parkway to welcome him home. It was the kind of silly, romantic gesture guaranteed to make him dewy-eyed.

It was Karen, also, who had the idea of getting a special Monopoly set made for him, with little figurines of the regular players. The money was printed with etchings of the two Playboy Mansions on one side and a Lincoln-style likeness of Hefner on the other. On the dice, tiny Playboy logos replaced the dots. Hefner was delighted with it.

One day, they were halfway through a game when a butler came to tell Hefner he was due to leave for the airport. Giggling like a couple of kids, they promptly carried the board out to the limousine and continued playing, eventually finishing the game on the *Big Bunny*, where Hefner noticed that Karen was barefooted – she had not even stopped to put shoes on.

Karen was not, of course, allowed to visit Playboy Mansion West; but she often travelled with Hefner in the *Big Bunny* to Los Angeles, returning immediately and uncomplainingly on a scheduled flight. Alternatively, she would fly out to meet him at Los Angeles Airport in order to return with him in the *Big Bunny*. Once Hefner chartered a Lear Jet, for $ 10,000, to pick her up from Texas, where she was visiting her family, and bring her to Los Angeles just so she could join him for the three-hour flight back to Chicago. Barbi remained happily unaware of these various clandestine arrangements.

**KAREN HAD A SPECIAL monopoly set made for him with little figurines of the regular players. The money had etchings of the two Playboy Mansions on one side and a Lincoln-style likeness of Hefner on the other. Hefner was delighted.**

IN JULY 1973, Hefner's domestic bliss was discomposed by an eventuality that might, perhaps, have been anticipated.

Under a headline *Adventures In The Skin Trade,* a story in *Time* magazine revealed Hefner's unusual rooming arrangements: "Long a two-of-everything consumer, Hefner has lately extended the principle to his romantic life. Former Playmate Barbi Benton, his long-time escort, lives in the California Mansion; blonde Karen Christy, an ex-Bunny in the Chicago Playboy Club, is ensconced in his Chicago quarters." Accompanying the feature was a picture of Hef being cuddled by Barbi in Los Angeles and another picture of Hef candoodling with Karen in Chicago. "Somehow," *Time* added, with a hint of bewilderment, "the arrangement continues to work."

The arrangement, however, came to an end as soon as Barbi Benton read the story. She then packed her bags and roared off in her Maserati (a present from Hef) without a word to anyone. Although she had not dared to hope that Hef was faithful to her while he was in Chicago, Barbi was dismayed to learn from *Time* that Karen Christy was considered to be her counterpart, the chatelaine of the Chicago Mansion. When Hefner telephoned from Chicago to tell her how much he loved and missed her, a secretary nervously broke the news that Barbi appeared to have gone. Hefner was distraught: he *loved* her, how could she do this to him? Pausing only long enough to persuade Karen of the urgent need for him to go to Los Angeles, and assuring her that he loved her and that he would telephone every day to tell her how much he missed her, Hefner summoned the *Big Bunny* to fly him to the West Coast to look for Barbi.

By the time he arrived at Playboy Mansion West, Barbi had been located at a hotel in Hawaii. Hefner telephoned her immediately to plead for her understanding and forgiveness. They talked for a long time, but Barbi insisted on her need to get away from the Mansion to think things over and said she was going to stay in Hawaii for at least a week. Hefner waited unhappily for her return, telephoning constantly. When she got back there was an emotional reunion, but Barbi announced that she was going to find her own apartment in Beverly Hills so that she could have some independence, although she promised not to date other men. She said she still loved him and would move back into the Mansion in time. With this, Hefner had to be content.

Leaving instructions for flowers to be sent to Barbi's new apartment every day, he returned to Chicago, to discover that Karen was strangely cool and remote. She was finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the stress of competing for Hefner's affections and the loneliness of the Mansion when he was away. She desperately wanted to believe that she was the most important person in his life, that she was the one he preferred, but it was hard to

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# EXTRACT

forget that bitter jibe: "You're just the one he fucks!"

After the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, Hefner insisted that a security guard accompany Karen every time she left the Mansion, a sensible precaution, no doubt, which also enabled Hefner to keep tabs on what she was doing and where she was going. One day, Karen slipped out of the Mansion unobserved and disappeared. Her absence was not noticed until evening, when Hefner came out of an editorial meeting and could not find her. The Mansion was searched room by room, but by midnight she had still not been found. Hefner was stricken.

Someone said she might have gone to see her friend, Nanci Heitner, a Bunny who lived in the Lincoln Park area. Hefner put a coat on over his pyjamas and set out in a limousine, with two guards, for Lincoln Park. There were no names on the bells outside the apartment block where Heitner lived. Hefner rang them all and when the front door buzzed and clicked open, he went inside and shouted up the stairwell: "This is Hugh Hefner. Is Karen Christy up there?" When there was no response he began banging on each of the doors. He found Nanci Heitner on the second floor – she was alone.

Karen telephoned her friend Nanci a few minutes later and said she had to talk to her. They arranged to meet in a nearby bar, the Four Torches, where Karen sobbed for two hours over Hefner. Nanci's advice was to leave him; it was clear, she said, there was no future in their relationship. Karen tearfully agreed but as they walked back to Nanci's apartment, Hefner stepped from his limousine, which was parked outside, and ran across to her with tears in his eyes. Karen began to cry again as they hugged each other and Hefner gently led her back to the limousine. Nanci Heitner shrugged and returned alone to her apartment.

After this incident, Hefner did his best to convince Karen to stay. He took her on a holiday to Acapulco and when she went back to Texas to visit her family, he offered to fly down to Dallas in the *Big Bunny* to pick her up and meet her folks, a gesture designed to reassure her of his sincerity. Karen gathered various aunts, uncles and cousins at Dallas airport to await the arrival of the great black jet. As it circled out of the sun and touched down with a faint puff of smoke from each wheel, a sizeable crowd had assembled to gawk at this famous aeroplane and speculate at the nature of the revels that undoubtedly occurred within its sleek, black body. Hefner jumped down the steps as soon as the jet stopped and walked across the tarmac to where Karen was waiting in a skimpy mini skirt and T-shirt. He shook hands politely with her assembled relatives, chatted amiably for a bit, posed for a picture, then walked her back to the plane, which hauled up its steps and turned back towards the runway.

**NONE OF THESE DRAMAS were mentioned in *Playboy* which continued to present Hef as the man who had discovered the secret of eternal enjoyment. He was even the subject of a *Playboy* interview which raved 'like his legend, Hefner is larger than life'.**

All Hefner's efforts were to prove fruitless. Karen had met a young man in Dallas and the prospect of a simple, straightforward relationship of the kind ordinarily enjoyed by girls of her age highlighted her unhappiness and disaffection with her life in the Playboy Mansion. Back in Chicago, she began secretly packing up her possessions and sending them home to Texas. She 'lent' the white Lincoln to a friend for a couple of days. One afternoon she said she wanted to go shopping. A chauffeur brought a limousine round to the front door and Karen stepped out into North State Street Parkway with a security guard at her side. First stop was a boutique in Rush Street. While the guard and the chauffeur waited outside, Karen went into the shop and out through a back door, along an alley to a parallel street, where she hailed a taxi. An hour later, Karen Christy and her friend Nanci Heitner were well away from Chicago, heading south in the white Lincoln, on Route 57, bound for Texas.

None of these dramas were mentioned in the pages of *Playboy* magazine, which continued to present Hef as the man who had discovered the secret of eternal enjoyment. In the 20th anniversary issue of the magazine, published in January 1974, Hefner was the subject of the *Playboy Interview*, an assignment which apparently occupied the interviewer – freelance writer Larry Dubois – for no less than six months.

The result was *Playboy* at its self-indulgent worst. The editors proclaimed themselves well pleased with Mr Dubois's efforts. "He saw," they unblushingly noted, "all this complex man's facets and explored, more thoroughly than we dared hope, his thinking."

