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August 1999



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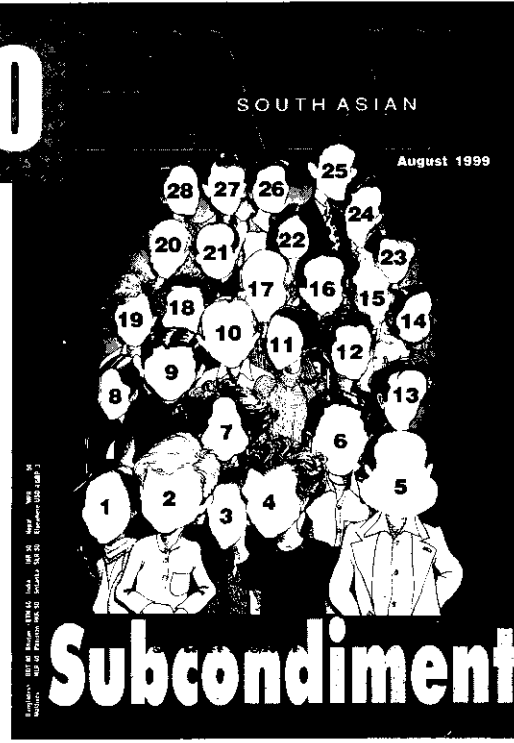
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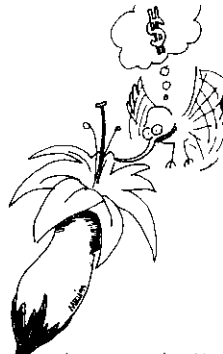


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literary south asia

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Abominably yours



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Biological
determinism
and
corruption

HIMAL

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JS days

Ah, JS! Ah, that poster of Karen Lunel in a bikini that I could have killed for (the poster, not the bikini). The one that made me write to everyone I knew everywhere in the country, pleading: buy me this issue of JS, I need more copies, and no, it's not because of the Karen Lunel poster, I want to read an article in it. Right. What article?

And that's the question I asked every week with nose buried in JS: just how did all these JS dudes get these strange and yet almost insufferably cool names? I mean: Jug? Doig? Dubby? So many more? And just who were Papiya and Tuktuk Ghosh and where did they get those names? Does anyone know? Did they exist? Do they exist?

And the memory, keen even today, of reading that goodbye note in the last issue. Was this some fantastic joke? I scoured the magazine stands for the next several weeks, convinced it was. JS could not die like that, it would show up before long with some typically witty, easygoing explanation. But soon I had to face it. It was no joke. The magazine had vanished. It took me years to realise that it had vanished at the same time, more or less, that many other things vanish in your teens. There was some cosmic significance there, I thought for a minute. But dropped the thought quickly. I knew JS, my JS, would have none of it.

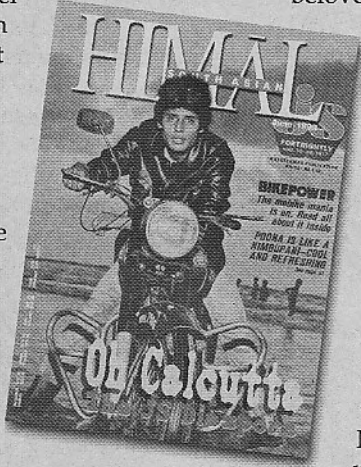
And I have JS to thank for one of the high points of my career as a teenager. Read it and weep. I put an ad in the magazine saying I wanted to learn hypnotism and ventriloquism by mail. I got flooded with responses, including one from a Salim Durrani, no, not the cricket hero. A good friend, also a JS freak, would call every day to

sneer at my attempts to pick up these skills through the post. So, I decided to teach him a lesson. The next time he came over, I stationed my brother and sister up the stairs and, catching him at the front door, said: "OK, I've learned ventriloquism! I can make you think a cow is mooing upstairs." On cue, my beloved sibs let loose a

flurry of moos. The mixture of awe, respect and envy on his face is a memory I will take to my cremation ground.

