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PUNJAB: A WAY OUT

HOW CAN ONE EVEN BEGIN to describe the unholy mess that was discovered following the sensitively executed Operation Black Thunder which successfully flushed out a large number of terrorists from the Golden Temple? Mere words will not suffice to encapsulate the sheer horrific defilement and desecration that was only too evident within, for all with eyes to see. Suffice it to say that the revulsion felt by the entire nation, particularly the deeply religious Sikh community, was all the more overwhelming because those responsible for the desecration of the holiest of holy Sikh shrines were none other than Sikhs themselves.

That terrorists and criminals have sought sanctuary in the Golden Temple, built arms caches therein, and conducted atrocities from places within the complex, was a well-known fact. They had, in this fashion, already violated the sanctity of their shrine, as well as their religious norms, as far back as 1983. But what was discovered in the wake of Operation Black Thunder was evidence of a foul defilement of the Temple, something unthinkable.

The sacrileges committed in the Golden Temple by terrorists last month dealt a crippling blow to the religious feelings of the devout Sikh community. Can the faith and religion of this proud people be thus exposed to ridicule? The answer is No. A firm No. Yet, the unpleasant truth is that some Sikh extremists and criminal elements, and some power-hungry priests and politicians colluded in these shameful acts, and brought dishonour on their heads and those of the entire community.

And yet, the Sikh community watched and witnessed, in silence. Their grief has not been voiced in any expression of protest, or any public manifestation of anger. In stark contrast, the Sikhs in the Punjab, in India, and indeed the world at large, had expressed their sheer outrage at the deep injustice they felt was done to them, following Operation Bluestar in June 1984. And much of India had understood their agony, and grieved, as both Sikhs and non-Sikhs did, during the carnage — the loss of life and property — that followed the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. And the people of India continue to grieve at the escalation of terrorist violence, particularly in the last six months, that has claimed so many innocent lives.

But these same people who have been deeply concerned about the trauma of Punjab, are today disillusioned. They are disillusioned by the failure of the Sikh leadership including the priests, to ensure that the sanctity of their Temple not be violated. By the widespread apathy amongst the Sikhs that permitted heinous crimes to be committed. By their deafening silence in the face of such dastardly deeds. For these people, and the rest of India, the Sikh community now needs to take a stand, to record its sense of outrage, to express its anguish and ensure that such a situation is never repeated. For, what the terrorists did within the Golden Temple Complex last month, is as reprehensible, if not more, as the army action in 1984.

It is time now, for the Sikh community to demonstrate its resolve to uphold its religious tenets and its glorious religious tradition, by organising peaceful *jathas* to the Temple. It is time for the Sikhs, wherever they live, to put behind them past rancour and bitterness, and in a spirit of brotherhood, come together to renew the relationship. It is time for Sikh political leaders to acknowledge that the divisive politics that have been played out for the last 50 years and more, bring no glory to their creed. It is time for the priests of this great religion to restore the dignity of the Golden Temple and of the *gurdwaras* in the state.

There is also the need for the Sikhs to consider a movement towards separation of politics and religion: there is need to consider the separation of the Akali Dal from the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). The image of the SGPC has already suffered a great deal because of the divisive, power-hungry politics of the Akali Dal with which the SGPC is so closely linked. There is no reason why the SGPC should shoulder the responsibility for political misdemeanours of the Akalis. Also, the Akalis are, strictly speaking, a communal party. Do the Sikhs wish to forever attract this label of being communalists in politics?

Once the Sikh community demonstrates its resolve to effect this, the people of India will once again support them in their quest for justice. One of the first remedial measures to be taken in this regard, would be to ensure that the perpetrators of the 1984 riots in Delhi, are punished. Once justice is seen to have been done, perhaps the hostility and enmity between the Sikhs and Hindus — erstwhile friends and brothers — will be lessened to some degree. Indeed, if an atmosphere of trust and brotherhood, which had hitherto marked the relationship between the Sikhs and Hindus, is restored, a healing touch will be administered. And in such an atmosphere, a generous initiative on the part of Mr Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, and his government, towards the restoration of peace and prosperity to a state that was once India's pride, will be possible and greatly welcomed. Indeed, it should then be possible for the Prime Minister of India to visit the Golden Temple. Such a symbolic gesture will go a long way towards allaying Sikh insecurity; it will demonstrate the country's desire to heal the festering wound that is Punjab, and finally, and hopefully, end the endless night of terror.

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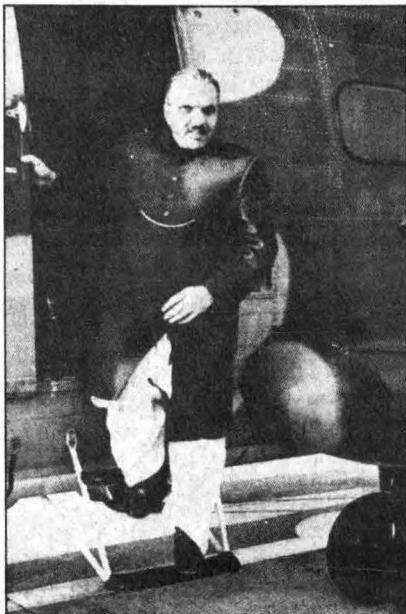
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LETTERS



Dangerous Priorities

Congratulations on your cover story, 'Why is India Obsessed With Pakistan?' (**Imprint**, May). It was one of the only articles I have read that tackles the disturbing subject so thoroughly. Two points, however. Firstly, although the writer *does* allude to Pakistan's equally engrossing obsession with India, he doesn't mention that they have much the same grievances and fears that we have: incursions on the border, the arming and training of subversive elements on our side of the Kutch border, the accumulation of arms, and more currently, India's courtship of Afghanistan's Najibullah.

Secondly, both India and Pakistan, regardless of rates of development and progress quoted by their respective governments, share incredibly high rates of illiteracy, poverty and underdevelopment. Both countries require to be vigilant about exacerbating the already considerable divides between the rich and poor. So when will they stop being unduly anxious about what is going on in their backyards and attend to what is obvious and visible on their doorsteps?

Ahmed Ansari
New Delhi

Timely And Thought-provoking

Kudos to **Imprint** for being right on the mark! Your May cover story on India's obsession with Pakistan – another brilliant essay by S Nihal Singh – was followed almost immediately, by a spate of remarks on the same, by our venerable Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. Newspapers also headlined the issue for days on end. Sufficient cause to be termed obsessive, surely?

Shaila Shah's article on South Africa's children was indeed a moving word-picture and brought tears to my eyes. The heart-rending report of atrocities committed on children, provides a valuable insight into the problem of civil liberties in South Africa. Especially as I am certain that the BBC's latest documentary on the same subject, called "Suffer the Children", which was smuggled out of the country, will never be shown here. In the event, perhaps your magazine – which had, I remember, published Nelson Mandela's speeches in an earlier issue – could devote space for an update on South Africa, in forthcoming issues?

Akanksha Jain
New Delhi



One-sided Account

'Burning Questions' (**Imprint**, May) made shocking reading. But it was also a one-sided account from the victims of the spate of fires that have de-

vastated some Bombay slums. What about the 'other side'? I would have been interested to see what Bombay Municipality would have had to say, especially since soon after your correspondent wrote the article, there were two attempts to demolish slums that had previously been razed to the ground by fires. It would seem that the residents' view — that the fires were due to deliberate arson — is correct. Are our authorities so heartless that, not content with seeing so many live in utter squalor and misery, they resort to using such means to rob the poor of what little they have?

Janaki Mishra
Bombay

Missing The Point

Maithili Rao's article on film censorship (**Imprint**, May) was both comprehensive and well-written. However, the emphasis was restricted to the usual outpourings on sex and violence in Indian cinema — issues that have been written about and discussed *ad nauseum*. What about the insidious messages implied, and glorified, in film after 'dangerous' film? That justice, always long-denied, cannot be attained through the proper channels? That the police force is necessarily impotent and corrupt, in the bargain? That one-man crusades, involving or condoning murder, or even murders, are the only way to redress grievances?

These pernicious influences are likely to do far more harm than 'wet-look' heroines and 'tomato ketchup' villains.

Rajiv Chopra
Chandigarh

Of Crocs And Crocmen

'The Crocodile and the Boy', by M D Riti (**Imprint**, May) made interesting reading and promises to make for even better viewing! As Romulus Whitaker has rightly observed, there is undoubtedly a market and an audience for these kinds of films, judging by the tremendous enthusiasm with which

films like *Beautiful People* were received, a while ago. Here's wishing Whitaker (and his crocodiles) luck in newer ventures.

Vasantha Menon
Bangalore



A Paradise Lost

Avijit Bakshi's essay on the changing face of Goa (**Imprint**, May) struck a deep chord. How apt was his lyrical description of the beauty and charm that Goa once enjoyed! As a Goan who lived there in the early '60s, and made a pilgrimage there in 1972, I bear testimony to the ravages caused by haphazard tourist and industrial development, as far back as then. In the early '60s, Goa was *indeed* a paradise — clean, uncrowded beaches, a slumbering lifestyle that *nothing* could hurry... unspoilt by material greed and alien vested interests.

Today, with hordes of vandal tourists pouring in daily, and commercialism that fails to safeguard the essence of Goa, it is just as attractive as Lonavala or Matheran, or even Juhu, which is saying nothing at all.

David D'Souza
Bombay

Misguided Optimism

Rahila Gupta's article 'From Raj to

Reality' (**Imprint**, May) was quite thought-provoking. I am delighted to know that talented film-makers are addressing the complexity of India with such imagination and verve, albeit in England. And that political developments in the subcontinent are also being reflected in well-constructed, analytical programmes. I have seen some of these while in London, so I know. But not everyone has had the opportunity. So really, what is the point of teasing your readership by giving them a taste of what they will never see? If, for some reason, this has been done with the hope that some enlightened soul in the corridors of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting may take note and emulate these examples, or even import them, all I can do is lament your misguided optimism. Why don't you review Indian programmes instead?

Naina Bakshi
Calcutta

No Smoking Bans

Apropos your report, "Reading The Smoke Signals", (**Imprint**, May). Singapore banned both the smoking and the sale of cigarettes in government buildings as part of its campaign to create a nation of non-smokers. Pakistan had already done so a couple of years ago. And a lethal fire has now brought about a total ban on smoking in the subways of London and Liverpool.

But, in India, in some public-sector organisations, there is even a budget provision for the purchase of good-quality cigarettes and for supplying the same to senior managers to entertain visitors with! And, unless our anti-smoking welfare government puts a ban on cigarette advertising in cinema halls and on TV, as suggested by anti-smoking campaigners, the false notion amongst the youngsters that 'cigarette smoking is both physically and socially acceptable', will not be discouraged.

K P Rajan
Bombay

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*Cover transparency:
Yog Joy.*

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COVER STORY

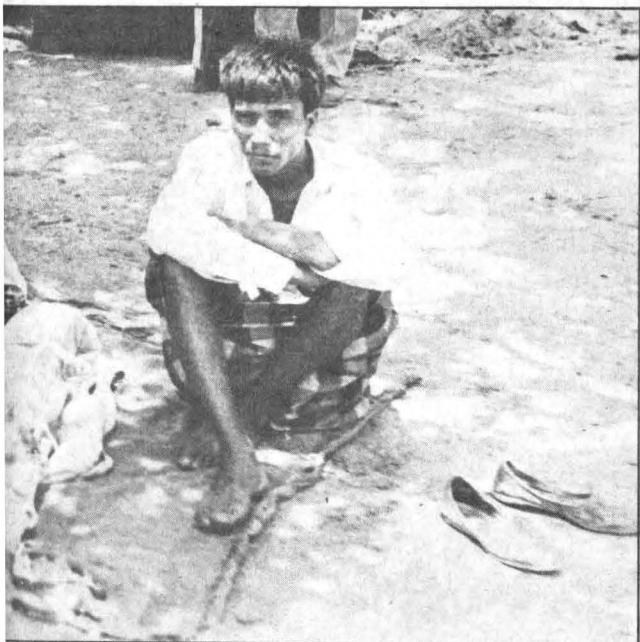


FOR EVERY STORY there is, as Henry James noted in his diary, a 'germ' or a 'seed' which provides the impulses for it, and the imagination picking up the signals then begins to tick, so to speak. To be sure, the American novelist was talking about the mystery and dynamics of art, but even a political commentator in search of a master metaphor to rivet down his 'story' to specifics, needs, I believe, a sight, an experience, an episode to animate the nar-

ative, and bring out its operative energies. That such a metaphor materialised for me one Sunday morning lately when I happened to see "Operation Save Sukhna Lake", now underway in Chandigarh, would then indicate the nature of my concern here. For as I watched that massive desilting exercise, it assumed for me in that brief but intense moment, the aspect of a political allegory. For, whatever the cynics might say, the spectacle of thousands of bright, illuminated faces

By Darshan Singh Maini

PUNJAB: THE SNAKE PIT



The politics of passion, paranoia and perfidy, being played out with chilling ferocity in the Punjab, have blocked all lines of communication and understanding. And transformed a lush, generously-endowed land, India's 'pride', into a killer-carrion state – a snake pit of vicious terrorist violence. In this evocative essay, noted writer DARSHAN SINGH MAINI argues for the restoration of a climate of confidence in the troubled state, through a Gandhian movement of 'desilting' the venal politics of the Punjab.

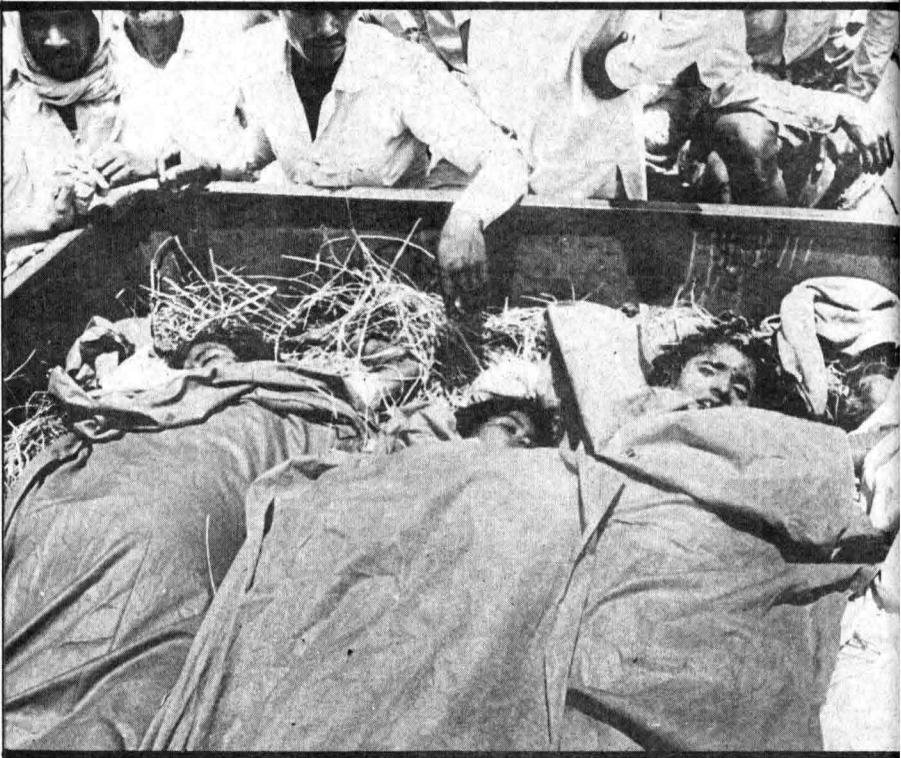
COVER STORY

in that morning sun, going about their labours as if in a dream of religious service, could not but lift one's heart at a time when the news from all around had a smell of death about it.

It was the promise of "the sound of water" once again, and had, at least for one pair of eyes, a redemptive relevance in respect of the unending Punjab tragedy.

To be sure, the tropes of muck and dirt and pitch, etc, are perhaps the commonest figures of speech in relation to the nature, business and traffic of politics *per se*, and, therefore, have almost lost the power to induce a sense of shock in us. As George Orwell argued in his essays, when an idiom or expression is pressed into service as a stock response, it signifies the failure of the imagination at some level. But in certain situations where the reality and the metaphor come dramatically together to make a particular experience both true and expressive, even such stretched expressions become serviceable enough. They compel us to examine afresh the nexus between experience and language. And, I suggest, that's precisely the metaphor which describes the mucked-up condition of Punjab today. For, as Wordsworth describes England in his famous sonnet on Milton, this state is now "a fen of stagnant waters" where "altar, sword and pen" have lost all virtue, and the political stink is vile enough to roil the imagination and induce moral nausea. The politics of passion, paranoia and perfidy have, in short, blocked the sinews of thought, and the lines of communication and understanding. What we need, then, is a prodigious movement of mind and muscle, a massed effort of all our moral, spiritual and nervous energies to *desilt Punjab politics*. A beautiful, lush land, generously endowed by nature, fabled in song and story as the eternal sentinel on our Northern frontiers, has turned, alas, into a killer-carrion state, thanks to the communal virus injected into its body politic by friends and foes alike! And the

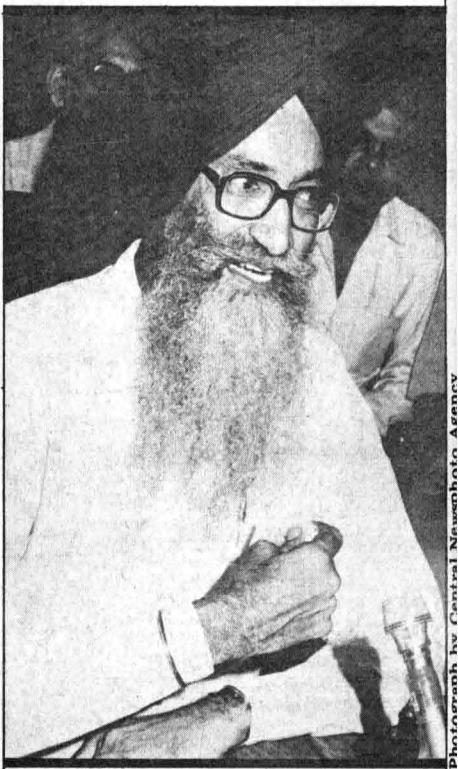
Photograph by Secret Eye



The gruesome killing of the marriage party at Panipat.

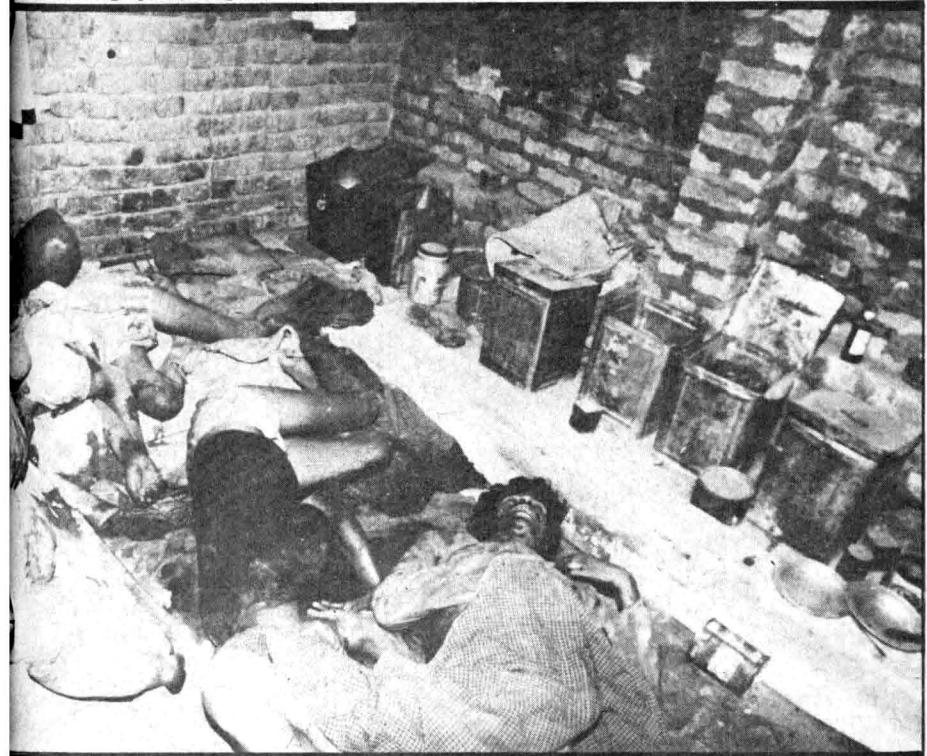
vultures of venal politics are still hovering over our heads, spoiling for the bones and remains of power.

There is, I trust, no need at this stage to uncover, once again, those political sewers and cesspools that have lately been sending up foul vapours, and poisoning the Punjab air. The body of massed commentary on this subject, and the literature of pain and protest, leave little to the imagination now. The chronicle of Punjab's 'crucifixion' is already a familiar text. We all know the names, know the Judas and the muck-merchants and the death-dealers; know the motives and the machinery; know, above all, the lethal consequences of the power game in progress. We know, too, how in this game of snakes-and-ladders — a classical pastime of those in the business of politics — the rogue element has, for once, cheated both the masters and the agents, making nonsense of all the known 'rules' of governance. The gambler's hand and the over-reacher's have pushed the game



Barnala: hugely-wronged.

Photograph by Yog Joy



The massacre of migrant labourers at Marjat on May 8.

Photograph by Central Newsphoto Agency



Governor S S Ray

into the realm of the irrational from which there is no reprieve. And the ensuing tragedy has acquired all the aspects of the Theatre of Cruelty. Terror, wantonness and malignity hold the stage.

And arguably, this great national tragedy — the greatest after the Partition holocaust — features chiefly villains. There are no great heroes on either side of the dividing line except perhaps Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal who, again, was a tragic misfit in this drama of bad faith. And if we must see the whole drama in terms of the classical Greek tragedy, it has been one long slide down the hill — from the *hamartia* or the initial error or tragic flaw (the *hubris*) or overwhelming pride in Indira Gandhi, and the failure of the political imagination in her at the most crucial moment in her life) to the *crisis* (the Akali leadership's complicity and cowardice in the face of a fundamentalist challenge, and the 'Himalayan blunder' of Operation Bluestar and Operation

Rosewood), and finally to the *dénouement* and the *catastrophe* (Mrs Gandhi's assassination, the November carnage and the traumatic isolation and alienation of a whole community). The rest is a tale too sordid to bear another agonised recital.

It is, then, a tragedy with no glimmerings of any mobility whatsoever, and it seems to roll on and on like a huge rock hurtling down a slope carrying everyone before it — from the great ones and the guilty to the ordinary mortals and innocents around. It has been a swift passage from darkness to darkness, from terror to terror, from suffering to suffering. And that is where Punjab finds itself today — in a snake-pit of vicious terrorist violence and unredeemed state skulduggery. And a cry goes up in each home each morning when the screaming headlines in the papers and the gory scenes on the TV screen bring the chilling, macabre reality, inch by inch, closer to one's own door. "Oh, when will this madness end? When will this stink of carrion politics leave this land?" one asks in pain and bewilderment.

BEFORE I TURN to the latest 'turns-of-the-screw' in this cruel drama, I may, to enlarge my argument, adduce evidence from three arbitrarily chosen English texts: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Dickens' *Bleak House* and Conrad's novel, *The Secret Agent*. They are all political allegories dealing with the corruptions of state and society, with the decay in the system when evil in human nature find its structural correlative, and becomes manifest in body politic. I have naturally no idea of going into these tales of venality and sin, but it serves my purpose to highlight the fact that, in each case, the imagery of disease, dirt, miasma, putrefaction, poison and pit, etc, runs like a dark thread in the discourse. It is the sickness of the state and the sickness of the society, compounding the misery of man. Humankind, it appears, is condemned to create, from time to time,

COVER STORY

dirt out of its own nervous system when the vision of civilised life is lost *en route*. Punjab, the pride of India, is its 'sickman' today, and there's a need for the knife as much as for prayers and pity and understanding. How to purge the body politic of its ranknesses and distempers is, then, the great question before us.

As far back as 1983, I had, in an article on the Punjab, used this very metaphor in a passing reference to the *mystique* of historic sentiments when such sentiments begin "to silt up the conduits of the imagination," and turn passions into wild, mindless movements, and populist ideas into blind ideologies, thus distorting the structure of a people's sensibility. And Khalistan, a sad joke of yesterday, and more a fanatic's dream of a summer day than a serious geo-political proposition, today rides the national imagination like an incubus, addling our brains. You simply cannot keep it out of your talk whether you are at a wedding or a funeral, at a meeting or a ceremony, at a seminar or debate. And it erupts most disconcertingly in private exchanges, in drawing-rooms and in parlours. It's a phantom that will not go. And the shadow falls across our daily doings and relationships, dividing friends and families, colleagues and companions, neighbours and fellow travellers. And it threatens to cause a vertical split in our hearts even as it has done so in our perceptions.

As I have argued elsewhere, Punjab is now more than a ruined political entity; it is a state of mind, a clear ethical question compelling one to move out of the cover of cosy clichés and senile sermons. It has become an analogue for the battle of ideas, and a test of one's integrity, courage and authenticity. It shows up at once the tragic vulnerability of the Indian State to the pressure of the political predators that the Congress (I), in particular, breeds in such large numbers. The national swindle simply appalls. The Sikh extremists are no better, and, in fact, they are



Entrapped in a web of deceit and destruction.

their spiritual 'double', the limits to which expediency can go. Together, they constitute a freemasonry of the damned and the demented, and if they differ in their idiom and style, they are all, at the bottom, after the same whore. The Congressmen have sold their souls to the devil for a few crumbs of office, and the extremists have drummed up a messianic dream of power out of the dark, atavistic depths. Nothing seems to hold at the moment; neither our spiritual heritage nor our moral masonry. Only the transparent trickery and the open terror abide.

IT IS TIME, THEN, to translate those fears and phantoms into the language of the street and the marketplace. And that means the casting of a cold eye on the gory proceedings of the last few months. To begin with, there has been, particularly since the treacherous dismissal of the Barnala ministry (whose virtues formed part of Rajiv Gandhi's song in Parliament barely a month earlier), a quantitative jump in terrorist killings and po-



A freemason of the damned.

lice "encounters", and a qualitative change in tactics, weaponry and warfare. The lethal scenario has been changing so rapidly, and the degree of ferociousness mounting so conspicuously, as to unnerve the people and the administration alike. There is a note of hysteria in the public outcry, and a new note of panic and despair in the reaction of the cop and

Photograph by Karam Singh



Mounting hysteria and a new panic and despair.



Badal: unreconciled and agonised.

the bureaucrat. Almost everybody, from Governor Ray (whose wonted skills as a destroyer of the Naxalites in West Bengal have come a cropper in Punjab) and the no-nonsense, upright, down-to-earth supercop, Julio F Ribeiro, summoned to do duty in the toughest terrain of his distinguished career, to each limb of the law, appears tense and keyed-up, expect-

ing some kind of a blow-up any time. The man in the street is, in any case, on the edge of his nerves, and jumps out of his skin, as it were, at the mere touch of a rumour or a whisper. Something huge and monstrous and sinister, he feels, is imminent. Will it be another Operation Blue Star, or another dose of the Emergency, or another war with Pakistan? The New Delhi options are all narrowing down to an apocalypse, it appears.

I have had occasion lately to discuss these vague apprehensions and fearful speculations with a large number of involved persons, including Mr Ribeiro, the hugely-wronged but still serene Surjit Singh Barnala and the unhappy, unreconciled, agonised Parkash Singh Badal. From what I could gather from their observations, and from their apparent but unstated positions, they all seem agreed that another Operation Blue Star would close all options forever. So, when the countdown began finally for the siege of the Golden Temple complex (GTC) amidst conditions and apprehensions ominously reminiscent of June 1984, there was a general feel-

ing that no government, whatever its compulsions, and whatever the nature of the provocations, could afford the political costs of another army action, involving battery and assault; and that if one Operation Blue Star could shake the Indian state to its roots, another could almost destroy it. The compounding of that criminal folly was, therefore, ruled out. And that is one reason why the Sikhs in general did not exhibit that kind of spiritual restiveness and agony this time. A proper mix of politics, strategy, tactics and action on the ground (which included a war of nerves and attrition besides other measures) thus helped achieve an early surrender of the entrenched terrorists. The humiliating and ignominious end brought this drama of degradation to a quick close. There was no sense of high tragedy as in 1984, but a sense of a low and dispiriting theatre of surrogate emotions. During all the days of the siege, the Sikh sentiment remained curiously distanced, though still outraged. Or, to put it differently, the misery and the bewilderment this time centred round the emotions of shame and disgust and despair rather than those of shock, anger and revenge.

Not a little of this reaction could be traced to the foul actions of the militants inside the *sanctum sanctorum* itself. To have so desecrated the sacred temple with stink and dirt was the kind of ultimate indignity which no Sikh *sangat* could have countenanced even in thought. So, the politics of the pit eventually did reach such low depths as to leave the community and the country in a state of moral revulsion.

AND YET, all this should not be taken to mean that the Sikhs are even an inch closer to New Delhi. Far from it. If anything, the resentment now takes a more complex form. It is not direct and violent, but a settled chill at the heart. The Centre continues to be an implacable enemy in their reckonings. What's more, Operation Black Thunder (what fanciful

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names for such unhappy exercises!) is seen as a case of Pyrrhic victory, a victory which is as good as defeat. For, apart from other things, it establishes, *ipso facto*, the utter futility and immorality of Operation Blue-star, and, in retrospect, the moral defeat of Indira Gandhi! Thus, those who tend to see some sort of silver lining on the darkened horizons of Punjab are hugely mistaken. Neither the creation of a corridor around the GTC, nor any other strong-arm measures would alter the situation in the countryside. Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi's proposed visit to the Golden Temple would be seen, in the absence of a political settlement, as an affront. The Sikhs never forgave Indira Gandhi despite such a gesture on her part as well. And now she is their special anathema, a significant figure in their demonology. As she is apotheosised or mythologised, the Sikh sentiment in proportion gets harder and harder, and the Punjab problem more and more intractable. This is a point that needs to be understood, for opposition to her dynasty has now become their *political fixation*.

There is no doubt that New Delhi was circumspect this time, and prepared Operation Black Thunder with some imagination, and executed it with care, on the whole. It allowed the trapped terrorists to stretch themselves to the end of their tether, and be shown up, finally, as dispirited and desperate men battling it out not for any great cause, but for an ignoble exit. That the government, once again, allowed the matter to reach the flash-point as a matter of state policy, fishing in the troubled waters of priestly politics and queering the pitch with a mix of selective information and doctored reports, could not but create a sense of resentment. Still, the fact that the worst did not happen, and that the siege was not pushed beyond a point, did lift a load off Sikh chests, so to speak.

To be sure, the Sikh imagination still responds respectfully, and even passionately, at times, to the music



Rode: the Centre's Trojan Horse?

of sacrifice, and the mystique of martyrdom has still a compelling appeal. All of Sikh history resounds to the beats of those drums. But where the supposed heroes turn out to be men of straw, or mimic men involved in dubious and pitiful proceedings, the same imagination, in recoil, turns back upon them, and casts them out as spiritual thugs and moral outlaws. Even at the best of times, there's always a hint of 'false consciousness' about the business of martyrdom, but where the game is showing so plainly, the situation generates a series of negative emotions, and there's a general feeling of betrayal, belittlement and bedevilment. So, there's hardly any sympathy for the wretched creatures who desecrated the most immaculate Sikh shrine, indulged in extortions, sexual orgies and closet killings, and drove a whole community into an ordeal of unearned shame. There wasn't, again, any sense of high tragedy either, for such a sense is accompanied by an array of pure and noble emotions. And, there was hardly anything of that order or magnitude in the present case. True martyrdom is a matter of "impassioned clay", to use a Keatsian phrase, and the damned bunch of terrorists had no high emotion of any kind to light up their faces or frames. A dirty and desperate lot, on the

whole, they are more likely to go down as traducers in Sikh history than as men worthy of thought. It's a psychic wound, and this unhappy interlude hurts in the deepest spot. It's something the Sikhs would best not remember.

As for the Akali leaders and the Damdami Taksal priests, none seem to have covered themselves with glory in this hour of trial and test. Their reaction to the events, their wailings over the disruption of the *maryada* and their self-invited, protective arrests are beginning to be seen as a part of their politics of drift, confusion and retreat. They seem to have lost a good bit of their image *en route*, having sought the comfort of a safe haven inside the jail. To run away from the awesome burden of moral responsibility is eventually to court the fate of political deserters.

As for the sealing of the border with Pakistan, the wire-fencing and the increased patrolling, etc, these measures, it is averred, would not stop the mischief from across the borders. The terrorist-narcotics-gold and gun-running mafia combine would always have the means to negate such strategies. Apart from other factors, the police and the border security forces are amenable to bribes which, according to some reports, have already reached scandalous proportions.

And then, there are innumerable "soft spots" on the border which can be easily breached. In other words, short of a full-scale war with Pakistan, and its defeat, the situation offers no real hope. Both the Sikh extremists and the Pakistani spies parading as Sikhs (a view widely held by the people in the state) would, it is feared, continue to operate as midnight prowlers despite the increased hazards. And this menace cannot be ended till the hearts of the Sikhs, not only in the countryside but in general, are won back through a generous solution of the Punjab problem. And, there is no such hope from the Rajiv Gandhi government which did not

solve the problem when it could have, and which, now hamstrung for other reasons (the Bofors and submarine kickbacks, the V P Singh phenomenon, the Sri Lankan misadventure, etc. . .), would need a bleeding and burning Punjab to keep it in power. Such, then, are the stakes, and such the strategies of survival. This unhappy, suffering land would yet serve the Sultan of Delhi as a political sacrificial goat! For, he has wilfully closed his other routes of escape.

THERE WERE, IN FACT, serious doubts in some responsible Sikh quarters about the manner in which the situation had been allowed to acquire dangerous dimensions once again. It was being said that the Centre had now raised its own terrorist groups (as in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers and others) to destroy the terrorists from within. And these *sarkari* terrorists were recruited from the ranks of the bereaved youth whose families were slain or maimed by their co-religionists. There were also rumours about the seconding of some para-military elements masquerading as Sikhs for this purpose. One of these groups allegedly, was in occupation of the Gurdwara Shaheedan in Amritsar lately. And it was surmised that there were also some groups inside the GTC, having infiltrated the hardcore ranks. The disconcerting and incriminating reports regarding the discovery of some crates of rocket launchers and other such arms meant for RAW which appeared around that time in *The Observer* of London and in *The Indian Post*, Bombay, thus added to the confusion and the multiplying doubts. Mr Ribeiro's cryptic comment to newspaper reporters about the possibility of another police or army action inside the GTC further complicated matters. His statement that the police would be there "to collect the dead bodies" was then seen as a sinister and coded message. Of course, he could have been simply referring to the law-and-order problem, but the soured and



Ragi: marginalised and neutralised.

riled Sikh imagination, always willing to believe the worst, had now fastened upon it as yet another evidence of the planned mischief.

And talking of fears and doubts, it is clear that nobody really knows the full truth. In fact, the truth becomes partisan in a most shameful and destructive manner. There is a thick, impenetrable wall of lies and half-truths, and the opposing parties have barricaded themselves behind it. Rumour, in brief, is king, and doubt "a deferential tool." One such rumour current now is that there's Khalistan in the border districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Faridkot, etc, after sunset. Terror is abroad, and it talks with AK-47 rifles. An eerie silence descends upon the countryside at nightfall, and no one knows when death will claim a family and wipe it out in one fell swoop. And, if it is not the terrorists, then, it is a midnight knock by the security forces. A young son is whisked away on the merest little suspicion, and often disappears forever if not ransomed, or "bought back" in time. It is all the same, one way or the other. "It is our *karma*," say the elders and menfolk, while the bereaved mothers, wives and sisters go on keening till they are reduced to a stony silence.

And, indeed, who are these extre-

mists and terrorists, and how do they keep cropping up in one kind of "incarnation" or another? One doubts if even the state intelligence has any real clues to it. It seems to be a motley crowd of fanatics and fundamentalists, of army deserters and school drop-outs, of common criminals and conmen, of foreign spies and moles, etc. Above all, and most agonisingly, it is a spill-over of angry young men genuinely hurt and out to vindicate the honour of the community, as they put it. And perhaps the most reckless is the group of orphaned sons from the Delhi and Kanpur massacres of the Sikh families. Though five or six groups are well-known, new factions and splinter groups keep forming and dissolving, leaving behind a doubtful register of names. There is apparently, no "central command", and each group evolves its own strategies, and manages its own funds and finances.

Nor is any central 'philosophy' discernible in their doings, unless, of course, Khalistan alone is enough as a war-cry. For the Khalistan of their dream has yet to create a positive and purposive air of ideas. So far, it has all been a movement of death and destruction. "The boys", as the villagers call them, do not even understand what they really want. Sikhism, in whose name they operate, abhors all provincialisms of the mind and the spirit. It celebrates, on the other hand, the glory of all created life, and considers pity and compassion as the highest human virtues. Indeed, the sense of the sacred in secular social life distinguishes Sikhism from other major creeds or faiths. Are they, then, chasing a shadow that has no religious sanction?