Mr Dubois himself, in the preamble before the interview, despaired of finding the words to describe the ineffable bliss of being in the presence of the editor-publisher. Being around him, he recorded, was a "forceful, funny, absolutely extraordinary experience. Like his legend, Hefner is larger than life. . .an elusive, contradictory, sometimes maddening, sometimes just mad genius." He had 'all the facility and polish of an uncommonly shrewd politician' and, but for his 'tremendous reserve', he 'could be a very successful stand-up comic'. Moreover, "in many ways he is an even more remarkable figure than his legend. . .the man is 47 but his energy is staggering. . .his powers of concentration are – well -- overwhelming. . .His mind is so quick, so totally focussed . . . an incredibly compelling personality."

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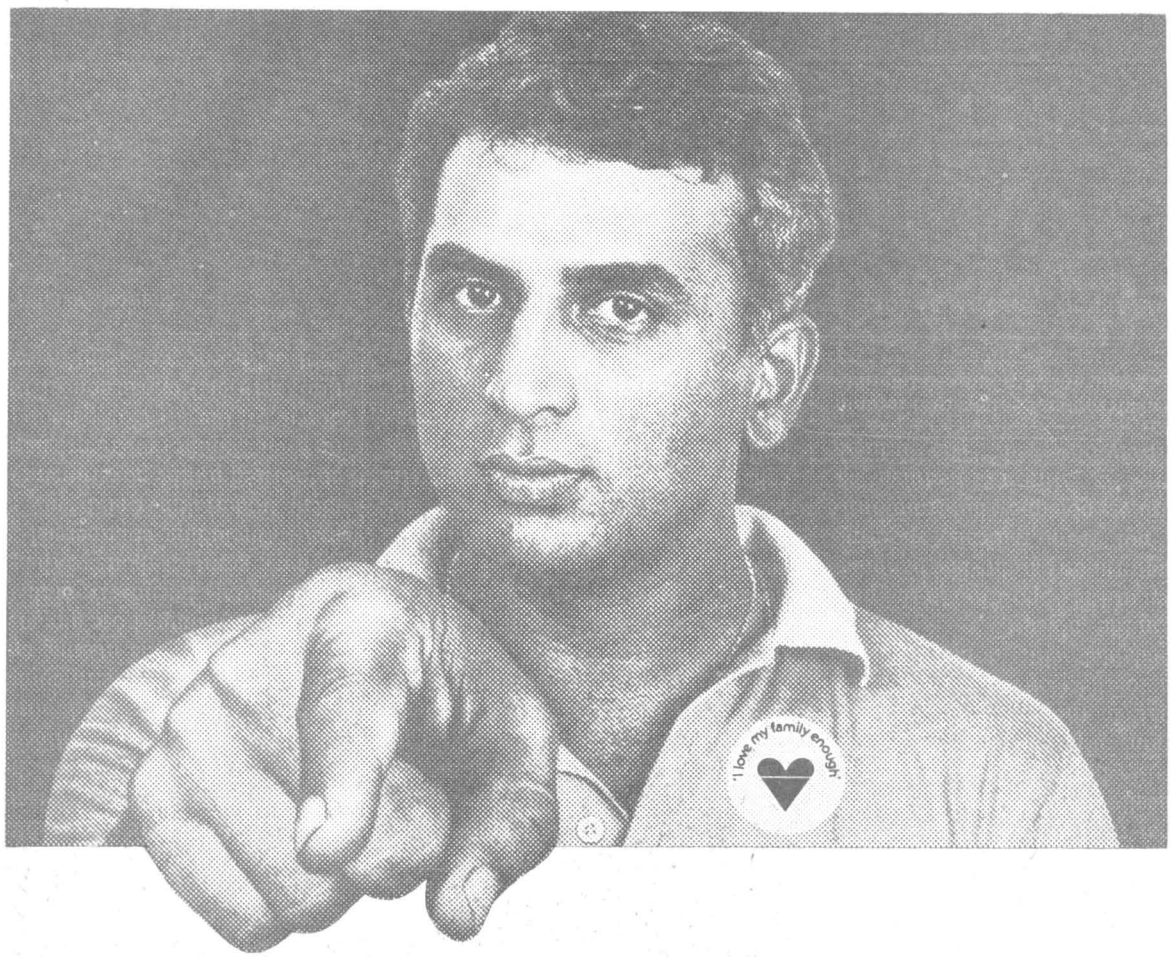


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Guest Column/by K S Venkateswaran

# THE PARIS CONVENTION DEBATE

**THE DEBATE ON** the desirability of India acceding to the Paris Convention for international patent protection has been riddled with so many myths and fallacies that the first task of any dispassionate analyst would be to separate fact from fiction.

A typical exposition of the case against signing the Paris Convention (see **Imprint**, January 1986) would, besides invoking the usual emotive pleas rooted in anti-business rhetoric, include the following arguments:

- that the Convention, established as it was, over 100 years ago, is an anachronism today, given the rapid technological developments that have taken place in the intervening decades;
- that only a handful of 'rapacious multinationals' of Western origin are benefited by the Convention;
- that accession to the Convention by developing countries like India would virtually toll the death-knell of indigenous industry;
- that the Convention, biased as it intrinsically is in favour of 'private' rights, is wholly impervious to considerations of public interest;
- that, in the Indian context, accession to the Convention would be irreconcilable with domestic legislation on the subject.

Much of the opposition to the proposed reform on patents law has emanated, not from radicals, spouting anti-business polemics, but from businessmen. As Milton Friedman so perceptively observed, "The business community, despite its rhetoric, has always been a major enemy of truly free enterprise."

Even a cursory examination of the arguments being advanced by the opponents of reform would reveal that they are a garbled collection of surmises borrowed from myths long since exploded. Fashionable though it may be for those with a vested interest in perpetuating the *status quo* to assail the Paris Convention as an antiquated piece of colonial legislation, they would do well to remember that the Convention has, during the 100-odd years of its operation, succeeded in fostering technical innovation around the world.

**TO ARGUE, THEREFORE,** against the Paris Convention on the grounds that it is 'antiquated' is to fall into the oft-repeated error of equating change with progress. Such an argument, additionally, betrays an appalling ignorance of the place intellectual property rights occupy in a pluralistic set-up founded on the ideals of democracy and freedom. As one eminent authority on the subject explained many years ago, "In private enterprise economies, a patent system represents a judicious compromise. On the one hand, it is a recognition that technological innovation, which is seen as the way to economic growth and social prosperity, cannot be left to the stimulus of market competition alone. On the other hand, it leaves the added stimulus to be determined by demands of the market rather than by the apparatus of the State, through rewards or grants of some kind."

This ideal has been distorted beyond recognition by an ill-conceived legislation like the Indian Patents Act 1970. Like all radical measures, this piece of legislation was initiated with great fanfare and greater euphoria about its alleged potential to usher in an era of progress in the area of intellectual property rights in India.

Representing a marked departure from the country's earlier approach to patent protection, the 1970 Act introduced changes which were as radical as they were far-reaching. The main features of the new legislation are: a drastic reduction in the term of patent protection, conferment of wide and untrammelled powers on the government to grant 'compulsory licences' to anyone making an application (including those already holding voluntary licences from the patent owner), grant of rights to the government (including commercial government undertakings and 'any person' authorised by the government) to use or even acquire a patent, narrowing down of the area of patent protection, artificial expansion of the concept of 'licences of right', weakening

*K S Venkateswaran, Editor of* Freedom First, *is a frequent contributor to* **Imprint**.