Thank you, sibs. Thank you, JS. Thank you Himal, for jogging the memories. Now if you can dig up that Karen Lunel poster...

Dilip D'Souza.
Bombay



- Being another of those "oldest teenagers", the cover story ("Oh Calcutta: The JS diaspora", Himal, June) refreshed memories of the bygone halcyon years. If the JS story were a part of the Desmond

Doig saga, I have a few yarns of my own.

"I'm looking for a Rock'n'Roll group called The Hillians. They are from Darjeeling. Do you know them?"

That was Dilip Bose. Dilip-da was the Reporter Man of *The Statesman* in Darjeeling. He was asking the hangers-on at The Orient Restaurant—our mid-town hangout in Darjeeling town. It was in the late 1960s.

I introduced myself as the Band Leader of The Hillians. "Yes, Dilip-da, what can I do for you?"

"Do you know Desmond Doig?"

"Yes. Of course, I do. I mean, we've met a few times. But why?"

"You know him? Do you really know him?" He was uncertain, but impressed. It was difficult for him to accept that the internationally known Desmond Doig also knew a hillbilly and his crummy musicians in a distant and remote corner like Darjeeling.

Again I replied in the affirmative. Then he clarified, now convinced: "Look here. I've received a telegram from him." He showed me the scrap of paper. It said: "Interview a group called The Hillians for *Junior Statesman*. Send their photographs also. Desmond



Doig."

"Well, I'm the man, alright, Dilip-da." I puffed up my chest.

I had met Desmond Doig sometime in March 1964. In Gangtok, Sikkim. Several international luminaries had gathered there to grace the coronation rituals and festivities of the Chhogyal and Gyalmo of Sikkim. We, The Hillians, were to attend a distant cousin's birthday party and maybe sing a few songs. There were only three of us, and one guitar.

Then something happened. There arrived three impeccable gold-threaded badges of royal invitation. Courtesy Desmond Doig. But the real source of the badges was the queen, Gyalmo Hope Cook herself. It was an invitation for a command performance at the royal gala night of the coronation.

We went—in shiny black

leather jackets (almost exactly like the bike rider on the *JS/Himal cover!*), our black trousers tapered, Beatles style, our long hair in Rolling Stones cascades, our black ties knotted reverse, the wider length tucked and hidden into our long dog-collared white shirts, Elvis Presley-like in *G.I. Blues*.

There was a band from Calcutta's Moulin Rouge. I borrowed an electric guitar from them. We sang four songs, including the rage of the month—The Beatles' *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. Even the Chogyal and the Gyalmo gyrated in the latest Twist dance—the original Chubby Checker way. We received a loud ovation and that was that.

By the time *Time* magazine (4 April, 1964) described us as the "Sikkimese Beatles" to whose "Himalayan version of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*" the Chogyal and

Gyalmo did the Twist, we were back in Darjeeling. After the Sikkim sojourn, I got to meet Doig only twice, in Kathmandu. The series of interviews with Dilip Bose resulted in a *JS* story on The Hillians.

Why am I writing all this? Well, these words are testimony to Doig's generosity, his knack for discovering talents and qualifications in young and unknown people, and then projecting and promoting them to the outer world. What he did to us, through the single action of

having us invited to the royal gala, opened so many doors for us. Whether we took advantage of these opportunities is quite another matter.

Were Calcutta and *JS* mutually representative of each other, as the Himal cover stories indicate? I do not think so, especially if *JS* were portrayed as an *Angrezi* mouth-piece of Western civilisation. To us from the remote corner of Darjeeling, Calcutta was Modern, not Western. To us, the English and the Anglos were a passing phase even in the 1960s. Calcutta was more permanent or long lasting because of the Armenians (Fair Lawn Hotel at Sudder Street) and the Chinese (food of the Overseas Chinese Restaurant at Wellesley Street, laundries and dry cleaners, shoes at Bentinck Street). When these tribes began dying out and departing, Calcutta became the spawning ground of such mutually or diametrically opposing elements as Marwari mercantilism and Marxist manifestoes.