WHAT, THEN, ARE THE emerging prospects and perspectives? In the highly confused and charged atmosphere of today's Punjab, no political pundit or soothsayer or crystal-gazer can remain in business for long. There's such an insanity in the whole situation that to predict is to burn

"THE FINAL SOLUTION HAS TO BE A POLITICAL ONE..."

P Chidambaram talks to SHIRAZ SIDHWA about the government's game-plan for the Punjab.

On the Punjab, he is Rajiv Gandhi's number one trouble-shooter. And in early May, P Chidambaram (42), the urbane and articulate Minister of State for Home, managed to pull off what was widely hailed as a highly sensitive and successful operation. Operation Black Thunder succeeded in flushing out those terrorists who had made the Golden Temple their military headquarters, and the entire operation was conducted under the close scrutiny of the media. SHIRAZ SIDHWA met Mr P Chidambaram to find out about the government's future game-plan for resolving the Punjab imbroglio.

Imprint: Do you see Operation Black Thunder as a major victory against the terrorists? Will there be any perceptible change in the Punjab situation?

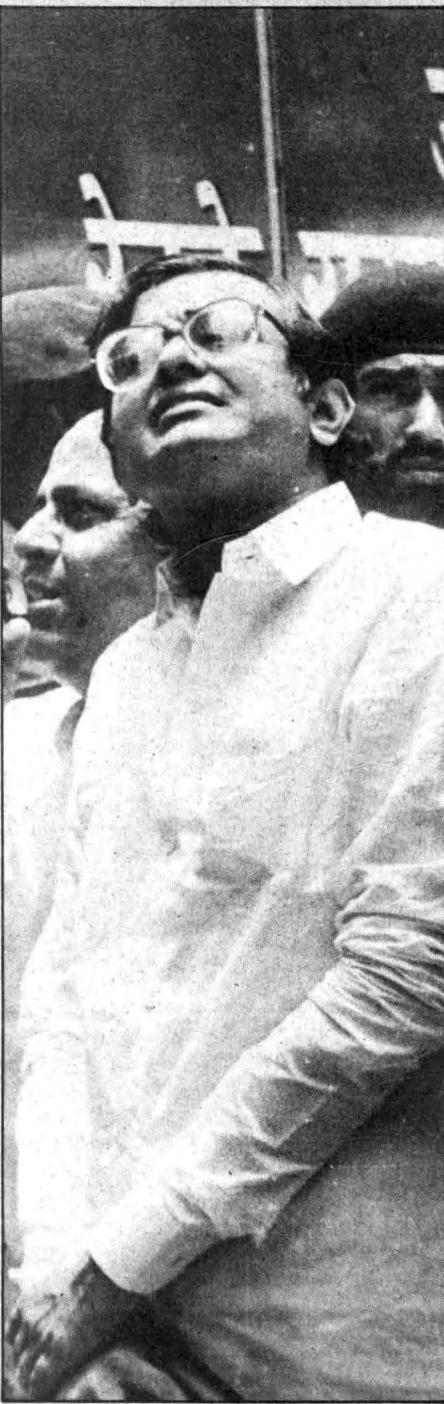
P Chidambaram: We realise that the situation hasn't changed very much. Yes, the operation was a success in the sense that we have shown the terrorists that the entire government machinery is intent on combating terrorism — so this is a tactical victory, if at all you want to use that term. The Golden Temple was being used by prominent militant groups as their headquarters, and we have very strongly conveyed to them that they cannot operate from there again.

What about the retaliation by terrorists outside the Golden Temple — the spate of killings that followed the weeding out of elements within the Golden Temple?

We expected that, we anticipated it, but it had to be done. We were certain that more individuals, groups and arms would be sent into the country in retaliation against the action.

So it's the foreign hand again?
Of course. Is there any doubt about it?

What is the government's game-plan



for a workable government policy in Punjab?

Terrorism is not an easy problem to tackle, and we know it will take a long long time. I don't want to draw any parallels, but look at terrorism the world over — it takes years to overcome, and one can only hope the situation won't take so long to improve here. Our policy is two-fold: firstly, we are fencing the border, and secondly we are looking into the police structure at the district level, and improving upon it wherever necessary. We are inducing more forces, supplying more arms and sophisticated weaponry, and intensifying patrolling, especially in the villages. Policing at the district and village level will be intensified, and special village protection forces are to be deployed.

But has it not been accepted by now that the border is impossible to seal?
Who says so? We are not *sealing* the border, we are *fencing* it, and the first phase of fencing will be over in the next eight weeks. The BSF is doing a great job, you can go there and see for yourself.

Will you be able to convince the people that there is adequate security in the villages and that they should stop fleeing their homes for the towns?

With the intensified patrolling and the village protection forces, we want to be able to assure the people that they do not need to leave the villages, and those that have gone away, are to be encouraged to return.

With the widespread fleeing, is the government not concerned that there will be no farmers left to do the sowing which is scheduled for the end of the month?

No, we are not worried about the

sowing. And the exodus from the villages is not all that widespread as is made out. We will do all we can to stop whatever little there is of it.

Do you plan to release any more detainees?

Tell me who you have in mind specifically, or I can't answer that.

What are your views on Jasbir Singh Rode?

There are no views. We released him, that's it.

But does he figure in the government's game-plan at all?

The release of Rode and some others was a calculated political risk. It's too soon to say what part he will play, or whether he will help the situation.

What is your prognosis of the Punjab problem?

That we have a long way to go in battling terrorism. I'm not saying we are anywhere near a solution, but what we have in our favour is that the public at large is not with the terrorists, and that besides a handful of fundamentalists, criminals and foreign-trained terrorists and mercenaries, the people of Punjab want peace, and

are with us in our fight against terrorism. And that, I believe, is our major strength.

But what is the solution to the Punjab problem? There's more to the problem than terrorists...

The problems have different dimensions. There is one lot of people, the fundamentalists, who are agitating for a theocratic state. Then there is what is termed the 'foreign element', with trained terrorists and mercenaries from across the border. Add to that the frustrated and unemployed youth who are misguided and take to killing. But most important is the collapse of moderate leadership in the state.

What is the government doing to tackle these problems?

The government can't provide answers for each of these problems. We do believe that in some way we can help with our intervention, but the final solution to the Punjab problem has to be a political one, with the political process being reactivated, and some kind of moderate leadership being restored in the state.

Does the Congress (I) have a viable

leader for Punjab?

That will depend on the elections, as and when they take place, and it is for the people to decide which party will govern them. I am sure that if we are in a position where we have to throw up a leader, we will have no difficulty in doing so.

Will the government support S S Barnala? What is your assessment of him?

Who are we to support or not to support? The people will elect the government they want. As for us, we have always extended our support to the moderates. Barnala's government could not sustain the party without power and the collapse of his government came from within the Akali Dal.

When will elections be held? And would that be an immediate solution?

It is too early to hold elections in Punjab. But we have to show the terrorists that we will not give in to their pressure. The final solution to the Punjab problem has to be a political one, as I have said before. What we have in our favour is that the people, too, want peace, as well as a solution, even though I have to admit that this might take a while to achieve.



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one's fingers before the word is out of one's mouth. Indeed, the moment one begins to sketch out a scenario, the implacable and insatiable reality delivers it a cuff or two in the form of some gruesome event designed as if to mock one's line of vision. For, the irrational obeys no stars and suffers no forecasts. It is time we all understood a difficult political problem in the classical sense; all the rules of the political game have come unstuck. Nor does New Delhi have an overarching view of this tragedy, even though they plan and plot in their own miserable way. The fact is that the Centre lacks a sense of direction, and thus keeps wobbling from decision to decision, from experiment to experiment, reacting nervously, and often wantonly, to the gathering storm. A political computer has not yet been designed to aid our high-tech Prime Minister.

Will this then be Mr Gandhi's "last battle"? Mark Tully, the BBC man in New Delhi, is still around to do another *Amritsar*, canning away reel after reel of the developing new catastrophe. He was in a tearing hurry when I ran into him at Mr Barnala's 'ghostly' residence the other day. He had to reach Kapurthala to cover yet another gruesome massacre in this bloody chain. There is, perhaps, about such things, a fatality, and the clock of doom seems to be ticking away! Will Rajiv Gandhi still stand up and extend a hand of contrition to the Sikh community? Perhaps it's already too late.

And there is now no Sikh leader available to be used by the Centre as its tool or Trojan Horse. It has propped itself up on one leader after another only to destroy him within weeks and months. Badal alone seems to have resisted the bait. All others, including Darshan Singh Ragi, and even the new Takht chief, Jasbir Singh Rode, have been either marginalised or neutralised. And if the Simranjit Singh Mann card too is finally tried, he is going to meet the same fate. The compulsions of Congress (I) misrule demand such a specious strategy.

No one's political honour, it appears, is safe in the hands of New Delhi pugilates and pences.

It is, again, important to observe that the casualties of such killer politics are not merely the slain leaders and the ruined politicians, most of whom, in any case, have invited their doom. There ought to be no tears for those who have made many people in this country weep for shame, and weep in agony. The real casualties are those ordinary men and women and children who have been caught viciously in the coils of a conflict with which they have little to do, and which they hardly understand. And yet this fiery ordeal involves them all, invades their hearths and homes, blows them about like charred leaves, and drives them out as aliens and refugees in their own land. Hundreds and hundreds are rendered psychic cripples, and thousands and thousands are lacerated in the process. In the name of one wild dream or another, and on behalf of one dynasty or family, a whole mass of people are made the fools of history. Such, then, are the politics of the pit, and it is from these noxious nostrums that Punjab seeks deliverance today.

HOW DO WE PROCEED to clean up the Punjab pit, and how do we set into motion those vast energies of the corporate Punjabi spirit whose limited and fleeting, but authentic, presence at the Sukhna Lake site did launch this 'story'? Frankly, this is more an act of hope and faith and prayer than a blue-print for a mass movement. These are, at best, vague whisperings and intimations, perhaps only murmurs of the mind. But, it is now for the sister communities in Punjab to create a climate of confidence so that the politics of recovery may have a chance. And this means, in effect, an open repudiation of the leaders who have wrought this havoc, and a desecration of "the idols of the marketplace." It means, above all, to translate the groundswell of anger and discontent into a political *kar*

seva. The Sikh congregations and conclaves, to begin with, may harness the energies of the *panth* at the grass-root level. There is a need to sheath the sword and to uncock the gun, and a need to restore the Sikh image and its sovereignty in this country and abroad.

In sum, to save Punjab, while the Sikhs would have to move out of the populist-priestly politics, and modernise their mode of response to political challenges, the Punjabi Hindus would have to revise their entire attitude in regard to the problems of language, Chandigarh, river waters, etc, if they wish to see peace return to this violated land. Frankly, the present leadership of the warring camps has woefully failed, and history would judge them harshly. But, that's cold comfort right now. Of course, few in the field of power politics have ever sought *vanvas* or self-exile, and neither the Congress (I), a decrepit but tenacious behemoth, nor the Akalis, tragically divided and indulging in one kind of political gimmick or another for their survival, are going to oblige. Only a Gandhian-type movement of massive proportions is the answer. Something of the spirit of 1977 if you like.

The terrorist violence in and around Punjab will not end till the political causes that, in the first instance, brought the extremists on the scene, are attended to with sincerity and insight and compassion, and perhaps not even then. For, as Mr Ribeiro affirmed to me, it's in the nature of terrorism to seek a long tenancy, and to appear in all sorts of disguises. The Punjab problem, like that of Ireland, is going to be with us perhaps for generations. Ideas and ideologies, once abroad, do not disappear on their own. They turn into political genes, and they remain in business covertly for long spells of history. All we can do, then, is to desilt our politics and restore a measure of health, and hope that one day the wronged sons of Punjab and the deluded terrorists may return home to the bosom of the motherland! ♦

OUR VANISHING FORESTS

With indiscriminate deforestation being carried out to meet the gargantuan needs of the fuel and construction industries and the agricultural and industrial sectors, is India being rendered a wasteland? Latest statistical data reveals that India is losing over 1.3 million hectares of forests annually reports MOIN QAZI, who presents a grim picture of the denudation of our green cover.

"Man has reason to cherish much gratitude towards trees, plants, reeds and even the humble grass. These sustain the lives of man, animal and bird alike. Therefore, the Indian culture... has always looked upon the trees and plants of the earth as the manifestation of God's protecting and preserving power. Man, in his turn, is to reciprocate this vital function by being the protector of trees and plants. This is to be his relationship with all life around him."

— Swami Chidananda

THE ANCIENT SAVANTS and sages of our country had a deep insight into the mechanisms which determine the balance of ecological forces. If they did not have the scientific facts to justify their preachings, they certainly had an intuitive power and common sense that provid-

ed them the ability to propound theories on the complex aspects of the universe, which even modern-day scientists acknowledge as truly remarkable.

Having ignored the pertinent advice of our sages, our forests are being destroyed at a rapid rate, and the subsequent shrinkage of the green cover has begun to pose a serious threat to the environment. The necessity for fuel plays an instrumental role in this process of destruction: since oil and coal are not easily available in the villages, the natives have to make greater use of alternative fuels such as wood, cattle-dung cakes, agricultural residues, etc. Consequently, there has been an alarming increase in the number of trees that are felled annually

for fuel purposes; a rough estimate would easily put it at a figure that equals the country's annual composite consumption of oil, coal and electricity, yet, the denuding of forests does not stop here; they are also marauded for timber and other purposes such as the production of paper and the manufacture of furniture, the construction of houses, railway compartments and sleepers, bullock-carts, ploughs and other agricultural implements. But the results have been grave for the forest resources of our country, and our forest wealth has dwindled at such a rapid rate since Independence that only half our forests still stand. And, if the poor efforts in the direction of afforestation are not stepped up, a great fuelwood famine will, in all probability, break out.

Apart from the threat posed to our living environment, the destruction of forests raises several ethical questions. Forests provide shelter to innumerable birds and animals whose very survival is at stake owing to the shrinkage in the green cover. A recent World Wildlife Fund report makes alarming reading: "Much of the food, medicines and materials we use every day of our lives are derived from the wild species (of plants) which grow in the Tropics. Yet, only a tiny fraction of the world's flowering plants have been studied for possible uses. Horrifyingly, some 25,000 of all flowering species are on the verge of extinction. Once the plants go, they are gone forever."



1.3 million hectares of forests are lost annually in India.

TODAY, OUR FOREST WEALTH is

ECOLOGY

fast disappearing and, in turn, losing its biodiversity. In fact, it has been observed that a significant portion of the 15,000 plant species and 75,000 varieties of the animal species found in India, face the threat of extinction due to deforestation. Out of the 134 most-threatened plant species, 99 grow in the Northeast and Himalayas — regions that are fast losing their greenery. It may also not be known to many that elephants, once found all over India, have now totally disappeared from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. It is, in fact, pathetic to find such devastation in a country like India which, constituting only two per cent of the world's land mass, possesses around five per cent of the known living organisms on earth.

That they *are* endangered is a fact; latest satellite data reveals that India is losing over 1.3 million hectares of forests annually — nearly eight times the figure quoted by the Forestry Department. According to the "State of India's Environment 1984-85", in the five years of the Sixth Plan (1980-85), India would spend 40 per cent more on forestry than that it had spent in the previous 30 years. Furthermore, the increased annual plantation rate of 0.4 million hectares targeted for the Sixth Plan, still meant an annual loss of a million hectares of forests.

As mentioned earlier, growing rural energy needs have also contributed towards altering the ecological balance of our forests. In India, 68.5 per cent of household energy is in the form of firewood, while 64.2 per cent is derived from other natural sources. As a result, by the year 2000, there may be a fall in firewood supply to the tune of 137 million tonnes, requiring 34 million hectares of land and a Rs 500-crore annual investment to avoid a bigger crisis. Environmentalists thus feel that firewood needs cannot, and should not be met by natural forests, as it would reduce the forest area which is now only 23 per cent of the total land mass in India while effective plant cover is only ab-

out 12 per cent. And 1.3 million hectares of forests continue to disappear annually. The loss of forest area between 1951 and 1976, due to river valley projects alone, is estimated at well over 4,79,000 hectares.

APART FROM BEING responsible for the very existence of plants and animals, forest acreage plays a very vital role, both in the country's ecology and economy. If the catchment areas of rains have adequate forest cover, most of the rainfall soaks into the ground, providing substantial ground water in the dry seasons. But, if the forest cover is absent, the water flows off the ground, washing away the top soil which is finally deposited as silt in the river-beds. The rivers then overflow, causing floods and untold hardship for those located in the vicinity.

The most serious threat to India's land resources is this erosion of top soil by flowing water. Apart from affecting the fertility of the 100-odd million hectares of land, it leads to a number of other ecological problems. However, although land erosion has led to serious crises all over the world, suitable measures have been devised by some countries to combat these, and consequently, the damage has not been allowed to progress at the rate it does in our country. Satellite photographs indicate that only 12 per cent of the once verdant, volcanic land of Java is left with tree cover, and that in the Philippines, forest cover is today less than 20 per cent of the country's total land area. In Northern Thailand, forests are being decimated at the rate of 5 to 7 per cent a year, and in Pakistan, where 8.2 million hectares are classified as forest and range lands, only 2.6 million hectares are actually wooded. In Nepal, the destruction of forests is taking place at such an alarming rate that the country may lose all its forests by the turn of this century.

WHILE IT IS POSSIBLE to estimate the shrinkage of the world's forests,



Forest acreage plays a vital role.

it is impossible to quantify the losses resulting from soil erosion. But the fact that it takes nature anything from 500-1,000 years to manufacture an inch of soil, should give a clear idea of the tremendous depletion of natural resources caused by soil erosion. According to an authoritative estimate made in 1972, the quantity of top soil displaced in our country, by water erosion alone, was 6,000 million tonnes a year. It was further calculated that this represented a loss, in terms of the major nutrients — nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium (NPK) — alone, that would require 5.37 million tonnes of inorganic fertilisers to replace at a cost of Rs 700 crore. One can easily estimate the cost in terms of the current prices of fertilisers, yet, that is not all — the extent of erosion itself has increased tremendously during the last 15 years. Our actual losses are even greater if computed in terms of the mounting losses in agricultural, animal and forestry production as a result of wind and water erosion of 150-odd million hectares of land.

The indirect losses caused by water erosion are no less serious in nature. The premature siltation of our 5 lakh-odd tanks, and of the 487 reservoirs of our major and medium irrigation and multi-purpose projects, in which the community has invested over Rs 10,000 crore during the last three decades, is a particularly serious matter. Observations show that the average rate of sedimentation in most reservoirs is 4 to 6 times as high as the rates which were projected at the time they were designed and built. The life-expectancy of these projects is, therefore, being reduced significantly by unexpected soil erosion in their catchments. And, the only way to tackle the resultant floods, is to control deforestation, denudation and soil erosion in the rivers' water-sheds. A lesson can be learnt from countries like China and Korea which have successfully devised effective land management schemes. China, for instance, has placed 55 million hectares under new forests during the last 30 years, while in South Korea there is now hardly an acre of denuded land anywhere.

The consequences of our ill-planned policies and projects are indeed alarming. Apart from the loss of top soil, deforestation makes the use of river valley projects and dams much shorter because of increased siltation. For example, Bhakra Dam, initially estimated to live 88 years, will be able to sustain itself only for 47 years, and the Hirakund Dam, for only 35 instead of 111 years. And that too, at a great cost to their surroundings.

TODAY, AS THE ILL-EFFECTS of deforestation become more and more apparent, the wisdom of traditional beliefs regarding the need to protect forests is being increasingly realised by modern science. Thus, according to the National Commission on Agriculture, the beneficial effects of a forest ecosystem on human environment consist in moderating the climate, maintaining the soil mantle, regulating the water-supplies, purifying

the air, and helping in noise abatement. It is believed that at least 33 per cent of land in the planes and 60 per cent in hilly areas must be under forest coverage for a healthy eco-balance to be maintained.

Even the roots of a tree play a vital role: they act like a sponge, absorbing rain-water and releasing the excess in a controlled manner, thereby ensuring a measured flow to the river. The roots also bind the soil and the humus while the dense canopy of the foliage breaks the force of the fiercest rainstorms and allows the water to fall as gentle drops to the ground. Therefore, denuded hills mean floods; lack of vegetation means an excessive run-off of water to the plains below. In summer, on the other hand, when there is an acute shortage of water because the underground storage system has not been adequately charged, the conditions of drought might arise. And with nothing to hold it in place, the precious top soil, which takes 500 years or more to form, is washed down, rendering entire hillsides barren and causing river-beds to silt up; landslides, too, occur frequently.

According to Wiackowski, a leading environmentalist, the leaf surface is 10 to 20 times greater than the earth surface occupied by the plants, and thus plants may not only intercept many tons of dust, but also effectively change the concentration of harmful gases. It is also estimated that a single tree produces as much oxygen as is needed by 200 people. Trees also reduce noise pollutions in cities and check the generation of heat in the atmosphere by screening ultraviolet rays through their foliage. Their greenery is also known to provide protection for the eyes: a study conducted in Bombay revealed that on a hot afternoon, the asphalt jungle we live in reflects 45 per cent of the incident light while foliage effectively reflects nine.

ALL THIS CLEARLY INDICATES that both our economic and physical survival are intricately linked with,

and dependant on the eco-system. Lester R Brown, President of the World Watch Institute adds: "Experience tells us that the ecological indicators of today foreshadow the economic trends of tomorrow. If we are interested in the food process at the end of the century, we should be looking at soil erosion rates today. The less soil we have, the more food will cost. For some idea of the cost of lumber and the price of housing a generation hence, we should be following deforestation rates today."

Some of the startling but undeniable facts disclosed by Sunderlal Bahuguna, one of the world's greatest crusaders against deforestation, may also serve as eye-openers for us:

1. Humankind is, today, poorer than what it was a few centuries ago; poorer not only in non-renewable resources, which are on the brink of extinction, but poorer in renewable resources like grasslands, forests, croplands and oceans as well: resources that have become non-renewable due to their over-exploitation. One-third of our earth is desert.

2. This development cannot be sustained because we cannot have unlimited growth from limited resources. The Burtland Commission on Development and the Environment has accepted that 80 per cent of our resources are being utilised by 20 per cent of our population. If we want to maintain this standard of life, we need three more planets!

3. This is unethical because a single species, ie human beings, has no right to exploit other species to the extent that they are in danger of becoming extinct. A recent Kew Garden report has it that by 2050 AD as many as 60,000 plant species will be extinct.

One would do well to remember that while environmentalists may embark on countless "Save our Trees" campaigns and many "Friends of Trees" may launch crusades to maintain a vegetal cover, deforestation is, possibly, an alarming forerunner to a devastated environment. ♦

FEATURE

MASINAGUDI IS a small town in the Gudalur Block of the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, 27 kms from Udhampuram (Ootacamund). One morning last year, we were standing outside a little temple in a tribal village in Masinagudi, waiting for the *pooja* to finish, when our attention was caught by a boy mixing sand and cement for a housing project.

"Take a look at the amount of sand that's going into that mixture. I wouldn't like to stand in that house for even five minutes," Stan remarked. "What proportion of cement to sand are you using?" he then asked the boy.

Pat came the reply, "1:8, Saar."

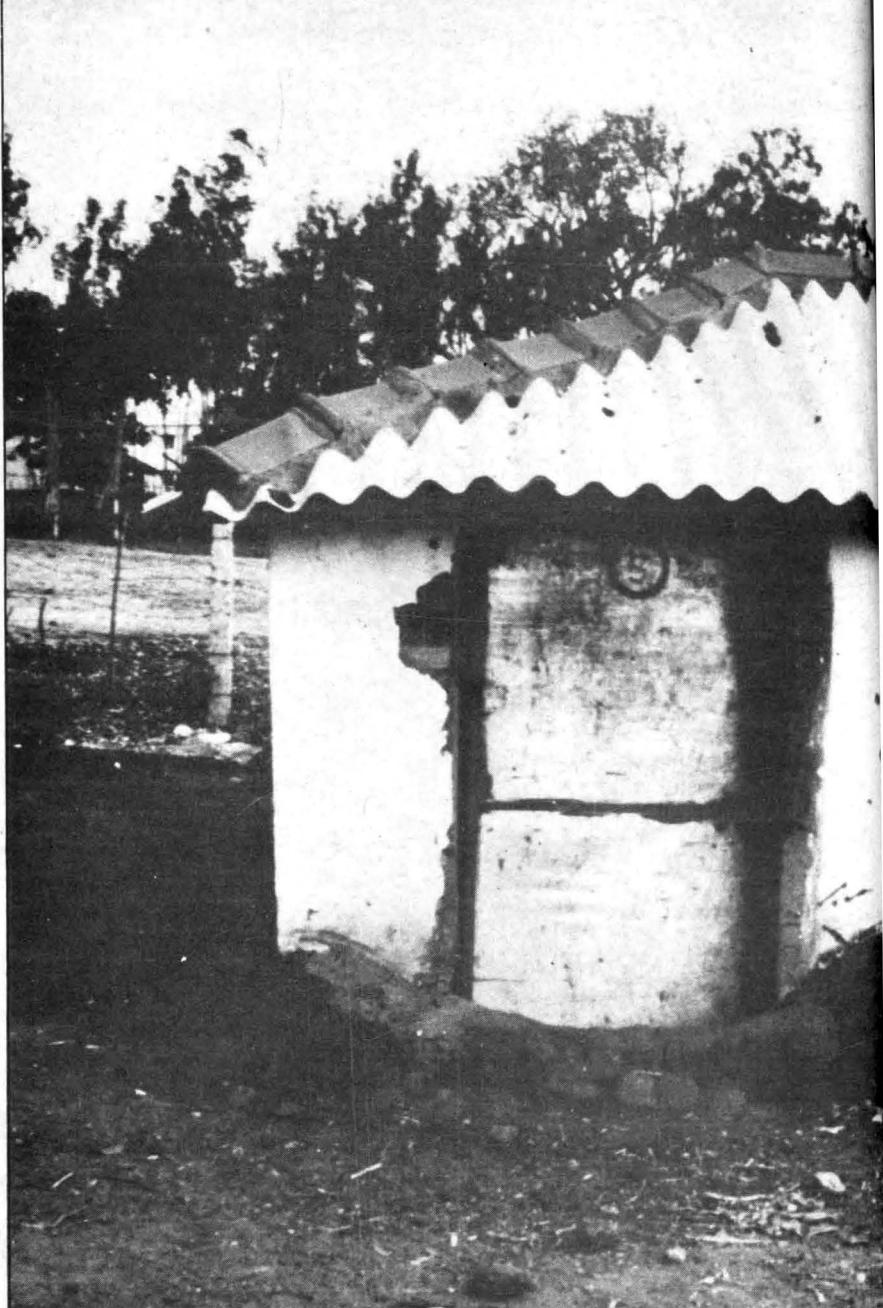
"Who are you kidding?" Stan replied, laughing at the boy. "I'm not the quality control inspector, son, you don't have to be so scared. Now give me the real figure. What's the proportion?"

"1:16, Saar."

"Madan!" yelled the contractor, "Come here at once!" The boy scuttled away like a scared rabbit.

Upon inquiry, we discovered that in the Jen Kurumba village in Masinagudi, the government was building 35 new houses for tribals under the NREP (National Rural Employment Programme). Each house was to cost Rs 10,500. Cement, asbestos sheets for roofing, doors and windows, purllins and beams were being provided by the government. Labour was to be provided by the people and paid for by the government at the rate of Rs 10 per day. Part of this payment was in kind — rice and wheat — and the balance in cash.

The people had a traditional concept of housing which was quite unlike what was now being built for them. They used to build a simple but functional structure of mud and bamboo with a thatched roof. But bamboo, once freely available from the forest, was now out of their reach, as bamboo-felling was completely banned by the Forest Department. Thatch was also increasingly difficult to come by, so in desperation they had agreed to this new housing which was, of course, alien to them.



THE SPECTRE OF the unfinished castle of sand continued to haunt us. If government houses were to be so shoddily built in spite of the hullabaloo being made about housing, with 1987 having been declared "The International Year of Shelter" what hope could there be? So Stan complained verbally to the Block Development Officer (BDO), Gudalur, convinced that at least in 1987, housing should have been treated more seriously.

CASTLE OF SAN

By Mari Marcel Thekaekara



Only months after completion, tribal dwellings in a government housing scheme have already collapsed while those undertaken by the people themselves stand firm. **MARI MARCEL THEKAEKARA** tours the district.

The project was completed. Even from a distance, when we whizzed past on a motorbike, it was an eyesore. The roofs were sagging visibly, doors and windows were badly aligned, and the plastering was a pitifully shoddy job. The sands of 1987 had already trickled out and with them, at an alarming rate, the deterioration of the houses had started. Visibly, and without any pretensions to permanence, the houses were cracking up

and crumbling just six months after completion.

So we stopped by to meet the villagers for whom these houses were built to gauge their reactions to their new homes. And, although it seemed a ridiculously obvious question, I asked it: "What's the problem with the houses?"

The Jen Kurumbas are not a vociferous lot but sheer frustration and anger let loose a volley of complaints: "Everything. Look at the roof, how bad it is."

"See these doors and windows, they hardly close. They look like they'll fall off any minute."

"See how hot it is inside. The smoke can't go out."

"And the plastering — just lean against a wall and something will crumble. You'll be covered with sand!"

That apparently *was* the crux of the matter — too much sand and too little cement.

KALLAN, A YOUNG BOY, leaned against the wall; a shower of sand cascaded on his head. He touched one of the precariously balanced tiles on top of the asbestos sheet; the cement which was meant to reinforce the tiles gave way and came off as a chunk of sand in his hand. "You see?" he said. "Come, I'll show you something else."

He led us to a ruin at the corner of the colony. "Look, this is my old mud house. It took so much work to *break* it down. We demolished it because they (the government) promised to give us new *pucca* houses. But the new houses crumble if we so much as lean against the walls. And for this I was fool enough to tear down my solid mud hut!"

A group of women took up the tale of woe:

"The roof leaks in three or four places. All the children cry when it rains. They get wet and we can't do anything except move away from the drip. The inside is cold and damp when it rains."

"And when it's hot (like today), it's like an oven and you can't sit inside as you'll be cooked."

FEATURE

An old woman huddled in the shadows between two houses with a small child. Everywhere, the women and children sat in small patches of shade. No one sat in their homes unless it was absolutely necessary. Opposite one house, a little shelter of bamboo and thatch had been put up; children and babies were in it, playing. No one felt safe leaving unattended children in the rapidly deteriorating houses. So, alternative shacks had been constructed already. Apart from that, the heat under the asbestos roofs was too much for the children and so none of them could stay in the houses during the day.

I STEPPED INTO MASINI'S HOUSE.

The little box-like structure was indeed like a furnace inside. Heat reflected downwards from the asbestos roof. Masini sat in front of a supposedly smokeless *chula*. Smoke billowed up from the fire and filled the house. She showed me the cracks which let in the rain, the crumbling walls, the precariously juxtaposed iron beams, and the asbestos sheets miraculously balancing without even fully resting on the beams. The walls were black with soot from the trapped smoke. I emerged coughing.

We next moved towards Chikmadan's house, House No 25. "Two days after completion, the roof cracked," he informed us. "I went to the contractor," he continued, "who came and put some cement on the cracked asbestos sheet." He showed us the crack covered with an old sack — a piece of wood weighted it down.

House No 5 had no door or window. The chimney was on the floor. "Why is that there?" I asked, pointing to the chimney.

Kallan shrugged, "They just didn't bother to fit it up."

"And what happened to the doors and windows?"

"They collapsed a couple of weeks after the house was built. There they are," he said, pointing to a crude steel door and window lying on the ground. "The fellow who lived in it was afraid it would collapse on his head one day.



The government scheme: too much sand and too little cement.

So he gave up, moved out and is now sharing a house with someone else."

A LUDICROUS THOUGH FITTING
finale awaited us as we ended our tour with an inspection of the attached latrines — the stone covers of the concrete septic tanks were covered with human excreta while a dog crept sheepishly out of an abandoned, unused latrine! Everyone burst out laughing and Kallan, grinning from ear to ear, exclaimed, "See! Only fit for dogs!"

"Why aren't the latrines being used, though?" I interpolated when the laughter died down.

"Because there is absolutely no water. Who is going to carry a bucketful of water all the way down from the pond each time?" was the reply.

"What can we do about these houses?" they asked us.

"Why! Haven't you complained?" we queried.

"We don't know where to go or whom to see," they answered.

"Have you tried the Block Development Officer?" we countered.

They shrugged hopelessly, too fed up to even want to protest.

WHEN WE VISITED the BDO's office at Gudalur, we were informed that

the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) schemes had been transferred and now came under the jurisdiction of a new officer, BDO, Programmes. Mr A Kari, who had only recently taken up the new post, was extremely co-operative. Excerpts from our conversation:

Mari & Stan: The NREP houses in Masinagudi are on the point of collapse, barely six months after completion.

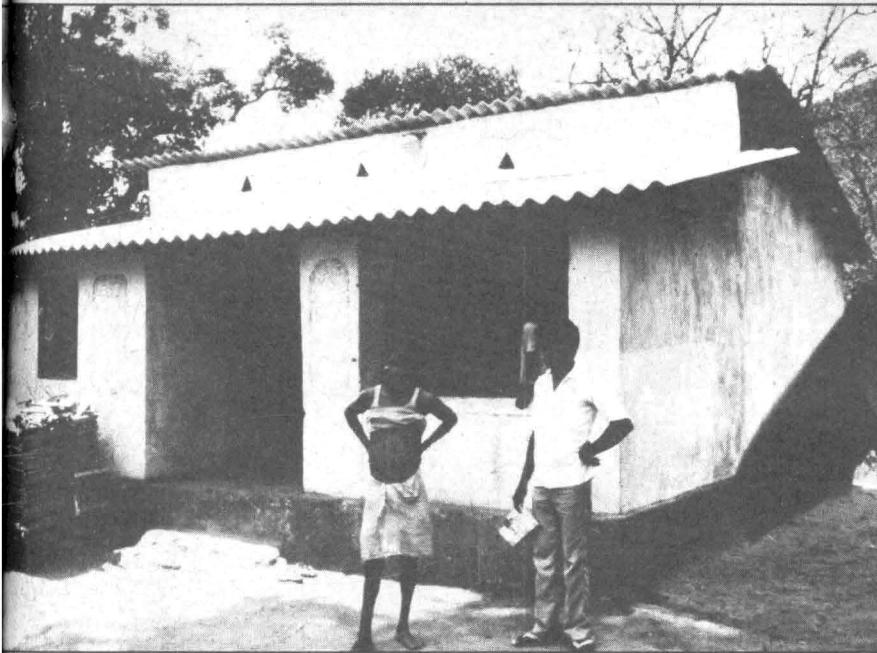
Mr Kari: Yes, I've heard that, but I was not here last year. Anyway, everyone knows that they are badly built.

Can't anything be done about this? No, no! There are no funds; no provision for repairs.

But can't you take action against the person — the engineer, Panchayat Union — responsible for the quality control?

If the people complain, action can be taken, but they haven't so far. Also, what good will it do? The past is the past. Someone should have complained at the time of building.

I did complain to the BDO regarding the adulteration of cement with ex-



An example of the Devala project.

cess quantities of sand, but unfortunately only verbally. No action was taken. This is the problem — cement for these houses is stolen on a large scale. Can't you stop this?

We give the cement. After that how can we impose checks? It is not possible.

According to the NREP/RLEGP guidelines, the housing projects under these schemes are not supposed to be given directly to the contractors. They are supposed to be given to the people or to other sponsors.

Who says so?

It's in the NREP guidelines.

I don't know anything about that. If we don't give it to contractors, how is it possible to build so many houses?

But the contractors say that they have to cut down on quality because of the large bribes demanded by your staff.

My staff? No, I don't know anything about that. Perhaps it is possible at the engineer level. I don't think my staff take anything.

Which would you consider the best houses completed last year?

The Devala sisters'. They've built very good houses.

And the worst?

(Laughing) You know — you've seen them!

HE WAS REFERRING TO the housing development completed under the NREP scheme and undertaken by Sister Luisa of Devala, a small town about 16 kms from Gudalur, also in the Nilgiris. Apparently it was an undertaking no contractor was prepared to take on — these were all tribal houses to be built in remote inaccessible areas.

When we approached Sister Luisa we were intrigued to discover that apart from the government housing project, she had undertaken yet another which she termed "the people's housing project", at half the cost of the government houses. Curious, we proceeded along a goat track to her "people's project". The houses were indeed remote, scattered on the hillsides in isolated spots on the Tan tea estate, with no roads linking them to the main tarred road of the estate.

The first house we visited belonged to Nanji, a young woman of the Paniya tribe. The house was solid — unburnt brick walls plastered with cement, raised high from the ground with the essential Paniya verandah, a big room, and a kitchen. It also had an unusual two-level roof, not com-

monly found in rural areas.

"This looks like a nice house. Do you like it?" Stan asked.

"I should," Nanji chirped back, "I built it with my own two hands — carried the mud, made the bricks, did all the hard work myself; the mason only built the roof and did the cement plastering..."

"That is a very fancy roof — where did you get the design?" Stan interrupted.

Proudly she replied, "That's America fashion — I saw it in the town and asked the mason to make me one too." Eyeing the camera, she added, "You can take my picture after I've changed." She came back and posed, beaming, with a plate of *kanji*, in front of her wonderful new house.