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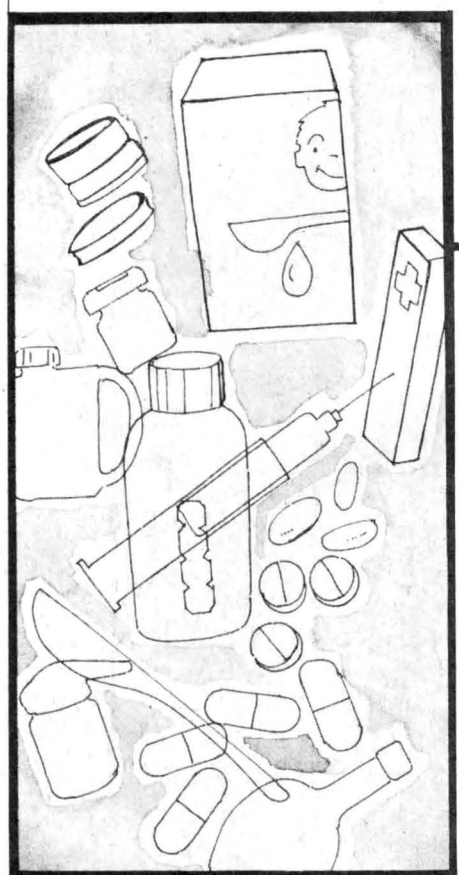


**It is fallacious to assume that multinationals achieve pre-eminence in their respective fields only because of patent protection. It is their enterprise and willingness to invest in research and development that is responsible for this.**

of the patent enforcement system, etc. Contrary to the predictions of the sponsors of these drastic changes, their cumulative impact over the past decade-and-a-half has been a significant erosion of intellectual property rights, with consequent debilitating effects on industrial development in the country.

The opponents of India's accession to the Paris Convention believe that any strengthening of the patents system can only lead to 'domination' by large, rapacious multinational conglomerates in the local market. At least in the Indian context, the argument (about domination by transnational corporations) falls by the wayside for two unassailable reasons.

First, it is fallacious to assume that the so-called multinationals achieve pre-eminence in their respective fields only because of the patent protection afforded to them for their research-based products and processes. In fact, what distinguishes these corporations from their less successful competitors is their enterprise and willingness to invest colossal sums of money in research and development activities. Is it not just and equitable, therefore, that these corporations be allowed to enjoy the fruits of their enterprise and willingness to take risks?

Secondly, the assumption that pre-eminence in their respective fields would automatically and inevitably enable these corporations to 'dominate' a local market, is highly questionable, especially in countries like our own, where every aspect of business activity (particularly that of companies of foreign origin) is subject to stringent and pervasive control.

The benefits, on the other hand, that accrue from allowing transnational corporations to function with a reasonable degree of freedom within broadly set national objectives are enormous. Since the main targets of the present attack against 'multinationals' have been the 40-odd pharmaceutical manufacturing companies of foreign origin which pioneered the development of this vital sector of industry in India, it would be instructive to base our analysis on the experience gained by the functioning of these companies during the four decades of their operations in this country.

The irresponsible babble about 'exploitation' cannot, for instance, conceal the fact that the multinational pharmaceutical industry's innovativeness alone has been the source of nearly all important advances in modern medicine, of which people in the so-called developing world have been the major beneficiaries. Who can deny that in the 15 years between 1950 and 1965 alone, countries of the Third World saw a leap in the average life expectancy of their populations equal to that achieved by Western Europe in 70 years, from 1800 to 1870? This, in spite of the incredibly high costs involved in discovering and developing new drugs (current estimates place the figure at around $ 70 million, spent over eight to ten years). Experience has clearly proved that only a regular and continuous transfer of technology through subsidiaries with equity participation can ensure that the fruits of international research and development reach the underdeveloped countries without any appreciable time-lag.

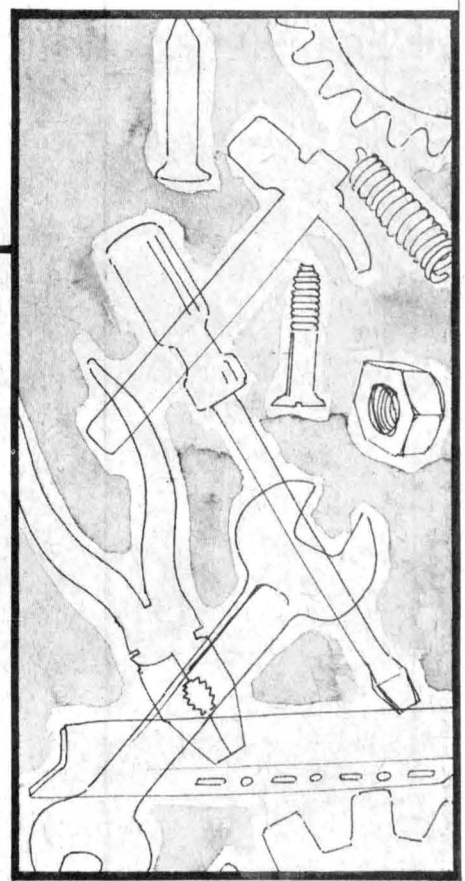
Irrefutable evidence of the adverse impact that a weakening of the patent system has on the transfer of technology is provided by the statistics relating to the number of patent applications filed in India ever since the radical legislation of 1970 came into force. Whereas no less than 5,429 applications were filed in 1966, the figure dropped to about 2,500 in 1972 and to a pitiable 1,800 in 1982 (compare this with the relevant figures for Japan – 86,046 in 1966 and 191,020 in 1980). As one British executive observed in this context, "What will certainly not foster the import of technology into developing countries is their opting out of the world patent system, as proposed by some developmentalists. This will only make suppliers of technology much more jealous of their expensively-won knowledge and transfers will dry up."

That transfers have indeed dried up, at least in the field of chemicals, pharmaceuticals, etc, was confirmed by the Secretary in the Department of Science and Technology, at the World Intellectual Property Organisation's (WIPO) 1977 symposium held in Colombo. The new Patents Act, said the Secretary, "...has resulted in a situation where patents relating to these areas, namely chemicals, drugs and food articles, are no longer being presented for registration."

The situation would not have been so dire if transfer of technology

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BHATLEKAR

**As crippling in their effect as compulsory licences are 'licences of right' which allow any party holding it to use the patent as though he were the owner himself, depriving the patent owner of his hard-won rights over the invention.**



from abroad had been the only casualty of our flawed patents legislation. Contrary to the ecstatic expectations of its proponents, indigenous research, too, has been hard hit by the 1970 Act. Apart from the fact that research and development expenditure in India as a percentage of Gross National Product (GNP) has been abysmally low compared to that in countries like Canada, France, Japan, the Netherlands, West Germany, UK and USA, the rate of growth of research activities in absolute terms, too, has been singularly disappointing. One indigenous entrepreneur put his finger on the hub of the matter when he said: "Few firms will risk their money on basic research without the incentive of a reasonable protection for their discoveries."

**A MORE DETAILED** examination of some of the particularly offensive features of the 1970 Act would reveal the absurd lengths to which vague notions of 'social justice' have been carried by the advocates of diluted patent rights. The provisions relating to 'compulsory licences' clearly take the cake in this regard. While the concept of compulsory licensing is not unknown to other democratic countries, it has taken a singularly extreme and oppressive form in India. Not only are the grounds on which a third party can obtain a compulsory licence formulated so broadly as to make the patent owner's right a virtual mockery, but it is even possible for a party who has already obtained technology from the patent owner under a voluntary licence (agreement) to apply for and obtain a compulsory licence on terms obviously more favourable than under the voluntary licence. Worse still, such a grantee of a compulsory licence can obtain an order barring anyone, including the patent owner and existing licencees (if any) from using the patent.

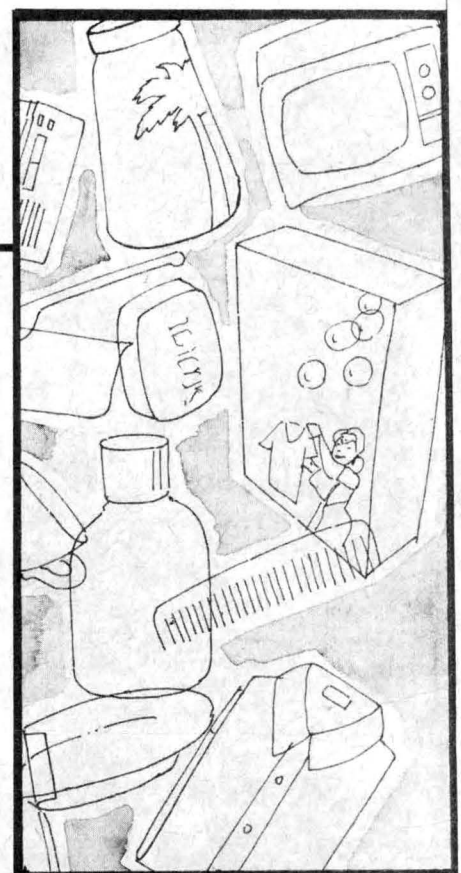
The oppressive nature of these provisions is compounded by the fact that, in sharp contrast to legislation elsewhere in the democratic world, the Indian law allows the holder of a compulsory licence not only to locally manufacture the product covered by the patent, but even *import* products made by the patented process. And to top it all, the Act enables any person, within a period of about two years from the grant of a compulsory licence, to apply for revocation of the patent on the same grounds as those on which a compulsory licence is granted, thereby effectively reducing a patent owner's rights.