In such an inhospitable climate, *JS*, too, received the last nail on its coffin. It was not merely due to some new and strange idiosyncrasy or bad management at The Statesman House. It was something else. Calcutta and West Bengal were somewhat shell-shocked by their own self-imposed restrictions that were actually an all-India phenomenon even then (Bal Thackeray is mentioned somewhere in one of the *JS* cover stories). Too many battles with itself had fatigued Calcutta. In the process of inventing new post-colonial identities, too many new and alarming idiots were created by Calcutta's and Bengal's neologisms and idioms. Any attempt to retain the faded British 'air' in a brave new world would indeed come to its failed end. *JS* had no chance to survive in India, our souls too were endangered in India. Both had to be transferred, transplanted, relocated.

Peter J. Karthak
Lalitpur, Nepal



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As sure as taking it there yourself



Amidst all the chaos of political violence, Sri Lanka is engaged in fashioning a workable system of regional self-government which will interest the other South Asians.

by Neelan Tiruchelvam

Neelan Tiruchelvam Death of a Friend

Neelan Tiruchelvam, lawyer, intellectual, Member of Parliament, and friend was murdered by a suicide bomber just after 9.00 am on 29 July in Colombo's Kynsey Terrace not too far away from his home and office. His death marked yet another senseless episode in the unfolding tragedy in Sri Lanka that no longer can simply be defined as an inter-ethnic conflict between the Sinhalas and the Tamils. It has become a power play between the armed forces of the most recent of the visionless post-independent regimes and the fascist suicidal nationalism of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

Unlike many individuals who were lost and exasperated in the midst of this chaos, Neelan Tiruchelvam brought much needed hope and vision to the country's political sphere. In a way, that was the result of his academic background combined with the sheer weight of his convincing personality. Neelan Tiruchelvam was also a reluctant politician and certainly an odd man out in the midst of today's violent politics in Sri Lanka. He was in politics because he thought that he could bring some sense and direction into that field of activity which had lost both sense and direction.

Being a man of peace, he never got used to and constantly felt uncomfortable with the security arrangements that were around him. Ironically however, on numerous occasions many Sinhala nationalists called him an LTTE sympathiser and branded the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo which he headed, an LTTE front. It is then much more than a tragedy when he had to pay with his own life to prove such individuals wrong.

In the long run, I wish that he had used his training at Harvard and his vast experience to remain in intellectual life and legal practice, keeping a reasonable distance from a politics that had lost all purpose. If so, in the midst of all this chaos, I would still have had a friend, even though as a country we may still be headed for self-destruction.

—Sasanka Perera

Revolution to Devolution

dev.o.lu.tion (dè-və-lōo'shən) n.
1. A passing down through successive stages. 2. The passing to a successor of anything, such as proper-

tempt to redress the imbalance in the relationship among different ethnic groups through devolution of power to the regions. Among other things, the proposals

Centre and Province
One of the limitations of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, which provided the basis for the Provincial Council scheme introduced in 1988, was that while it called for a re-definition of the Sri Lankan polity, the Accord did not bring about a change in the unitary character of the Sri Lankan state. It did declare that Sri Lanka was a multiethnic, multi-racial plural society consisting of

HIMAL April 1996

SRI LANKA

AFTER NEELAN

The assassination came barely a week after the Colombo government had announced its intention of placing its constitutional package on which its peace hopes rest before Parliament in August. It has widely been acknowledged that Neelan Tiruchelvam provided most of the input into this package from the Tamil side. Although even his own party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), did not directly accuse the Tigers of being responsible for the brazen attack, it was obvious to everyone that only the Tigers had a motive for the killing and, for that matter, had the capacity to execute it with the split-second precision that was clearly evident.