THE SECOND HOUSE belonged to Raman and Lakshmi. "We built it ourselves," Raman informed us. "The sisters gave us windows, doors, the tiles and cement. We made the bricks. A mason supervised."

"Who paid the mason?" Stan asked.

"The sisters — they gave us some money too, since we couldn't do our coolie work while we built the house." "How much did your house cost totally?" Stan asked.

"Three thousand, seven hundred and nineteen rupees," came and reply. "You could have got a government house completely free and without working so hard," Stan cajoled.

Raman protested indignantly: "The government houses collapse within a year. See how solid this is. There we would have had no say at all; here we could say what we wanted, and build the way we like. The house is raised, so there's no danger of damp, and there's also the verandah which we must have for our guests."

The owner of the next house, Channe, was equally proud: "Who built our house? Hah! We built it entirely ourselves. All the work we did ourselves, the wood we carried ourselves, everything..." She spluttered with indignation.

FEATURE

"Didn't some sisters help you at all?" Stan inquired.

"Oh, them! They gave us the tiles for the roof I suppose," she conceded. Her sons laughed: "They gave us the tiles for the roofs, doors and windows, cement for the foundation and for plastering, and they helped pay the labour with rice and some money." Stan continued: "If it was so much trouble why didn't you opt for government housing, old lady?"

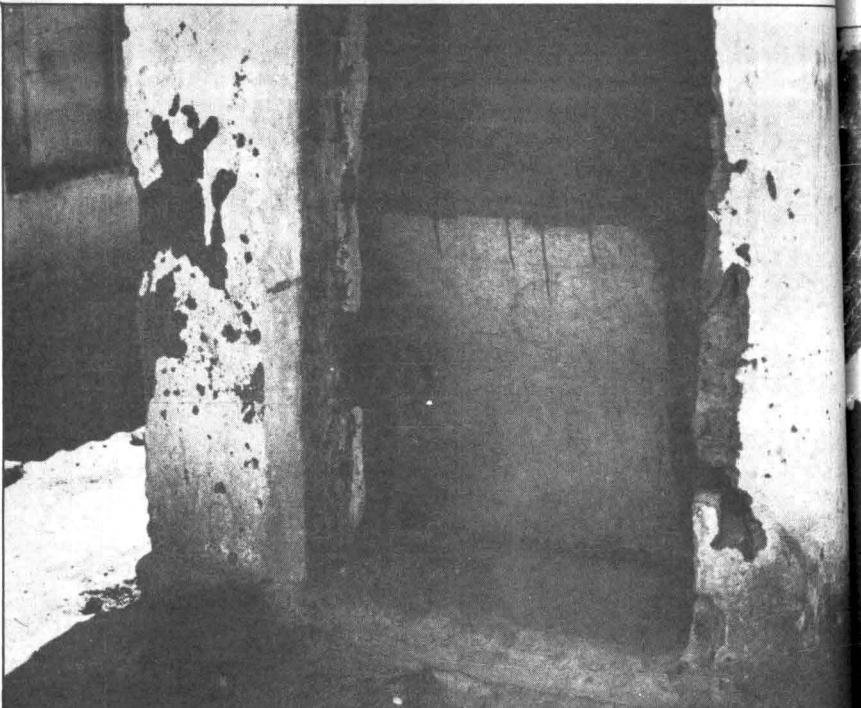
"Government housing! And in the monsoon you'd have to swim. Enough water comes into government houses for you to bathe, cook and wash your clothes and dishes! Government housing indeed!"

LAUGHING, WE VISITED the last house, whose owners, Kuttii and Valli, were busy washing the gold dust they had panned earlier in the day. We stood stock-still, amazed: the house was a big one — the facade had been smartly painted in blue and white with a very stylish finish. "America roof," beamed Kuttii, "we asked for it." The couple with their children looked typically Paniya, but we had never in our four years in the Nilgiris seen such a fancy Paniya house.

It was big. A large room, with a large kitchen and a smaller *pooja* room, all enclosed by a Paniya-style verandah. The total assistance from the sisters for this 'bungalow', by tribal standards, was only Rs 5,501.

We thanked them and moved on to the NREP housing scheme, also undertaken by Sr Luisa; these houses each cost Rs 10,500 — double the cost of her most 'expensive' low-cost Paniya 'bungalow'. And though they were a hundred times better than the NREP houses at Masinagudi, it was evident that they were far-below the standard of the low-cost houses which the tribals had constructed themselves. In fact, Sr Luisa has been accused of giving better accommodation to her favourites!

Most of the residents were at work when we visited their colony, but the children were quick to point out a major problem — leaks in the



Within weeks the doors collapsed.

asbestos sheets. There appeared to be a basic flaw in the design of the roofs — the sheets had gaps. Sr Luisa later informed us that this was so since the four-cornered Kerala roof was meant for tiles and not asbestos sheets. And, since the asbestos sheets were being given by the government, there was no possibility of using a more suitable alternative.

Additionally, the purlins were not strong enough to take the weight of the roof, and although they looked stable during construction, they were now beginning to sag. Neither were the asbestos sheets large enough for a good overhang. And the supposedly 'smokeless' *chulas* were not working very well either.

AN IMMENSE DIFFERENCE between the Devala houses and those of Masinagudi was apparent — the cement. Here the walls were thick and solid. And in spite of its defects, the houses still looked strong and well-built. But the strange phenomenon here was that the people took absolutely no interest in the building or construction of their houses, and refused to help. We asked Koima, the only adult woman around, why this

was so. Was this perhaps because they had no say in the kind of house they wanted? But she shrugged in typical Paniya fashion and refused to comment.

Another question, and one which has not been brought up at all, is the health hazard posed by asbestos-sheet roofing. No one concerned with



Forsaken: the traditional thatch hut.



Weighting down an asbestos roof with tiles and thatch.

ing seemed even remotely aware of the fact that asbestos is believed to be carcinogenic. Even though US health authorities have estimated that 50,000 new cancer cases would occur annually for the next 30 years due to past exposure to asbestos in America. Many of the US asbestos manufacturing companies have now

been forced to close down. Sweden has gone further and totally banned both the manufacture and use of asbestos cement. And in 1978, the asbestos-producing companies of 24 countries met and decided to put a "skull-and-bones" warning label on all types of asbestos.

Yet, in India, government-built houses continue to be built with asbestos roofs, and queries concerning the health hazards they pose, are met with blank uncomprehending stares.

The question of basic amenities is also completely disregarded. Electricity, of course, is still a luxury for most villages, while attached toilets are deemed a complete waste of money and materials. When asked whether water pipes had been connected to the Masinagudi's NREP toilets, people looked at us as though we were crazy: "Water for toilets? Are you serious? There is not even a tap for drinking water!" The tragedy is that although the original guidelines for construction of NREP and RLEGP housing had shown great insight and forethought in the planning of these schemes, they had not been implemented. Instead, the actuality mocks the guidelines and reduces them to a



poor joke. It is unbelievable that the concerned government authorities could accept, as completed, a project such as the Masinagudi one, which completely violates the guidelines and norms originally laid down by the planners.

THE VIOLATION OF the prerequisites for adequate roofing is only one such instance. While guidelines specify appropriate technology, and the ugly word 'asbestos' is not allowed to rear its ugly head anywhere in the guidelines, it is ironic that in an area of abundant forests, where timber in vast quantities moves out by truck-loads every day, the natives, the original owners of the forests, are forced to shelter under wretched asbestos roofs which render their homes iceboxes in the winter, ovens in the summer, and perennial showers during the monsoons.

And Masinagudi is only one of the disasters. In Elumaran, in Allur, in Putturvayal (all close to Gudalur town), houses have collapsed barely a year after they were built. The residents don't expect more; after all, it's government housing. And the situation repeats itself all over the district, the state, the country...

It is a matter of grave concern, perhaps even shame, that with the International Year of Shelter of the Homeless having just come to an end, an utter farce is being perpetrated in the name of housing for the poor. Especially as 1987 was celebrated with such fanfare as "The Year of Shelter", and huge amounts of money were designated for new construction and swallowed up by avaricious contractors, engineers and government employees.

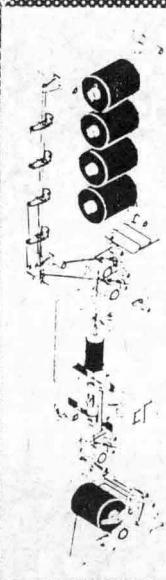
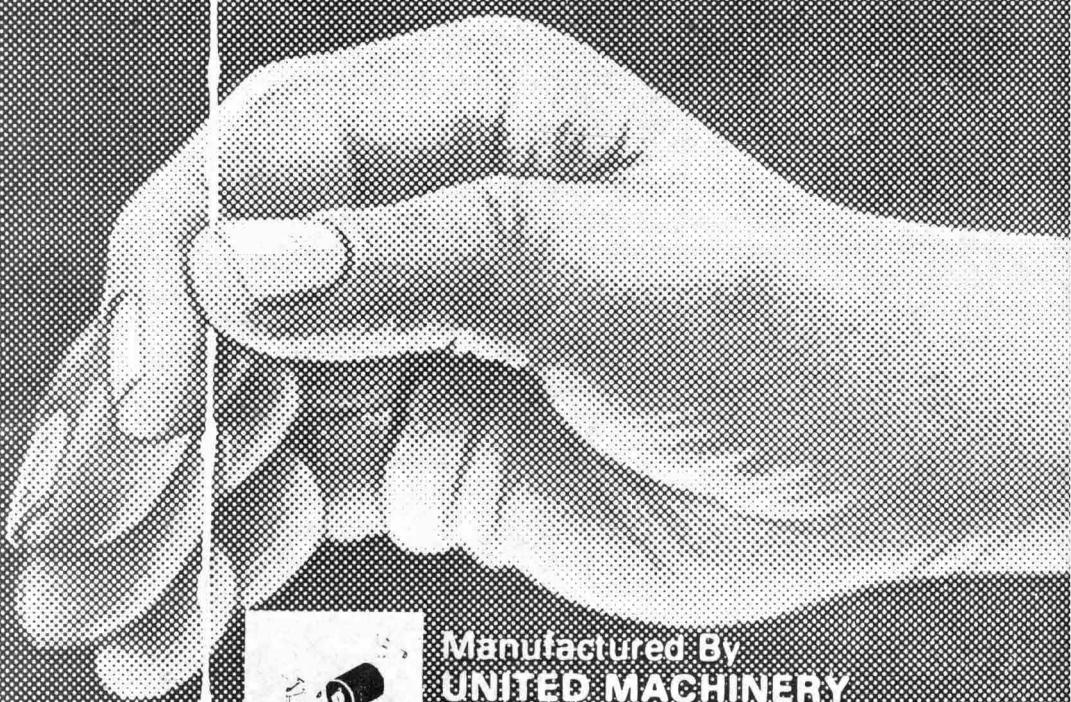
With 1988, the fanfare died down, and so has the dubious emphasis on housing. But reports still proudly proclaim, at least on paper, the number of crores spent on housing, the targets achieved, the houses built... The real story, however, is told in rural India in village after village — voiced by the cry of our homeless people. ♦

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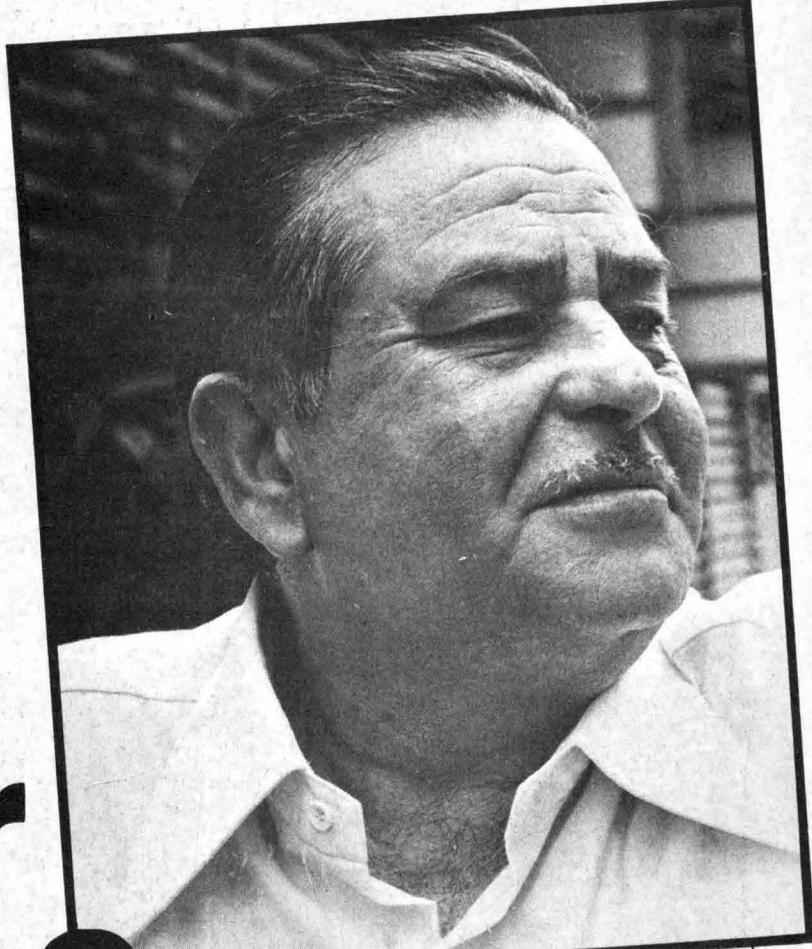


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Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip Kumar – the unforgettable triumvirate of the fifties, when films spelled pure magic. Haunting, mesmerising, riveting films. Today, with the tragic death of Raj Kapoor, the entire film industry seems orphaned. On these pages, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand talk to MINNIE VAID about the Raj Kapoor they knew.*

RAJ KAPOOR:

Master Of The Game



* These interviews were conducted days before Raj Kapoor died.

DILIP KUMAR:

I OBJECT TO THE TERM the "Big Three"; it's a misnomer because Raj enjoys a unique position as a film-maker; as for our being the top three actors at that time, well, there were people better than us, for example, Ashok Kumar. My association with Raj dates back to our college days (Khalsa college); we grew up together in the same city and belonged to the same social creed or ethos – the Northwest frontier culture. We're both open-hearted people, we speak a language that is neither Hindi, nor English, nor Urdu, it's a very private language of our own. I've known Raj very intimately, he's been more than a contemporary, more than a good film-maker; he's an excellent friend with abiding love. Our affection for each other transcended competition or rivalry. Though people did try, from time to time, to create friction amongst us – the 'Raj Kapoor

versus Dilip Kumar' kind of sentiment – we managed to maintain the best of relations, and steered clear of the petty squabbles of the world of cinematic gossip and rumour. As I said, our friendship was not just a professional one, we had similar interests apart from cinema. We were and are, both fond of sports – cricket, football – we often played together.

As far as Raj's film-making prowess is concerned, I think his contribution to Indian cinema has been historical. We have yet to come across a showman or film-maker who can equal the class and calibre of Raj Kapoor's films. He entertained people, moved them deeply, and in some cases, his fame spread internationally – the Soviet Union, in particular. And, mind you, he was very young then, in his late twenties!

NOSTALGIA

My association with Raj dates back to our college days. We grew up together in the same city and belonged to the same social creed or ethos. I have known him very intimately.



I have not seen all his recent films though I did see *Bobby* and that Mandakini film, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*. Raj knew the audiences he was catering to. Much earlier, he had burnt his fingers with films like *Aag* and *Jagte Raho*, which I feel were better films. Then again, with *Mera Naam Joker* he suffered a severe setback. But he was a fighter, good at this kind of battle, and he survived.

Of course Raj had his foibles — most artistes tend to be eccentric — it's common to all of us, but at heart, he remains the same — my childhood friend, colleague, comrade.

DEV ANAND:

RAJ, DILIP AND I were at the top — very, very busy actors right through the fifties. In fact, Raj and I were contemporary film-makers though he was into direction and I branched out in production. I remember several instances of our films being released simultaneously, for example, *Awaara* and *Baazi*. I switched to direction much later, in 1970. Raj, Dilip and I had immense regard, respect and love for each other, though I wouldn't say we ever hobnobbed together. Of course we met at parties, invited each other to our *muhurats*, premieres and parties. Often, we'd meet after months on end, yet when we did, it was with a feeling of having missed each other. We had formed an Actors' Guild — I was its President and both Raj and Dilip were very prominent members. We three were bound by a common cause — the well-being of the film industry. We met politicians in Delhi right from Nehru to Kamaraj to Indira Gandhi — that sense of purpose brought us all together. But otherwise we were very, very busy.

I think we really came close to each other during our visit to the Soviet Union in 1954. We led the first film de-

legation to Moscow, our visit had been preceded by Pandit Nehru's, and we all had great fun. It was a memorable six weeks — we travelled through the country, people held public and civic receptions for us, parties, champagne — it was a fantastic affair. Raj was there with Nargis — by that time everyone knew of their association — and *Awaara* was screened. The Russians loved it; they had been used to propaganda films with a social message. For the first time they were exposed to sheer entertainment — the aura of romance, songs and dances, the 'tramp' phenomenon. The song *Awaara hoon* is still popular there, after so many years.

It was after this fantastic tour that we started following each other's careers and work. There were annual parties, we visited each other, though Dilip was more introverted. In fact, I can only remember having attended his wedding to Saira Banu. But Raj, well, his lifestyle was grand, he always had a tremendous ego. You know, the 'I am Raj Kapoor' type of feeling. He'd talk about his past (especially when he was drunk); he's immensely proud of it, and why not, if you've done something worthwhile! I remember when *Guide* was shown on television recently, he called me up and said, "What films we made then, didn't we?" Raj gets very sentimental when he's talking of the past — you know, after a few drinks — he'll say "woh kya zamana tha!" Well, I've never had any of those complaints. I still feel I'm as good as I was, that my best is yet to come.

Now Raj is ill and we don't like it. One has been reading all the tributes to him in the media — I think he fully deserves all of them. He's made no compromises, he's taken 2-3 years to complete his films when he wasn't satisfied with the results. He gets obsessed with whatever film he's working on, stays on his sets longer and longer, becomes

a man with a single purpose. There's no such thing as a 'budget' for RK Films. He can shoot to the extent of wasting lots and lots of raw stock — well, he has his own studio, so he can afford it.

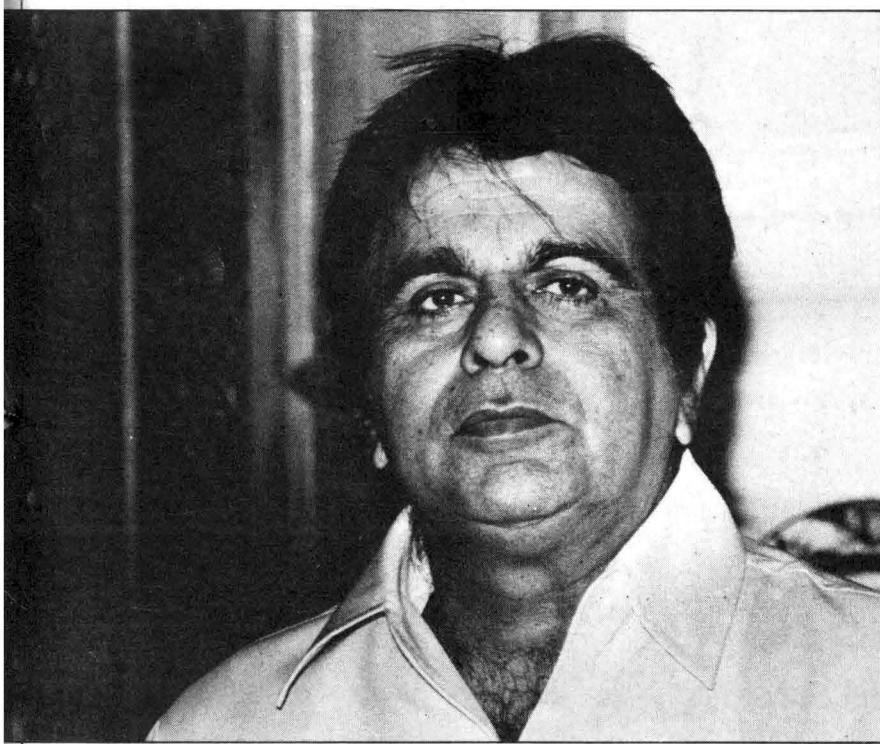
Personally I feel he was lost in today's world of cinema — *Mera Naam Joker*, which he considers his best film, flopped badly. But he showed tremendous resilience and came back with *Bobby*. A man who constantly moves with the times ultimately has his day. Still, his next films, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* and *Prem Rog* didn't click that well. I think he overdid the sex bit in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* — Zeenat Aman, who had just completed a Navketan assignment and left to work with the RK banner, was not really cut out for that role. Personally, I think *Awaara* was Raj's best, and I've liked some portions of *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*. Mind you, he would have been in a mess if *Ram Teri*... had flopped. Then again, I haven't much cared for some portions of this film, but, as a film-maker, I have had differences of opinion with everybody. Every film has its plus and minus points.

With Raj Kapoor, I think his major plus points were the music and love element in his films. Whenever audiences have missed out on these factors in his films, the film has flopped. After all, there's a big difference between a box-office hit and a good critics' film. But I firmly believe that as long as human beings exist, the love element will always be predominant and a vital factor to a film's success. Life is dry without romance, movies are dry without romance; everyone loves romance.

I agree that those days of magical romance are over, but then, those *times* were different. All three of us — the top heroes of the day — worked for only 4-5 films at a time; there was more to stardom then, more creativity. Today, there are so many entrants — some businessman sees some film on video and decides to copy it. There are so many new directors, actors, producers; everything is so accessible today. Now, in *our* time, Raj, Dilip and I never undercut each other. We all had our individual stamp, there was never any question of vicious competition. In fact, so many people used to tell us, "Why don't you act together, in a film?" Well, we were most willing but no one came up with a good enough script; it would have needed a genius to make such a film!

As for professional envy or jealousy, if you're human, it's natural to be envious occasionally, but jealousy taken to a point where it leads to being contemptuous, is another matter altogether. Yes, we respected each other's work but we never felt the need to copy one another. Ultimately our work was judged by the audiences and critics.

Raj is a great showman — his annual parties, birthdays, and premieres are very famous. After all, he had to keep up with his image. Personally I feel that after a point, when you've established yourself, the charisma is already there, and there can even be the danger of overpublicisation. But then, Raj has been known for his flamboyance. Let's put it this way — a Raj Kapoor in a gathering, *any* gathering, must be noticed! So he does his gimmicks. (Laughs indulgently). ♦

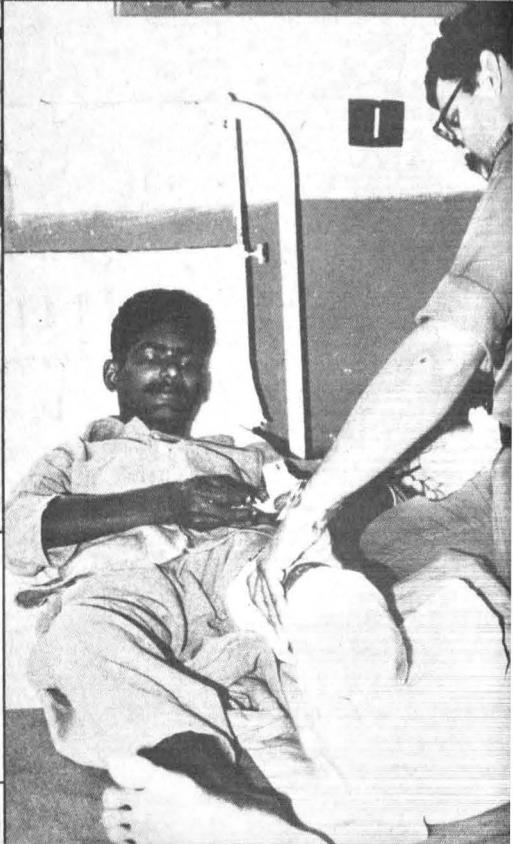
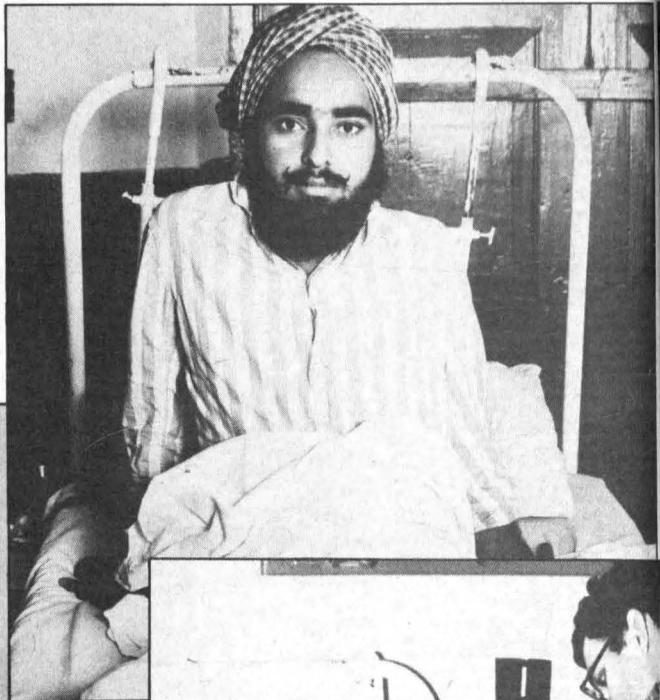
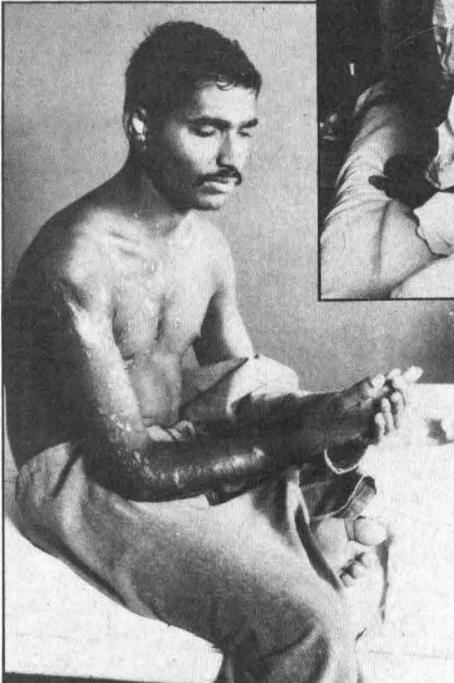


Raj Kapoor's major plus points were the music and love element in his films. Whenever audiences have missed out on these factors in his films, the film has flopped.



IPKF BATTLE CASUALTIES: FAREWELL TO ARMS

Surplus troops of the IPKF are now being withdrawn from Sri Lanka in what is being seen as a token exercise. Meanwhile, IPKF soldiers continue to wage battle against LTTE guerrillas. And the injury and death tolls inevitably continue to mount. What lies ahead for those irreparably wounded and despatched to various military hospitals in the country, their careers at an abrupt end? MINNIE VAID talks to battle casualties at the Military Hospital at the Southern Command Headquarters in Pune, about their experiences and what the future holds for them.



By Minnie Vaid



IT IS THE BEGINNING of another day at Ward 3 of Pune's Military Command Hospital. The elongated room is vast, airy and spotlessly clean. Trim nurses bustle around the long row of beds, placed at a comfortable distance from each other. The Medical Officer (in charge of the ward) goes on his morning rounds, attending to dressings at a meticulous and unhurried pace. There is a television set in one corner, while a large signboard at the entrance of the ward, lists the number and types of injuries sustained by the patients. Muted strains of music reveal the presence of several pocket transistors. On the face of it, Ward 3 resembles any other hospital ward attending to the needs of the sick. But Ward 3 and the adjacent Ward 4 cater, exclusively, to injured IPKF personnel, better known as "battle casualties".



The difference, moreover, is felt immediately — and it is jarring. Almost all the patients are very young and, at first glance, almost all seem to be crippled. I can see a row of stumps, and crutches propped against the beds. It is a horrific sight. As I approach individual patients, evidence of other disabilities comes to the forefront. Some patients have bandages over their shoulders and knees, others tell me that their limbs are partially paralysed and will need constant physiotherapy. A few 'lucky' ones have superficial injuries, and can hobble around the ward, stopping to chat with those immobilised in bed. Almost all the patients seem scarred due to the "deadly mine blasts in Sri Lanka".

A nurse introduces me to Naib Subedar A Savariraj. He is a 37-year old Tamilian and has put in 17 years of service in the army. He has 4 children, the youngest a mere baby, born after he was sent to Sri Lanka. He has never seen her and now, never will; because Savariraj has been completely blinded in a mine blast in Jaffna.

In the adjoining bed lies 21-year old Gurbachan Singh, who has served the army for only 2 years. He has lost his left leg in Jaffna and will receive a disability pension for the rest of his life. Needless to add, he will not see battle again.

AT LAST COUNT, official estimates revealed at least 400 dead and 1,500 injured. For these, the hundreds of soldiers of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF), waging fierce battles on unfamiliar terrain, their military careers have been irrevocably affected.

Once able-bodied men — tough, fit and enthusiastic — these jawans are today, the unsung heroes of an 'alien' war; many of those injured, quite obviously, have never been on the battlefield before. For them, especially those who have sustained serious injuries, Operation Pawan has dealt a crippling blow not only to their health and physique, but also their hopes and aspirations. Today, they find

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themselves part of the steady influx of jawans and officers admitted to the country's military hospitals — at Pune, Kirkee, Secunderabad, Madras, etc. The bulk of the battle casualties are, however, being treated at the military hospital at Kirkee and the Command Hospital, Pune.

AS I BEGIN TALKING to the jawans, it is obvious that they have been told to expect me. They are only too eager to talk — about themselves, their families, their injuries, their service in the army, etc. Some, more introspective than others, open up gradually and speak of "taboo topics" also, chiefly the war that they have just fought, on the assurance that they will not be quoted or misrepresented.

"We work for our country and go wherever we are asked to go," says the courageous Naib Subedar A Savariraj, animatedly. His face is scarred, eyes sightless, yet he struggles to articulate his feelings of loyalty. "When I joined

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the service I knew I would be called upon to fight. When you fight you don't think of your family. I was unlucky that I got trapped in a mine blast, I wanted to fight for many more years. It's my *kismet* — those mines are deadly," he says smilingly.

A jawan listening to the conversation elucidates, "Naib Subedar saved

at least 40 people by detecting the mines himself — he too could have sent his juniors. But he did it himself. Just that morning, he had been awarded too," he ends proudly. Savariraj will go home (to Madras) on sick leave, for a month, and as he is now unfit, will be awarded a pension. He intends joining a school for the blind and working in a civilian capacity — "My children should have a good education," he says firmly.

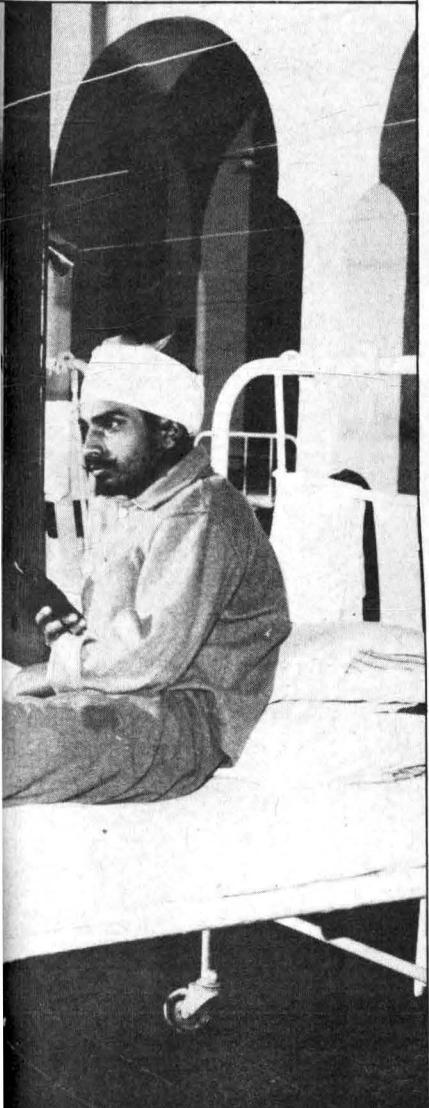
His slim wife, dandling her baby daughter on her knee, has been watching her husband with smiling incomprehension. How does she feel about

her husband's misfortune? Savariraj interprets the question but she only smiles more broadly in reply. What does *he* feel about losing his eyes and his cherished career, fighting an alien war in an alien country? "What is there to feel? In this hospital itself, there are so many who have lost a leg or hand in an accident, what's so different about me? I lost my eyes in duty, isn't that much better?" His logic and loyalty are unshakeable, even as I point out that this war could have been avoided and he need not have lost his eyes. (Later, after an hour's discussion on the same issue, a



senior army official cynically counters – “Which war isn’t or wasn’t avoidable?”

TWENTY-YEAR OLD Venkatrao in the adjacent bed, has put in two years of service and spent “two months and four days in battle at Trincomalee.” He has lost his left eye, has paralysis in his right hand, several mine blast scars on his chest and cannot hear very well. He echoes Savariraj’s sentiments: “I didn’t think about it being an alien cause, or any cause, for that matter. I merely followed orders.” He is awaiting another oper-



ation after which he will join his parents and relatives in Andhra Pradesh, on sick leave. He doubts that he will be sent back to his unit, which is still in Sri Lanka.

P Subbaraj, 23, lost his leg on February 20, also in Trincomalee. Having spent 13 days in the ICU, Subbaraj today thanks God fervently for sparing his life. “My companions died in the Eelam crossfire. I was hurt but lay down in complete silence for half an hour. Blood was by now flowing like water. Somehow I crawled to the road and was saved by my IPKF brothers. They (the army) will send me home now; I want to go home,” he nods earnestly.

Most of these ‘battle victims’ being sent home on sick leave, will be called back to the hospital for a medical review and then scattered according to the extent of their disability. Those who are deemed unfit, or who fall in the low medical categories, will be allotted sheltered appointments in var-

ious Indian regiments. Senior doctors at the hospital aver that, in most cases, the pensions will be higher than what the jawans would normally get. The jawans themselves are uncertain about this – most of them, in any case, are more disappointed by the premature sawing-off of their careers rather than their limbs. Some are

hopeful, others fatalistic. “The doctors assure me that though it will take time, my paralysis will heal,” says 27-year old Naik Ranjan, whose left side is totally paralysed. He has spent two months in this hospital and is being discharged to go home to Cochin. He will continue to draw his salary of Rs 1,200 per month. Gurbachan Singh, a slim, pallid youth, lying disconsolately on his bed, in between chats with a fellow Sikh, Charanjit Singh, 19, also a battle victim, is apathetic and unconcerned about his amputated leg. “Yes, I am very well-looked after here. I don’t know how long I’ll be here or what I will do in future,” he says morosely.

INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS notwithstanding, all of them re-affirm, with varying degrees of intensity, that, given an opportunity, they would sacrifice their limbs, eyes, lives, once again, whatever the cause and wherever the war. As one hears the refrain of “We only follow orders – that’s our duty and we would never question that,” from each bed, however mutilated its occupant may be, one begins to get a glimpse of the psyche of these indomitable fighters, or on a larger matrix, the psyche of the defence forces. For the spirit is so indomitable, the attitudes so devoid of bitterness or resentment, and so full of cheerful resilience, that one wants to applaud.

Later one is told that the conditioning – unquestioning obedience and implicit faith in superior officers – begins at a very early stage and forms an essential part of the discipline of the armed forces. It is, perhaps, the easiest and the most accurate explanation for the astonishing courage shown by youngsters of 21 or 23, who will spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs or walk with crutches. Do they *really* harbour no feelings of resentment, of incalculable loss? Or is it all a brave facade? It is difficult to draw conclusions: the stoic faces around provide no clues.

By and large, however, the mood is

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unbelievably cheerful and optimistic. "In the army, we don't think, we just do what we're asked to do," is the part mocking, part serious refrain in the wards. Regrets or recriminations, or even mere analysis, play no part in the lives of these IPKF soldiers. What appears to be a bleak existence in a sombre hospital ward, coupled with a no less bleak and nebulous future due to crippling deformities, is certainly not reflected in the chatter of those confronting it. They brush aside any attempt at sympathy with almost defiant insouciance. Pressed for details about their experiences in Sri Lanka, they start talking, cautiously at first and then with growing excitement, contradicting each other, shouting simultaneously to attract attention — enjoying the break from the hospital's normal routine.

They form a semi-circle around me, speaking animatedly. "This war (in Sri Lanka) will never end," says one, with implacable certainty. "God alone knows from when they (the Tamil insurgents) have been preparing for it. The LTTE has good brains to fight," he adds, almost admiringly. Another jawan clarifies his companion's remark. "It's like a mutiny, it will go on forever, and do you know why? Because we never know who is a civilian and who is a militant. We've

come across women who carry grenades wrapped in a bundle and strapped to their waists, under the guise of pregnancy. Then they throw them (the grenades) carelessly under our lorries. Little children take part in battle. And their courage is formidable. One woman, whom we caught redhanded, resisted all our attempts to extract information (through ceaseless beatings, he adds matter-of-factly) and said '*Hilay, sir*' after three days of incarceration," he ends wryly.