Compulsory licences are also economically counter-productive in the modern world where economies of scale make production in several widely dispersed centres unviable while catering to international markets. The fear, therefore, among industrial circles that compulsory licensing laws may spell the doom of global trade is far from imaginary.

As crippling in their effect as compulsory licences are 'licences of right', another feature of the Indian Patents Act of 1970 which is clearly harsh and inequitable. Obtainable on the same grounds as a compulsory licence, a licence of right would allow any party holding it to use the patent as if he were the owner himself. All that an applicant needs to do to secure such a licence is to allege that 'the reasonable requirements of the public' with respect to the particular invention are not being satisfied; or that the invention is not available to the public at a reasonable price. The Controller of Patents can then issue a licence of right at his discretion, and thus deprive the patent owner of his hard won rights over the invention. What is worse, in the case of products and processes in certain important fields like chemicals, food, pharmaceuticals, veterinary products, pesticides and agrochemicals, patents are automatically deemed to be subject to 'licences of right' on the expiration of five years from the date of sealing of the patent.

**ANOTHER SERIOUS** drawback of the Indian patents legislation relates to the *term* of protection available to patented inventions, namely, 14 years, which is further reduced, in the case of chemicals, food and pharmaceuticals, to five years from the date of sealing of the patent (or seven years from the date of filing of the complete specification, whichever is less). Not only is this position grotesquely incongruous with international practice (in UK and most EEC countries, for instance, patented inventions enjoy protection for a period of 20 years), but it is unimaginably harsh especially in the highly research-intensive fields of chemical and pharmaceutical

**The real loser is the Indian consumer who, despite being almost totally free of ideological predilections, is deprived of the fruits of modern science and technology for purely ideological reasons.**



manufacture. Representations made by the Indian pharmaceutical industry over the years have repeatedly stressed that it took no less than eight to ten years (often longer) for a new drug to be developed, and another couple of years before it became marketable after complicated bureaucratic clearance. Since applications for patents are generally filed at a very early stage of the drug's development – as soon as positive pharmacological results became available – the period of patent protection, however weak, would be likely to expire even before the product is launched commercially.

As if these inequities were not enough, the 1970 Act confers on the government such wide powers to use or even acquire patents as are inconceivable in any non-totalitarian polity. Its sovereign capacity apart, the government can, even for a purely commercial purpose (through a department or a government corporation or company, for instance) use a patented invention without the consent of the patent owner. The power extends not only to local manufacture, but also to importation of products covered by a patented invention. It can be exercised even by a stranger who is 'authorised' by the government. The Act further enables the government to acquire a patent owner's right for a 'public purpose'.

If there is one person who has been the real loser in the bargain, it is the hapless Indian consumer who, despite being almost totally free of ideological predilections, is nevertheless deprived of the fruits of modern science and technology for purely ideological reasons. Millions of Indians continue to suffer from dreadful diseases even as their brethren in the more ideologically pragmatic parts of the world enjoy the benefits of longer, healthier lives.

A timely warning in this context, from an altogether improbable source, is worth recalling. In a recent book entitled *Prescriptions For Death* which is a bitter attack on the multinational pharmaceutical industry, Milton Silverman, Philip Lee and Mia Lydecker, three academics who are not exactly known for their admiration for the industry, have this to say about patent protection in the area of drugs and pharmaceuticals: "It seems to us that wiping out patent protection for new drugs would be a short-term boon for some countries but a long-term disaster for the world. It would effectively choke off much if not most of the industry's research and the development of better drugs. . . Although non-industry institutions have contributed magnificently to basic research, they have turned out few important products. Certainly in difficult economic times, with tight budgets, few government agencies or university research centres would be willing to take the gamble of investing the enormous resources and the many years now required in modern drug development."

It should be reasonably apparent, therefore, that much of the opposition to the Paris Convention stems not from valid economic or moral objections, but either from misguided notions of 'national interest', or deep-rooted ideological bias, or sheer self-interest. Accession to the Convention, especially for technology-starved nations like India, cannot but confer benefits which far outweigh the risks, real or imagined. By internationalising the patenting process, the Convention has undeniably gone a long way in increasing efficiency and reducing costs of research and development on a global scale.

One final point which remains to be made is about the desirability of India signing the Paris Convention. The Convention is not, as its opponents aver time and again, a piece of legislation that would automatically reduce domestic law on the subject – the 1970 Act – to a cipher. The Minister of State for Industry and Company Affairs has said that, according to WIPO, which administers the Paris Convention, the Indian Patents Act 1970 is fully compatible with the Convention – a debatable point – but which should nevertheless silence those critics who argue that nothing short of a repeal of the 1970 Act would be necessary for India's accession to the Convention.

Against this background, those of us who cherish the values of truly free enterprise would do well to heed the advice of Milton Friedman: "We cannot expect existing businesses to promote legislation that would harm them. It is up to the rest of us to promote the public interest by fostering competition across the board and recognise that being pro-free enterprise may sometimes require that we be anti-existing business." ♦

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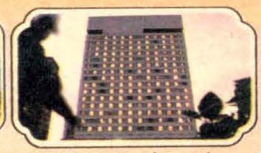

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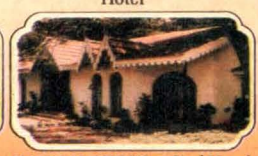

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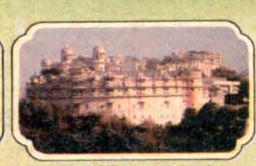

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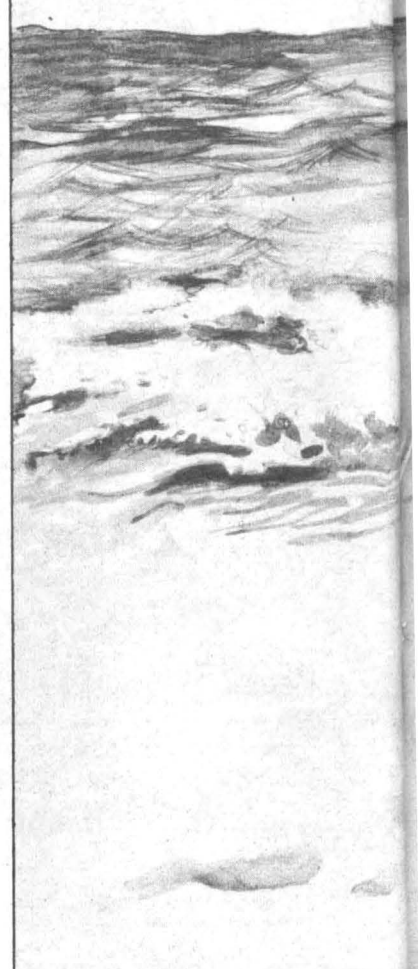
FICTION

# MIDNIGHT SOLDIERS

**By Vishwapriya L Iyengar**

*"I had an ocean, What made of? Good lord—*
*just an ocean! I had a son. I had a giant ..."*

*— FREDERICO GARCIA LORCA*



SEA-GULLS FLEW in straight lines. The sky was a hot pale silver light. Blue-green waves smashed against the deserted shore lining the sands with fine slivers of broken shells. In the distance the black blobs were curving boat-like on the waves.

The thatched walls of her hut were slipping away at an angle as though they no longer remembered why they had been there. Tony slept sunk in warm noon sands. Matilda watched the sleeping man from the corner of her eye as she unlocked a small black tin box. She opened a cloth pouch and counted some notes.