Dr Tiruchelvam was a gifted lawyer, a President's Counsel in Sri Lanka, an intellectual, academic and human rights activist with ready access to the major players in the Lankan polity. Though not an elected Member of Parli-

ment, he was nominated to the legislature by the TULF in preference to the son of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, the idolised founding father of the Federal Party, the predecessor of TULF. Equipped with a razor-sharp mind and finely-honed debating skills, he was the natural choice for negotiations between the Tamil moderates and the Sinhalese majority belonging to both the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which dominates the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the main opposition United National Party (UNP).

His killing has added to the conviction of many Sri Lankans who believe that the only way in which the troubled island can find peace, is by militarily subduing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and/or liquidating its megalomaniac leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. As a leading Colombo newspaper put it, "This incident is one more illustration of the futility of trying to resolve this country's internal conflict with constitutional reforms before the principal threat to constitutional government in this country, namely the LTTE, is neutralised."

The recent events in Northern Ireland have amply demonstrated that peace could be ultimately achieved not by the willingness of reasonable people on both sides of the divide to talk, but on the willingness of the militants (or "terrorists", as President Chandrika Kumaratunga no longer hesitates to brand the Tigers) to lay down their arms. There is no shortage of eminent people urging Kumaratunga to talk to the Tigers. They come from the political, academic, religious and business spheres and their calls have been becoming increasingly strident in recent months. In fact, one group used a condolence message issued in connection with Tiruchelvam's death to lament Colombo's failure "to engage constructively with the LTTE".

Chandrika Kumaratunga is clear that she will talk to the LTTE, but only if the Tigers, who regard themselves as the sole representatives of the Tamil people, recognise the rights of others to participate in the political process, that they will declare their intention of laying down arms and that the talks be limited by a time frame. Kumaratunga has rejected the Tiger demand for third party mediation although she does not object to a facilitator. Like the UNP before her, she too has been cheated by the LTTE using peace negotiations as a means of buying time to regroup and re-arm. She has vowed: "Never again."

Some observers believe that Tiruchelvam's assassination was part of an LTTE strategy to coerce other Tamil parties to refrain from backing the constitutional package that will soon be presented to Parliament. Though well-entrenched in the presidency, Kumaratunga survives in Parliament with the help of several Tamil parties including the TULF, of which Tiruchelvam was vice-president. Though her majority in the legislature is a technical one, she has never felt threatened because of the Tamil support. Tigers have not just targeted much of the Sinhala leadership in the country, but several Tamil leaders who do not toe their line have also been eliminated. The TULF particularly, has lost several of its leaders to the LTTE, but it stops short of branding the Tigers as brutal fascist terrorists. The days when they affectionately referred to them as "the boys", however, are long gone.

Kumaratunga rightly said that the country had lost Tiruchelvam at a decisive stage of Sri Lanka's political life when his services would have been most needed. "The aim of the terrorists who seek to decimate such eminent and democratic intellectuals of rare quality is to establish the terrorist leadership of the LTTE as the

only valid leaders of the Tamil people," she declared. Few will disagree with that, especially hardline militarists among the Sinhalese who say there is no alternative to crushing the LTTE if peace is to be won.

Meanwhile, the president has to live with the reality that the government's constitutional package has not been endorsed by the country's biggest political party, the UNP. Without its support, there can be no two thirds majority as required by the constitution to push it through Parliament. A number of other political parties, including the emerging Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), also opposes it and so does the vast majority of the influential Buddhist clergy. The LTTE, too, is opposed to it and as Sirisena Cooray, late President R. Premadasa's chief lieutenant has it, "With the combination of these major flaws it should not and cannot be implemented. It is unviable".

Sri Lanka's search for peace has to begin again at the beginning.