Others explain the various and by now familiar guerrilla tactics employed by the Tamil militants. "They know every inch of the areas that we followed through maps, half of which were often wrong. Their mines are concealed expertly, there are bunkers between civilian houses where they can hide. We fought by law, *they* follow no laws, they fire accurately. Not one bullet of theirs goes waste. When we fire, we have no knowledge of the terrain, no air cover." "No one who got caught in an LTTE ambush could escape unhurt; in fact, almost all succumbed."

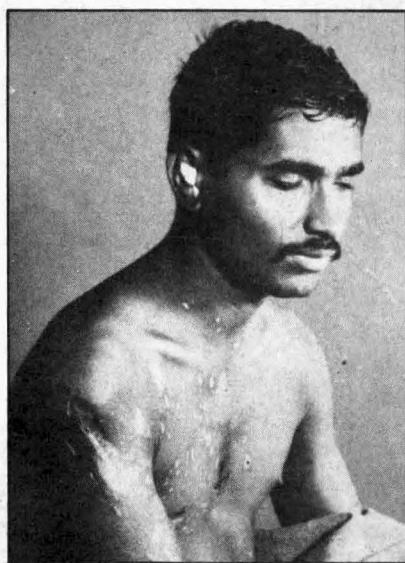
It is obvious that these jawans who were sent in to battle with what amounts to one arm tied behind their backs, do not under-estimate the enemy's strength. In fact, they acknowledge it openly, even quoting

"In this hospital itself, there are so many who have lost a leg or a hand in an accident, what's so different about me? I lost my eyes in duty, isn't that much better?"



"It's like a mutiny, it will go on forever, because we never know who is a civilian and who is a militant. Children take part in battle. And their courage is formidable."

Pirabhakaran's confident remark that "Till now the IPKF has been fighting with children." The civilian support given to the Tamil Tigers along with their intimate knowledge of the dense forest areas are, according to these jawans who were at the receiving end, the mainstay of the LTTE's continued manoeuvres. "When Indian supplies and rations were distributed to the refugees we weren't even sure that the same people would not return and attack us at night," says one jawan indignantly.



WHAT ABOUT LIVING conditions, supplies, food, etc? Good-natured laughter greets this query. "The first five days we survived on *nariyal paani*," chuckles one jawan. "Later, helicopters brought us *puris*. In any case, those days, who felt hungry? *Siraf jaan ki bhook thi*," he adds. "We slept



"We fought by law, they follow no laws. Not one bullet of theirs goes waste. No one who got caught in an LTTE ambush could escape unhurt."

for 15 days with our boots on; most nights, of course, we were wide awake," reminisces another jawan. "You can't imagine the size of mosquitoes in those jungles," twinkles another, with mock horror. Everyone breaks into jeering hoots of derision.

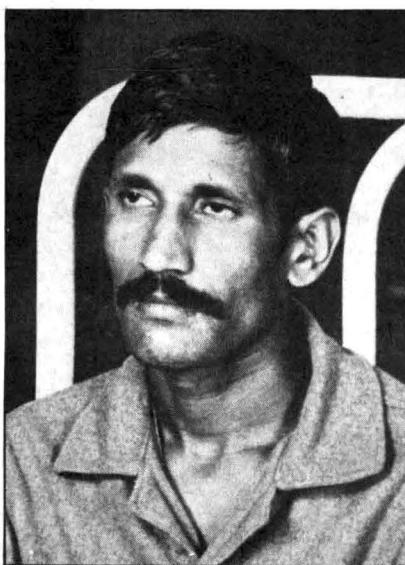
And medical attention? "Well, the nearest MO (Medical Officer) was about 15-20 kms away, or at the HQs (Headquarters). Some injured people did die because they couldn't reach the doctors in time, but, on the whole, the medical facilities were adequate." Most of them nod in unison. Ultimately, however, they insist again, it was all "God's will" — one of them holds out a hand with two fingers missing and offers, as proof, "I only lost two fingers, so many died. God saved me."

Were the civilians on the island at all communicative? "We generally found that only 25 per cent of the

civilian population joined the battle voluntarily. Most of them didn't want to fight," is the considered opinion of one jawan. He goes on to remark, "If there is a federation in Sri Lanka, there will be no need for Eelam." His insight is unusual for a man in his relatively low position in the hierarchy. Others listen to him in silence, offering no comment or dissension.

By this time, most of them are also fairly tired and trudge back slowly to their beds. Their fatigue makes me conscious once again of the appalling odds that they are still battling against. The enemy is no longer the trained guerrilla LTTE fighter. The enemy is within. The battle that awaits them now is against their own disabilities — whether it means coping with loss of eyesight or learning to live with a crippled leg or trying to overcome a debilitating paralysis of the limbs.

For these jawans, disability pensions will now replace salaries while active service will be sidelined for an as yet uncertain future. Under normal circumstances, a jawan assigned to a unit after a rigorous, year-long training period (following recruitment), signs his life over to the army for 20 years. At the end of this period, if physically fit and willing, he can serve his country for a further 15 years.

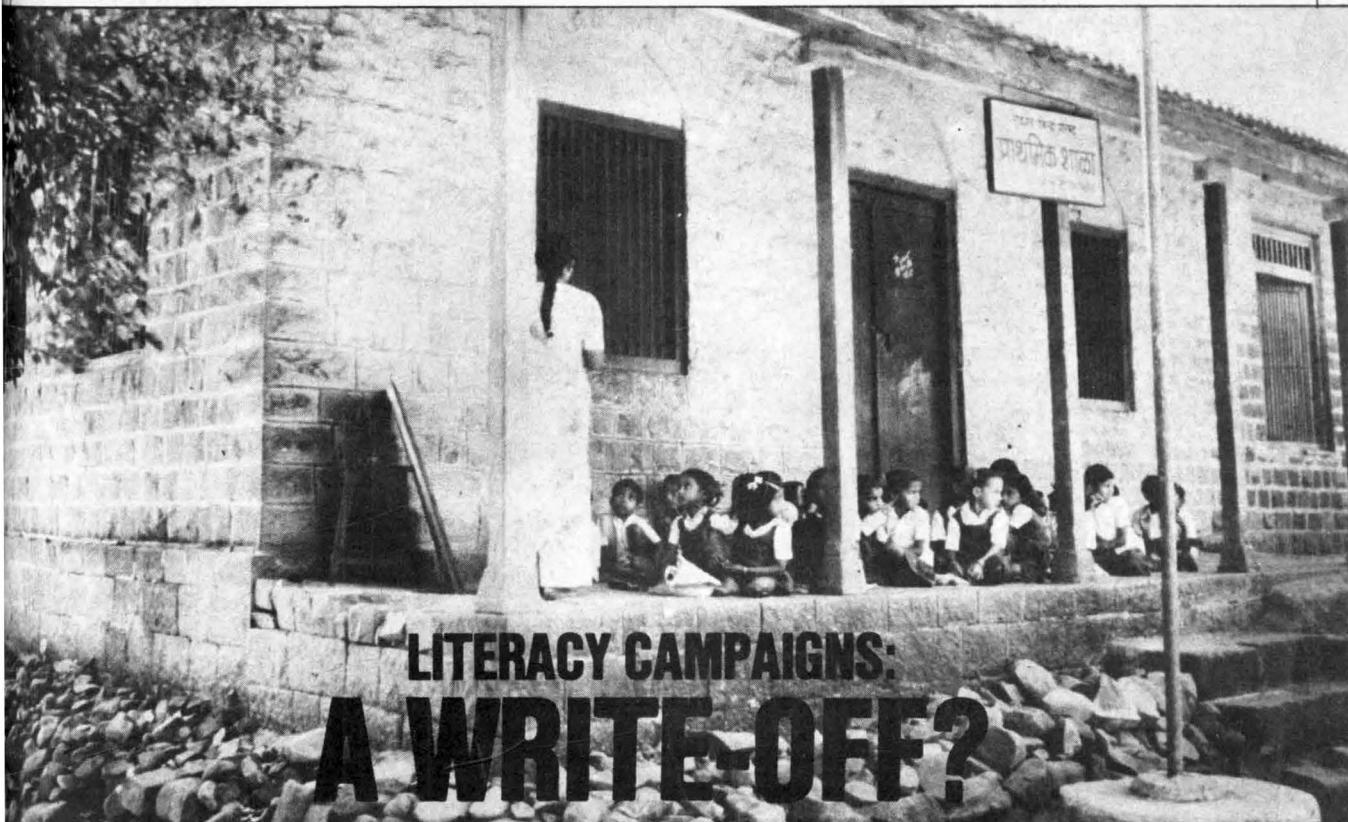


For those IPKF personnel who have suffered injuries of varying magnitude, completing a 35-year term of service, is a distant, possibly unattainable goal.

In the numbers game that appears to be played out with incessant hostility between the IPKF and the Tamil insurgent groups in Sri Lanka, public reaction is, perhaps inevitably, cynical and desensitised. When government officials, policy makers, defence personnel, commanding officers, and the public, scan the newspaper headlines daily — "10 IPKF shot dead" or "Mine blasts maim 2 IPKF at..." does anyone pause to realise that *that* statistic is or was, a human being with a family, with responsibilities, with a desire to live a normal life? That *that* two-inch column in the newspaper, on January 19, Feb 27 or June 4 — the dates are irrelevant — is, in fact, one of several premature obituaries?

As I leave the wards and face the bright sunshine outside, it is difficult to erase the memory of those mutilated limbs and sightless eyes. For what is, to an outsider, a mere encounter or memory, is to these jawans a grim reality. "Hard solutions leave scars" Rajiv Gandhi has said, referring to the Sri Lankan problem. Scars that these injured "battle casualties" will sustain for the rest of their lives. ♦

"When Indian supplies and rations were distributed to the refugees, we weren't even sure that the same people would not return and attack us at night."



LITERACY CAMPAIGNS: A WRITE-OFF?

THE BRAHMANICAL DEBATES on censorship that have, for years now, filled yards and yards of column space in the newspapers and kept several media experts gainfully employed, somehow never seem to acknowledge that the most fundamental form of censorship in this country is the illiteracy enforced on the overwhelming majority of its people. The Right to Freedom of Expression or Information fails to acquire significance unless coupled with other rights such as those of literacy and education. In India, over 63 per cent of the population — close to 500 million people — are illiterate, and the drop-out rate among school-going children is as high as 63 per cent between Class I and Class V.

But when have you last come across a newspaper editorial lambasting the government for denying nearly 500 million Indians this right? Come to think of it, when have you last seen an editorial in a major newspaper that was concerned with the pro-

Did you know that over 63 per cent of India's population — 500 million people — is illiterate? That the government's allocation of Rs 5,500 million towards the eradication of illiteracy works out to less than Rs 2 per literate per year? P SAINATH outlines the Government's indifference and dismal priorities towards resolving the illiteracy problem in India.

blem of illiteracy? In a six-month period last year, covering four newspapers, this writer found none. In a three-month period (spanning March to May) this year, he came across one — that too, occasioned by a speech of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in which he announced a "crusade against illiteracy." This sole editorial, in the *Hindustan Times* of May 7, faithfully recorded the "warning sounded by the Prime Minister" and was basically supportive of what he had to say. However, it said *nothing at all* about the policies of Rajiv Gandhi's government which are surely destined to worsen the scale of the very problem of illiteracy in the shortest time possible.

It would be wrong to be too harsh on the newspaper since it at least found the issue worthy of an editorial, unlike most others. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the editorial made no correlation between the dismal statistics it quoted and the policies of successive governments, in-

SPECIAL REPORT



"Literacy for All by 2020": empty slogans.

cluding Rajiv Gandhi's.

INvariably, the editorials and articles that appear, if at all, on this subject, also make few or no comparative references vis a vis the experiences of other developing nations. How, for instance, did Vietnam, ravaged by years of war and re-united only in 1975, manage such a massive literacy campaign in so short a period of time under such dismal circumstances? And how is it that Nicaragua, a state far more backward than India — it would be no exaggeration to say that the little Central American nation trails behind India on a hundred fronts — wins a UNICEF citation for its dedicated literacy programme within five years of the Sandinista revolution of July 1979?

Prior to that revolution, Nicaragua had been under the Somoza dictatorship for 45 years. Somoza's attitude towards literacy was revealing: visiting Costa Rica and being shown its new schools and its literacy programme, the dictator responded, "I want oxen, not men in my country." In other words, as Nicaragua's present minister for education explains

it, "uneducated people, little more than beasts of burden, were the more malleable material of his dictatorship."

The Indian elite would be horrified if it were suggested that its attitude was not altogether different, but the fact remains that, as measured by its practice, it isn't. Here, however, is a sophistication that a crude bumpkin like Somoza lacked; here there is wide-eyed innocence and frustration: "We've tried everything, but the problem's still there, you know."

But *do* we know? Are we quite clear as to why a nation that boasts 5,000 years of unbroken intellectual tradition will enter Rajiv Gandhi's much vaunted 21st century with 500 million illiterates? That, as a World Bank study reveals, the maximum number of illiterates in the globe will be concentrated in this country? In fact, they already are.

SO, WHAT IS THIS "CRUSADE" of which the Prime Minister speaks? The campaign he formally launched calls itself, with somewhat evangelical zeal, the 'National Literacy Mission'. One of the great deeds it aims

at performing is "promoting functional literacy" among 30 million adult illiterates between 1988-90 and among another 50 million between 1991-95, ie, during the remainder of the Seventh Plan and throughout the Eighth Plan. What's more, an impressive sum of Rs 5,500 million is being allotted for the "implementation of the strategies" involved. This announcement has been overworked as a news item — in one case appearing as many as three times in the same newspaper on different dates — on each occasion originating in either a government press release or a statement of Human Resources Development Minister P V Narasimha Rao!

Let us look at that impressive figure of Rs 5,500 million closely. Firstly, it covers less than 20 per cent of the total number of illiterates in the country. Secondly, it does that over a seven-year period. Even if we only go by the restricted target group, this means a princely expenditure of about Rs 10 per illiterate per year!

Do you know of a single part of this country where it is possible to enter a teaching, guidance or coaching class of any kind at all for Rs 10 on a yearly basis?! What is more, if this Rs 5,500 million were to target *all* the illiterates in the country, the expenditure per illiterate would amount to less than Rs 2 per illiterate per year. Simply put, if you are an illiterate, you can take much solace in the fact that, over the next seven years, your government intends to pour Rs 14 into making you literate!

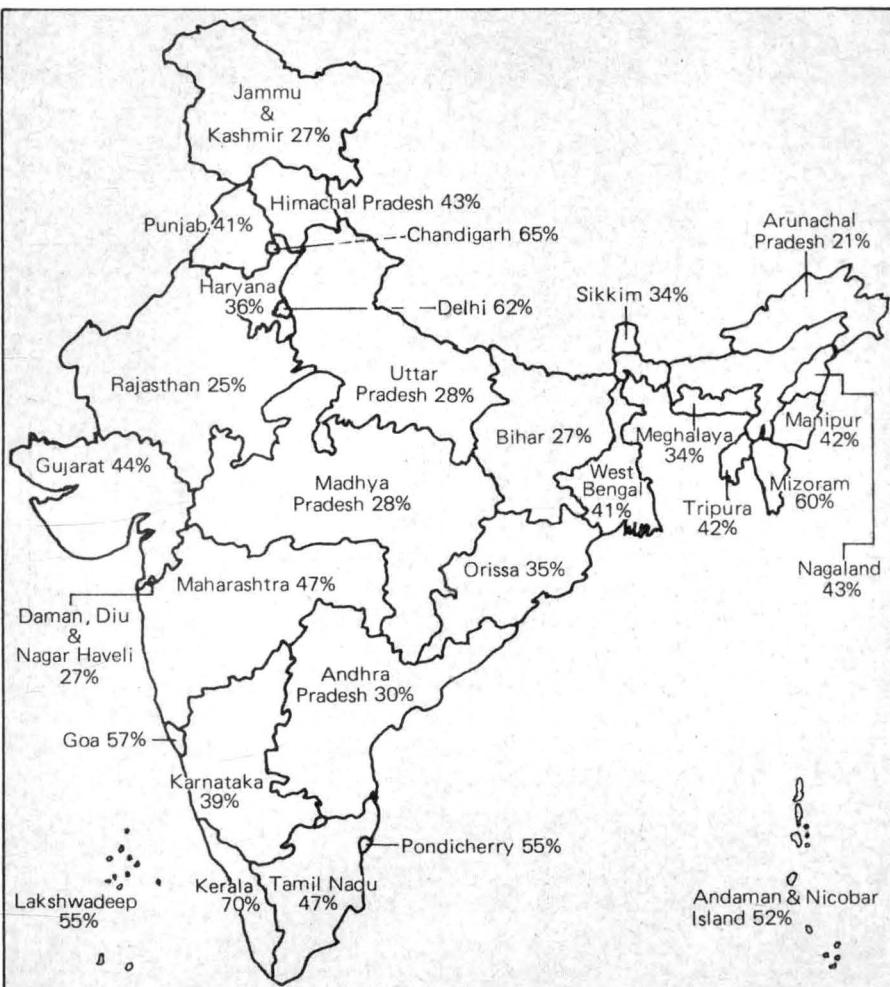
WHAT WOULD constitute reasonable expenditure on eradicating illiteracy? It would involve calculating what a single teaching hour in India costs and then having literacy programme experts decide the minimum number of such hours required on an average to assist an individual become literate. This would then mean calculating the time/expense required according to different groups of illiterates who may need different types and levels of inputs. It could also be

argued that the teaching hour here could cost less than that of a regular school as the overheads involved are far less. But there is no escaping the fact that the minimum figure worked out cannot or should not be drastically lower than the national average. There is also no escaping the fact that the school system itself is, or should be, the major vehicle of the campaign against illiteracy, certainly at the primary level. Indeed, it can be argued that it is far easier to inculcate literacy at that stage.

But what is the state of the educational system? It is plagued by declining investments and a very high drop-out rate (not to mention an increasing emphasis on elitism that diverts funds from basic levels of education). Even before Independence, the Gandhian Plan of 1944 strongly recommended an allotment of 10.6 per cent of the budget to education, both obligatory and mandatory. Even earlier, as far back as 1938, the Congress National Planning Committee, which included both Pandit Nehru and Dr S Radhakrishnan, had suggested a 10 per cent minimum. In reality, by the time of the Sixth Plan, this figure was down to a pathetic 2.20 per cent.

AS A RESULT, while the authorities boast of "Operation Blackboard" and other similar unimpressive clichés, official figures show that 40 per cent of the existing primary schools are housed in thatched huts, tents or open spaces. Nearly 1.5 lakh to 2 lakh premises do not even have mats for the children to sit on — and no blackboards either.

Incidentally, even the meagre amounts allocated are often not fully utilised. In the Sixth Plan period, for instance, the allocation for education, as a percentage of the total outlay, was 2.80 per cent. However, the amount *actually* spent equalled 2.20 per cent. The same thing had happened in the case of the Third and Fourth Plans. In the case of the Third Plan, the allocation was 7.47 per cent, but the actual expenditure equalled 6.87



THE LITERACY RATE IN INDIVIDUAL STATES & UNION TERRITORIES.

per cent, and in the Fourth, the figures were 5.15 per cent and 4.94 per cent respectively. To then express shock and surprise at the growing problem of illiteracy and backwardness in education is an exercise in sheer hypocrisy. Besides, the problem of education cannot be viewed in isolation from other social problems, the biggest of which is poverty, which is also the greatest factor influencing the high drop-out rate in schools. Unable to afford the loss of income that the working child could bring, or unable to meet the expenses of education itself, parents are forced to withdraw their children from school. Millions of Indian children thus plough lonely furrows in the fields under a blistering sun, or crowd the shops

and bazaars of city streets doing exhausting, and invariably, grossly underpaid jobs.

The location of schools is yet another problem. All too often, the schools are too far away for young children to journey to. The Kothari Commission (1968) had stipulated that primary school students aged 6-11 should have schools located at distances of less than one km from their houses, but the fact is that over 20 per cent of these (a much higher percentage in the rural areas) are well beyond this distance.

With such a situation prevailing in the primary schooling system, which should really constitute the main battlefield against illiteracy, how much will be achieved by programmes out-

Did You Know That...

* India has the largest number of illiterates in the world. The 1981 figure, according to the census, stood at 446 million.

* The total number of illiterates in 1951 was 302 million. Over the next two decades, according to NCERT and Census data, the number of illiterates increased at an average rate of 30 lakhs per year.

* Among the 15-35 age group, viewed by planners as a particularly important target group, the number of illiterates has increased from 91 million in 1951 to 110 million in 1981. The figure, according to a study conducted by the National Literacy Mission (NLM) is expected to rise to 116 million by 1991 and is then expected to "decline back" to 110 million by 2001 A.D.

* Female literacy is highest in Kerala (65%) and lowest in Rajasthan (5.5%).

* Kerala also tops in literacy among scheduled castes (56%), while, not unsurprisingly, Bihar plumbs the depths in this field (10%).

* Mizoram accounts for the highest literacy rate among scheduled tribes (60%) and Andhra Pradesh the lowest (8%).

* Indian children who ought to be learning how to read and write are out in the fields working. We have nearly 22 million child labourers, more than a third of the world's total!

* All this does not stop the government from officially announcing that there will be "Literacy For All" (with a rider, in small print, that this means for all in the 15-35 age group) by 2020 A.D.!

side the schools at an expenditure of Rs 14 (over seven years) per individual of a restricted target group? Surely people outside the 15-35 age group also have a right to literacy.

THE SUDDEN IMPORTANCE being given to the role of voluntary agencies is also not genuine. It is, instead, a route via which the government calmly discards its own responsibility. Educating the Indian people, as the Constitution makes clear, is the duty of the State. And the voluntary agencies, while they can undoubtedly play a role, cannot do the government's job for it. There is no way they can replace or substitute the machinery of the state, the only one equipped to deal with hundreds of millions of people. It would be rather like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon.

In any case, even in the "ambitious" National Literacy Mission project, of the Rs 5,500 million allotted, the share for the voluntary agencies will amount to Rs 100 million: Rs

3,250 has been allocated to the field programme, and Rs 1,100 million for continuing education. Besides, of the total Rs 5,500 million, the Centre will put up only Rs 3,400 million, the rest will come from the states. One begins to doubt if even Rs 14 per individual over seven years is a reliable calculation!

The fact is that the *same* government is willing to spend a thousand times that amount resurrecting a single "sick" industrial unit run to the ground by a corrupt and inefficient management. It is also willing to think on incomparably lavish terms while disbursing loans to industrial units that are never going to repay them, or when holding public "loan melas". And while thousands of crores are wasted on such phenomena each year, the government has never, even once, seriously considered the idea of introducing mid-day meal schemes throughout the nation — which according to its own estimate, would cost Rs 800 crore a year. Millions and mil-

lions of children would be covered and benefit from such a scheme.

THAT RAJIV GANDHI does not think much of this was made clear in his blistering attack on such "populist" programmes at the AICC session at Maraimalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, in April 1988. The truth is, however, that there is a direct relationship between poverty and health, between poverty and dropping out of school, between health and literacy on the one hand and productivity on the other. Furthermore, in reality, the investment would be a small one. Despite the various flaws in the implementation of the scheme in Tamil Nadu, attendance among poor students in the schools in that state shot up with its introduction, subsequently slowing down the drop-out rate. But those who scorn an investment in the nation's children as "populist" cannot be easily made to appreciate this.

Indeed, such an approach cannot even begin to appreciate the relationship between literacy or the lack of it and a whole host of social and economic phenomena. Kerala, which has the highest literacy rate of any state in the country — over 70 per cent — including the highest female literacy rate, also has the lowest infant mortality rate. Kerala is also the only state where the sex-ratio favours women (1,034 females to every 1,000 males); in the rest of the country, the sex-ratio is adverse to women, the national average being 935 females to every 1,000 males. The better status enjoyed by women in this state for decades also surely bears some relation to their higher level of literacy and education.

Compare these figures to those bastions of social backwardness, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (literacy rate: 28 per cent), or Bihar (27 per cent) or Rajasthan (25 per cent) (see map). It may be worth reflecting on the fact that while Kerala enjoys the highest level of female literacy (65 per cent), Rajasthan, which witnessed the horrifying *sati* incident

in Deorala in late 1987, has the lowest (5.5 per cent). The point is not that there is a relationship between that incident and illiteracy (Roop Kanwar was an educated woman), but that there is definitely a relationship between the level of female literacy and the general status of women in the society. (Incidentally, Kerala also enjoys the highest agricultural productivity in terms of rupee value of the crop per hectare.)

SUCCESSIVE INDIAN governments have concerned themselves more with massaging literacy and education figures rather than with confronting the problems of illiteracy and backwardness in education. Hence, any document released by the Government of India on these issues tends to speak in terms of absolute figures where both expenditure and student enrollment are concerned. For instance, there is much trumpeting of the "near-universal" enrollment of students. What gets played down is the drop-out rate (pretty near universal itself in some rural areas!). For every 100 students who join Class I, 63 drop out before completing Class V, owing to economic reasons, and all but 23 drop out before completing Class VIII — a drop-out rate of 77 per cent!

Another example is the government's scratching its own back in 1987, pointing out the tremendous increase in the numbers of schools in the country, complete with fancy charts and tables ("In 1947 only so many, but now . . ."). The fact is that the Fourth All India Educational Survey conducted by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) showed that there were 2,937 primary schools in the country *without a single teacher!* There were also 1,65,000 schools with just *one teacher*.

Yet another example is the attempt to show dramatic "increases" in spending on education by using absolute figures. Thus we are told that "In the Seventh Plan, the outlay for



Braving long distances for backward education?

education was enhanced to Rs 63,380 million from Rs 25,240 million in the Sixth Plan . . ." The facts? With every successive Plan, the percentage allocated to education (as a percentage of the total outlay) kept shrinking. It went down from 7.22 per cent in the First Plan to 6.16 per cent in the Second, then up briefly to 7.47 per cent in the Third Plan, after which it fell to 5.16 per cent in the Fourth, down again to 4.83 per cent in the Fifth (the draft plan) and to a dismal 2.20 per cent in the Sixth (1980-85). Yet, in a document titled "Challenge of Education" released by the Ministry of Education in August 1985, there is a conscious and deliberate attempt by the present government to falsify this picture. "In each successive Five Year Plan", it makes out, "the outlay and expenditure on education showed an increase over the previous Plan" (no mention of the declining percentages, of

course!).

All the undiluted hogwash of the past two years, the "New Education Policy" notwithstanding, the present situation is one where the government makes clucking noises of concern over the problem of illiteracy while, in reality, simply abdicating its responsibility to the people of the country. All the nonsense about the "concerted effort" along with thousands of voluntary agencies is part of this abdication of responsibility. The ground is simply being laid for less and less expenditure by the government itself on educating the people.

"A society where a part receives the light of education while the greater part goes without it," wrote Rabindranath Tagore, "is a society struck by the curse of schism." What would he have said had he lived to see the perpetuation by policy of an enforced ignorance and darkness on 500 million Indians by their rulers? ♦

SPECIAL FEATURE

THE VIGILANCE BRANCH of the Bombay police force found two of its attempts to rid the city of 'obscenity' prominently front-paged in early May. The first was the outcome of a complaint registered by the Women and Media Committee of the Bombay Union of Journalists against the publication and distribution of a Marathi tabloid, 'Balatkar Kasa Kartat?', which, crudely translated reads: 'How does one commit rape?' It is almost impossible to read this publication without being convinced that here is a manual for would-be rapists: it presents graphic details of how the crime is committed, some utterly repugnant 'case histories', and offers the encouraging information that almost all rapists go scot-free.

The second case was the result of independent police action following several complaints against a recent issue of *Savvy*. The target of attack was a photo-fiction feature titled "The Lock of the Rape" – a story of a woman's determination to ensure the conviction of the man who raped her (also her husband's best friend) despite considerable odds. Nothing objectionable here: it is, in fact, all quite banal and predictable. But what members of the public, the police, and the police legal department concurred in was that the frames depicting the rape were obscene and pornographic. And so it was that the editors of both publications – Mr Anil Thatte, a journalist who has allegedly published pornographic material in the past, and Ms Ingrid Albuquerque, well-known in the city's social circles – found themselves paired together in what was a strange alliance. Both were charged and arrested under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and copies of their respective publications seized.

The relevant clause under Section 292 declares that any "book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting, representation figure... shall be deemed to be obscene if it is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect... is such as to deprave and





By Shaila Shah

TAKING A LOOK AT PORNOGRAPHY

That there is a considerable demand for pornography is evident from its abundant supply. And both print porn as well as porn films are remarkably easy to come by. SHAILA SHAH takes a look at what is available under the counter and argues that pornography is a pernicious medium with deeply offensive and dangerous messages.

corrupt persons who are likely to read, see or hear the matter embodied in it." This can only be described as wonderfully vague and open to a wide range of interpretation — a fact which has disturbed several individuals and organisations concerned about the competence, and indeed the authority, of the police to interpret and recognise what is obscene. And in this case, it would appear that the reigning confusion about what constitutes pornography, or the pornographic, has been amply reflected in the equal outrage that greeted the two aforementioned publications.

IN MY VIEW, there is an evident disparity in the 'pornographic' content of both. In the first instance, despite an absurd little editorial note which claims that the provision of details about rape will assist women in its prevention, it is transparently clear that the *raison d'être* of '*Balatkar*

Kasa Kartat' is to titillate and appeal to prurient interest. Here is a publication, obviously targeted at men, which details the crime of rape in such a way as to provoke, inspire and encourage, simply because this behaviour has not been condemned. "The Lock of the Rape", however, explores the *consequence* of a rape on its victim and her determination to fight. The context neither endorses nor approves the rape; on the contrary, it is opposed. Undeniably, those frames depicting the rape itself are distasteful — a ghastly and unnecessary reminder of the horror of the crime — and could have easily been omitted without damaging the story line. But should these offending frames be viewed wrenched out of context? Should they not, rather, be looked at with reference to what is being conveyed by the story? Photographs possess an immediacy and power that the written word can sel-

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dom harness so tellingly: if the rape had been described in words would the protests have been so vehement, if at all? Films and fiction are replete with such detailed descriptions of violence, sex, and sex crimes. Should these be avoided, deleted or censored, simply because they are ghastly, distasteful, and supposedly 'obscene' in themselves, despite the fact that they may well be integral to the story? And can they be called pornographic?

There is little doubt that the distinctions between various types of sexually explicit material — ranging from the titillating to the pornographic, the educational to the obscene — are considerably blurred and confused. So is an understanding of their function. And it is this confusion that needs to be dispelled in order to ensure that it is the real pornographers that are singled out for punitive action in a court of law.

IN ANY ATTEMPT to define what is pornographic, there is nothing more useful, harrowing as it is, than to look at what is available in this category. Despite the commendable efforts of our city police forces to rid the streets of Bombay of pornographic material — and there have been several raids which testify to their enthusiasm — pornography is freely available from news vendors, roadside book-stalls and video libraries in Bombay, and, apparently, the same applies to other cities and even smaller towns.

Glossies smuggled in from the sex capitals of the West, particularly Sweden and Denmark, boasting charming titles like 'Sex Play', 'Screw', 'Femme Fatale' or even 'Anal Sex' are obviously popular. Most contain photographs of frantic copulation and other sexual acts with any number of participants, often in clearly inconceivable positions. Some tell a story in pictures: for instance, the gang-rape of a virgin on her way to the market; the initiation of a wide-eyed nymphet into the world of chains and whips where every infliction of pain is a lesson in pleasure; the adventures of sex-starved

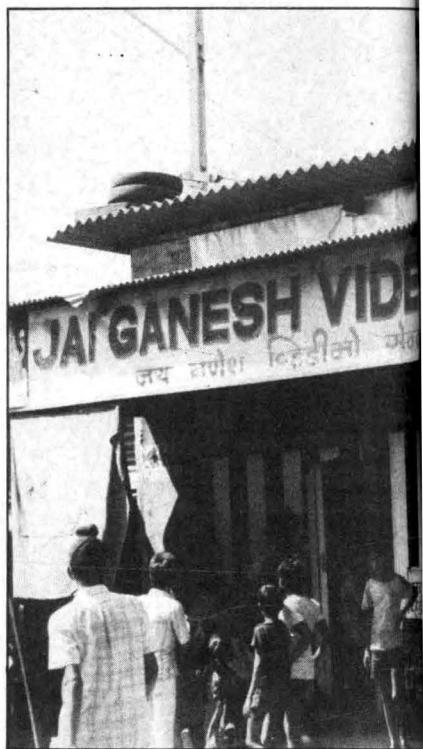
school girls who are the unwavering disciples of the Headmaster of the School of Lust, and so on.

The home-produced variety is also popular, and cheaper: these are either shoddy reprints of salacious imported texts, or regional language magazines illustrated with foreign images, or Hindi 'novels' — if they can be called that — which reportedly surpass the crudity levels evinced by their foreign counterparts. Sordid little video parlours offering a wide range of porn films for as little as Rs 2, litter the streets (a prostitute can be thrown in for an additional Rs 5); and even the most upmarket video libraries rake in a tidy sum from their 'Triple X' selection. Anyone who wants to know where one can obtain or see pornography can do so with considerable ease. It is fairly widely accessible and price is no real barrier: video films can be seen in parlours for as little as Rs 2, or as much as Rs 25 in the comfort of one's home; magazines and books cost anything from Rs 2 to Rs 120.

It is difficult to gauge the proliferation and volume of pornography available in Bombay — the police themselves claim to have little idea and no independent bodies have researched its availability, distribution networks, or even readership. But that you can find it easily enough is well-known, and that traders do a brisk business can be deduced from the fact that one Bombay news vendor claims to gross Rs 2,000 per day from the sale of print porn.

WHO LOOKS at pornography? Pornography is essentially for male consumption; it represents, primarily, a masculine interest; it is men that are 'aroused' by it. Women have generally remained insulated from it and react to it with disgust. Does the disgust emanate from innate sexual conservatism? Or from horror at seeing an obscene and degrading representation of women?

Just as it is easy to find pornography, it is equally easy to avoid it and



Blue movies can be seen for as little as Rs 2.

remain quite unmindful of its existence. There are many, especially women, who remain totally oblivious to the true nature of hard-core porn; many have never seen any at all, other than soft-core porn images which have today found a place for themselves in mainstream media, often under the guise of 'art' photography.

If women *were* to see pornography, it would undoubtedly cause outrage. For this is what they would see: they would see women in roles which were restricted to their function as providers of sexual services to men. They would see the use and abuse of women's bodies solely to fulfil fantasies, satisfy male desires, including violent ones, and massage the male ego. They would see recurring stereotypes; virgins who are forcibly defiled and loving it, or the nymphomaniacs who are *never* satisfied, or a combination of the two — the virgin, who, subjected to all manner of sexual perversion turns into a raving nympho-



maniac who can never get enough. They would see that as and when women's sexual pleasure is represented, it is always subordinated to that of men. They would see women gagged, bound, whipped, raped, tortured, and mutilated in order to provide a means of sexual stimulation to men. They would also see women supposedly deriving pleasure from these acts.

What they would *not* see is an honest and real portrayal of both sexuality and humanity. They would not see sexuality and sexual interaction as "a way of bonding, of giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differences, discovering sameness and communicating emotion," as Gloria Steinem, editor of *Ms* magazine, describes it. They would not see men and women on an equal plane — sexual beings exercising free choice and will. They would not see a sexuality free of violence and pain. But then, one cannot expect to. Because one of the functions of pornography is to exploit the intimate relationship between sex and power, exacerbate the very real inequalities that exist between the sexes,

and reinforce the superiority of the male. And profit from it. This is effected with varying degrees of crudity, or sophistication, and, increasingly, with the use of violence.

ALTHOUGH THERE IS an established and disturbing link between sex and violence, not all pornography is violent, but even the most banal objectifies women's bodies and perpetuates some dangerous myths. Women are shown to be obedient and unquestioning 'sexual workers' — every male wish is her command; his desires become hers despite the fact that they may, and often do, involve her suffering debasement and humiliation.

'Blame it on Ginger' was my first foray into the celluloid world of sex, sex and more sex. It has a dreary plot and through it emerges the message that women just can't get enough! They live for sex, to give themselves to male pleasure, and nothing else matters. Like several others, the plot of 'Rich Bitch' is totally forgettable and none of the 'stars' could have passed an audition for a school play. But here we have a film imbued with a moral: the heroine dared to believe that money could buy her anything and anyone. Her punishment? That she be sexually ostracised. Her reward for repentance? A renewed licence to be a sexual slave. As the name suggests, 'Bombay Fantasy' is a local offering, and does not bother with even the semblance of a plot: two men are sexually serviced by two women on a large bed in a sordid little room. Two hours later, the scenario hasn't changed much and there has only been slight variation in activity. The entire film is indescribably banal, but even here there is a clear message — the women are there to follow instructions issued by the men, and they are abused in the process. Meanwhile, the women whine their delight and cry out for pain; the men oblige.

I have described these films not to bemoan their rampant amateurishness or the histrionic skills of the participants. After all, these films are not

viewed for their artistic merit, depth of perception, or the talent of the 'stars'. They are viewed because they show sex and they titillate. Cameras focus on the sexual organs, particularly the male organ which is the real 'hero' of the film, and the only 'being' that is invested with a character, of sorts.