Tony's mouth was open, drooling, a little vomit had dried on his chin. Even now, vapours of arrack hung thickly in the air. Matilda slid a tiny key behind the oblong picture of the Ailing Madonna. Angels in lacy white gowns swirled around her. They were telling Mary, Matilda thought, about the grand home in heaven.

Only a scrap of lungi covered his body. In one hand he clutched a crochet tack and his head had rolled over a bundled net. Yesterday, 500 net-eyes had torn. He had to mend the net before the evening boats went out to sea. Yetta, their baby daughter, slept in the crook of her father's arm. Tony grunted and shifted, the baby too, moved.

Matilda ran through the burning sands, her outstretched toes, her callused heels stamping flight. The boats were looking bigger moving towards the shore. Matilda watched, her eyes cutting the mist of distance, her palms already weighing the silver bellies of firm fish. Listening to the wind, she reined in her impatience and stood waiting, letting frothy waves wash her feet.

Sweat slipped down from her black-brown waist and clamped the red-black

*Vishwapriya Iyengar's story* The Library Girl *was published in* **Imprint**, *June 1985.*

ILLUSTRATION BY NITA BHOSALE

# Give her the gift of time

Remember when you had just married. She always seemed to be waiting for you to come home. Peeping out shyly. Surrounded by her new family.

Remember that first movie you took her to. The long walks ... Spending hours together. Getting to know each other. Those were the good times.

Then came parenthood. Astonishing the amount of work and time small infants demand.

Suddenly, she had no time left. Between the nappies and the midnight feeds she fit in the cooking for 3-meals-a-day. Shopped daily, to not waste a thing. Washed. Cleaned. Ironed. Stitched. Looked after your parents. Even you!

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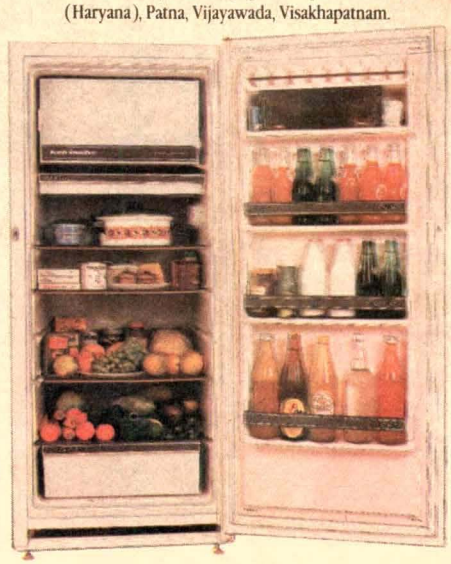

Mutual-4177

checks to her taut thighs. She dug her feet into the soggy earth and moved shells around with her toes. Salim, the auctioneer, was already at the shore. He folded up his lungi and lit a *bidi*. A mangy village dog flopped around him, licking his ankles and more women clustered around. Bleached baskets yawned empty and in the waiting eyes the homing boats sailed nearer. Salim threw fish bones like arrows. The drowsy dog ran and collapsed on every bone, then he would turn around and bare his teeth at Salim, wagging a matted tail. He was hoping that Salim would throw him some little fishes when the boats came.

The boats came in, each within a short time of the other. Matilda wandered, peering, waiting for her voice to scream numbers. To wrest in the giddy spiral of the noonday bidding. Salim stared at her with red dead-fish eyes and repeated the last bid, his smile a splinter taunting her reckless spirit. She turned away. More boats would come and then she would get fish cheap. Today she had only 30 rupees. For six months she had tried with an iron will not to borrow money from Salim. But Tony had already sunk them. Last year one whole log had to be replaced for the catamaran. It must have cost 700 rupees.

Tony could never repay his debts, in the end it always fell on Matilda. He did not even give her money for rice. He told her he was returning the money his father had borrowed from another moneylender, not Salim. The year of her marriage, his net had been destroyed by a trawler at sea and she had given him her gold bangle to buy another. Now they no longer spoke about their debts. His drunken brawls with moneylenders had become a daily storm that she had learnt to live with.

Other fish vendors were walking, running away with baskets full of fish. With fish on their heads they forgot everything. They ran for miles, ten miles, sometimes more, to the market. Only these days fish was expensive, like everything else. It was with great restraint that she was able to put away money for the auction. Paul's medicines and magic brews for Yetta left her with very little money to invest in fish. Staring at the empty sea Matilda prayed fervently for a wonderful catch, for then the fish would be very cheap.

Snivelling and wheezing, Paul came towards her. He wrapped his long thin arms around her slender waist. Babbling warm words on her perspiring skin, he lisped that he was hungry and hesitantly asked for 50 paise. Matilda turned away from the vacant grey-green sea and tripped on her empty basket . . . a dark anger gripped her thoughts whenever she saw her elder son. His arms and legs were thin. His face and body swollen and bruised. The child kissed his mother's waist and left faint squiggles of green mucus, he pouted his lips and his round eyes shone in anticipation. Matilda slapped the water bloated cheek. From the back rows of huts women walked shorewards. Crows flew low and swift, heralding more boats. Salim turned to her with his red dead-fish eyes. She screamed, guttural and hysterical: "He is lying. He never buys food with the money I give him. He only buys sweets which flies eat. My son is not a fly." Salim was smoothening out the creases from the crumpled notes, the dog was licking away salt from his slippered feet and he kicked the dog away. She realised he had not been looking at her, nobody had; Paul was playing a game with tamarind seeds.

Paul was five years old. He had been sick a long time. Only two months ago the sisters had told her that he had asthma and a disease in his kidneys which could not be cured. She had to wait for his death. The doctors in the big hospital in Trivandrum told her the same. Someone had said that big money, the kind that Matilda would never see in her life, might cure him. Money to buy organs from dying people. "Forget it," they said. "Try and understand, everybody has to die. Some young and some old. Heaven is, after all, a grand place with good food." Stubbornly, she refused to give in. The saints had to save her. Perhaps Tony would catch sharks – many, many sharks which would fetch a lot of money. Money to save Paul. Money to buy many, many kidneys. Carrying the grown child in her arms, she had walked for days to the other end of the coast to visit a famous shrine of the Madonna of Good Health. She prayed for three days without stopping to eat or sleep. She would never give up hope. Only his wheezing watery greed made her blind with anguish.

A catamaran was tossing over the banks. The tide was high and the men were pulling the boat with difficulty. They handed the basket over to Salim and Matilda ran towards him. Salim carried the basket, his eyes reflecting the diamond grill scales of a blue-grey fish. Pulling on his *bidi*, a twig of ash fell on the midnight scales. Every fish was as large as a grown man's arm. Salim pressed a long fingernail into its flesh. Blood gushed out in red hot squirts – it was very fresh. He dipped it in sea water and smeared it with sand. Matilda picked up another, she stroked the long fat creature with the palm of her hand, she moved her fingers along the stiff feathery fins. Its mouth was open and the cavity ribbed in circles of orange and red and the tough veins of old blood – black. Sometimes, on each of these big fish, she could make a profit of ten rupees, but today she could not even open the bidding.

Fathima was peering into the basket and her hands clasped a fish tightly. Matilda caught her throat and hissed: "You whore woman, leave my fish alone." Fathima slapped Matilda hard on her face, caught her hair and dragged her down. Matilda twisted Fathima's arm and the older women shrieked in pain. Salim threw them apart. Panting, a countdown of hurried breathing, and the bidding began. She should not have said that. Salim provoked Fathima to begin the bidding at 80. Ridiculous. She felt her throat dry and she was shouting numbers that were meaningless. "Ninety, 100, 130." Fathima stared

at her, bitterness hammering the black point of her eyes into Matilda's guilt. Salim looked at her with his red dead-fish eyes. Matilda undid the damp knot and counted 30 old notes into his outstretched hand and told him she would give him the hundred tomorrow. The weight of the fish basket on her head was her equilibrium. She felt secure and real. Women with fish were not allowed to ride in buses, so she had to walk 15 miles to the market.