—Manik de Silva ▲

PAKISTAN

DANGER OF DESPOTISM

The biggest threat in recent times to peace and security in the South Asian region was averted by Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's unexpected air dash across the Atlantic to make Uncle Sam a promise: that he would ask the militants fighting the Indian army from Pakistan's side of line of control (LoC) to withdraw. With that promise ended the over two months of fierce fighting at the LoC, fighting that had taken a heavy toll on lives and finances, and which had threatened to spill over onto other fronts, with possibly the worst scenario of all, an all-out nuclear war.

For some, the whole scenario had been like watching a game of 'chicken' being played by two horned billy goats facing each other head-on atop a narrow mountain path, gnashing their teeth and pawing the earth with their hooves before beginning to gallop towards each other. A collision would mean certain disaster as they would both be knocked off the mountain path and be dashed to pieces in the ravine below. Which goat then would stop first? In this case, it was Pakistan. But it is chilling to think how close both came to hurtling down that ravine.

The sense of relief that was widely felt by what some perceived as a demeaning step for

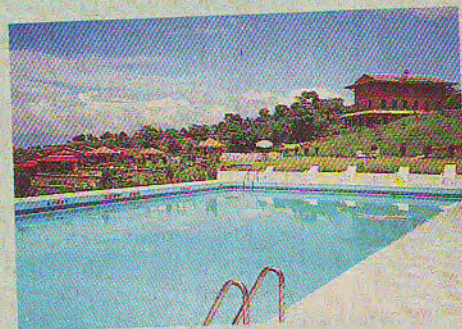


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Sharif to have taken, was, however, tempered by indignation at why such a crisis had been allowed to develop in the first place. There has also been a great deal of resentment at Sharif's unilateral style of governance.

Since the 'Kargil Agreement' as it has been dubbed, the extreme Right has been calling for Sharif's head, vowing that the jihad will continue, regardless of Pakistan's 'deal' with the USA, which they refuse to accept. They maintain that since Sharif was not in charge of the operation in the first place, he had no right to make any commitments on behalf of the mujahideen who were out there in the chilly mountain heights of Kargil, staking their lives for a righteous cause, facing the entire wrath of the Indian military.

Processions and demonstrations are being organised to gather support against the government. Sharif, however, appears calm. He knows that the combined parliamentary strength of all these parties is less than the majority his Pakistan Muslim League enjoys. Furthermore, since he came to power in Feb '97, he has managed to successfully de-fang all major sources of threat to his government.

But the allegation that the country is being run by a coterie of three or four men does hold water. Even the Cabinet is not taken into confidence about decisions and policy matters until after the event. Sharif is under fire for his refusal to take Parliament into confidence before dashing off to Washington DC, and not briefing it until several days after his return. The Fourteenth Amendment that Sharif pushed through the House last year prevents parliamentarians from opposing their party's stated policy — an effective gag to any dissent. But now, for the first time, Sharif's own party members are speaking out, albeit in muffled tones, against this gag, and asking for a greater share in the decision-making process. This of course is one of the major gripes of the opposition too.

The state-run radio and television trots out the government line, even if this means zigging and then suddenly zagging, oblivious to the contradictions. Meanwhile, the independent press which questions Sharif's policies and decisions, continues to be under tremendous pressure, its owners, editors and reporters routinely bullied with tax cases,

criminal charges, threats and intimidation.

If Sharif is to retain his power base, all this ought to change. Although the opposition against him is as yet too weak and scattered to pose any real threat, the momentum could grow if the perception that this so-called democratic government is actually a despotic one gains ground. Sharif would do well to remember the lessons of the past, and recall the events that years ago led to the downfall of Z.A. Bhutto, the first popularly elected prime minister of Pakistan and the only one so far to have completed a term in office.

Sharif's mandate has been compared with that of Z.A. Bhutto, who came to power following the 1973 general elections. The buzz in Islamabad is that Sharif, who has already passed his half-term mark in a five-year tenure, may call for early elections by the end of next year. If he does so, a parallel will be drawn with Bhutto, who called for elections in 1977, a year earlier than they were originally scheduled. But Bhutto could not resist rigging those elections, even though he would probably have won anyway. At the rate Sharif's popularity is dropping, he may be sorely tempted to go for some unethical practice during the elections. However, other than the charge of rigging, it was Bhutto's increasing despotism and his pandering to the religious right that paved the way for a 12-year-long military dictatorship. The repercussions of that regime are felt even today, nationally as well as regionally. No one, least of all Pakistan's suffering masses, would want to relive that experience.