THE NASTIEST and most dangerous films, however, and the most popular, are those that show the use of obvious violence against women. For instance, 'Slaves of Love', which presents variations on the theme of two black women, naked, exposed and spread-eagled to camera, in chains — over them stands a white man with a whip. Or 'Penetration', advertised as "unbelievably violent. . . graphic. . . a double turn-on. He always hurts the one he loves. Some women deserve it!" Or 'Nazi Love Camp' with its easily imagined and unspeakable horrors. Or 'Infant Love' in which a ten-year old girl is shown to experience endless pleasure from sex with a number of adults. Or films depicting women in sexual intercourse with dogs and donkeys — the 'bestiality' range, which, according to a video library manager, is fast becoming popular. Or "snuff" movies, in which women are assaulted, dismembered and killed even, in sacrifice almost, for the male orgasm.

There is an even greater variety in print pornography. There are the glossies that display nude women in provocative poses. There are those that show women bound and gagged, exposed and available to the camera, and the viewer. There are those that show, in graphic detail, acts of sexual sadism. Or there is the photo-fiction variety which tell stories of the salivating nun who can't wait for the Bible-thumping preacher to arrive; or of women behind bars, let out only when their keeper wants to use them. . . . There are also the Hindi novels which, reportedly, display a penchant for horrific and ghastly stories of incest and rape of female members of the family.

Traditionally, there has been a dual approach to pornography: there is the conservative view that pornography is immoral simply because it exposes the human body and actually depicts sex publicly. And there is the liberal approach which slots it as a by-product of sexual emancipation.

THERE ARE ALSO the cheap English novels, invariably authored by "Anonymous", which are centred around ridiculous plots on which much sexual activity is hinged. For instance, 'In and Out' which catalogues a staggering variety of sexual encounters and contains passages like: "The fiend gloated over my shame, using the filthiest terms he could think of and hinting at atrocities I had never dreamed of, but, alas, was soon to be subjected to, and even to revel in." It's an illuminating statement, that. And the preface to an endless number of atrocities and shameful acts, all designed to teach her a lesson, to "reduce her to subjection", to cause "unspeakable pain". All the while, nevertheless, the heroine admires her tormentor, uses all kinds of superlatives to describe him, venerate him, even worship him, simply because he has displayed his unquestionable superiority over her. Or take another book in which a woman, the only female participant in a foursome, performing in public, dies from the excesses perpetrated on her. There is little horror expressed; instead, her performance, or rather acquiescence, is lauded and she is hailed as a martyr to the 'cause'.

It is clear that pornography thrives

on certain clear-cut stereotypes that depict stark power relations between the sexes. And language reinforces these. The male is almost always the aggressor; he and his sexual organ are invincible, virile, lusty, vigorous, potent, irresistible, superior, commanding. There is little emotionality in him; *machismo* oozes from his every pore. Here is a sexual superman who takes what he wants and never takes 'no' for an answer. The female is pliant, obedient, slave-like, and utterly malleable. She knows what she is good for, she knows too, that that is *all* she is good for. But there are also those who are carnal, promiscuous, insatiable. These are the tramps, the whores, the raging nymphomaniacs — the ones who 'deserve what they get', including pain and violence. The above is, of course, vastly simplified and doesn't allow for the complexity that is sometimes evident, but that these are visible, and dangerous, trends, is undeniable.

SEVERAL DEFINITIONS of pornography have been proffered, mostly in the West, where the incidence and increase in pornography have generated alarm. The Oxford Dictionary tells us that pornography is the "explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films, etc, intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings." But surely this is inaccurate and incomplete as it is obvious that pornography is much more than just an "explicit description of sexual activity." If it was so, could the term be used to describe educative sex manuals? Or passages in biology books even? This definition also reflects a confusion between the pornographic and the erotic.

Perhaps a more useful working definition is one provided by the US Commission on Obscenity and Pornography: "Pornography is the verbal or pictorial explicit representation of sexual behaviour that has, as a distinguishing characteristic, the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female... as

a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually." To expand on this, what renders a work pornographic is not simply the depiction of degrading and violent sexual behaviour — after all, such behaviour and action can be depicted in order to condemn it. The context is also important. What makes a work pornographic, then, is the implicit or explicit endorsement or approval of such behaviour, sometimes in the absence of a condemnation of it, with the calculated intent of causing sexual arousal.

It is also necessary, and educative, to distinguish between the pornographic and the erotic if only because the two are often used interchangeably and a call for a ban on the former is often viewed, and disparagingly so, by proponents of sexual freedom, as a conservative moralistic attack on the latter. The roots of the two terms provide some clues: the root 'porno' means female captives, thereby inferring that the subject at hand is about a relationship based on power — dominance and submission. The latter word comes from the root 'eros', or passionate love, and implies the exercise of free will and a positive choice amongst those involved. The erotic, then, is about a mutually pleasurable sexual expression. Pornography, on the other hand, uses sex to reinforce inequality, or create one; its message is that women are playthings, mere sexual objects at the command of men, objects that can be used at will.

TRADITIONALLY, there has been a dual approach to pornography: there is the conservative view that pornography is immoral simply because it exposes the human body and actually depicts sex publicly. And there is the liberal approach which slots it as a by-product of sexual emancipation and welcomes it as healthy and liberating. The latter theory believes that since free, unfettered sexual expression is necessarily a 'good' thing, so must pornography be. Al Goldstein, Editor, *Screw*, even described porno-

graphy as "one of the most sane manifestations of the human condition."

There is a third approach. This view, perhaps the least popular and one likely to meet considerable resistance, believes that pornography is an extreme expression of a deeply sexist culture in which male power rules. It is based on the reality that the society is a male-dominated one and that women, generally, exist in a service role to men and are exploitable, and nowhere is this more sharply delineated than in the sexual arena.

RESEARCH into pornography and its effects has been meagre. In India, there has been hardly any at all except for the stray analyses of the pornographic content of NRI film imports, some Indian cinema, and obscene hoardings. But then, this is hardly surprising as the pornography industry in this country — its production, import, dissemination and consumption — remains largely under wraps. And so it is easy to turn a blind eye to it.

But there *are* vital questions that need to be considered about what pornography does. Does it reinforce contempt for women? Does it endorse violence against women? Indeed, does it *instigate* violence against women? And ultimately, does it make it more difficult for men and women to relate to one another as human beings? These are questions that have concerned social scientists, researchers, sexologists, and most recently, feminists. A senior police official in Bombay opines that there is a direct correlation between the availability of pornography and the incidence, and escalation, of violence against women. But this is a controversial view indeed.

American sociologists have, for some time now, attempted to establish or refute such a correlation. Reports and commissions looking into pornography have been concluding that it has no dangerous or harmful effects, that pornography is "harmless entertainment". The US Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, despite

its definition that pornography contains degrading and dehumanising images of women declared: "Empirical research has found no reliable evidence to date that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal sexual behaviour among youth and adults."

President Nixon rejected the report outright, with a telling comment: "The Commission contends that the proliferation of filthy books and plays has no lasting effects on a man's character. If that were true, it must also be true that great books, great paintings and great plays have no ennobling effects on a man's conduct. Centuries of civilisation and ten minutes of common sense tell us otherwise."

THE WEAKNESS of this and many subsequent reports is that they only look for 'abnormal' effects, such as 'delinquent' behaviour. Indeed, it requires little imagination to realise that pornography can victimise individual women and cause distress to women expected to fulfil demands that they do not want to. On a larger matrix, it can legitimise certain practices and offer suggestions for new ones. On an ideological plane, it can suggest that women exist merely to ensure the gratification of male sexual desire, and little else.

Researchers have traditionally studied the effects of pornography along two lines, using either the catharsis model or the imitation model. The former theory assumes that safety valves — like pornography — are necessary to rid the psyche of sexual urges which may otherwise explode and harm others. And that without such outlets, rape and other crimes against women would escalate. If this were so, it throws up disturbing questions about male sexuality: For instance, should we assume that men are inherent rapists? And is pornography, then, a temporary panacea to keep them out of harm's way? This is clearly an untenable and absurd view. The latter theory — the imitation model — holds

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that the dissemination and proliferation of pornographic images will inevitably lead to their being adopted, imitated, experimented with. Again, an inadequate approach, as it assumes blind adherence and imitation of role models one is exposed to, and this is not what takes place in actuality.

Further, if the catharsis model were correct, along with an increase in pornography we would have witnessed a decrease in rape and other sexual crimes against women. Statistics show otherwise. In the '60s, pictorial pornography was legalised in Denmark and Sweden on the assumption that its availability would decrease the incidence of rape and other violence against women. That is, men who might feel the urge to commit rape, would simply visit the local newsagent and buy a porn magazine instead. In Denmark, commissions declared that sex crimes decreased as a result of the liberalised porn laws. But subsequent research also divulged that the studies conducted were incomplete and inadequate, and that sexual harassment and crimes against women continue unabated. A recent report in *The Spectator* (Britain) also made a telling observation about Sweden, that it suffers "a continuing increase of rape, crimes against women... a burgeoning

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of porn magazines and a trebling of their circulation in the past decade." A Swedish writer, Britta Stovling, recently disclosed that 30 million copies of porn magazines are sold annually to a male population of 4 million!

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, in order to establish cause and effect factors between pornography and the development of a violent sexuality or the increase of sex crimes, do we really need to have social scientists proving or corroborating this? When the issue of glorification of violence on the screen is considered, members of the public display little hesitation in condemning it on the basis that excessive violence does have a deleterious effect, desensitises the viewer, and renders the violence acceptable. Why can't the same logical reasoning inform the public's view of pornography?

It must be remembered that the pornography of yesteryears was a far cry from the pornography of today. Like any other marketable product, pornography, too, has had to be constantly revamped to encourage sales. A barrage of sexually explicit images loosely hinged on predictable plots is bound to become repetitious. Even certain degrees of victimisation of women is likely to, eventually, cause desensitisation. And so you get the more bizarre, the more fantastic, and the more violent variety swamping the market. And with that, an endorsement of new modes of behaviour, an acceptance of new levels of degradation. As the threshold of shock diminishes, there is the real danger of becoming increasingly immune to the dangers of pornography. Today, in most major Indian cities, schoolboys can pick up magazines showing a man raping a woman handcuffed to the bedpost, adolescents can hire objectionable and deeply offensive films depicting bestiality, from their video libraries. And they are being taught dangerous lessons: men are being taught that this is what they should be; women are being shown that this is what they are.

Calls for the banning of pornography have been met with outrage from the defenders of freedom and democratic rights. But let us examine this concept of 'freedom'. Is freedom to incite violence permissible? Should slander and libel be allowed? Should false advertising be encouraged? Constraints have always been necessary as without these a fearful and dangerous anarchy would prevail. So, should the "freedom" to depict women being sexually assaulted, or engaged in sexual intercourse with animals, or to depict ten-year olds being subjected to sexual indignities by adults, be granted?

OURS IS A SOCIETY in which sexual taboos, hypocrisies and double standards are all-pervasive, and sex education that could foster healthy attitudes towards sex is largely absent. In such a repressive atmosphere, what is particularly disturbing is that pornography, and in its absence, Hindi commercial films with pornographic content, become the prime source of sex education. There is a plethora of commercial blockbusters that have the almost obligatory soft-porn sequences — where the heroine gets wet at least four times; where the starlet exhibits the larger part of her anatomy either in cabarets or the popular scenes-near-a-pool; where rape scenes are graphic and explicit. "Smut sells," says Khalid Mohamed, the *Times of India* film-critic wryly. "Film-makers evolve devious ways to bypass censors (censorship decisions, in any case, are taken quite arbitrarily) and provide fresh means of titillation." Khalid Mohamed is not fully convinced that Hindi cinema is the only outlet for sexual frustration, though he agrees that this is possible in the smaller towns and villages: "Women have been shown in a bad light — brutalised, degraded, mocked at as silly playthings, etc," says Mohamed, "but it is a situation in which changes are almost impossible to effect." And if that is the case with commercial cinema, which is subject to controls, the

situation would appear pretty grim where the proliferation of pornography is concerned.

MOREOVER, what sort of priority does an issue like pornography command and deserve? In a developing country where, necessarily, real and grave survival issues are of immediate concern, it is all too easy to relegate the representation of women in the media, and in this case pornography, to a low level of priority. Although some women's groups have voiced deep concern about the dangers of pornography, the issue has remained largely unexplored. As one activist says, "Our targets have been obscene hoardings and titillating film-posters as these are available for mass viewing — everybody sees them." True enough, but pornography has a hidden, almost surreptitious, audience and readership, and although it is difficult to gauge numbers, the sheer amount of available pornography must testify to the demand.

So, what is to be done? A ban? This would only force it underground and the industry would become even more lucrative because of its illicitness. A more concerted campaign from the law-enforcement agencies? Apart from the fact that eradicating pornography would not, and could not, be of high priority, there is the real concern that, armed with anti-obscenity laws, the police could easily victimise just about anybody. In any case, police officials aver that delays in the judicial process do not help and unsubstantial punitive measures hardly serve as a deterrent. Also, periodic arrests of news vendors and video library managers will not even touch the nerve-centres of the industry — the smugglers, the distributors, the filmmakers, the publishers. In the absence of effective legislative measures, then, what else is possible? The picture is grim, and the solutions — barring an overhaul of a culture and society based on a stark inequality between the sexes, in which pornography thrives — not easy. ♦

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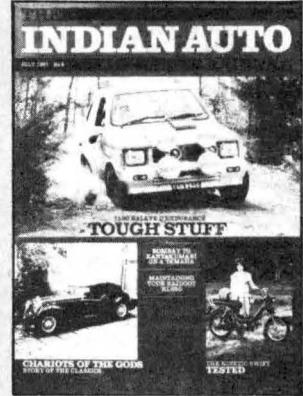
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Holding Up Half The Sky

THE IMAGES OF WOMEN in China today are several: the women in the fields garbed in blue cotton, the older women in black, the young city miss with permed hair and fashionable gear and the model industrial worker in a boiler suit. The peasant worker is bent double in the fields and the woman worker stands over the drawing desk or machine. On stage, on the screen, in literature and life, the images are multifarious, and are perhaps symbolic of a transition period marked by rapid changes of ideas, norms and patterns of behaviour.

Today there are about half a billion women in China: 80 per cent live in rural areas and over 50 per cent are under the age of 25. They live in geographically and economically very diverse situations, but they share a common cultural heritage and a common revolution, the latter progressing at a slow, tortuous pace into the 20th century with women playing a significant role.

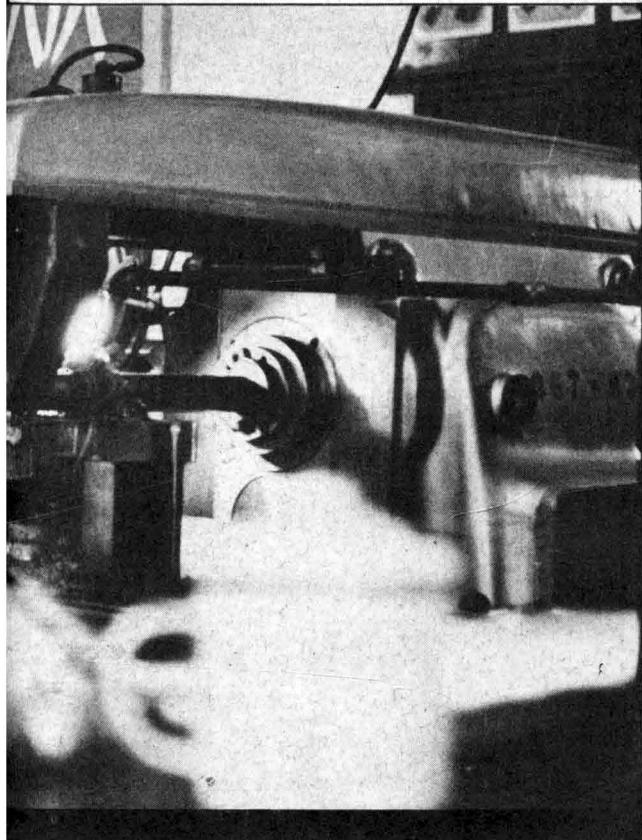
The oppression of women in traditional China was legendary – the most commonly-known aspect being the brutal practice of footbinding that had been the scourge of Chinese women since the 10th century. On a larger matrix, economically and socially, women lived as family slaves though the form varied from class to class and region to region. In southern



and central China, lower-class women worked in the fields, in addition to housework and child rearing. And in both north and south China, women were the backbone of a well-developed cottage textile industry. Often, lower class women were even bought and sold as **mei-tsai** (household slaves).

Since then, there has been considerable change and improvement in the legal, social and economic status of women. But as in the past, the party has repeatedly subordinated the interests of women

to goals and policies that were declared more important. Since the introduction of the modernisation and reform policies approximately 10 years ago, it has become obvious that women are victims, once again, of



conflicting policies.

In rural areas, the one-child family planning policy has conflicted with the agricultural reforms which reinstated the individual household as the basic unit of production. By the late 1970s however, an estimated 80 per cent of women worked in collective agriculture and comprised at least 40 per cent of the collective labour force.

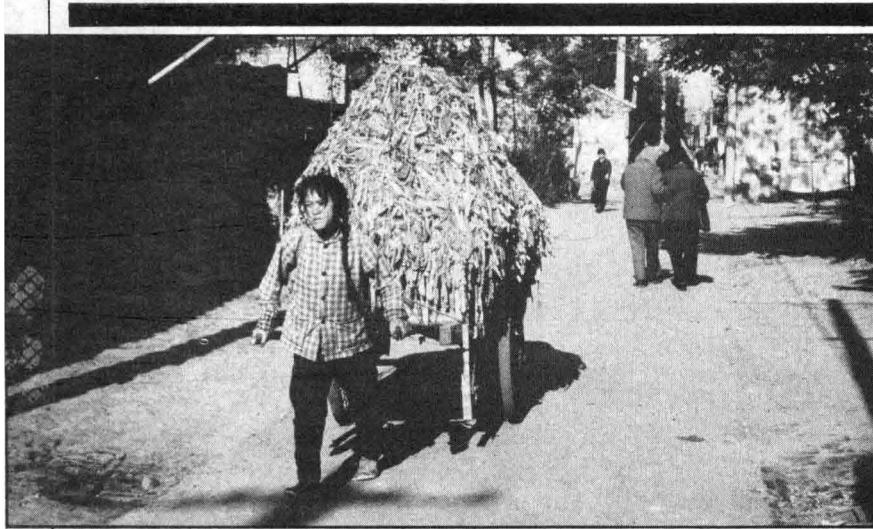
In 1979 it was estimated that only 10 per cent of urban women were not employed. Chinese working women

are to be found in a wide range of occupations, including professions, (such as medicine and engineering), skilled and unskilled factory work and service industries. But in science, engineering and other technical occupations, as in government and managerial positions, only a third of the four million workers are women. Unfortunately women are still thought to be best suited for certain fixed industries such as textiles, weaving, handicrafts, food.

The Women's Federation, a party-led mass organisation, with the task of taking up women's issues and enforcing party policies amongst women, declared the promotion of women's participation in the country's modernisation as its foremost aim. Echoing Chairman Mao's exhortation to women to "hold up half the sky" in the task of restructuring China. Calling upon women to become more competitive, the organisation also started legal campaigns to protect the rights of women and children, and initiated discussions over topics, that were taboo till recently.

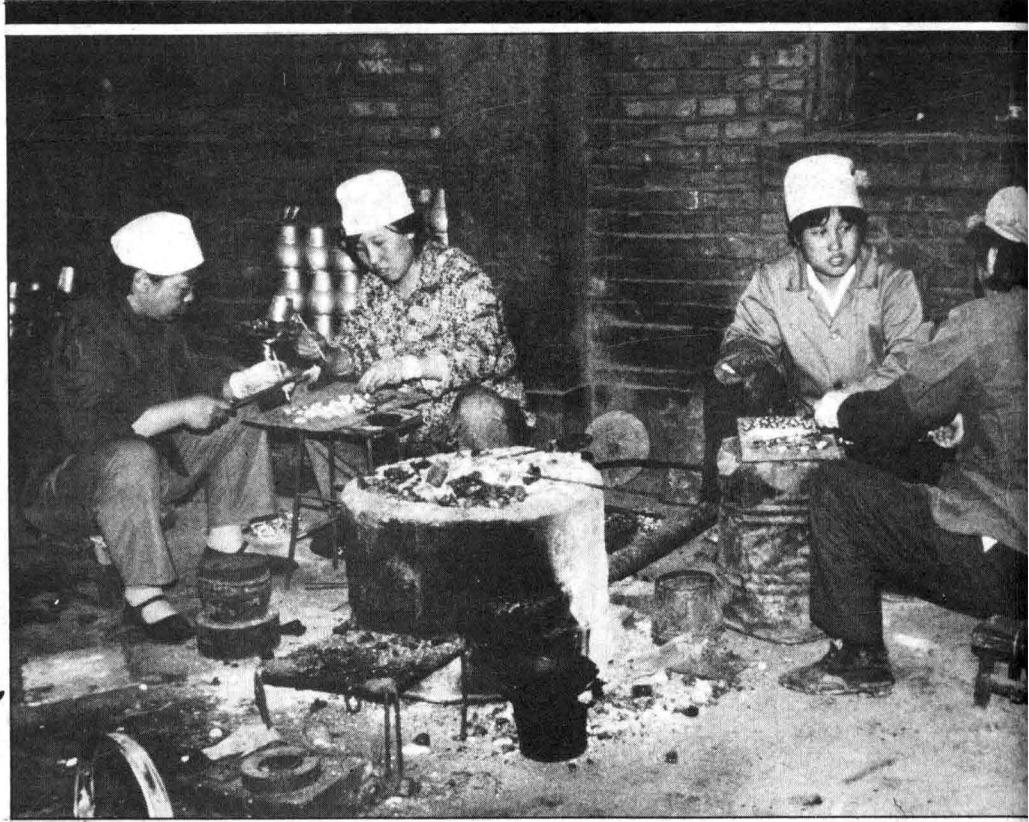
The single nation-wide image of the woman in blue – the practical garb of the majority of the women in the labour force – has thus receded and in its place, there are juxtaposing contrasts and a plurality of female images in the China of the 1980s. MUMTAZ KARIMJEE, who visited China recently, offers fascinating vignettes of the life and times of women in China today.

PHOTO FEATURE



“*To cope with the needs of production and to push it forward – women's federations must organise the life of the people on a co-operative basis, thereby transforming household chores gradually into social labour..*”

New China News Agency, 1958



“*T*

he argument that 'protecting women's health means not completing production responsibilities' is not correct.”

Li Dequan, China Women, 1959

“*J* fa
woman can
integrate what
little she can do
into the cause
of socialist
construction and
if she has the
ideal of working

for the happiness of future generations, she would be a noble person, a woman of benefit to the masses, a woman of communist morality.”

Au Ziwen, *China Women*, 1959



“*L*ately some
union officials have suggested
that too many women are
employed in types of work
more suitable to men and that
women should step aside to
make way for unemployed
young men. They argue that
women actually hinder
economic development and
result in lower productivity,
poor quality and inefficiency...”

Beijing Review, 1985

PHOTO FEATURE



“J

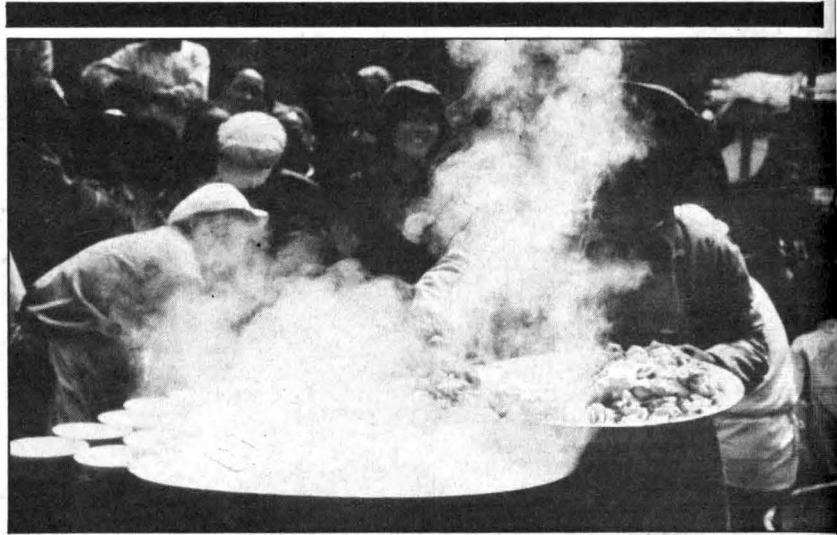
In a large family, the mothers get chained to tiring housework and demanding children. This drains their energy for production and study and they fall behind in politics and their careers.

Bo Ling, Yangchen Cultural Daily, 1963

“W

omen scientists, technicians and commune members need to work hard and study but they have to spend a considerable portion of their time tending to housework and children.

Red Flag, 1978



“Participation in agricultural production is the inherent right and duty of rural women. Giving birth to children and raising them up as well as preoccupation with household chores are also the obligations of rural women. These things set



women apart from men... While farm production is the principal form of labour in the country-side, good housekeeping and proper care of children are also labour of social significance."

*People's Daily,
1956*

AS A LEADING YUPPIE in the Indian firmament, I have been approached by the leading Indian magazine *Imprint*, to jot down the how's and wheretofore's of the process by which a self-respecting Indian bloke can convert himself from a young, laterally static professional layabout to a modern, young, upwardly mobile professional — a yuppie.

I myself underwent this transformation, voluntarily and diligently. It was painless, and took two years. I emerged from it as a newly positioned, repackaged, stylishly unshaven, casually superlative, irresistibly cologned, effortlessly unkempt, highly popular, fashionably uncontroversial, smoothly bonhomous, uncompromisingly professional, baggy-trousered, after-dark phenomenon. I am a phenomenon. I am a yuppie.

You, too, can become one.

The process, for me, consisted of data-gathering, some information-processing and finally, some data conversion. In earlier days; I might have said, 'I checked out a few facts with a few friends,' but, as a yuppie, even my self-expression is radically altered. In brief, however, I spoke to lots of true Indian yuppies, and picked their brains, lifestyles and wardrobes. I learnt that anyone may seek yuppie-dom, but true salvation has to be imported, specifically from the USA. I discovered that this transferred technology must be Indianised, at least partly, to become truly culturally meaningful.

And finally, it is no use being a secret yuppie. Others should know, and acknowledge — preferably with awe — the fact that you are a yuppie. In the course of this document, I have endeavoured to give, wherever possible, true-life instances of average Indians who yearned for and found the courage to find genuine yuppiedom. I hope these will serve as inspiration to those of you who wish you could but fear you mightn't.

A Chandwani, a young executive in a multinational firm, is wondering what would happen if he spelt his

name with an 'e' at the end instead of an 'i', and is beginning to sell white Assam cane to the people of New South Wales and Queensland. "I could call it Chandwane Cane," he muses. "People would think it is Italian, and pronounce it stressing the second syllable instead of the first."

Such idle speculation is a pre-requisite to being an Indian yuppie, because, as a Third World country, we cannot seriously dream of entertaining the sort of lush reality that is so popular in the West. As an Indian yuppie, you *must* be master of the art of make-believe, and learn to content yourself with whatever parts of the fantasy turn into a real yuppie reality.

attempt to use products that sound like they might be American, but are actually Indian. For instance, he will not use Jackson's Tik Tok tissues, which is a failed attempt at sounding American, but instead announce, at a suitable gathering: 'I switched to the new Satchet-Homewell range of interleaved yellow-and-white tissues after I found they came in a cubic container — just about the perfect size for the Maruti dashboard.'

3. Use names, not professions. Thus, you wouldn't say, 'My builder sold me a lousy hole-in-the-wall' but, 'Hiru — you know, Hiranandani — recommends a three-bedroom suite in his upcoming condo *Swiss Chalet*. I told

TEN EASY WAYS TO BE A YUPPIES

From yokel to yuppie in a matter of months! Is it really possible? Popular yuppie, C Y GOPINATH, who himself effected the transformation relatively quickly and painlessly, observes the burgeoning phenomenon (amongst the male of the species) which is set to take the country by storm and presents an authoritative guide to eager aspirants.

If Chandwani were to actually go into Assam cane, he would instantly become an American yuppie, like — oh, say Murjhani, if you will.

I put down here a few of my notes on the distinguishing traits of yuppiehood:

1. Clothes make the yuppie. A serious yuppie chooses his clothes with the greatest and most deliberate lack of care.

2. Use brands, not products. A serious Indian yuppie will use Indian brands, not American ones — mostly. Exempt are mainly colognes, VCRs, JVC cameras, perfumes and Compact Discs. In India, too, the yuppie will

him I wanted something less obvious.'

4. Lifestyle reveals the man. After donning the right accoutrements, it is no good thinking that you have arrived on the Indian yuppie scene. I have learnt the hard way that you must be alert through the waking hours if you are to project a consistent yuppiehood. The mask must not slip, even for a moment. Lifestyle is everything.

Chockalingam Perumal, 29, is known as Joe, but also wears a T-shirt with the words 'You can also call me Pierre'. He talks of starting a new fad in time management aids called Joe-Cards. Chockalingam of Arkonam district, Tamil Nadu, has finally ar-

By C Y Gopinath



HUMOUR

rived. He is a true yuppie because his lifestyle shows it.

I present you, below, with ways in which you can start the journey towards yuppiedom. It is easier than you may think. Remember, there are many who have trod this road before, successfully.

CLOTHES: Firstly, Charagh Din is out. It is simply too *déclassé*. Not uppish enough. The very fact that it is an Indian shirt-speciality shop goes against it. If you go around in CD shirts, you will be seen for what you are — a loud, unsubtle masquerador. Much better to make up designer tailor names: 'Abdul Nazakatali makes my evening wear?' Then, informally, 'You know dear old Abdul. Just refuses to put his initials anywhere.'

If someone should be saying these lines in your presence, then go one up at once, with, 'Yes, but have you checked the third shirt-button? It has 'AN' silk-screen printed on it. Behind, of course!'

Dress in nondescript work-a-day outfits all day. Endeavour to resemble an indigent trainee chartered accountant doing his articles, not in London, but in Changanacheri. This means rolled-up shirtsleeves on white cotton shirts that bear the distinct faint tone of having been washed in Robin Blue and ironed at home (important!), and plain, unstyled cotton or polyester trousers. Slippers — NO. Plain leather shoes — yes. Hush Puppies are okay, so long as you don't trumpet the fact.

Come evening or a weekend, and you must take care to emerge as a totally different breed, I presume that you will have a fine stubble, based on the fact that you do not shave till late evening. Trot out some outstanding new colours — say, orange and red, and those baggy baggy trousers that you can get only at International News. Show the world that when it comes to work, you, as a yuppie, are a true pro, but you will not be found wanting when it comes to letting your hair down and having a simple good time.

Tailors you can name: Jaladhar,

Manohar Srivastava, Lobo, Ram Swarup, Dinyar Karachiwalla, Pestonjee. Also try: 'I get my evening wear at 11, Laburnum Road. How about you?'

FOOD: Yuppies are notorious for *appearing* unparticular about what they eat, and *actually* being ruthless fuss-pots. There is nothing wrong with this. It is decidedly an asset when building a yuppie image. However, there are certain items that are best not tinkered with at all, as they could undo months of careful image-building in a single stroke. To name a few: *bhel-puri*, roadside *dosas*, *panipuri*, and in Calcutta, *jhalumi*. If you absolutely must eat these, do so furtively. Send a servant to buy them. If



possible, tell him to eat them as well and report to you on their taste.

Rustom Petawalla, 28, a meek and mild Parsi youth working in TELCO, was afraid to try anything other than dhansak or his mother's batata ni cutliss. Today, he is planning to sell a line of home-made apple pie labelled Rusty's Apple Pie (to be sold at a discount to Parsis and fellow TELCO employees). He also sells caps bearing the words Apple Pie like Rusty makes it. Rusty is now a yuppie.

As a yuppie, let it be known that you do not eat just anywhere. However, don't at *any* cost reveal where, in fact, you do eat. Leave it at statements like: 'Chef Noronha says they've found truffles in the Himachal. Of course, he swears he'll never use any truffles that don't come from the Provence.'

Places you could eat at: Mahesh Lynch Home (rave about the exotic seafood and the 'local' atmosphere), Trattoria (Tratt's), Khandahar (*don't* ask for a knife and fork; eat with your fingers), Chic-Fish (Delhi). Also, when ordering wine at restaurants, *don't*. Yuppies in India drink *stout*, just because no one else does. If you absolutely want to do a wine number, then, for God's sake, send it back at least once because the temperature is not right.

SEX: Yuppies have sex too. Nothing wrong with that. When two yuppies in India mate, the result is usually a Puppie (defined in *India Today* as a Punjabi Urban Professional). Little Puppies left unattended will usually grow up into big Puppies unless you

Yuppies are notorious for 'appearing' unparticular about what they eat, and actually being ruthless fuss-spots. There is nothing wrong with this. It is decidedly an asset when building a yuppie image.

actively work at modifying their behaviour. There are few more irritating types than a superficial Yuppie (ie a Puppie) who feels that a pair of jeans and Giorgio cologne is all you need to enter the club.

Returning to sex, as a Yuppie you must develop a major commitment to it, either singly or severally, but very seldom in twos. Yuppies encourage the notion that they have great staying power, and also that they have had sex with famous people: 'If Tina is going to be at the party, count me out! The last time, I had to miss a board meeting because of her. That woman doesn't know when to stop.'

V Subramaniam, known as Velcro, used to be an acid-dropping, high-school drop out, but, today, is a successful yuppie. In a confidential interview, he revealed that impotence is only in the mind. "I started out by not having sex with starlets. Since

then I have never looked back," he says. "Today, I don't have sex with a gallery of celebrities." According to Velcro, if you allow coloured condoms to 'accidentally' fall out of your wallet now and then, and also talk of starlets you wouldn't dream of having sex with, then people assume you are a major stud as far as the other starlets go.

CARS: Every yuppie has a car. This is a basic fact of yuppie inheritance. The car is not his own but belongs to the Company. Hardly any serious yuppie in India could afford his own car. Those who do have such cars, drive them themselves, in keeping with the image of a chap who does his own dirty work and believes in the dignity of labour. Two years ago, the

in and out of potholes; a leemony car perfume; stickers saying 'If you can read this, you're too close' in a minuscule pointsize, the word 'Suzuki' painted in a nice strong typography; an ice-box at the back with canned stout, lager and ice-cubes; also at the back, a clean, pressed shirt hanging from a hanger; and empty cans of real Coca Cola (available at any old paper-mart).

SCANDALS: Many people have asked me: What is the role of scandals in a yuppie's life in India? My answer to this is: "If you are not actively in the middle of a scandal of serious proportions, such as a kickback or grave negligence in the course of work

ly criminal, it isn't worth the loot. But there is no harm generating a few juicy stories as long as you are certain you will be exonerated of the charges at the district level itself.

A sure-fire method is to marry your typist, or at least make a pass at her. If you take her into confidence, she may agree to protest and create a small controversy in the office. This will further your rise more than you could imagine.

It also helps to foster the image that there are small irregularities, involving large sums of money, where you are concerned. People tend to be a little wary of dealing with one at the non-yuppie level, but the magazines start getting very excited, and fellow yuppies instantly recognise one who is on the upswing. You will be called to several parties straightaway. Politics is, in the long run, the only way to get into serious scandals. If you are fortunate, you might even be able to hint at a few bank accounts in Switzerland or so. However, it takes such a long time and so much effort to generate a significant political scandal, that you may be an old yuppie before then. I say the trouble isn't worth it.

In conclusion, I would like to add that, according to my latest reports, the yuppie phenomenon is dying out in the USA. However, this need not affect developments in India, where the phenomenon is just starting. In fact, indications are that each state will soon have its own genre of yuppies, like the Puppies of Punjab. The names have already been decided: Tuppies (Tamil Nadu); UP's (Uttar Pradesh); MP's (Madhya Pradesh); Buppies (Bengal); Muppies (Maharashtra); and Guppies (Gujarat).

Those interested in finding more details about how they may enter the domain of yuppiehood, with specific details about the right colognes, shoes, pens, personal effects and so on, may feel free to write to me, enclosing US\$10 only (no rupees accepted) at the *Imprint* address. I will be happy to spend an hour or so explaining things over a suitable stout. ♦

One of the chief distinguishing traits, one of the chief ones indeed, is the yuppie's ability to create a scandal where none exists and place himself in the centre of it.



vehicle of choice was the Maruti, but then it was the only car around as well. Briefly in between, it was the Standard 2000. At the moment, sadly, there is no car around that qualifies as a good yuppie choice.

Of course, no yuppie worth his cologne would dream of turning down a Company-proffered car, even if it was an Ambassador. But if you have one of these, remember that, at parties, it is wise to park the vehicle a bit down the road, and offer no one lifts back. Drop statements like: 'I'm waiting for the Maruti 1000cc to come out. It even looks like a Honda Accord!'