The other vendors had already reached the ferry, she must hurry. Matilda walked quickly. As she passed the sweet shop she saw Paul, his eyes fixed like a spider on the glass jar, the pink and yellow egg-sweets ballooning into a frightening fantasy. She pressed a coin into his wafer-thin palm. His smile faded into the dusty horizon of his mother's preoccupation.

From the vacant paths that narrowly slit rows of thatched huts, she could see the late noon boats breaking through the high tide and moving into the deep sea for the night fishing. Tony. Tony drunk. Tony sick and vituperative. Tony corroded with sea water. Tony with 500 torn net-eyes. She turned back home.

The thatched walls were slipping on the sands, each time she had to bend lower to enter. The fumes of arrack were as thick as a whole distillery smashed to smithereens on one man's soul.

She held his smooth mahogany arms and shook him. Flies scattered from his sleeping face and studded the torn coconut matting like nails. His hands were thrown apart like Jesus. She crossed her heart . . . asking forgiveness. God was no drunkard. She slapped him hard. Startled, his eyes opened like a child's into a nightmare. His lips and teeth meshed in a cobweb of stale saliva. "When will you mend your net? When will you go to sea? After all the fish have been taken by other men? After your children and woman have starved to death?"

Rubbing the stupor from his eyes, his lips warped a smile. She stared at him, enraged and humiliated. She watched him fumble, groan, twisting his perfect body into a thousand trivial distortions. When at last he was able to stand up they stared at each other with the sharp white electric flare of ritualised hatred.

The voices awoke the baby and she began to whimper. Tears moved in soft rivulets over tiny granules of gold sand that were embedded in her cheeks. She turned over on her belly and wriggled a pair of oval bottoms. She discharged a grey gruel clotted with dark blood. Matilda snatched the child away in distress and impatience wishing that there was some way of staying home, away from the market route.

Yetta had had loose motions for days. The *mantravadi* said a lizard was eating her stomach. She was too small for exorcism and so he had prescribed a herbal brew, but she had not grown any better. She had not taken Yetta to the doctors because she did not believe that those who had given up on Paul could save other human beings. She was also afraid of their predictions. They had told her to care more for Yetta because she would live. But she could not cut love like a fish and divide it between life and death. Matilda threw sand over the excreta and threw the congealed mass outside. She dropped the galvanised iron bucket into the cement well and yanked out the rope in rough jerky movements. Sharp metal rims scraped the mossy walls and she washed the baby in green water. Her basket of fish lay waiting on a stump. She was late for the market. Tony stood watching her and Paul sucked noisily. The egg-sweet made a lump in his bloated cheek and pink saliva dribbled from his mouth.

Covering the basket with bark, she saw that the blood had hardened where Salim had cut the fish with his nail. She began to run, wide, the tendons of her thighs stretching like blades. It was fortunate that she had not invested in sardines or mackerels of which there were quite a lot these days. There would still be a market for her big fish. She walked fast, faster. Matilda felt that dull glow of delight in an unexpected speculation. These days her spirit did not gamble. The fight with Fathima had sent the blood coursing to her brain. She had desperately wanted to sell the basket of big fish today. She was glad that Fathima had started the fight. She did not think Fathima was a whore or even that it was such a bad thing to be a whore. Fathima had helped so much at Paul's first Communion. But she did not want her to take the fish today. She was glad that Fathima had helped to start the fight. Salim was a dog. A poisonous dog. She had felt violated when he had intervened. If she was not a Christian she would curse him, she still could, sometime . . . when God wasn't looking. If she had a good sale, she would buy a banana for Fathima's youngest daughter.

Tony dragged his net under the fan shadow of the solitary coconut palm and bent down to work. Between tacks he slurped arrack, throwing back his head to savour the rush of alcohol. A shield of sunlight metalled the child's bloated chest and he sucked, wheezed, sucked and wheezed. "*Aya* Paul, come here and sit next to me. You don't respect me because I drink, huh? You know why I drink, huh? I drink because there is no fish in the sea. See those trawler boats? They take away all the fish and kill the eggs. Because there is no fish for the fishermen those fellows are making arrack instead of fishing. Because they are making arrack instead of fishing, I am drinking instead of fishing. Ha, reason is smart, no?" He slapped the boy's back. "Tell your mother. She will slice your tongue into ribbons." Paul smiles. "You know why we paint our chickens pink? So that vultures don't recognise them. Poor little Paul, you are stupid. Your poor mother, she wanted you to go to school and study to become a bus driver, not some stupid fisherman. I don't care. Kaddallamma is our mother, for her any son of mine is good enough. Go to sea. The sea always has a place for us

and our children.

Matilda rubbed the aching tissues of her insteps on the chips of granite that floored the black tar road. She loved to hear the big rumble that buses made and even the delicate squeal of the occasional car. They made the roads a little dirty, splashing water and dust around. Still, they were nice. Nobody moved when those came, they always stood in corners, leaning against walls, watching the huge round wheels turning. A blue bus went past and Matilda watched with a flickering pause of pleasure. Some seven months ago, when Yetta was only two months old, a social worker had come visiting the village. She was fair and pretty. She had worn a white starched sari with a thread border of mango leaves in black. She had worn black-and-white bangles. Tony had gone fishing when the lady had visited her. Matilda was glad that Tony was away. The lady might have got upset if Tony was drunk. Yes, she was glad he was not at home. The lady spoke very softly and clearly and had told her intelligent things. She told Matilda that they were all human beings who must live well and be healthy, earn cleverly, spend reasonably and save carefully. Husband and wife should not fight, they should love each other and Matilda had agreed heartily. The lady had told her that they should have few children, two children, so that we could spend time and attention in making them as wonderful as human beings should be. The lady showed her photographs of families with only two children. They had chairs made of velvet altar cloth and big pictures of crystal bowls filled with grapes, bananas and pineapples. The girl child's long black hair was caught in blue satin ribbons and she was leaning out of a sunny window looking out at a flower and a bird. The boy's small head was heaped with thick black curls and he was wearing a watch on his smooth broad wrist. He was spinning a top. The photograph had caught the spin in a blur. The mother and father were sitting together on the beautiful chairs drinking tea together, in cups and saucers. "They don't fight," the lady told her. "They love each other." The lady's pictures aroused something reverential in her thin lactating breasts. She went to the big hospital in Trivandrum to have the operation. It wasn't an operation, it was a prayer, a dream of satin ribbons, and of drinking tea together.

She told Tony about it only after she returned from Trivandrum. His eyes contorted with pain, he spluttered for words – spraying her face with angry spittle – a mouth deformed in trying to scream wordless thoughts – about dying wombs and the barren sea mother, Kaddallamma. She could not fathom his fury. Was it rage at some unknown hands turning the secrets of his woman's womb? she asked. He stumbled upon her like a wild animal and beat her with wide palms, a possessed man keeping up the rhythm of his demon. When Matilda had been reduced to the fluid emanations of her anguish he embraced her tightly and fell asleep crying and blabbering, the heavy bones of his chin axing into her chest. The nightmare was never spoken of again.

Lush ferns unfurled in thickets along the river. Matilda stood, cooling her feet, waiting for the ferry. The hot sun draped the lean planes of her shoulder. The slap of water on spade-spooned oars grew louder and she leapt onto the boat. Matilda embraced the big curving basket and hummed a church song.

She paid the boatman and ran, counting the fish in her basket, her excited brain cutting the fish into sharp fractions. She calculated the many permutations and combinations which would determine the price of the day's fish. She prayed that the tiny, trawler boat fish from Quilon or the junk fish from purse-seiners in Cochin would not flood the markets today. Last Monday she had to bring back a whole basket of unsold mackerel. The baby fish from trawlers were going so cheap that she had been unable to sell her fresh, fully grown fish. The iced fish strangled her prices. Until now she had been able to keep Salim at a distance. Salim had a gang of boys who collected debts at any cost. If she was not able to return that hundred tomorrow. . . Her stomach contracted.