Of course, it goes without saying that your car, if you have one, should be properly outfitted in true yuppie style. This includes the following: a small furry doll hanging from the rear-view mirror and which emits a beeping sound whenever the car rides

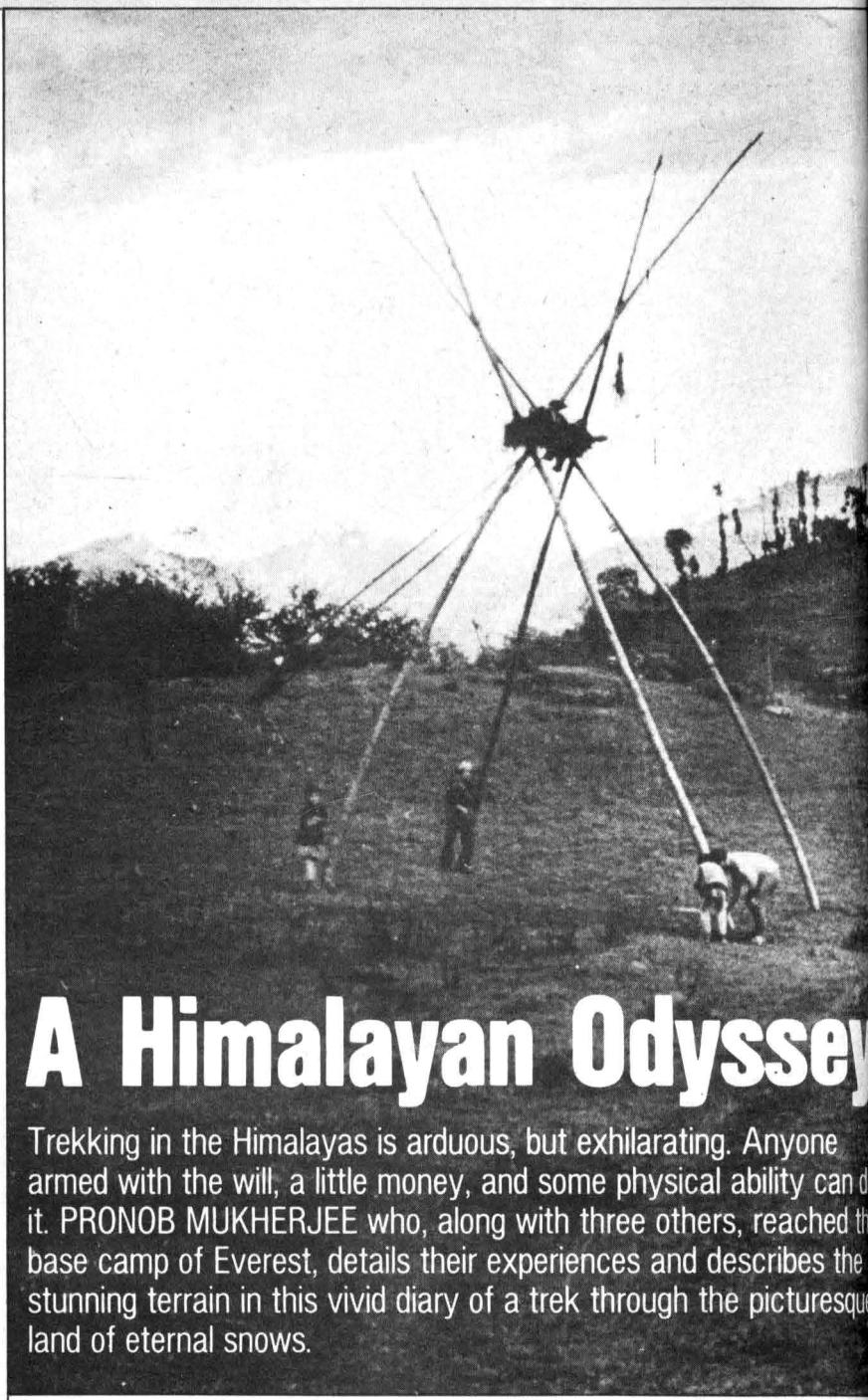
which has caused a few losses of life, or professional misconduct, then you are not worth the name of yuppie. One of the chief ones indeed, is the yuppie's ability to create a scandal where none exists and place himself in the centre of it. Much like in the USA, he realises that Indian society is changing and the man who is in the middle of a scandal is a star before he has arrived. His name will never be forgotten, and large multinationals will offer him large consultancies in later life to help them generate their own scandals.

How can you get into a scandal? Well, for one thing, if you are under 30, you are too young to be scandalous. However, over 30, chances are you could try a small scandal or two. Don't, however, do anything serious

T HAS BEEN a hard day today. The sun is steadily making its way down behind the trees and the clouds. It is also getting colder. We are sitting around, catching our breath before hurrying on. Groups of porters, men as well as women with heavy loads on their backs, slowly and steadily move past. Nothing beyond the thickly-forested hill is visible due to the dense clouds and a descending fog. The valley below is quiet, except for the distant roar of the Dugh Kosi at the bottom and an occasional twitter of wild birds.

I quietly wonder what I am doing in the centre of the Sagarmatha National Park forest with a 15-kg load on my back, clambering up and down hills with God-knoks-what lurking just round the ridge. Still lost in the winding trails of my thoughts, I hear a shrill tune, a Pahari song, the voice of a woman somewhere. A second voice joins in and then a third — a trio bursts upon the scene, rounding the bend, and as they see us, a brief silence ensues. Having passed us by, they continue where they had left off. I do not catch much of what the song says, but the tune and the lively style of singing washes the worries off my mind.

The Sagarmatha National Park (SNP), through which we are trekking, covers a region of about 1,243 square kilometres northeast of Kathmandu, in the Kumbhu region of Nepal. Established in 1976 "to safeguard its unique cultural, physical and scientific values," this is the home of Everest, the highest peak on earth. Thousands of trekkers from all over the world — from Israel to Bavaria — come year after year to this land of eternal snows. The trek through the Sagarmatha National Park to the Everest Base Camp (18,000 ft) and Kala Pathar (18,192 ft), from where one gets a fascinating and enchanting view of Everest and its neighbouring peaks, Nuptse and Lhotse, is a very popular one as the entire Kumbu-Himal range is visible from it. Anyone with the will, a little money and



A Himalayan Odyssey

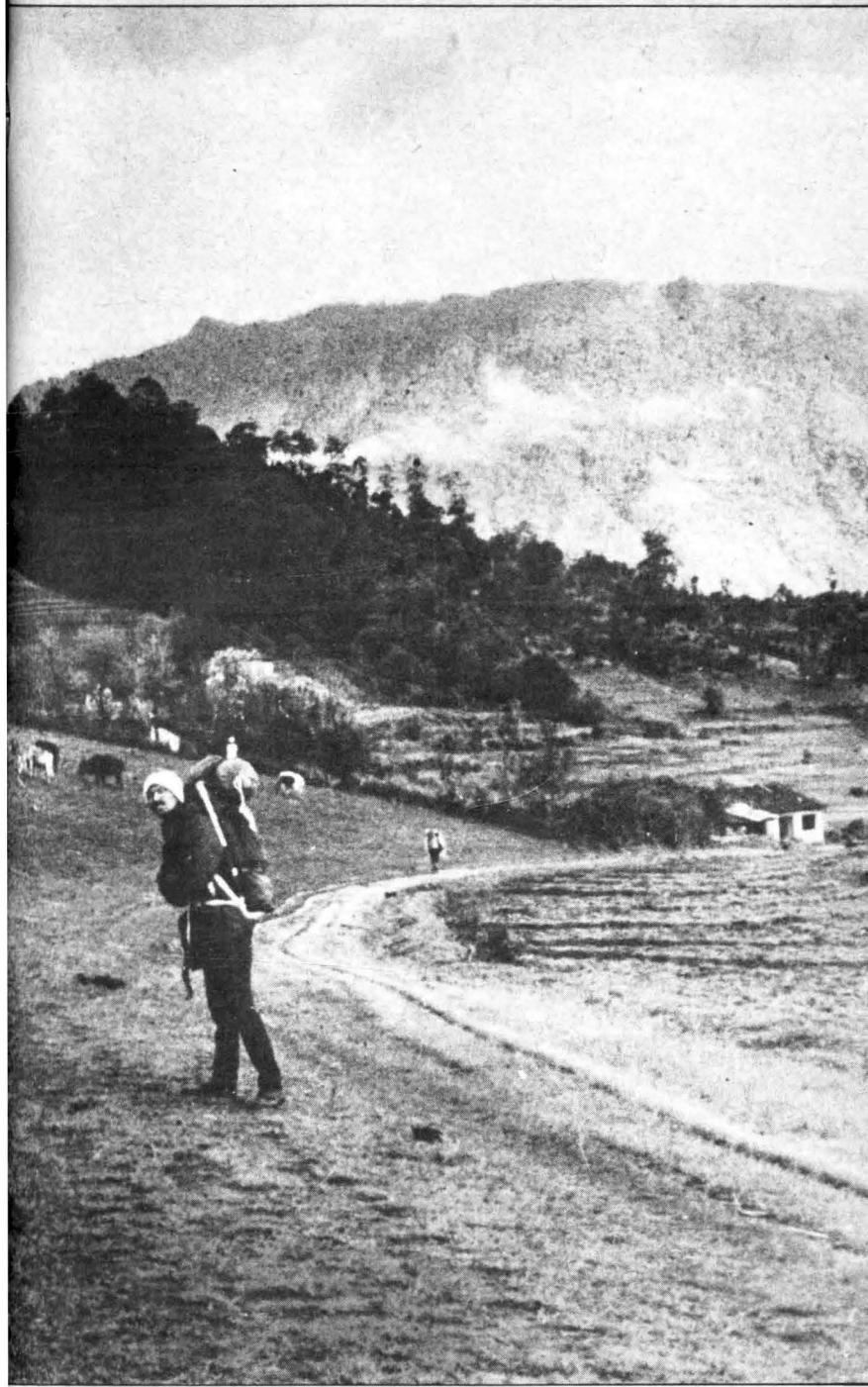
Trekking in the Himalayas is arduous, but exhilarating. Anyone armed with the will, a little money, and some physical ability can do it. PRONOB MUKHERJEE who, along with three others, reached the base camp of Everest, details their experiences and describes the stunning terrain in this vivid diary of a trek through the picturesque land of eternal snows.

a lot of stamina, can do it.

I meet two ladies from Bavaria, one 72 years old and the other 58, who, with the help of walking-sticks and an occasional helping hand from their Sherpa guide, are making the steep uphill climb from Jorsale to Namche Bazaar. I also meet two separate groups who have come with their children. The children love the

trek because they can see, before their very eyes, the highest mountain ranges in the world, dense forests, milky-white streams flowing down from every nook and cranny — in short, a perfect dreamland setting.

THERE ARE A NUMBER of points from which the trek can be begun: one popular route is to first travel by



bus from Kathmandu to Jiri (6,250 ft) and then start trekking; the other, to fly from Kathmandu to Lukla (9,200 ft). But the cheaper and better way, as far as acclimatisation to the altitude is concerned, is the one from Jiri, which is also the one we choose.

As the bus leaves the city, and the sun rises above the hills, the snow-

peaks come into view. The gradient is steep, and so the bus cannot move very fast. Moreover, the road, at some places, is quite narrow; one more inch in a particular direction and you might get a dip in a stream at the bottom of the hill; no one seems too bothered about that, though. Because of a recent landslide, more than half the road is blocked

and everybody has to alight from the bus. The driver keeps his door open, just in case, while he precariously manoeuvres the bus over the heap.

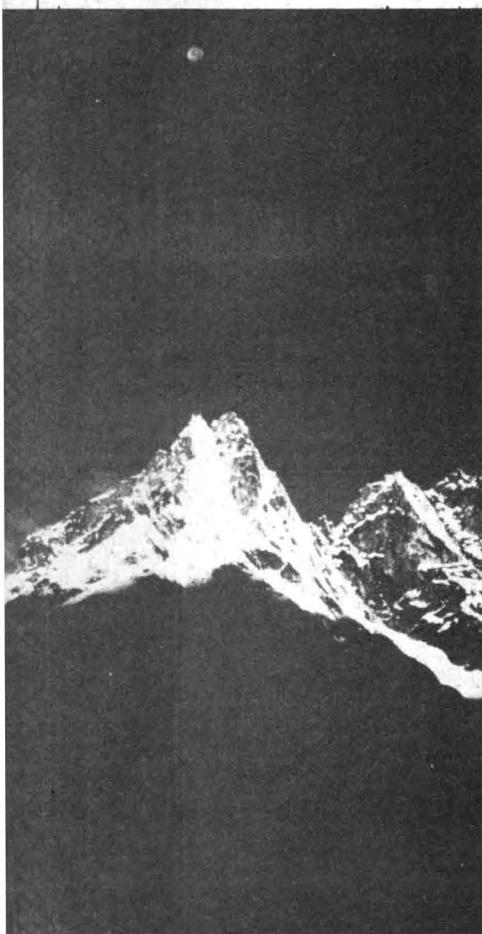
We reach Jiri just after sunset, to find ourselves in pitch-darkness with no electricity. Only the flickering flames of candles signal a welcome from the surrounding lodges around, and we are pleasantly surprised at the hospitality extended towards us — one that we encounter throughout our sojourns in these remote mountains. A Sherpa guide offers us his services having warned us that tomorrow (the first day of our fortnight-long trek) will be very tiring, so we thank our hosts and retire for what is left of the night.

THE FIRST DAY

My friend wakes me up early, and in the twilight, we prepare to leave. There are two routes out of Jiri: one is steep and short and the other, gradual and longer. A group of excited lads, we choose the former. Among the many tips we learn on a trek is that it is always advisable to take the easier route — at least at the beginning, when the body is just getting adjusted to the altitude.

After an hour, we stop for tea and directions at the top of the hill. The child who runs the store plays us a tune on his home-made violin. The sun gets hotter as the day progresses and takes its toll in the form of fatigue. Lunch is chow soup, salted and hot, followed by a mug of home-made rice beer. From Shivalaye it is a steep uphill climb to Baludanda, where we plan to stay. But it is our first day, and a full stomach prevents our steady progress. We stop frequently to rest, much to the amusement of the Sherpa couple accompanying us. Eventually, we decide to leave the steep trail and take a track with an easier gradient. It does not lead to Baludanda, but by-passes it to Deorali (9,000 ft).

The sun is behind the hills now and soon it will be dark. We stop at a hut half-way between the two towns



The land of eternal snows.

and the owner allows us the use of his verandah and a small stock-house to rest.

THE SECOND DAY

We pack up and after a hot cup of tea, we are off again. Each of us has aches and pains all over, but we must keep going. It is a little easier today. We pass Thodung, where there is a cheese factory, and have lunch at Bhondar where we are delayed by a drizzle and sit around chatting. A Sherpa guide tells us of his many feats, one of which is that he had climbed Kanchenjunga (28,000 ft) and not many people have done that! After our impromptu break in the rain, we trek on towards Likhu Khola. The road is very slippery and care must be taken at each step. It drizzles again, but there is no shelter other

than the umbrella of trees. And since the need to get to a shelter is quite urgent, we hurry on in the rain.

We reach Likhu Khola with the arrival of night, yet hurry on in an effort to reach Khinja Khola. Soon it becomes evident that we shall have to travel in the absolute dark and, because of the persistent drizzle, we call it a day at what seems to be an abandoned hut. But an adamant old man is occupying it. On persuasion, he allows us to stay and use his fireplace and wood. We cook chow with peas, and oh, what a great meal!

THE THIRD DAY

Khinja Khola (4,950 ft) is reached before the sun makes its presence felt, but it is a difficult uphill climb from here. We reach Sete (8,450 ft) by late afternoon, and though discouraged by the local hoteliers, who obviously want us to stay, we carry on after a brief rest.

In the gathering dusk we see a variety of birds, pheasants mostly, of various kinds and colours. At Dakchu (9,500 ft), a kind Sherpa allows us to rest in one of his huts. This is probably the most enjoyable and comfortable evening we have spent. The entire hut is ours and a fire is lit — it is like a scene set in the Wild West. The BBC World Service tells us that a Soviet diplomat has re-defected to the USSR and is accusing the US of kidnapping him. We have quite a laugh, cook hot fried-rice, and listen to music.

THE FOURTH DAY

After a breakfast of boiled potatoes and tea, we are ready for Lamjura (11,540 ft), where, or so we have been informed, there is snow. There is little civilisation around here, except for some stray huts and a small lodge near the top of the Lamjura pass. And our isolation is all the more apparent as there is so much fog that visibility is down to 10 feet. A chilly wind also blows in our faces.

Having conquered the top, and with the worst over, the trail is more

or less steeply downhill. And at a brisk pace, we arrive at Junbesi (8,800 ft) before sunset. The ex-lama of the monastery there provides us shelter at his newly-constructed lodge, and a hot shower worth Rs 5 (Nepalese currency) before dinner sharpens our appetite.

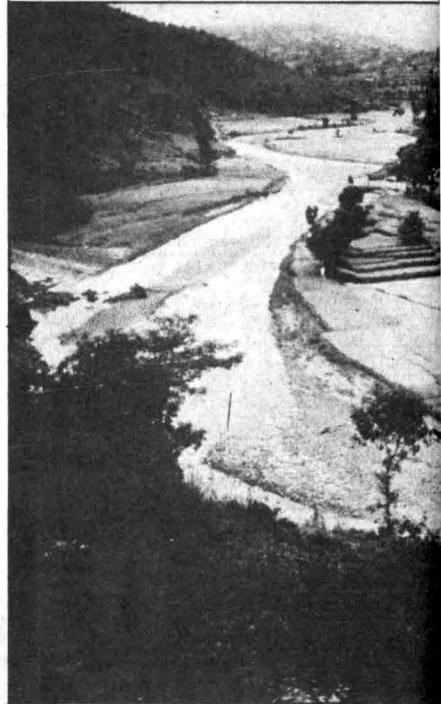
THE FIFTH DAY

An early-morning financial review tells us that we are running short of cash.

We reach Ringmo, famous for its cheese factory, in the early afternoon. Trogshindu (9,800 ft), known for its monastery, sits at the top of the hill. Yet, morale is low because the snow-capped peaks are hardly visible due to cloudy skies, except for a brief period early in the mornings.

THE SIXTH DAY

We set off with the cock's crow. The trail is now mainly downhill. We stop for brunch at Nuntale and then encounter the absence of the bridge over the Dugh Kosi, which was ripped away by landslides and a turbulent river. The only way to get across



En route to Jiri to begin the trek.

is in a box — better described as a crate on a rope — a poor imitation of a cable car. We manage, and cross Jibing (5,500 ft) to Khari Khola (6,800 ft), where we spend the night in yet another Sherpa's hut.

THE SEVENTH DAY

A hard climb to Phuiyan (9,800 ft), and to undo what we did all morning, downhill to Surkha (7,700 ft).

THE EIGHTH DAY

A friend has injured his leg and needs to fly back to Kathmandu. So we make a detour to Lukla (9,200 ft), a town equipped with a regular air-strip and a helipad. And we wait in vain for the whole day for a seat. Fortunately, we meet a member of an Indian Army Everest Expedition, Vidya K Negi, who has interesting experiences to relate: he climbed 27,000 ft up Everest before he was knocked down by an avalanche that caught him unawares.

THE NINTH DAY

Seeing off our friend on the first flight of the day, we leave after tak-

ing out each and every bit of luggage we do not need urgently, to lighten the loads of our back-packs. For, above 10,000 ft, every gram makes a difference. We then head for Namche Bazaar (11,300 ft). For once we are making good progress; even though the regular trail has been rendered almost totally useless by landslides, and worsened by the overflow of a big lake in the vicinity. In certain places, the trail is even a bit dangerous, and not more than one person at a time may cross it.

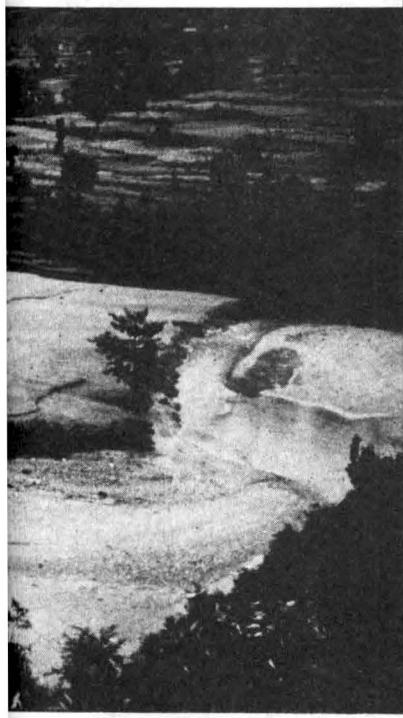
We succeed in reaching Jorsole which marks the boundary of the Sagarmatha National Park. Here everyone, except the Nepalese, needs a permit to enter (one has to pay Rs 60 per adult and Rs 30 per child). It is worth both the expense and exertion — a beautiful forest, with water streaming down for more than a 100 ft across vertical, bare rock-faces, and then, further down, as a rivulet to join the Dudh Kosi. The trees, with leaves of various hues, are equally breathtaking.

It is also a very busy route, with tourists and porters going up and coming down all the time. We thus follow a make-shift route, mostly along the banks of the Dudh Kosi. Though at times difficult, the beauty of the surrounding landscape is so overwhelming that the past eight days of strenuous trekking are totally forgotten, and we are propelled on in expectation of more. And more there certainly is.

Namche Bazaar, the base camp of Everest expeditions, is a total surprise. It is a huge place, set in a horse-shoe-shaped valley with snow peaks all around, just a stone's throw across the bare hill-tops. From sunset to 10 pm, a generator provides the town with electricity, so a bulb-lit dinner is a welcome change. There are also stores stocked with all one needs for a full-fledged expedition. Most trekkers who plan on going higher are advised to spend a day here acclimatising to their surroundings. There is also a good, short side-trek to Syongboche, where there is an airstrip.



En route to Namche Bazaar.



There is a splendid scenic view of the Everest range from here as well. At Namche, we become very friendly with members of the Indian Expedition, who have come down due to injury.

THE TENTH DAY

We gather our gear after a day's halt at Namche Bazaar. The trail from here to Tengboche (12,715 ft) is an extremely pleasant one alongside the small river, Imja Khola. We are now above the clouds and the peaks and the sights we yearned for are right there, to the right and in front (our left view is restricted by the mountain-side along which the trail runs). Glimpses of Everest and its neighbouring peaks — Nuptse, Lhotse, Makalu — fulfil all our expectations and dreams.



The valley of the Gods: Pheriche.

Down and across the Imja Khola, the path skirts uphill. After Lamjura and Trakshindu, this is not very difficult for us. But, as the afternoon wears on, the hillside gets foggy and clouded; visibility is low, and we have to console ourselves with the beauty of the seasonal blossoms along the path.

The route from Namche Bazaar (11,300 ft) to Tengboche (12,715 ft) is fascinating: the trail is so good that we can walk in the dark. (While returning, we will trek by moonlight.) We are greeted by the sight of tents being pitched on the clearing in front of the Tengboche monastery, the most famous Buddhist place of worship in the hills, and one which forms the centre of the hill peoples' religious life. It is very crowded because of the recently-concluded Manidin-gma festival. There is also a marked difference in temperature here, compared to that of Namche; by evening, we are shivering by the fireside and put on a further layer of warm clothing.

THE ELEVENTH DAY

I step out into the early morning chill and am lost in the swirl of mist. Which way shall I look? Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, Makalu, Ama Dablam, the Gokyo range, or a host of other peaks whose names I don't

know. (Everest will be visible again only at Kala Pathar (18,192 ft), beyond Gorakshep.) A clear and cloudless morning sky captures my soul; against the blue sky rise milk-white peaks in all their majesty, only a stone's throw away. The moon is still in the sky, we are very close to the snow-line and heaven.

We leave, much too soon, for Pheriche (13,921 ft), in time for a late lunch on arrival. En route lies Pangboche, and a little further, we rise above the snow-line. At first, we find snow in clumps here and there, icicles melting under the warm sun. And then it is more pronounced, with shrubs jutting out of the whiter-than-white snow like dark cracks in a virgin porcelain cup. Towards the right skirts the path towards Dingboche and Chukung. Ama Dablam is a sheer rise on our right and Pheriche is a cluster of houses in a huge valley, the immensity of which is only realised as we proceed towards Lobuche (15,500 ft).

At Pheriche, there is a small hospital with pressurised oxygen rooms for people suffering from High Altitude Sickness or Acute Height Sickness. There are also helicopter flights between Pheriche and Kathmandu. We meet some of the returning Indian Army Everest Expedition members and are their dinner-guests.

They are so homesick after three months in the mountains, having endured severe weather conditions like winds at speeds of 120 km/hr and temperatures of -40°C, that their joy in meeting compatriots spills over into a late-night chat.

They reached the south summit of Everest three times, they tell us, but had to retreat each time, barely 300-400 ft from the summit, because of extremely harsh weather. Additionally, the assault team were simply blown off the ridge by strong winds which uprooted their ice-axes twice. Having had to go through the trauma of losing five of their team-mates – Everest took a heavy toll of the team: Major Bahuguna, Major Kiran Inder Kumar, Capt Vijay Negi, Bhaskar Rao and R K Bakshi – four of whom were frozen to death at the southern face, and a bitter defeat, they want a respite. We are a much-needed diversion for them, while for us it is a great day, an honour to meet some of the best Indian mountaineers the Army has in its ranks.

On returning to our lodge after dinner, we are treated to a clear moonlit view of the dazzling peaks, but are unable to stay for long in the freezing cold.

THE TWELFTH DAY

Our shoes are not good enough for traversing snow, and we hear that there is plenty of it on the trail ahead. The Army team tells us that there is about five feet of snow at the Base Camp (18,000 ft) and that it is difficult to get accommodation at Gorakshep since there is only one lodge. The melting snow poses a further danger because, if our canvas shoes become wet, then frostbite is certain. So, we dump our rucksacks at Pheriche and proceed without any luggage, aiming to return before dark. While two of us head for Lobuche (15,500 ft), the other two head for the other side. There is a huge lake about an hour-and-a-half from Pheriche, in the opposite direction of Lobuche. Most people do not know

about this and therefore do not visit it. But then, there is also no regular trail, and the heavy snow-fall further worsens whatever dirt-track there is.

After proceeding about half the way and, in the process, slipping flat on our backs quite often, we sit in the sun, admiring our surroundings. In the evening, after a late lunch and a short siesta, we, representatives of the civilised world, sit around the fire and exchange pleasantries. There is a Swedish couple, a group of French trekkers, an American who works in Kathmandu for the Peace Corps, two fellow Bengalis from Calcutta on a 'holiday', a Dutchman and some Italians. We discuss everything — politics, education, Calcutta, the economy, world-affairs — and as the night deepens, the discussion switches over to religion. Four of us sit the night out, satisfying the foreigners' curiosity about Hinduism.

We even take a walk in the moonlight, a bit morose at not being able to climb further, but in no way repentant. Instead, we are quite satisfied with what we have achieved, the aches and anxious moments included, and what we have seen. The sky is so clear here and so is the mind; worldly worries seem so far away from this land of timelessness.

THE THIRTEENTH DAY

We return to Namche Bazaar in one day from Pheriche. It is a distance usually covered in two days, but now our shortage of money is acute. Luckily, we meet our Army friends again, and are treated to a hearty dinner.

THE FOURTEENTH DAY

A visit to the SNP museum above Namche Bazaar is very informative, providing a brief history of the cultural heritage of the land, and after thanking and bidding goodbye to our friends of the Expedition, we begin a fast descent. The route here is not very good and hampers our progress, but we are much more agile, and with Col Prem Chand, the leader of the Army Expedition, and N D Sher-



The majestic Lhotse-Everest wall.

pa, both famous mountaineers, accompanying us, we are in sky-high spirits. They stop at Manju, at the Japanese Hotel, beyond Jorsole, to meet an old Sherpa, while we hurry on to Lukla.

We have to cross Ghat (6,800 ft) before dark, as there are two big and dangerous landslides on the way. After quite a few stumbles in the dark, we trek into Lukla to wake up our hotel assistants. On recognising us (we had stayed with them on our outward journey), they re-light their fire and cook a hot dinner for us.

THE FIFTEENTH DAY

Praying for a plane ticket, we rush to the airport and to our joy, secure seats on the fourth flight of the day. The plane lands just before the end of a runway less than a couple of hundred metres long. We board it, but it is not ready to take-off just yet because of low visibility and gales. The planes are manually-controlled, and the pilots do not risk flying in bad weather with nothing to guide them.

We wait at a coffee-shop for the weather to improve; the air-crew have a quick card-game there, gambling for increasingly high stakes. They stop when they think they have lost enough for the day. We meet an eight-member Australian ballooning

expedition who are on the same flight as us. There are also two members of an 11-member Polish expedition to Lhotse present, and who, in their unsuccessful attempt without any Sherpa guide, have lost a member.

As the afternoon passes, with no sign of clearing clouds, the flights are postponed to early next morning, and we carry our rucksacks back to our lodge. A Californian group comes over to our hotel for drinks. They had gone to Tengboche and are so impressed that they promise to bring their children along next year and climb higher. We also meet a Briton who has been all over Europe, Australia, the Soviet Union, America, Africa (Tanzania and Uganda, if I remember right), South-East Asia, China, and India! A computer technician by profession, he goes back to work when he runs out of money; Nepal is the *only* country he has visited twice as he likes it best.

The next morning, a helicopter guides our plane out of the hills, towards Kathmandu and 'civilisation'.

And now, immersed in a civilised world, the song I heard on the hillsides of Namche comes back to me, along with the sight of the snow, lit by the golden rays of the setting sun. Indeed, it is hard to resist the pull of the Himalayas and Nepal, the land of Everest and eternal snows. ♦

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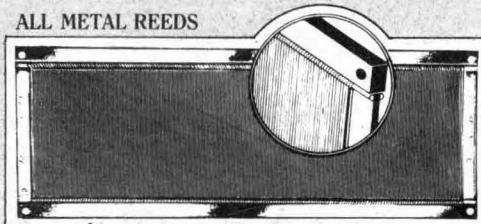
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WHEN RAJIV GANDHI'S government decided that human beings were to be seen as a valuable resource, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) was established, bringing under its ambit a curious amalgam of education, sports, child development and women. Although the Department of Women and Child Development, as it

is now called (focusing quite clearly on development as opposed to welfare), has been around for only a few years, women, it seems, have been on the government's agenda for longer than one might expect. Different ministries have had, and continue to have, projects which have a women's component built into them. But it is only in recent years that the idea of

focusing specifically on women has assumed any importance in the government.

If we were to look for the beginnings of this, the impetus could be said to have come from the landmark publication, in 1974, of the Status of Women Committee Report and its alarming findings about the continuing decline in the status of women in

MINISTERING TO THE OTHER HALF

It is three years ago since the Department of Women and Child Development was set up, under the leadership of Margaret Alva, to 'put women on the map'. Yet today crimes against women are at an all time high, discriminatory practices and social evils continue unabated, and the status of women remains unchanged. Is the Department, then, redundant? Or has it, indeed, effected some changes? Urvashi Butalia talks to Margaret Alva and delves further to find out.



REPORT

India. Following this, and the Conference in Mexico in 1975, at the beginning of the UN Decade for Women, when the Department was merely a bureau of the Ministry of Social Welfare, a national plan of action was proposed. Drawn up after meetings with several ministries, the plan of action was meant to urge the Prime Minister to "initiate a comprehensive programme of specific legislative and administrative measures aimed at remedying, as far as possible, the economic and social injustices, disabilities and discriminations to which Indian women continue to be subjected."

Several action points were identified to this end. Among these were: a review of existing legislation to ensure social justice and equality to women of all communities and creeds, and a commitment to a Uniform Civil Code by the year 1985; ironically, the very year in which the Shahbano affair sparked off a national controversy. Other areas that the action plan identified included education, employment, health care and nutrition, training, and promoting voluntary effort: basically the same areas that the committee report had prioritised.

ALL THESE WERE AMBITIOUS claims. How did the then women's bureau plan to ensure the implementation of these plans? The proposal, at the time, was that a national level standing (advisory) committee be set up to review the progress of these plans, and that this committee submit an annual report to Parliament. Called the National Committee on Women, and under the aegis of the Prime Minister, the Committee was to be serviced by a special bureau which was to keep in touch with the implementation of various programmes by central ministries, state governments and non-official agencies. Similar committees were to be set up at the state level.

Today, it is anybody's guess how often this committee has actually



Margaret Alva.

met, and all claims to action remain mere claims. And the status of women remains unchanged: the sex ratio, which has been adverse for women since 1911, apart from a small and as yet unanalysed upturn for women as shown in the 1981 Census, remains the same; the life expectancy of women, on par with men in 1931, has been much lower since; female mortality rates remain higher than those of men; literacy for women remains lower than that for men, both in rural and urban areas; violence against women seems to be on the increase; there has been a steady decline in women's employment since 1911, and more and more women are being pushed into the unorganised/informal sector which is characterised by long hours of work, little or no pay, extreme exploitation, lack of job security, uneven patterns

of work and therefore increasing pressures of ensuring survival of a woman's family at the cost of her own.

What then has it meant to have a separate department for women? According to one activist from Delhi, precisely nothing. "For, after all," argues Rukmini Rao of *Saheli*, an activist group, "what can you expect from a ministry that is merely a parallel ministry? What kind of power, what kind of clout can it have over other ministries? And if it is to impress upon them the complexities of the women's situation, it must be in more than just an advisory position."

"The whole idea of setting up such a ministry is wrong from the start," volunteers another. Confirmation of the Department's limited powers (since Margaret Alva is a Minister, the Department is generally referred to as the Ministry) comes, unexpectedly, from Margaret Alva herself: "... implementation machineries are with the state governments ... I have no direct implementation machinery in my hands, that is the truth of the matter. Now you can judge from that how much clout we have . . ."

"It's not that we are entirely powerless," say bureaucrats within the Ministry (who prefer to remain unnamed). "We do sit on advisory committees in other ministries but, even though our views are solicited by all other departments, we have little clout in policy-making." Apparently, one role the Department of Women can play is to be on different departmental committees, and to have access to the information they have about women. But even this becomes virtually impossible because there is no regular mechanism of feedback and no way of ensuring that other departments/ministries actually send in feedback. To quote Margaret Alva again: "I go on writing reminders and so forth and everybody says we are in the process . . . in the process (of sending back information)."

AT SOME TIME OR THE OTHER in

their lives, women's groups within the movement or the voluntary agency framework have had to come in contact with the Department. What have their experiences been? "It would help to know," say some, "what exactly the women's department is supposed to do. The technical function of the department has changed from welfare to development, but there are not enough people within the department who have adequate experience to deal with this. So there's a lot of propaganda — women this and women that, but nothing much gets done."

Does nothing much get done? The Ministry of HRD would be the first to deny this, for not only does the Department of Women see itself as a lobby for women within the government, it also has, under it, a number of programmes for women that it runs directly, some in various stages of implementation, and others that are being planned. Among these is a scheme of assistance for construction of hostels for working women whereby the government provides financial assistance of upto 50 per cent of the cost of land and 75 per cent of the cost of construction; there's an income-generating and employment programme that was set up in 1982-83 (with the help of the Norwegian Ministry of Development Co-operation) which aims to provide employment to women from weaker sections by giving financial assistance not directly to the women but to their would-be employers in the form of public sector undertakings, and to voluntary organisations, to train women and absorb them in jobs, particularly non-traditional occupations such as electronics, watch manufacture, printing and binding, etc.

And then there are schemes for short-stay homes for girls, a scheme for the setting up of women's training centres; a new programme called STEP (Support to Training and Employment Programmes for Women) which is supposed to focus on the poorest and most marginalised of

women; there are the Women's Development Corporations which aim to provide employment avenues and foster economic independence; there is a budget of Rs 20 lakh for the production and dissemination of propaganda and publicity material for women... and so the list goes on. All this sounds wonderful on paper — although a few such schemes are hardly sufficient to address the problems of nearly half the population of this country. Nonetheless, there are problems, and very real ones. Says one activist, "Basically the problem with the Department is that they pass on jobs they should do, they don't own up to their responsibility, and then they complain..."

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BY AND LARGE, PEOPLE agreed that not only is the Department ill-informed about women's affairs as a whole, there is also very little co-ordination with other departments. Everyone is into their own thing. The Department claims, as one of its achievements, the Indecent Representation of Women Act. Yet obscene and objectionable hoardings still continue to dominate our streets. Meanwhile, Delhi's Police Commissioner, Ved Marwah, has set up a committee, with great fanfare, to monitor such obscene representations — a committee consisting of a film star who has not the remotest connection with the women's movement and who constantly appears in advertisements, with her husband, as the ideal wife, and others whose only recommendation, it seems, is that they are women. Why could not the Ministry have been consulted in this, ask feminists, and why didn't the Ministry protest when it happened? Not surprisingly, this much bruted committee has done precious little, and when it has come to actually protesting against the hoardings and taking them down, it is, predictably, the women's groups who have come to the fore and taken action.

There are other, similar instances of the word not matching the deed. The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987, the most recent piece of legislation concerning women with which the Department is charged, has recently been blatantly and publicly flouted by the Shankaracharya of Puri and there has been not a word of protest from either the Prime Minister or the Department of Women. Ironically, it was Swami Agnivesh who is, in this case, on the side of the law, who was arrested! When questioned about this, Margaret Alva said that Agnivesh was arrested because otherwise it would have become a law-and-order problem and, in any case, "why haven't women's organisations protested about the Shankaracharya?"

Saheli cites another instance: that of assistance provided to women's

"I WOULDN'T SAY DOWRY IS A COMMON PROBLEM IN INDIA..."