When Matilda reached the market, it was already in full swing – anticipation of Easter made transactions brisk. Playful, loud sounds curled the air. Matilda saw her treasured customer walk away in the soft pluth-pluth of rubber slippers. Today she wore a voile sari and fresh flowers. She had purchased pomfret, but had Matilda been there she would certainly have bought some big fish. Her crate stall was at its usual place – flung sideways on the garbage heap. Inside was a litter of light-white kittens. Matilda lifted them out and placed them gently in a broken pitcher that lay atop the heap. She upturned her crate and placed it in the semicircle of the fish market. The women from her village had already sold three-fourths of their fish. She cursed Tony and Yetta. Two other women were selling the big fish but they only had a few pieces left. She smiled as she washed her crate. The absence of the little pools of melting ice pleased her immensely. With a long iron scythe she slashed the fish into chunks and measured them in her palm. The ache in her shoulder blades eased, the ligaments of her thigh slowly throbbed still. She joined the fray, throwing her voice in a few stray notes, and her eyes watched the slow walk of hesitant customers. She jumped onto the unaware customer with the agility of a leopard. She smiled, flashing perfect orange stained teeth and pressed her fish upwards to sweet-smelling palms. The knot of crisp rupees and new coins grew bigger. She began shouting and selling like a gypsy begins to dance.

The hunchbacked beggar came shuffling and Matilda threw a meaty piece affixed to the still glistening eye into the rattling tin. Night spread around the market square and the vendors walked away slowly. Matilda stretched her arms and arched her spine backwards. She yawned. Scarlet stains patterned her crate and one big

fish lay waiting for the nocturnal customer. She peeled tapioca roots and sliced white rims into her basket. Street lights paled against the smoky darkness. Further away, in the main streets, windows lit up sibilant cloaks of intimacy. It was the hour of her loneliness. Wearily clutching the edge of her crate, Matilda lifted herself up and tossed the last fish into the basket. She smoothened the ripples of her lungi and rubbed her sweat with the frayed fabric. Her hands moved massagingly over tired thighs and she pressed the tense roundness of her hips. These days, she looked at her face in the broken jagged bit of mirror and saw age, ghost-like, beginning to weave its thumb-print in fungus silk on her skin. She placed her crate on top of the garbage heap. She gazed at the sealed velvet eyes. One pale grey kitten hung its head out of the broken crack of the earthen pitcher. Gently, Matilda lifted its infant head back into the snug circle of sleeping kittens and sighed.

She walked away from the deserted market square that was marked only by broken crates and rotting vegetables. By dawn, the lepers would have cleared even that. She walked riverwards down a long road to the ferry. Starlight splashed on the coconut palms. The lower branches of yellowed leaves crackled in the breeze and shone more silvery. If she could only cut it now it would be enough to thatch her home. The palms moved their long leaves tantalisingly in the black water. She must thatch her house soon, before the monsoons set in. She would have to pay for the leaves, pay the boy for climbing and pay for the matting. It would cost her 500 rupees at least. Salim? No. She must not ever borrow. By the time Paul grew up, the tree in her yard would have grown tall. He would climb the tree, cut the leaves and weave thatch mats. She would teach him. Church bells echoed a dull bronze clang over the water. Paul would light the evening lamp. He would kneel before Christ and make the sign of the cross. He would say, "Our Father in heaven. . ." He would pray for his father at sea and his mother in the market. She stepped out of the ferry thinking, believing, that God delighted in the prayers of children.

She walked slowly, almost at a leisurely pace. There was rice and perhaps she would take a small cut from the big fish and make a curry. She would dry the rest to sell another day. It had been years since the family had tasted the big fish. The sea sounded very rough, there was a strong gusty breeze and Matilda walked with the breeze bouncing her petticoat. The long road was like a tree trunk which branched into lanes that held many homes like fruit. In the darkness the most pleasing sight was the lamp light glowing through homes. She turned into a side lane, walking faster, her strides growing longer, heart beating louder. . . A withering pain wrung the empty space of her heart as her hut stood dark and silent. Church bells clanged in her skull and her mouth tasted tarnished metal. She hurled herself into the hut. . .a cry of dull remorse uncoiling from her belly. "Paul, you Satan's child, where are you? A thousand curses on your demented brain. What do you want? That your father should drown at sea and I writhe under Salim's knife and you die, eh? Do you care, child? Do you care? Then why have you left your home blind at the hour when God looks at us?" The hut was dense with the child's wheezing and he hid along the scalloped shadows. Her fingers shook as she lit the small kerosene lamp. The long paw of waxy light spread slow and quivering over a sleeping baby. Brown, pale and delicate, the child slept very peacefully in a cradle of sand – in the centre of the hut. The flame flickered and climbed a wooden cross. Bloodless ivory feet crossed, a black nail running through.

Poor little Yetta, how tired she must have been to sleep such sleep. In her small hands she clutched a yellow egg-sweet. Matilda smiled at her elder son whose face was fraught with anxiety. Taking the small key from behind the picture of the Ailing Madonna she unlocked the black tin box and put the money in. His wheezing disturbed the flame. They had told her he would die soon. They had told her to care more for Yetta because she would live. She could not. She could not believe in the certitude of doctors. The saints were older than the doctors. She stroked the smooth brow of the sleeping child. It was cool, cold, the fever had left her at last.

Matilda picked up the big fish and went outside to cut a slice. She placed it on the flat granite stone and picked up her knife. Even now it etched shadowy silver squares. She pressed the knife a line away from the eye, a cool breeze wafted through the doorway . . . cold, and she crept stealthily back into the hut, sweating with ominous fear. Paul sucked and wheezed. She placed her hands over the boy's mouth and nose and bent her ears over the sleeping girl child. She listened long and hard for a sound that did not escape the stillness. She picked up the child and pressed it deep into her breast. Tiny thin arms fell softly out of the mother's embrace.

Her scream cut the silence like a sword. Women came running out of a hundred lamp-lit huts. They rushed towards Matilda, despair touching despair. Fathima held her.

They caught the fading embers of her cry and blew into it – a hundred pain-wrought screams. Without pattern or design they filed into rows of two in a line that grew longer as more women came rushing out of the night's immense branches. Matilda stood at the head, in one gnarled hand she held a fish, in the other, a dead child.

The women wept. The sea smashed against the shore in turgid waves. Somewhere in the depth of the ocean Kaddallamma thrashed around her rocky bed emitting a hollow roar that resounded in the women's cries. Paul wheezed, coughed, wheezed, spluttering his lungs with blood. The sounds mixed.

The long line of midnight soldiers stood transfixed. Where would they burn this fire that always burnt them? ♦

## PAPER TIGERS

# PRIYA TENDULKAR

**Rajani may well be the middle class heroine referred to in our cover story but what of the actress who plays her? VIDHUSHAK argues that she has got far too much personal publicity.**

**THE LOUD** knocking on the door was followed by a roar. It was spine-chilling. With my heart beating fast, I got up slowly and opened the door.

"How dare you practise this discrimination, you wretched MCP?" roared the visitor, her already wide mouth turned wider in a snarl. "I could tear you into little pieces for writing only on paper tigers. In my next television programme I'm going to expose MCPs like you."

My visitor was Priya Tendulkar of *Rajani* fame. And her threat really struck me. How could I have ignored her all these days? And did she really mean it when she threatened to expose so-called MCPs like me?

In the pre-*Rajani* days, all that one knew of Priya was that she was the daughter of the controversial playwright, Vijay Tendulkar, and that she occasionally modelled and acted in Marathi films and plays. All this only confirmed our accepted theory that paper tigers (and tigresses) are not born but made.

That moment arrived for Priya when film director Basu Chatterjee decided to make his debut on the idiot box with *Rajani.* According to filmland reports, Padmini Kolhapure was first offered the role but refused it because of prior commitments. Basuda's second choice was Priya Tendulkar, and Rajani was born.

Let's admit it. Among the crassly stupid sponsored programmes on Doordarshan (can any sane mind produce such horrors as *Karamchand, Bawaji Ka Bioscope* or *Idhar Udhar*?), *Rajani* initially appeared to be different. The individual versus the establishment theme – be it the

*Vidhushak is a regular contributor to this column. His last victim was Ravi Shastri.*


ILLUSTRATION BY BHATLEKAR

# PAPER TIGERS

**The TV serial's popularity obscured the fact that most of Rajani's exploits would never turn out the way they do in real life. Both the approach and the solution are too simplistic. Does Ms Tendulkar really believe in what she's doing?**

gas company, telephone department, taxi service or pharmaceutical industry – did have an appeal as Rajani began to take on these Goliaths one after the other. David's weapon was the slingshot, Rajani's her big mouth.