Imprint: What exactly are the terms of reference of the Ministry? Is its function only to monitor the functioning of other departments and make suggestions, or does it have the same clout as other ministries?

Margaret Alva: We are a department for women and child development, part of the Ministry of Human Resources Development. We have certain autonomous bodies which come under us: in the department for women, for instance, there is the Social Welfare Board and the Social Advisory Board; almost every ministry has some component or programme on women which is supposed to be monitored by us. You ask about 'clout'... I have no direct implementation machinery in my hands, and thus you can then judge how much clout we have. But I'm not saying that we have *no* clout; we *do* chase, we *do* follow up, but the point is that implementation machinery as such doesn't exist with us.

In this limited framework, how do you see the role of your department? Essentially, we plan programmes and schemes. We are the central point at which women's programmes take place. We have an all-India picture of what's happening and are therefore able to concretise the assessment into some kind of follow-up programmes. We feel that 'awareness creation', both within the state government machineries and among women themselves, is very important. For this, there are two things we have directly launched: media campaigns and the process of introducing the women's component into the training of bureaucrats at all levels. For instance, among the police, there's a programme which NIPCCD is organising on rural development because 80 per cent of Indian women are essentially rural. Simultaneously, there are media campaigns. The Social Welfare Board is also trying to hold awareness-generation camps.

Socio-economic programmes like those of the WDC (Women's Development Corporation) and STEP, (Support to Training and Employment Programmes for Women) for which funding has increased quite a bit, are another concern. And, as we have found that giving something here and there in isolation doesn't really have the desired impact, we will fund all these programmes in the states through their development corporations, so that there is a central point at which it is known that *this* organisation or district has a particular programme.

But how many programmes have actually been sanctioned under STEP? Rumour has it that there is some hitch with the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission is right: we are talking about huge amounts and one has to prepare a scheme. You have to have a project approach when huge amounts are given: how do you guarantee it, how many instalments does it go in, what is the type of managerial support...

What is also happening is that only those who know about it come and take what is available while the others remain ignorant. We are talking here about funding organisations the state governments are also prepared to co-operate with; there are certain tie-ups which have to be guaranteed because huge sums are involved. That is why, maybe, the take-off might be a little slow, but we *are* talking to people and getting it going.

And how many have been sanctioned so far under this scheme?

I wouldn't be able to give you the details, but no money from it has gone because, you know, they are huge amounts...

You spoke of the planning of programmes... What role does your department play in this? For example,



are you consulted when the Planning Commission draws up plans?

Our people are called in as planning in isolation for women has not really produced results; there has to be a multipronged approach to women's development, a national fund towards which all ministries will pool in and work out a common capsule for implementation. We have, for instance, surveyed agricultural training programmes and discovered that an overwhelming number of those trained in better techniques are landless labourers whose improved techniques help the landlord, but do not improve the economic status of the women workers. On the national level, we say that production has gone up, but have the benefits percolated down to the women who do the bulk of the work? This is the question we have been posing.

If these are the questions you have been posing, surely this holistic approach demands a resource and information base with your department serving as a repository of data and statistical analysis. Especially since this material is not accessible to anyone, if it does exist in the first place. It is here. In fact, the women's division of NIPCCD is essentially collecting this data.

Now, regarding your scheme for providing assistance for hostels and shelters for women in distress: women's groups who have tried to make use of

this scheme find it impracticable and improperly planned. For example, you provide money for the house-rent of a shelter, but you well know that no landlord would be willing to rent his house for such a cause. Why has your department not taken this up? Just as you have built crèches in the DDA (Delhi Development Authority) colonies in Delhi, why not shelters?

You can't just give a one-room place as a shelter for a women's group. But, the point is that it is not wholly a Central thing; we have also got the state government's funding, through the Social Welfare Boards, for running crisis centres. Approximately Rs 3,000 is being granted as our support. We're considering tying up these centres with production and training centres for women so that, while they're there, they'll be able to be trained for something as well as earn something. We have also introduced changes: one is that after this thing about the status of the widow in India, we have said that at least 5 per cent of the rooms must be kept in reserve for young widows, young women in distress . . .

What about the question of mounting violence and the anti-dowry legislation? Dowry murders seem to be on the increase — what has your department done about this?

What would you expect me to do? It's okay; the Government of India is stationed in Delhi. Immediately as something happens in Delhi, everybody talks about it. There are various kinds of atrocities committed on women . . . if I'm to get involved in Delhi cases every day, then my department would only become a department of social welfare in Delhi . . . The fact that more and more crimes are being reported and recorded is, in itself, a fact that awareness has increased over the last few years. And so, while people talk about figures and say that is why crime has gone up, I keep saying it's not only one way — it is also that the police are now be-

ing compelled to register them in their crime registers, which has never happened before. Whoever went and complained about a rape in the past? It was a stigma on the family, so you'd rather send the girl away. And the girl was transferred (sic) from the locality so that nobody even knew about it.

It is a positive factor that more and more crimes are being registered, investigated, and exposed. That is why the figures are, today, showing a trend which is positive as far as 'awareness generation' is concerned: take the girls who get burnt. . . they are women who bring income into the family, they're not just chattel who've been sitting at home.

Secondly, there are also only *certain* communities, certain parts of the country where this happens. I just *wouldn't* say that dowry is a common problem in India, in every corner of the country, for, in most families — 'jo diya wo liya', you know, 'khatam ho gaya'. Burning a girl, ill-treating her, torturing her, only occurs in certain parts of the country.

But you have a 20-lakh budget for publicity and propaganda material to fight these crimes against women.

Yes, for instance, we have this budget, these mobile exhibitions, a part of which are, for example, these capsules that we put on TV — about the age of marriage, etc. We are also funding certain publications, and I must say honestly, although I may sound illiterate, I have been fighting against spending money only on research; I keep saying, 'listen, you have studies, hundreds of them, that I don't have enough shelves to file what I have.' But what is the follow-up? Publicity of the programmes themselves is the important thing, and I must tell you that it's after I've come that I've had these printed and reprinted, because as an MP, I, myself, didn't know what the programmes of the Department of Women were . . .

organisations for setting up shelters for women. According to them, this scheme, as with many others, is ill-thought out and difficult to implement. Assistance is provided by the Department in the form of house-rent (which has only recently gone up from a meagre Rs 750 to something in the region of Rs 3,000), but experience shows that very few landlords would be willing to rent their houses for this purpose. And even if they did, the sum would fetch barely a couple of rooms. "Why can't the government," they ask, "sanction grants for the purchase of office space or an actual building. Surely they are aware of how sensitive an issue this is?"

"With every programme it is the same," say others, "there's a lack of political will. They've done little or nothing on the dowry issue, violence continues unabated. Whatever programmes they have are ill-thought out: they have asked the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), for example, to provide space to set up creches in DDA colonies, why can't they set up women's shelters as well? At the very least, one major role the Department can play is to collect statistics, information, data, analyses on women. There's no one place where these are available. Surely the Department would be the obvious place? Why haven't they even *thought* of doing this?"

NOT ALL ACTIVISTS, HOWEVER, are so sceptical about the Ministry. Abha Bhaiya of *Jagori*, who has been involved in the awareness-generating camp scheme of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), an autonomous body under the Department, feels that one thing that is important today is the kind of openness that exists within the bureaucracy, particularly in the Department of Women and Child Development. Most activists would agree with this — that their dealings with bureaucrats within the Department have been open and easy. But, they would say, even the best of

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officers are handicapped by being part of the system and, with the best of intentions, they cannot get out of it. Bhaiya feels that the openness may, in fact, only be due to certain bureaucrats, but, she says, "at least they are willing to listen." She cites the example of discussions with voluntary groups on the awareness-generating scheme of the CSWB. "We were asked for our comments on the syllabus that had been prepared for the trainers . . . many of us felt the whole syllabus was wrong and should be changed and reworked totally. The CSWB was quite open to this, saying that we (women's organisations) were the ones with the expertise, and that we should go ahead and give in our suggestions. Today, the syllabus that stands is the one that we have prepared, not the one that had been offered earlier."

According to Bhaiya, there is a definite attempt, in this scheme, to involve younger and more radical women's organisations and the idea is to generate awareness and confidence among women. The camps themselves are not conducted in a vacuum. There is an initial survey through which activists link up with women in the villages. A village profile is prepared, along with a class analysis, and only when such information has been collected and women identified, is the camp planned. Bhaiya points to some successes: in UP, after taking part in such camps, a group of women have got together and bought themselves a tractor which they hire out. The income from this is divided into twelve units and one unit each goes to each of the shareholders (10 in number), with one being kept for repairs and the last being banked as savings. Although there may be other similar instances, the real problem comes with the time scheme, for, at the end of six months, this process ends artificially and the women are left high and dry.

Within the Department, there are similar minor success stories. An unmarried mother of the Department of Telecommunications was denied



Assisting family planning.

maternity leave and the Women's Department took up her case successfully. In another case, a widow married a widower and the Defence Ministry (of which her first husband had been a part) stopped her pension. Here, too, the Department of Women was able to help her. "But," as bureaucrats rightly point out, "this is not our major function for we can't really get caught in taking up individual cases." How do they themselves see their role? "As a lobby, taking up policy matters, and basically in increasing the visibility of women, in 'mainstreaming' women. For example, we have begun the process of sensitising civil services personnel and planners to women's issues; we have, in a sense, attempted to put women on the map."

PERHAPS THE REAL QUESTION to be asked is what exactly is meant by 'putting women on the map' — and which map are we talking about? If, by putting women on the map is meant an increase in the visibility of women, perhaps the Department of Women and Child Development could lay some claim to this. But, has their contribution been any greater than that of women's groups within the movement who have, over the last fifteen years or so, been engaged in this activity? For it is, without question, the women's groups who have brought to the agenda of public debate the questions of violence, dowry, rape, discriminatory laws, the environment, health and nutrition, women's work within and outside the home . . . Perhaps then, we should rephrase the question and ask what kinds of things the movement has done and how these are any different from what the Department has tried to do. Within the movement, there have been militant campaigns, demonstrations, lobbying the government for changes in laws, debates on the 'women's question' and so on; on the Department's side, there have been the propaganda films on television (offset, interestingly, by the continuous flow of sexist and fundamentalist serials and advertisements which perpetuate stereotypes of women — areas over which the Department has no control) and radio, some travelling exhibitions, some research studies. On one side are the exhibitions and posters women's groups have made on health, violence, the use of street theatre, songs, *jatras*, and on the other, the Ms '87 exhibition, or the tacit support to the *Stree* exhibition in Moscow or participation in SAARC regional meetings . . . It is arguable which of these sets of activities has placed women's issues more firmly on the agenda of public debate.

Perhaps, then, we should look at the question of legislation. It is one thing to be responsible for the drawing up of the anti-sati or anti-dowry acts (and women's groups and others

may argue about how pro-women these are), it is quite another to work out an implementation machinery, or to monitor exactly what is happening. In this, as in other areas where the Ministry itself is not responsible for implementation and has no control over feedback, one might ask what the point is of having all this on paper. Or, take the Equal Remuneration Act. No one can quarrel with what it attempts to do, but while it may exist, the Ministry is powerless to enforce its implementation or to stop or even arrest the enforced retrenchment of women from the organised workforce because of rationalisation and mechanisation.

YET ANOTHER WAY of considering the issues might be to look at the before-and-after scenario. Where were we, and were things any different, *before* the Ministry (or the Department) came into existence, and have there been any visible changes *after*? One would not have to look far to find an answer to this question. If things were dismal before, they remain so after. It may be true that a number of groups now know that there is an alternate source of funding to tap for some of their work, but how many of them are actually able to use this source easily is another question. If then, there is no major change in the before and after, nor has any clear role emerged for the Ministry/Department, why then is it there at all?

One could pose the question differently and ask what role a government agency can have in improving the status of women, in actively aiding and abetting a process which, if carried to its logical conclusion, means its own overthrow. For after all, the reasons for the status quo of women's oppression have to do with a set of interrelated factors that involve government policies at every level and it is not only foolish to think that the Department's intervention, however well-intentioned, can in any way be powerful in this regard or that it can put a stop to anything. So, for ex-

ample, if it is the government who wishes to build dams, or give contracts for felling trees, or setting up alcohol shops, or bringing in long-term and as-yet-untested contraceptives for women — all of which have an adverse effect on women's work lives, their health, and ultimately their status — how can the same government be interested in empowering women to fight these things? Does it make sense to empower people so that they can turn around and oust you?

But then, you might argue that even if all this doesn't work, at least the Ministry has its own programmes which could, in some measure, be effective. But how then do you judge effectiveness? And how far, beyond providing some financial assistance,

Yet another way of considering the issues might be to look at the before and after scenario. If there is no major change in the before and after, nor has any clear role emerged for the Ministry/Department, why is it there at all?



can the Department involve itself in this process which is riddled with contradictions? You make a policy, contribute your share towards it, wait for the states to put in theirs. What if they are unable to? Or you wait for the states to implement your schemes and if they are not particularly interested, what do you do? Or you begin a new scheme (as with STEP) and a couple or more projects are sanctioned (in this case four) and then the Planning Commission steps in and says that too much money is being spent and the whole process of 'development' is stopped artificially. What do you do to your so-called 'beneficiaries'? Or, you finish your first round of providing assistance to different organisations to train women in non-traditional skills. You train women welders, electronic engineers — and they may get jobs (although often even that is unlikely for who, in semi-urban or rural India, would want a woman welder?), but are rejected, laughed at, pressurised to quit by their cultural milieu (or by the men whose jobs are threatened) which does not accept women in non-traditional occupations and this then leads to another kind of oppression. How then do you see your role here? How far have you concerned yourself, when formulating the programme, with imperatives other than economic, with things other than figures?

And so we come full circle: back again to the question we began with — what is the Ministry's role and how does it propose to fulfil it? We are forced to reach the unpleasant conclusion that however good the individual officers/bureaucrats may be, and however easy it may be to deal with them, in the ultimate analysis it is not the individual bureaucrats we're talking about, or talking to, for they are merely birds of passage. We're talking about the structure of which they're a part. Can we really call that structure ours? Are we at all sure that our priorities tie in here, even in a minor way? It is surely time we began asking such questions. ♦

EXTRACT

BUT NOW LET ME TELL you a story. A true story. A true story for me, since then, is always false. So, history is false. It is just a chronicle of human truths, of newspaper cuttings, etc, etc. You understand?" My mind was too benumbed to speak. So he started again after a moment's deep-breath silence.

"You are a sensitive, gentle, highly civilised fellow. A Brahmin, a mathematician, and soon to be a member of the Royal Society, etc. And who knows, you may even win the Nobel Prize."

"Absurd," I spat. "Don't be too absurd."

"Absurd, sir," shouted Michel, sitting up straight, and small. "Who is absurd, those pedestrians of Paris, the clerk at the Credit Lyonnais, the professors at the Sorbonne, the minister of De Gaulle — I will, for the moment, leave the great man, as much for your comfort as for my own — for he is a good man, but for how long, who knows, who knows? Good becomes bad overnight, like milk left at night becomes curd next morning — does it or does it not?"

"Yes, it does."

"Well, I spoke it, because I had read it in one of your Buddhist books. You see, I am not mad. I am sane. I am Michel, all right," and he rose, came to me as if a little drunk, patted me on the back, and said: "Oh, *mon frère*."

"Oui, Michel."

"You are too innocent. You do not know hell. I do."

"Yes, I know you do."

"When you've *tripote* so many dead, and have been *tripote* by so many dead, what do you think you become? You leap out, that's if you're still alive and a young fifteen, run to an abandoned house, and lie amidst the silences between gunfire — for God has at last come. God reveals you an empty abandoned house, with a rich larder — how do you like that? Between bombs, machine-gun tick-tacks, Mauser rifle-shots. You see, a true fairy-tale, better than any

THE BRAHMIN AND THE RABBI

Eminent writer RAJA RAO's considerable literary merits are brilliantly displayed in the following excerpt from his latest masterpiece, "The Chessmaster and His Moves". A Brahmin and a Rabbi meet — for the first time in literature — and confabulate; it is a dialogue that is, at once, metaphysical and realistic, tender and sensuous, tragic and

humorous. It explores the reasons for the Holocaust, highlights its horrors, and relates a love story that is incongruous with, yet a result of, that harsh reality. And through it all, emerges the discovery that, despite the fundamental differences between East and West, the possibility of a union of souls on humanitarian grounds is alive.

"The Chessmaster and His Moves" is the first of a forthcoming trilogy to be penned by the author who recently won the prestigious Newstadt International Prize (an alternative Nobel).

Excerpted from Raja Rao's "The Chessmaster and His Moves". Published by Vision Books India, 36 C Connaught Place, New Delhi. Price Rs 275.

written by the great Andersen."

"You're right. Andersen never knew hell."

"BECAUSE," CONTINUES MICHEL following his own monologue, "because you see, the good Germans, Grandfather, Mother, Children, who sat on the other side of Birkenau camp, ran. They who would visit the SS men's families, with neat gardens, fresh clothes, and after a chat and a cup of tea, they would stroll the perambulator, and peep through those



innocent windows, you know, and see the Musulman's all entire, without a cry, abjuration or disdain, but tied to their God, as the exiles were in the old days of the Czar, going to Siberia, hand to hand tied, a never-ending line, on the snows, white, pure, but singing. Listen, I can still remember, a song my great-grandfather is supposed to have sung coming back from the land of the snows — for he was caught in some minor misdeed done to the name of the Czar, or of his henchmen — and this

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Warsaw, and she would make for him a good wedding — her brother had told her of Simon Katz and Manes Satorsky, who became famous engineers, despite government obstructions raised against the Jews, became rich men and even lived in villas. And why would not Isae, her son Isae, build a villa in Poskya Street, off the great boulevards. So her brother had told her, for her brother too hoped, if his nephew became rich, he too could open a bigger shop — and in Warsaw. Thus you see the world is round, round," laughed Michel, good-heartedly. "Don't ask me," he continued, "if the mother wanted to be rich, or if the brother of the mother wanted the nephew to be rich, maybe he wanted to be rich to make his wife think better of him, for she came, said my mother, from a family of apothecaries. Who knows, who knows? You know the world is full of Suzanne Chantereuxs." I did not understand why he said what he said, and then after a moment's silence, he continued: "Well, well, my Isae, our Isae, being a bright boy — my mother told me he looked just like me, broad and short, and with thick glasses, but, of course, I never was very bright in mathematics, or in anything, nor did I have an uncle who ran an electrical appliances' shop. My father wrote petitions for the unlettered: Your Excellency, the *Préfet*, the Magistrate, the Count, etc, etc. For there were many counts. And we have even a count in my story.

"WELL, WELL, ISAE WENT to Warsaw. But, like an untouchable, sat at a separate table, at the University of Warsaw, for remember, that was how we were treated, even under Marshall Pilsuduski, so I was too. And our Isae read all the electricity which could be read, finally wore a gown and became an engineer, and was given a minor post in Warsaw municipality. But by now, his real interests were elsewhere. He never wanted to be a rabbi, even when very young, that his mother knew, and he knew. He wanted, however, to save mankind. Re-

member, we are all like that. We Jews are. If some *tartanpion* in, say, Tahiti, is dying of venereal disease — a venereal disease, as you knew only one virtue, and that is to be a woman — so this white man gave the disease to a woman, and that woman to a Tahitian, and he is, the Tahitian is, covered with small and big boils. And somebody, another white man, a good Pole maybe, because he had heard of the beauty of Tahitian women, goes there, you know, like Gauguin went, but this time not to paint, but to enjoy the thick juicy richness of Tahitian women — and there it comes, the news to, say, Isae. And he will say, *'Tiens, tiens*, someone, some people in Tahiti are suffering from venereal disease. So I will study medicine. Become a doctor. And then go to Tahiti and help the Tahitians get better." How do you like that?" smiled Michel, slapping his thighs with both hands.

"So that our Isae was involved in trying to help mankind in every way — therefore, he joined the Theosophical Society. Do you know that organisation at all? It has something to do with your country. It's a sort of *Gurdjieff*, with Tibet and Mongolia and the Himalayas, and all that. And saints of course, many, many saints, and Masters several thousand years old, sitting on top of your Himalayas which guide mankind, etc, etc."

"Well, I knew something about it, just a little," I said.

"So my Isae studied theosophy. And when one studies anything so outlandish as all that, you always meet — especially in faraway Poland — people of the upper classes — like, say, at the Rotary Club in Paris today. So, my Isae met many counts and countesses, studying, you understand, esoteric, yes, esoteric philosophy." And by now, Michel was exhausted, he asked for a glass of water, and I went to my room to fetch him some cool nice water. And when I returned, he sat there, silent as a rock, as solid and natural as the rock of the Trocadero hill, which rose in front of us, across the garden.

"SO TO GO ON WITH MY STORY, my Isae fell in love with a countess, with a real countess, a highborn lady. He was five foot three-and-a-half and hunchbacked like I am — his back was like an accordion, my mother used to say, 'and therefore, when he spoke, it was like music, like some psalm. He spoke not words, but long musical syllables. And many were often like words from the Bible. He lisped — he did not talk — as a child does or a dumb person, and so it carried rich meanings.' Thus spake my mother. But let me go on with the story. He was hunchbacked like me, I told you — he had fallen from a tree when young, like I had from a colt — and though I had never seen him, but it's as if I know him, even sometimes I feel I *am* him. Since he is not alive, I'd even believe in your theory of reincarnation and cry, 'I am Isae, I am he indeed, our Isae,'" said Michel, and laughed again, tenderly, as if he had no reason to hurt me.

"Whether you believe it or not, it might still be true, like in the Middle Ages, whether you thought the earth was flat and the sun went round the earth or not, for which Galileo had to be burned at the stake, the sun still was the centre of our planetary system.

"Maybe you are right. Often what we suspect to be true turns out true. Why, the reincarnation theory might even explain the story I am going to tell you. Listen."

"Yes, I will."

"I said, Isae fell in love with the countess, but to be true, it's the countess who fell in love with him. She thought him a genius and perhaps he was one, who knows? The countess was from a famous Polish family, with castles in Silesia, on one side Greek and on another German, and she was at least a palm-wide taller than he was. But he had a mind, my mother tells me, so brilliant, the rabbi refused to discuss with him. As I have said before, maybe he was a genius, a new Spinoza."

"Now, now," I protested, "Spino-

zas are not born so often. Please?"

"But, said my mother," continued Michel, without listening to my own remarks, "he spoke in Biblical Polish, as I have said before, or sometimes, Yiddish, with a touch of softness that made one think he loved vocables, he loved to pronounce vocables, like a good rabbi. And he must have spoken sweet things, to the countess, and she must have adored him, much, much. She said, the countess said, 'I would wed you today were it not I have two daughters to marry. If you

ing her son was going to Paris to make money for them, said, 'Oh, what a fine son I have, he thinks of us, of me, of his sister Liza. And he will build us a nice house in Lvov — after all, we still have land there that Maximilian, my husband, had bought outside the town for a nice house. That was when he was working at the grain exchange. And we shall have a grand marriage for his daughter.' "

"Just like in India."

"ALL THE WORLD IS INDIA, sir,"



can wait a year or two we will surely get married.' But she boldly, openly, for she was a courageous woman, became his mistress. She took an apartment in the city and moved him there. And spent evenings with him, as much as she liked."

"A beautiful story," I said.

"But wait, wait. So my Isae said, as all good Poles thought at that time, 'I will go to Paris, like Madame Curie had gone, or like the good Chopin, and I will make money, so that I may keep my Helen,' for that was her name, Countess Helena Volonsky. 'I will make any Helen happy.' And so to Paris he went. His mother, think-

he said somewhat in mockery. One always felt, talking to him, or in fact with any Jew, as if there was a sort of supernal rivalry between the Hebraic and the Hindu. Of course, we the Hindus, especially the Brahmins, always felt we were the eldest beings of creation. And the Jews, of course, were the 'chosen people'. So, who would decide? God would. But he did not exist. So?

"She was, Helen was," he started, "some sort of a Shékina."

"Now, what's that? It sounds almost Indian."

And he laughed again, somewhat compassionately, and added, "Oh,

why, as I have said before, all that's good comes from India, does it not, *mon cher ami?*" and he came over and once again patted me on the shoulder good-humouredly.

"Well, well, maybe," and I joined him in laughter, as though it were a private joke.

"So, she was his, Isae's, Shekina."

"Now, now, Michel," I said, smiling within myself, "what's all that?"

"Well, if God is a He, the feminine aspect of God is, of course, a She."

"Like Saki and Shiva," I said to understand.

"Yes, more or less so," and he laughed again. "And if God is a He," and this time he laughed so loud, loud enough for the whole building to hear, and even the concierge must have heard, and, as if in sympathy, the fire in the hearth shot up, or so it seemed.

"HOW IS IT, MICHEL," I asked very grave, "how is it you can laugh at God in that manner. I thought you shouldn't even pronounce his holy name."

"That, my friend, is the trick. God, *Dieu*, is not the unpronounceable. Because it is Latin and not Hebrew. You know, pundit," he added smiling, "I think we are prisoners of our language. So it is that I have become involved with linguistics, the newest science of all. For example, in linguistics, one notes there is no plural in Chinese. Those *Chinois* are so materialistic, for them their object, *la chose*, is very, very real. So real they can see only one thing at a time. In our linguistics laboratories, when we have to choose the computer for the *Chinois*, we are in a fix. So we have to give to Chinese letters a plus, an algebraic symbol like x or p. Yes, we are prisoners of language, for example, the Jews have no vowels. We too, in our own way, love objects, because we use consonants. God is beyond, therefore we have no vowels, so you explained to me once, and I think that is precise."

"But — "

"No, no, let us get back to my Isae

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and his Shekina. Now I have said to you already, all that I say is pure legend, the legend of the ghettos. You know, when the Germans entered my country, Poland, they created a ghetto government, so to say, and they named a Fuehrer for us, and our Fuehrers could be as terrifying as the one you know, all Fuehrers can, were they even Hindus — ”

“Now, now, Michel, don’t be so hard on us.”

“No, sir,” he said, sitting up and

crossing his legs, “we are all *les êtres humains*. And I am speaking of ‘*la condition humaine*’.”

“Well. Let us go on.”

“IN THE GHETTOS OF LVOV, the legend of Isae was one of the most enchanting. It was like some ancient fairy-tale. Our parents sat on their frontsteps on summer evenings, listening to our grannies talk, talk, talk. So, we would, had we more time, have written a ballad, an epic poem,

like Roland, to extol the exploits of our Isae le Bossu. And Isae le Bossu would have become tall, bent and noble as a rabbi. His words were so clear, they could sound Talmudic. He was a saint, there was no doubt of it. For the story said, he made so much money, Isae did, in the very first year of Paris, taking patent after patent, so his mother’s supposed to have said — and that was in the good golden days before this heinous war — that our Isae made much, much money.



and sent her enough money to live in peace, and even put aside some in the bank for his sister's marriage."

"So he had a sister?"

"Yes, a sister, I told you so, and she studied pharmacy. She was already engaged to a young man, even before Isae went over to France, and that must have been around 1930 or 1931."

"Oh, as long ago as that?"

"Yes, does it not all sound prehistoric! Anyway, our Isae then made

so much money, but he would not send too much home, lest our government get suspicious as to how a laundress had so much money, and we Jews have prudence in our fingernails, so to say, you understand, counting our rosaries — turning the pages of the Talmud," and he laughed again. And this time, I understood his nerves had become so frail, he had to laugh, laugh and laugh, at himself, at his own people. "Thus our Isae then made so much money, so his mother said again to my aunt, or to my aunt's aunt, or my aunt's aunt's aunt, who cares. She told it all to my mother, and Isae in two years' time had bought a home on the outskirts of the Bois de Boulogne. But I, in my own way, made inquiries here in Paris and found through a Russian, a restaurant keeper who had helped him in the beginning — the Russian survived because he was some sort of a prince before the revolution, so the Hitler people spoilt him — and the Russian talks of Isae with contempt, for he did not know who I was, and he said, 'A house, a house! The Yuopin lived in Clichy, in a hotel with a gas-ring. True, he was generous with all his friends. *Tenez*,' he said, 'he gave me money to bet on horses. And if I lost, I said to him, Isae, I will not live, if you do not give me any money, and I will hang myself, like I've done once before, you remember, and Isae would give me another fifty or a hundred francs — and in those days it was a grand sum, and I would be betting again. In fact, he helped two or three refugee girls from Lithuania, Latvia — good girls who did not want to go on the streets to make money. Yes, he was a man of heart,' the Russian concluded, and clapped his hands, as if he was paying off a debt to Isae, and took the bill of the next customer. Yes, that's how I made inquiries everywhere.

"SO, TO GO ON WITH MY STORY, my Isae had indeed taken many patients. I, I went out of curiosity to the patent office here, and found that he had in true fact taken some 22 pat-

ents in a year. That must have brought him a lot of money. And despite the Russian prince, Isae must have lived in comfort. And here we come to the last part of the story.

"Our Isae then decided it would soon be time, in a year or two, to get married to Helen because her two daughters were by now engaged. And I found on inquiries from other Jews here, who knew him then but did not know the story, that he had bought an apartment on Rue des St Pères No 7 or 9. I do not remember, a comfortable one. It's now an office. And he waited and he waited, like Balzac did, his Shekina, who, as you know, was a Polish countess, and all that."

"No, I did not know that."

"However, the apartment once found, the Shekina had to come. And here the story becomes complex, tragic. She's supposed to have written one day, imagine, to this anxious, all-awaiting Jew, that she had met a famous count, elegant, tall and an admirable dancer — met him at a party, and they danced the evening away — of course it was in Warsaw. He was so exquisite a dancer, they danced till almost the light of day, and this Shekina is supposed to have said, 'I went and married him as soon as the papers were ready. I am sorry, very sorry, to have done this to you. I am really sorry. You know I am a woman of impulse, Polish to the core. But don't come here,' she seemed to have added, 'for Victor knows everything about you. He said he would shoot you if he saw you. So please do not come. Yet I love you. I love you, etc . . .'"

"But, but, Michel, why are you telling me this story?"

"Well, you will see why. Just wait. I thought Hindus had a lot of patience, because, with you, time is cyclic and all that. Anyway, our Isae, then, heroic, charismatic, brilliant, had only one thing to do. A good Jew he would understand anything. He would forgive anyone — even a former prisoner, a murderer whom he is supposed to have befriended in Paris, and gave him money — to live

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in honour. So, he took the first train to Warsaw, and a short tacko to the castle, some 70 miles or so away, and presented himself. Yes, presented himself, like Rolland before the Saracen, and at the castle door. He knew the guards would never let him in. So he pretended he was a county engineer who had come on government inspection. And he looked intelligent, well-groomed, efficient. So, they let him in. And once up and inside the castle, he just said he wanted to see the Countess, to ask about the electrical repairs. He had learnt about such matters from his uncle. And imagine what a shock it was, she in her nuptial splendour, so to say, before a hunchbacked Jew, here in this fifteenth-century castle."

"Yes, I understand — it's like when I visit Jayalakshmi in her palace at Vilaspur."

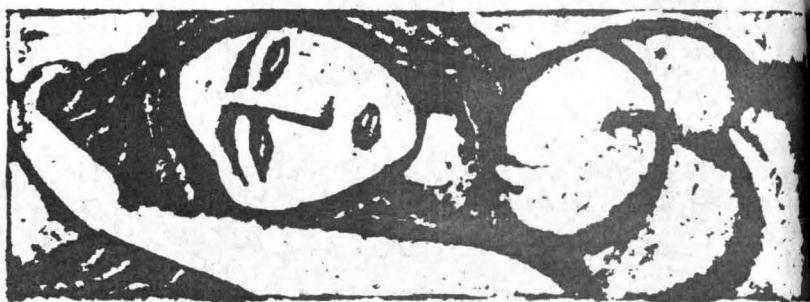
"WELL, WELL, THE BRAHMIN of India is not quite the Jew of Poland. But you understood what I mean. Then openly, quietly, she went and told her husband what had happened. And believe me, and I have been assured of this here by two or three Polish noblemen in exile — impoverished and humble, now polishing hotel floors, running lifts — and they say the story is true — that the Count came out and said in his chest-high-and-moustached manner, 'Well, engineer, what is it you want?' 'You know who I am. I have come to settle some business with you.' 'Business in the castle is done by the bailiff,' and he almost walked away. 'Yes, I know, but I have another business,' and the legend says, so sweet was the voice of Isae, so true, and maybe the Count did not want to offend his new bride, the two men settled down to business together. Isae said he loved his Shekina so totally, he would only wish for her happiness. He said he had become, while in Warsaw, a liberal Catholic priest, so even more did he understand love. Thus, in the name of God, His Son and the Holy Ghost, and here Isae, must have sincerely crossed himself, and in the

name of the Trinity, can we make a pact. And he had asked for Helen to be present. And Helen came out, trembling, ashamed, proud, heroic, while all the maids and butlers were amazed at this historic confrontation. A Jew, and this is how the Count talks to him! Well, human nature is magical. Yes, a Hasid, I tell you, a Zadik, can work miracles, prayer can. Then Isae said, and this was in the large hall of the castle with the portraits of all the Count's ancestors in armour, gold and ermine, looking down on him in pride and protection, 'So make a promise to me: If she is happy, she stays with you, if not, if not,' 'Yes, if not?' 'she comes to me.' And the Count, a real chevalier, was so moved, and Helen, so proud of her Isae, they shook hands ceremonially, had lunch together, and he, Isae, left for Paris by the evening train."

Here Michel stopped, mopping his head, perspiring, and went over to the coffee-machine, which was still blinking red, took a cup of coffee, came back and sat down. And I sat there, of course, thinking of Jaya. How could I not have? If I went to Raja Ashok and told him the same, then what would he say? He might say: *'Mon vieux*, or old chap. Let us wait and see. She is not yet mine. And when she is mine and if ever, we can always settle the accounts!' He would use, I was sure, the same expression, having been brought up in the Anglo-Saxon, the upperclass, background, that is, a European background. So, it's all a common story, you see. Then why is Michel shifting about his legs so often? One has to wait and see. The evening had

not yet set in, and all one heard was the Orpheus singing out the water, the naiads below. It sounded much like his own story too. Helen, Eurydice, and all that, as Suzanne had explained to me — a barbarian from India who did not know Greek mythology. 'For the European, a French, he who does not know Greek mythology is indeed a barbarian,' she had said one evening on *Les Bonnes Soeurs*, au 7e, and added with a passionate kiss, 'but I love the barbarian Brahmin prince.' Yes, the Queen, I had said and smiled, thising of Jaya of course.

ALAS, THERE WAS BUT ONE queen for me, one Shekina so to say and squeeze as I might Suzanne, under my power-led loins, in my tight gripped arms, begging her for more and more of *that*, all she gave was thin now, so dry, so melancholic. Jaya's simple touch of hand had more wealth than all this psychodrama. Suzanne was even as Hermione, still theatrical, mental. Her mind ruled her, and as such Gurdjieff. She seemed so Germanic to me, will, absolute will, the *Herr* with the *knout*, like Lord. Yet she wanted so much to be a woman. And obviously, I was not her *Herr*. I wondered if she had shown any of her privileges to Michel yet. The smell of her pubic hair, for example, or the big black mole on her left breast — Suzanne's well-shaped breasts — the mole big as a small ring, black and pink, was to be touched only by the highly privileged, and was, she had assured me, at the moment, and, was forever to remain, the only privileged one. And I felt so jealous, I knew how the Count could



might have killed Isae.

"You may wonder why I tell you this." He must have read my thoughts. "You Indians — Indian thought such — since the eighteenth century — have usurped our place. We were the priests of the Western world. Ever suppressed, pogromed, burnt, they knew and we, of course, knew we were ultimately to be the destroyers. The West belongs to the Jew. The God-carriers of the Mediterranean, if you remember what Mediterranean is, despite Paul Vévéry and boasted Latinism. The Mediterranean man includes Rameses II, the great Gilgamesh, and of course, Abram. Yes, that is what Mediterranean means. I have told you the Greeks are Asian Aryans. They had a sense of the occult, of mystery, Orphic, Dionysian, but no prophets — of the pronounceable!" And he let his good foot down and stood up, as if to feel his own true stature. "Moses Sinai, that's the only metaphor of man to his maker. All your neutral and so on, is *c'est la fantaisie, l'inventeur*," and he came and patted me on the back with what seemed, at first, contempt and affection, a father to a son. The Jew, the Father of the world. And everyone not his children only the Jew can be child of the world — the others just his farmworkers. "You have taken our place," concluded Michel, with almost anger, I might even have said hatred, and he went to the glass-window to see the trees of the garden, as it were. The atmosphere was at least as angry and ant, I am sure, as when Isae might have faced the Count. Christianity, especially Catholicism, was even more Greek than Jewish — Saint Paul

had done his job — thus the Christian was a sort of Indian of the West. And so — the ghetto and the incinerators. History smells bad, you know. Attila and Hitler, they are all the same.

The Hasid, he worked on the Garden of Eden. His language was prayer. From his prayer grew fruits and forests, and the cattle to slay. He, the Hasid, even invented a knife, so gentle, it would cut his goat or cow without pain, or almost so. I was now the goat before Michel. I was now his Isaac. He seemed in prayer. I had heard he too had thaumaturgical power — he had healed people. There was no doubt he was a Zadik. How could he, otherwise, have come out of the dead?

FROM NOW THE STORY is simple," he said, going back and taking his seat opposite me. There was no Paris or Poland that evening. No world — two humans face to face, in what seemed an eschatological drama. No Helen of Troy, no Suzanne the Problem. It was whether the sacred ship from Delos had come into the harbour or not. Then Socrates would have to take his poison and die. Such are the laws of history.

"Of course," exclaimed Michel, "of course, a count who could be such a good dancer, even were it only the mazurka, could not have satisfied our Helen. This Isae was a Jew and a Hasid. He had seen the Maker face to face. He gave her, Isae gave her, his powerful God. She was infatuated. Under the Hitlerian law, she would have been shorn in public, marched in front of people naked, and taken to the firing squad, with the *pancarte* hanging from her neck: 'I cominded

with a Jew.' This is just to set an example, you know. Hitler then had no such power. But Isae knew, for he knew his God well, that she would come to him. And, of course, she came back to him. The Count was a man of his word. He belonged to a different order of nobility than of the French or of the Germans today. The Polish counts were servants of the Black Madonna. They were first Christian, and then Polish. They died fanatically on the field of battle, even as recent history shows us. There could be no Hitler in Poland. A house-painter become dictator! *Impossible*. Even a Hindu could become a dictator, a Brahmin," he laughed, "could become a dictator, but never a Polish house-painter." And Michel smiled at his own joke.

"So, our Isae said to his Helen, not of Troy but of Warsaw, shall we say, and remember she was part Greek too, he said to her: 'Come my love, and we'll go to India.' "

"What?" I said, almost standing up in astonishment.

"Yes, he said, did our Isae, 'India is all peaceful and beautiful,' and he dreamt of it, a Hasid, as his Garden of Eden, you see, that's our obsession, where everything is positive and good. So thither, my friend, he took her, to his Gandhi and all that. They say he invented many things in India, became a monk."

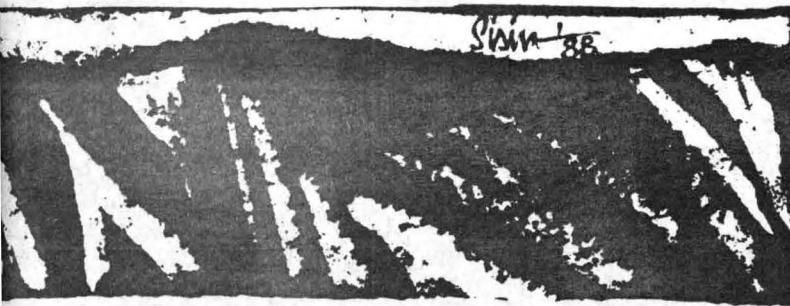
"What, a Hindu monk? A bizarre story."

"Yes, a bizarre story. A Jew first, then a theosophist, then a Christian, finally a Hindu monk — "

"Now tell me, how did this happen, according to your legend?"

"I asked some men of your country, working at the CNRS. They told me little, they knew little. One man amongst them had a father who was a theosophist. And he heard of Isae Zimmerman and his monkship. Yes, and a disciple of Krishnamurti, a devotee of one Ramana Maharishi, and finally a worker with Gandhi. So I've heard. Have you not heard of him?"

ZIMMERMAN, ZIMMERMAN," I



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said, "never. Besides my father was on the British side. How would he have known of someone with Gandhi?"

"Anyhow, and again I've heard, it was Gandhi's last spinning-wheel, a great invention — an Indian one — was one of Isae Zimmerman's make. And our Indian at the CNRS, whose father is a minister in some state, in Madras I think, even said Mahatma Gandhi had given this elegant instrument of spinning, one of the first, rare ones, a gift to Chiang Kai-shek. So, who knows, if this Polish Jew's spinning-machine is not singing away with some of Mao's comrade maidens in Szechwan. Thus life, my friend, with this Hasid life."

"But Helen — what happened to her? You never completed that story."

"In this paradise of his, this Eden of the World, India, people certainly are angels — as Suzanne and her mother never stop discoursing to me. For these two ladies, you are only next to God. You understand. Well, well, let us leave that part out."

"Yes, let us!"

"Anyway, evidently the Hindus do not know much of microbes. So, this Isolde, in the land of enchantment, drank no magical potion, but water from an infected well. She had typhoid. Nobody had told her to take an inoculation against such an event —"

"So?"

"So, she had typhoid. And Isae duly telegraphed the Count. He had, the Count had, even in those days, an aeroplane company. So he hopped and hopped to India in four or five days — you know in those days, there was no night flying. And he reached Bangalore."

"Oh, Bangalore. I know Bangalore..."

"Well, so much the better. However, the lady lay flat in her bed, on the outskirts of Isae's factory — for he was the first to start an electrical factory in India — the British did not like it, but there was a good and strong maharaja, a saint, I am told, who gave Isae all the money he needed, to build the factory."

"But I thought Isae was with Gandhi..."

"That was later. So Helen, like a Tolstoian heroine, lay; on one side, the hunchbacked thaumaturgical Jew, and on the other, the elegant Polish Count whose family had fought many battles including the one at Sadowa in the fourteenth century with the Russians — and between the two, she gave up her 'ghost', as the fairy tales would say. And she was cremated. And her ashes later thrown into the Ganga. The Count now took the two daughters back to Poland — the war was still far away — Hitler had only marched to the Rhine, you understand, and the French panicked and ran..."

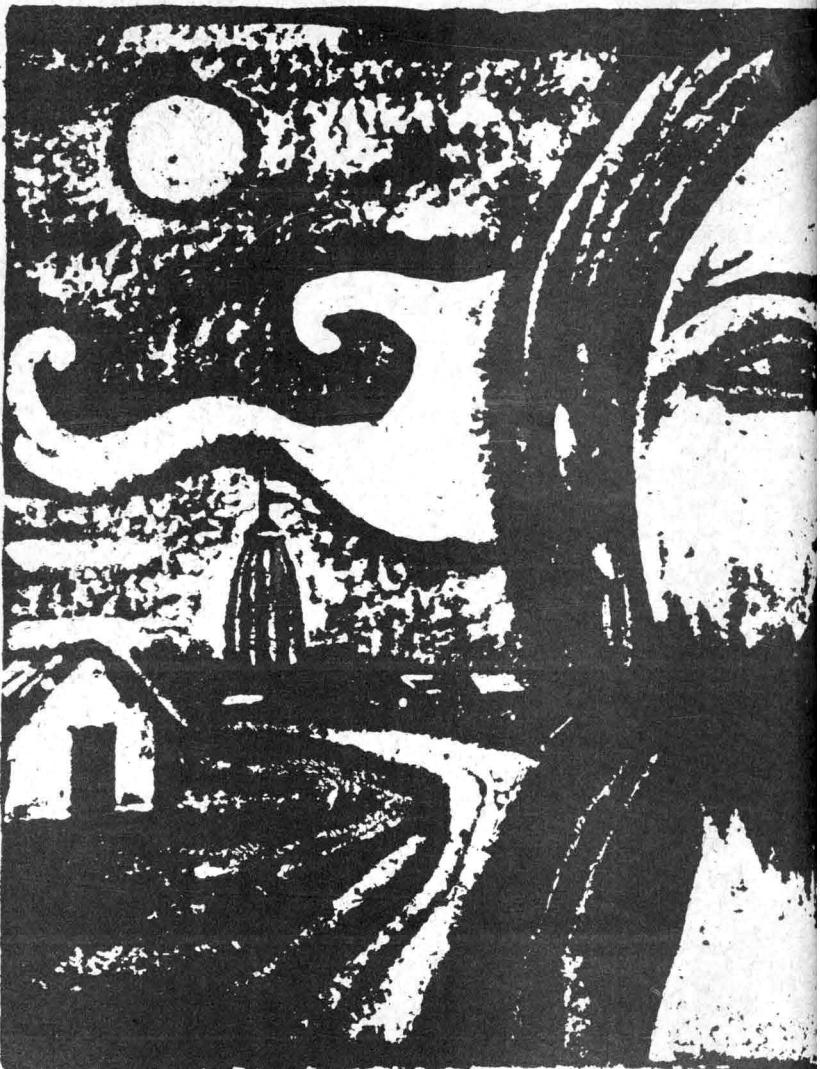
"OH, YES, BUT THE FRENCH show extreme courage when faced with real danger, never with mere danger, like we Hindus do," I said. "When the Japs were coming we were all so frightened — we ran from Madras for our lives. But the Japs never came."

"But Hitler marched into Poland — and you know the rest of the story. At that time, I was happily just over twelve."

"Why happily?"

"Because later they took from the ghettos all the very old and the very young. They left me because I was thirteen and took Sasha, my brother, seven years of age."

"What did they do with them?"



"You innocent," he said, very angry. "They sent them to the gas chamber immediately. Thus my uncle and my youngest brother, Sasha, prede-
d us into paradise. . . ."

"And Isae, what happened to him, that time?"

"He must have sat in rapt meditation, in holy harmony, as the Hasidim says, before one of your many aunts, maybe talking of the brotherhood of man, of non-violence, and that not. Later, so my Count in Paris told me, his mother and sister went to Birkenau, like I did, where the Count's brother-in-law worked, in a chemical factory."

"What happened to the Count?"
"His time too must have come."



One never heard of him either."

"Oh!"

"SO ENDS THE STORY," said Michel stamping his feet, as if all was said. "One more thing, please."

"Yes?"

"Well, well, in this paradise, he found that there were thieves too. So some poor fellow, whose good Indian habit was to steal, I suppose — one day coming home, thus I've heard from one of your countrymen — who'd read it in one of your Indian newspapers — so Isae coming home and finding his rupees gone — is rupee the money in India?"

"Yes, it is."

" — his rupees gone. Isae in a nice bourgeois manner slapped his servant. So, the poor fellow whose habit was to steal, I imagine, cried and howled. Confessed he had done it. So that our Isae, who'd read a lot of Tolstoy — you know, we Poles read Russian very well — Isae, the saint, then said unto him, 'Pardon me, brother?' And not able to sleep night after night, went, so I was told, to a nearby Hindu temple, a temple of Siva, donned the ochre-coloured robe, and so became a Hindu monk. Could one become a Hindu monk so easily? No ordination, etc?"

"I don't think it's so easy."

"Well, anyway, that's the legend. He knew his mother was dead and his sister as well. They had some news through the underground which worked between India and Eastern Europe."

"Oh, was there such an organisation?"

"Well, if your Mireille worked in Greece and communicated with England, this too was possible between India and Poland, especially through Persia and Southern Russia."

"And then?"

"And then came the deluge. We were swept away till Stalingrad. Then we were cooked, you understand, cooked as lamb or hen. And when he had turned into ash, my dear fellow, it grew potatoes. Potatoes and turnips, all over Germany today. You

could ask a potato: how much chemical from the Levi and the Katz do you have? It might sit up, the potato might, as in a cartoon, and say: Why, I have 0.3% of the Levi's and all the Katz's. And does it taste good, you ask of Herr Gobaldo Kommin, and Gobaldo Kommin will say: It tastes *schon, schon*. Heavenly. Yes, that's our Europe. Yes, that's it."

"THUS, HE, ISAE, WENT BACK to the source," I said in mischief, smiling.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because Hasidism, from what little I know of it, and of what you have said, came late to Judaism."

"Not quite. But if it were so?"

"Anyway, your Scholem says it"

"Perhaps. But I do not remember."

"So Hasidism was influenced by the Christian mystics."

"Maybe."

"And Christian mysticism, I repeat, of Poltinus."

"So?"

"And the roots of Poltinus?"

"Of course, India," he snarled with bitterness.

"Thus — "

"He went back to the source!"

"Does Hinduism alone contain the Truth?"

"No."

"No. Then what does?"

"The Truth."

"Are you a Hindu?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

"A seeker, a simple seeker. But who knows, maybe Truth is . . . is Peruvian." And we both laughed.

"Then what is true Hinduism?"

"He who goes beyond Hinduism, like . . . "

"Yes, like . . . "

" . . . a true Christian, one who has gone beyond theology, like Jakob Boehme, like Eckhart, and . . . "

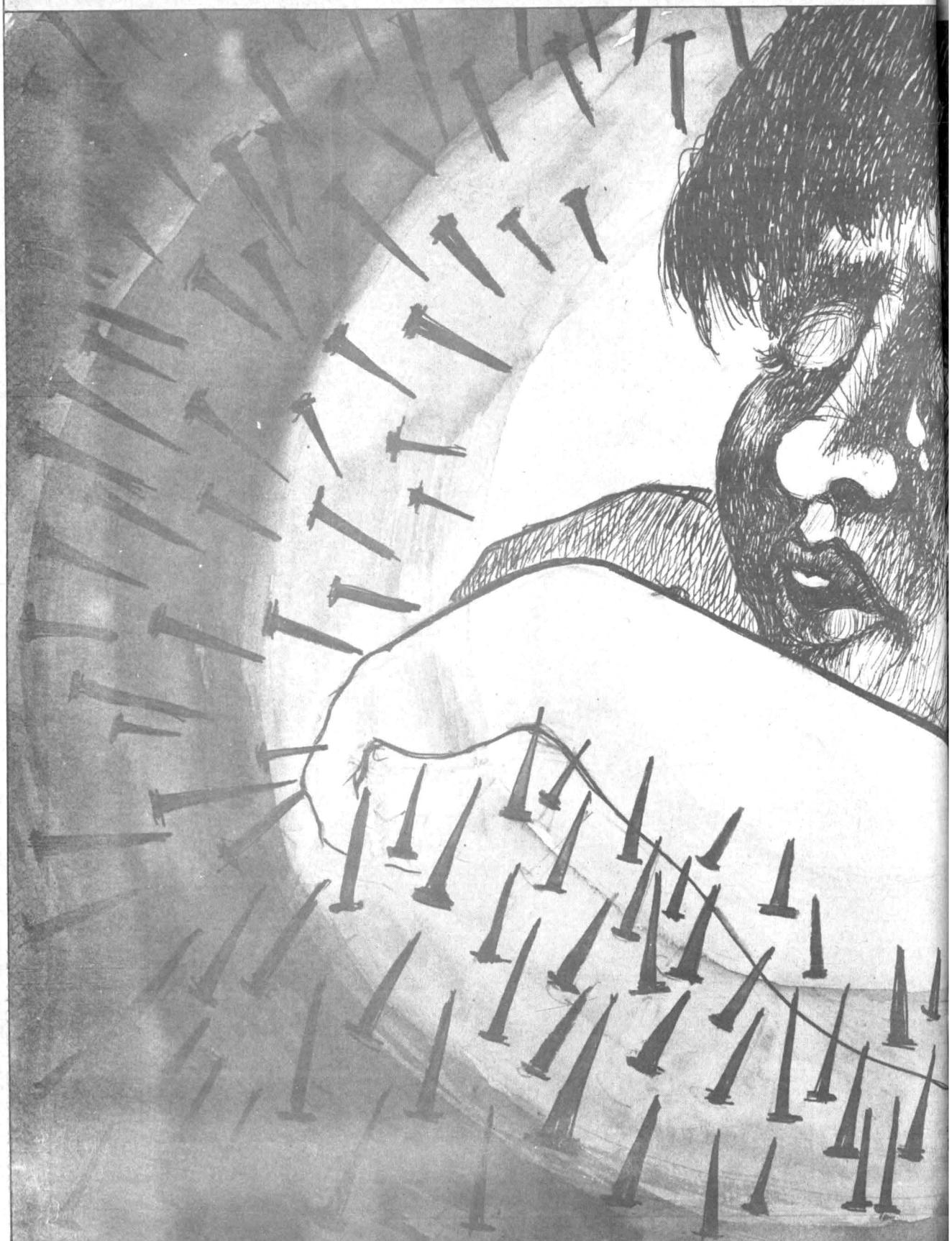
"And . . . ?"

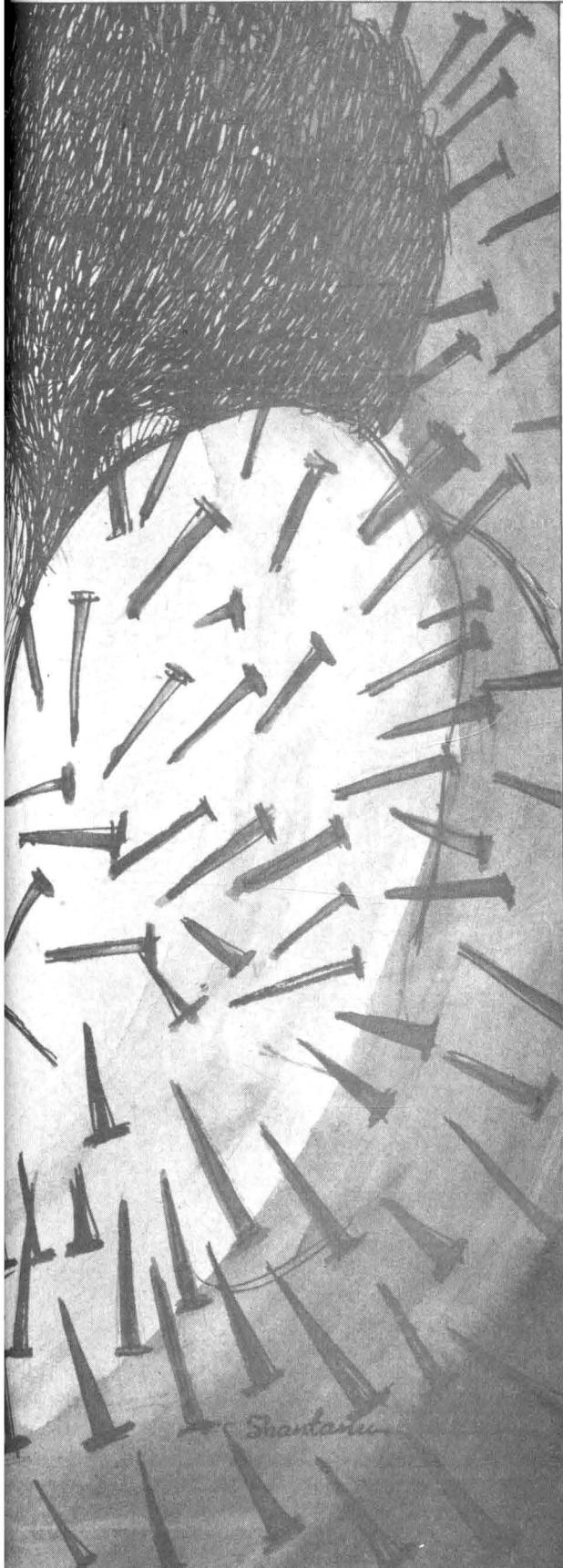
"Like the Sufis in Islam — like Rumi — could you say the same thing, of your Jews?"

"Maybe not, but of the Hasidism, yes."

"So, you see, we meet again." ♦

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WINTER IN THE MORNING

“YOUR FATHER WILL be coming soon,” they told him.

It was said to him as he ate his dinner squatting on the kitchen floor, between mouthfuls of *daal* and *chappatti*. It was repeated as they ran into him on the creaky wooden stairs between the first and second floors, just over Grandfather's Visitor's Room. They threw the event at him as he ran stark naked from the bathroom behind the house to the second-floor room where he put on his clothes.

The next day, he asked his mother as she scrubbed him hard between his toes with the grey pumice stone while bathing him. “He'll be coming soon,” she replied.

“Will he come in the chhoo-chhoo *gaadi*?”

“Yes.”

“Will his eyes be red and hurting like mine were?” he asked, remembering his only trip to the railway station with one of his uncles.

“Stop wiggling and stand still,” she admonished, soaping his face.

His mother talked to him only when they were alone, and then too, not much. Most of the day she was busy with the housework, and though he tried following her as she went from room to room, he usually fell behind, especially on the creaky wooden stairs. He still had trouble with the stairs: they were narrow with the edges worn away so that you could easily slip and hurt your chin, as he often did. By the time he made his way up to where she was, his mother would have moved on, and he would go looking for her through the longish, dark rooms with their heavy musty odour, and down the back-stairs to the kitchen. When he lost her in the maze of rooms, he would go to the kitchen to wait, for she was forever touching base there. And while he waited, he snacked on whatever the aunts were cooking at that time of day.

They talked, he and his mother, in the mornings when she bathed him, and at night when she crawled into bed with him after finishing up in the kitchen. He told her of

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the salt-and-pepper mix Cousin Kalpi was forever sucking on; he told her of the half-*laddoo* he had clutched in his hand, all the way back from the temple on Granduncle's shoulder; he told her of the shiny buttons he had found in the lowest drawer of the big black cabinet in the Other House (as Big Uncle's side of the house was called). And that night, he asked her again about Father's coming soon.

"Of course, you've seen Father before. Don't you remember the wooden horse he brought you last year that you used to drag behind you everywhere you went?"

"Will he bring another one?"

"Maybe something else this time."

"Where is he coming from?"

"How many times do you want me to repeat it? You know the answer. Go to sleep now."

"My father is coming from Bombay. On the chhoo-chhoo *gaadi*. When will he come?"

"Soon. Hush now and sleep," she said with finality, beginning to thump him on the back rhythmically; a cue for him to snuggle his head into her chest, hug one of her breasts with both hands and close his eyes.

IT WAS THE BEST PART of his day, this harmony with his mother in the dark of night, surrounded by the regular breathing of his cousins and assorted relatives sleeping in heaps around the two of them. *Then*, tired and sleepy and snappish as she was, she was his *completely*.

The early mornings were also his favourite time of day, when the two of them would wind their way in the half-light to the *puja* room — she smelling cool and clean after her bath, he still groggy from being woken up. He could never sleep for long without her body next to his. Every morning, he would doze fitfully, waiting for her to finish her morning ablutions and return for him before going to the *puja* room.

She would prop him outside the small room full of huge, colourful pictures of the gods and goddesses, so that he could watch her as she lit the lamps, burned the incense and began her daily prayers.

The day would slowly come to light around him. It would waft through him in the silken scent of the fresh flowers and the heavy musk of the incense-sticks. The little *puja* bell would tinkle occasionally, breaking through the clamour of the morning birds outside. Above all, it was his mother's voice — rising and falling in a singsong whisper, her husky incantations to the myriad gods — that he came to love as the reassuring call to a new day.

* * *

HE WAS SLEEPING WITH a cousin in the Other House one afternoon, when his mother came looking for him. Without a word, she heaved him on her shoulder and headed back through the common kitchen to *their* side of the house. He was pleased with this unexpected attention from her in the middle of the day. He would have liked to make



the most of the opportunity and talk to her as well, but he knew he was not likely to get much of a response. It was too public a time for her. So he contented himself by smiling at anyone they happened to pass, even though most of them were the cousins who ignored him anyway.

His mother changed the loose shirt he wore around the house, and which was wet that afternoon from playing in the street, tucking the fresh one into a pair of shorts. That is when he knew his father was finally coming that day.

"Haren, where are you?" he heard them call. He was busy in his favourite corner of the second-floor room, behind the wall of mattresses that were piled up during the day, telling himself the story of the rabbit who swam out of the magic well, when he heard them call, "Haren, your father is here. Come down at once!"

He was wondering whether he should wait for the rabbit to reach the palace and eat the sweet, pink *paapads* before going down to meet his father, when he saw Big Cousin standing in front, waving him out of his corner.

"Come on out of there. Can't you hear them calling for you?"

He crawled out slowly and was dusted off firmly and disapprovingly. He resisted being lifted, insisting on following Big Cousin downstairs on his own, one step at a time. He could hear the voices in Grandfather's Visitor's Room.

At the bottom of the stairs, he turned right and stood poised at the entrance of the room, one hand lingering on the doorpost, the other clutching his rather outsized, hand-me-down shorts by the lower hem.

The men were all there — grandfather, uncles, cousins and even some neighbours. Women were constantly coming in and out of the room, while some of the children were clustered together, looking on. Haren waited, not knowing how and from where to slip into this stream of humanity.

"Ah, there he is!" exclaimed a stranger who looked like a heavier version of Big Uncle. "Come here, son."

FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS, he hovered around his father, standing between his legs, straddling his lap, hiding behind his chair till he was missed and pulled up, stealing an occasional look at his father's wondrous moustache. He was allowed to do pretty much what he wanted, and so, it was not long before he forgot his usual desire to run away and hide. He listened to his father talk, picking out the voice by its gravelly gruffness; he sipped from his father's many cups of tea; he investigated his father's pen till both hands were an inky blue, pausing occasionally to look and smile when he heard his father laugh out loud.

Once in a while he looked around for his mother, but she was nowhere in sight. Finally, he slipped off his father's lap and went in search of her to the kitchen. She was busy brewing tea on one side while making dinner on the other, surrounded, as usual, by the various aunts. He went and stood by her for a minute, seeking reassurance in her presence.

"What do you want with your mother, Haren?" interrupted the aunt with the grating, high-pitched voice. "Go it with your father today!"

He stared at his mother in silence, drinking in her movements — the remembered warmth of the familiar contours of her busy hands — tracing them slowly, past the pair of thin gold bangles to her shoulders, her breasts half-concealed in her pale yellow cotton saree, to her face. She was looking at him looking at her, and their eyes locked, though just for a moment. She smiled. He knew immediately that they had just talked in public and, replenished, he went back to join the men on his father's lap.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, HIS MOTHER fed him his dinner along

with his cousins, as usual, but instead of falling asleep outside the kitchen door as he did every night, while waiting for his mother to finish and carry him to bed, he stayed up to watch his father have dinner. He was invited by his father to sit on his lap while he ate, but decided he would much rather stay near the door and watch his father's moustache move as he chewed on his food. The cousins tried to call him away to the sleeping quarters on the second floor, but he managed to sit at the kitchen door all through the men's dinner. Then, as they trooped past him — one by one — some to wash their hands on the corner of the back stoop, some to the front room to talk some more, he turned his head to search for his mother amidst the women in the kitchen, and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke, she wasn't by his side and it was still pitch dark. He sat up and peered into the darkness . . . the usual deep-breathing of the cousins stretched out in a row on the floor was familiar to him. Patiently, he waited for his mother to return. . . When he heard nothing for a long time, he decided to go and look for her. Slowly, he crawled towards the foot of the mattress and touched the wooden floor with his hand. Then, he turned right, past the rows of sleeping bodies, towards the stairs leading down. When he reached the first step, he got to his feet and began his descent, one step at a time, as was his habit. But in the dark, the rounded edges of the worn wooden stairs were smoother than he remembered, and he slid all the way down, suddenly and swiftly, and found himself deposited, in a split-second, in a painful heap at the bottom.

HIS HOWLS OF BEWILDERMENT and pain roused the entire household. Lights came on, adults rushed up and down both the front and back-stairs from their respective rooms in search of the cause of the commotion, other children were heard crying in the back rooms, he was swiftly engulfed in his mother's arms. She sat down on the floor and held him close, rocking him gently to and fro, one hand stroking the back of his head. She was cooing in his ear.

"What happened?" they asked.

"Haren fell down the stairs," someone answered.

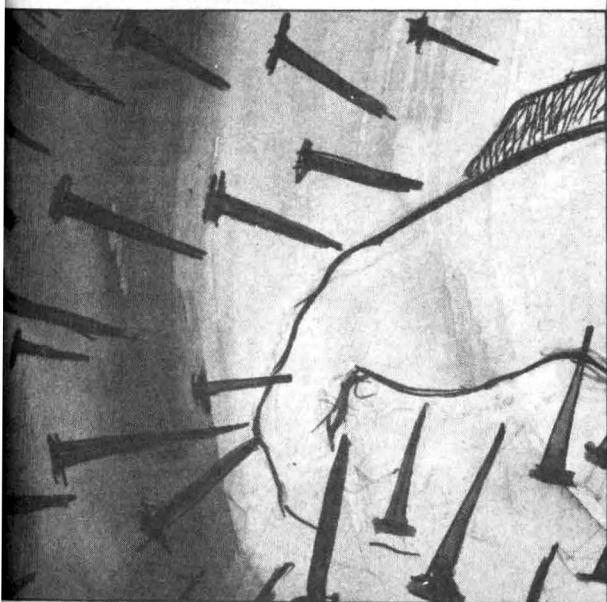
"Is he hurt? See if he's broken anything."

"No, he's alright," his father said as he ran his hands up and down the boy's body, gently pressing here and there. "Bruised a bit, perhaps. . . I think he was half-way down when he slipped."

"Where was he going in the middle of the night? He hasn't sleep-walked before," someone commented.

"He may have been looking for me," his mother answered. "He's not used to sleeping alone." She stood up with him cradled in her arms, slowly walked to the back of the house and up the back-stairs to the third floor. Downstairs, the others drifted back to their beds and lights began to go off.

He was still hiccuping tearfully, clinging to his mother



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in a fierce hold. She got into bed, laying him down by her side gently. "It's alright now. You're with me. Go to sleep. I'm here by your side. Sleep, baby, sleep." And she rocked him in her arms till he finally floated away into a dream.

* * *

HE AWOKE SUDDENLY. The darkness around him was inhabited by strange presences. They were swirling around him, rustling, groaning, igniting a heavy odour. *He* was lying on the floor! He waited a while to get his bearings. *This* was not where they slept every night; the communal breathing of the cousins was replaced by an irregular gurgle churning through the room, coming to rest on the thick mattress to his right. Instinctively he sought his mother, once again missing from his side. He needed to be rescued by her. He reached out, slowly, towards the mattress. Even though the monsters seemed to have descended exactly on that spot; he reached for the familiar haven of her cushioned warmth. He would be safe there. He felt for her softness, and finding it, crawled into a churning vortex.

She was moving and heaving in the dark. He thrust himself further. Suddenly they descended on him; something like a heavy bolster hit his upper body and squished it against his mother's chest. He grabbed at her, slipped, grabbed again and clung to her with all his might.

Her arm wrapped around him, and mother and son rocked together in the violent storm; fear piercing the pores of his body like a million minute needles, a thousand screams drying up in his throat. The malevolent presences raged around him, attacking his mother, pinning her body down with brutal force, breathing at her like one enormous machine. She flailed and she moaned and Haren screamed in huge mouthfuls of soundless terror.

Finally, it came to an end.

Slowly, the room emptied itself of the presences, leaving behind his father panting on the mattress next to them. She turned over and slipped Haren to one side. Gathering the end of her saree she wiped him where he had wet himself. Then she cradled him in the hollow of her body, rocking him gently back and forth until he stopped quivering.

HE LAY AWAKE AWHILE, waiting for his mother's warmth to shake off the fear-needles from his pores. Slowly, they fell, one by one. But they left behind little stains; for each of the million needles that had ruptured his body that night in a fearsome pain, there were a million little stains on his psyche that he would never be able to wash off for the rest of his life. That storm that night *did* pass, but it fissured his childhood with a nameless dread. He would never sink into the blissful nothingness of deep sleep again, he was condemned to float restlessly on the surface of night, each night, every night, until death would save him with a finality, seventy-two years later.

He could have forgotten that night's typhoon, you see, but it kept coming back. Each night, he was put to sleep



on the second-floor room with the others, and each night he navigated his way to his mother's side to endure the storms with her. Each morning, in the early hours of dawn, he would awaken with a palpitating heart, waiting for the turbulence to strike again, as it did, with terrifying predictability. Only thereafter would his mother be free to start her day.

And then he listened attentively for the faraway clanking of the metal pails as she bathed, anxious for her to finish so he could recover the lost rhythm of his days.

The fragrance of the incense and the flowers still smelled around him each morning as he sat outside the puja room, as in the days before his father came. The cawing of the crows still mingled with the tinkling of the puja bell before, and that bite of ultra-sweet *prasad* was still delicious. He still loved the cool, clean smell of his mother's body after her morning bath and the way it became imbued with a muted fragrance after her *puja*. He still clung to her possessively when she carried him through the house, and he still tried to follow her as she performed her chores.

And yet, the fine texture of his days was affected by the upheaval of his nights. He began to grow increasingly irritable and cranky; he cried without cause, he curtailed his talks with his mother... He seemed to need her more than before. Now that she was his less than before. He also became suspicious of strangers, in whose fraternity he now placed his father, knowing instinctively that his father had brought the storms with him. And he waited for this violent stranger to depart so that he could reclaim his mother.

* * *

ONE DAY, shortly after the monsoons broke, when the house was permeated with the delicious smell of drenched earth, and the huge mango trees outside swayed drunkenly in the torrential rains, his father returned to Bombay. Haren did not ask to be taken to the chhoo-chhoo station. Instead, he watched silently as his father boarded the *tonga* and rode away. Then he went to the kitchen to eat something.

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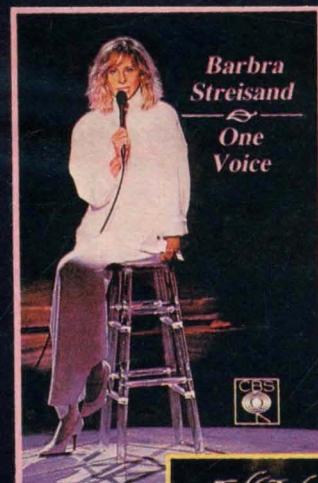
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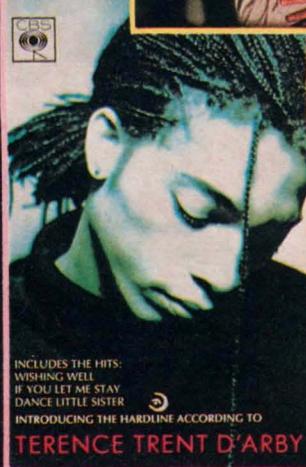
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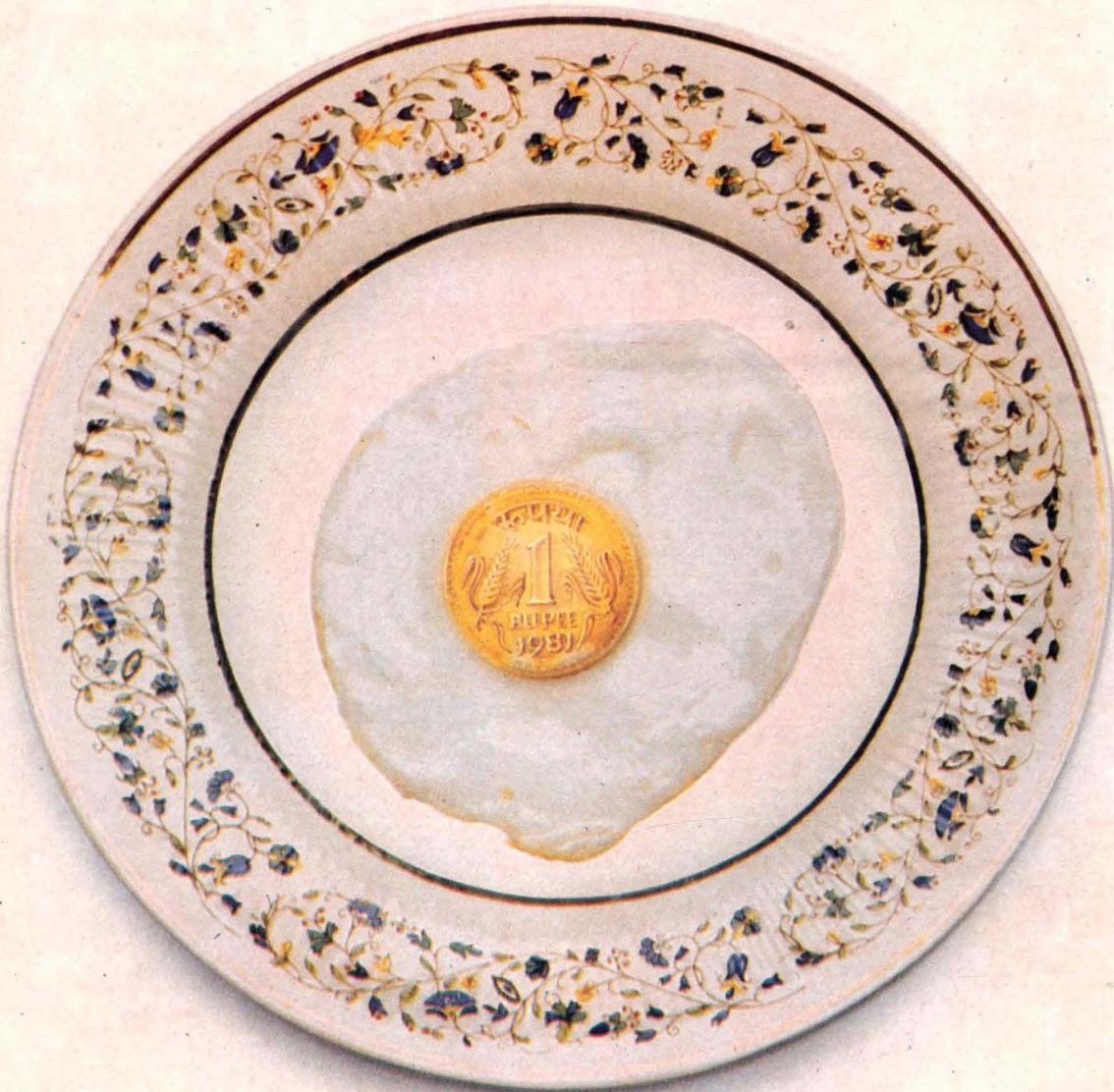
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