The common man's heroine talked her way out of difficult situations caused by rude taxi-drivers, corrupt government officials and greedy school trustees. And then came public adulation. *Rajani* clubs sprouted in many towns, people began writing letters to newspapers and magazines about how they did a *Rajani* by talking back to a cabbie or challenging a telephone department official. Glossies featured Rajani on the cover, parents named their daughters after her and *India Today* carried a story on her quoting communications expert N L Chowla, behavioural scientists and other bigwigs.

The middle class had finally found its champion. And in the process, Priya Tendulkar had become a star. While one can understand the feeling of retribution the common man felt when Rajani solved everyday problems with almost magical ease, the glorification of the actress herself was beyond comprehension. Especially since, by her own admission, she is no Rajani off-screen. The no-nonsense Rajani admitted that her parents were terrified of letting her travel alone in a taxi after the television episode that attacked taxi-drivers. Besides, said Ms Tendulkar, she did not mind her mother paying a little extra for a gas cylinder. Recently, too, the actress created a minor scandal by modelling with similar products for rival companies.

Unfortunately, television viewers cannot distinguish television crusades from real life as well as Ms Tendulkar can. So, both the actress and the character climbed the popularity charts, despite the fact that most of Rajani's exploits would never turn out the way they do in real life.

If the clerk in the telephone department does not co-operate, she barges into the office of the General Manager, brushing aside the peon as if he were a fleck of dust. Try doing that in real life! Or try lecturing to mobs, intent on breaking the queues at the bus-stands and pushing each other as the bus arrives. Try challenging the gas agent and his shady cronies; you won't get your supplies for months.

The villains in *Rajani,* unlike those in real life, always have a change of heart and reform. The school's managing trustee, after listening to Rajani, is deeply moved, forgets everything about donations, and meekly admits everyone recommended by our paper tigress. The secretary of the housing society quietly eats humble pie after his tricks have been exposed by our heroine.

The Rajani technique, approach and solution are too simplistic, taxing our credibility. Does she really believe in what she is doing? In the telephone episode, after listening to Rajani, the General Manager grandly announces the suspension of some of the junior employees. In real life, this would have led to a flash strike and Rajani Prabhakar would not have been able to telephone her friends for weeks.

The problem with *Rajani* is that it employs the logic of the commercial Hindi cinema in real life situations. The logic of instant single-handed solutions, by their very impossibility, should seem ludicrous. But history has revealed the Indian tendency to believe in the impossible.

Take the case of MGR in Tamil Nadu. For over 20 years, Tamilians have idolised him and made him an invincible political force. Their faith in him is easily explained. Did he not fight corruption, tyranny and injustice in his 100-odd movies? Was he not the incorruptible, the saviour of women in distress on screen? Well, he would do the same off the screen. In Andhra Pradesh, another film star, NTR, has been the beneficiary of similar reasoning. When he played the role of Lord Venkateswara, people came to worship him. When he stood for elections, people believed he would fight tyranny just as he did in his films.

So why not Priya Tendulkar as Rajani, the champion of the consumers? For women's libbers she is the trump card and for henpecked husbands she is the avatar of their domineering wives who can achieve anything.

Yet, there are warning signals. The charm may be wearing off. The serial will now be a fortnightly. Basuda is tired, he has invited scripts from other people. Will Rajani now expose the black money culture in the filmworld or the *chamchagiri* at Doordarshan? But then, that's not what paper tigresses are expected to do.

Paper tigresses can growl only at those they are allowed to frighten. Taxi-drivers and telephone officials are fine, but would Godrej and Mudra Communications, producers of *Rajani,* allow their pet to take on consumer product manufacturing companies and advertising agencies?

The two would probably be on the hit list of most housewives – cheated at some time or the other by faulty products and exaggerated advertising claims.

But considering the exemplary influence *Rajani* has exerted in the past, such episodes would probably result in a boycott of consumer products.

Obviously, Rajani's growl is worse than her bite. ♦

# Bejan Daruwalla's Predictions

**ARIES: March 21 to April 20:** A Moon-Jupiter conjunction on the ninth results in a trip, ties and collaborations. You will be in an introspective frame of mind. Expenses will mount, as the Sun will be in your twelfth sector. Those interested in research, astrology, the occult, religion and space technology, gain new insights. A feeling of restlessness possesses you.

**TAURUS: April 21 to May 21:** The full Moon on the 26th helps you in three different directions: friendship and fraternity, which can lead to a happy relationship, a contract, and socialising and partying. March is the month to polish your image and strive for a new assignment. Many Taureans will find March the turning point for better days. A possibility of romance and marriage.

**GEMINI: May 22 to June 21:** The first 21 days will have you working hard, with a strong drive to achieve targets and goals. Here, Jupiter helps you. Do not be afraid to ask for favours and do not take slights too seriously. The health of parents and in-laws could cause some concern. You will find time for fun and amusement, especially on and after the 20th.

**CANCER: June 22 to July 22:** The new Moon on the tenth suggests new opportunities, especially for actors, editors, writers, musicians and those in the travel trade. Definitely a time to fan out to people and places, make your presence felt, and shed inhibitions. Publicity-wise, an excellent month. In the last few days, you will be gearing up for a burst of hard work.

**LEO: July 23 to August 23:** A Jupiter-Pluto trine on the 22nd suggests a slant towards finance, funds, loans, banks, credit cards, insurance and premiums. Get set for a journey. Rites and rituals will attract you to an unusual extent. In March-April expect journeys, loans, work pressures and new assignments. Your heart blossoms. The only snag is that health precautions are a must.

**VIRGO: August 24 to September 23:** A Sun-Moon sextile on and after the sixth spurs you into partnerships, both on the personal and professional levels. It is a time for love and collaborations. This is an exceptionally newsy, gossipy month. Industrialists, teachers, publishers, politicians, writers, actors and lawyers will be successful. Be prepared for a change.

**LIBRA: September 24 to October 23:** A Sun-Jupiter combine in your sixth angle signifies a job-switch, a more handsome pay-packet, and a higher level of efficiency. This is a good time to keep a pet. There is a danger of theft or the misplacement of valuables. Those in business will be thinking of opening a new branch. In the last ten days expect ties and trips.

**SCORPIO: October 24 to November 22:** A Mars-Uranus conjunction on the 13th could lead to impulsive action. But it also favours romance, entertainment, hobbies and the pursuit of studies and research. You will hone your skills now. Conception or childbirth is a distinctive feature of 1986 from March onwards. A minor wish-fulfilment is probable. A month of exceptional creativity.

**SAGITTARIUS: November 23 to December 21:** A Sun-Saturn trine on the 30th indicates that the last ten days of March are best for new ventures, exciting enterprises, export, import and foreign connections. The first 20 days will be important for renovation, decoration, buying and selling. Be practical and get set to bargain. Take care of your health.

**CAPRICORN: December 22 to January 20:** The new Moon on the tenth signifies contacts and communication. It is also a time for travel. Calls, interviews, functions and meetings give you a chance to show your undoubted prowess and skill in management and entertaining. Your organisational ability comes into devastating play now, resulting in envy and applause.

**AQUARIUS: January 21 to February 18:** The full Moon on the 26th makes March memorable in terms of buying, selling, outlets for money-making, family affairs, business deals and get-togethers. The last ten days will be significant for trips, ties and happy relationships. This trend will continue through April. Loans and funds will be secured after a delay or a cancellation.

**PISCES: February 19 to March 20:** A Jupiter-Neptune sextile on the 16th means a triumph over rivals. You will charm others into submission by using your imagination and persuasive powers to the full. March is a month of accomplishment. It is the right time to launch an undertaking, start a romance and also take on new assignments.

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PHILIPS

# How beautifully a bulb can fool you.

Light bulbs are making the prettiest promises these days. Promises of long life, bright light and so on.

You have no way of checking these promises out because all bulbs look alike – to start with.

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