—Beena Sarwar ▲



Indo-Anglian Writing

Nandi Bhatia

Earlier this year two new novels—one by Salman Rushdie and the other by Vikram Seth—were launched with much fanfare. Nothing significant in that since new books by luminaries are launched all the time. What was notable was the fact that although both writers are Indians, it did not evoke the surprise that it might have earlier.

Even a couple of decades ago it would have been difficult for those born with a 'foreign' tongue to find their work accepted as part of the canon of literature written in English. But now, Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Seth's *An Equal Music* are matter-of-factly taken as two more additions to the vast corpus of an area of literature now identified as "Indian Writing in English", which, having gained recognition in the West, has become the subject of numerous Web-sites and English department courses, and continues to generate interest both at home and abroad.

The corpus of Indian writing in English has reached such monumental proportions over the last two decades that it is nearly impossible to recount the names and works of all writers. It was Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) that took Indian writing to new heights of recognition, but the easy acceptance it received followed those who had been there earlier.

The world of Indo-Anglian writing has continued to thrive since Rushdie's publication of the Booker Prize-winning *Midnight's Children* in 1981, followed by *The Satanic Verses*, which, due to the *fatwa*, in a twisted way immortalised him in the literary world. Some of the titles that stand out are Amitava Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story*, Vikram Seth's *Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*, Allan Sealy's *Totter-Nama*, and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*.

The novels of Anita Desai, Chitra Devakurni, Anita Rau Badami, Nayantara Sahgal and a host of others provide a

significant forum for voicing the personal and political concerns of women. While some are overtly political like Sahgal's *Rich like Us* (dealing with Indira Gandhi's Emergency) and *Plans for Departure* (which links Western suffragette activism with Indian nationalism at the turn of the century), others self-consciously engage in the task of subverting social structures that attempt to subordinate women in the name of tradition.

Masks of Conquest

Contemporary Indian writing acquires special significance in a world increasingly identified as a "global village" in which, as cultural theorist Arjun Appadarai puts it, movements of "people, technologies, capital, and cultures" constantly establish new transnational links. Even as the rhetoric of globalism debunks nationalist mythologies everywhere, the complex heterogeneity and the multi-locational contexts of this growing body of literature are seen to both cross and subvert the borders erected by narratives of nationalism.

But though globalisation may have fostered its dissemination and impact, the explosion of Indian writing is the result of a number of factors. Chief among these is the growth of an English-speaking post-Independence generation in India. As Gauri Vishwanathan has shown in *Masks of Conquest*, though the English language was introduced to function as a linguistic tool of sociopolitical control in the service of the British Empire, it did not disappear with the withdrawal of the British in 1947. Instead, the postcolonial period has seen an unparalleled rise in the number of people who identify English as the most effective language of communication.

Expatriate writers such as Mistry and Rushdie may enjoy a large readership in the West, but many of their compatriots identify their audience in India. And they have found outlets through Indian publishing houses that have



Arundhati Roy

emerged since the 1980s: Penguin India, HarperCollins, Ravi Dayal, India Ink and Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house.

Besides the impetus provided by the publishing industry and a readership of an expanding English-speaking middle-class, the reception of Indian writing in English as an area of importance is related to the rise of postcolonial studies in the West over the last two decades. As a field that interrogates the relationship between imperialism and culture, postcolonial studies takes literary texts from previously colonised constituencies as cultural artefacts that reveal the complex colonial interrelations and histories and their sociopolitical, ideological, economic and cultural implications in the present.

Postcolonial studies thus created new readers in universities where students discuss Indian writing in English with a degree of comfort that was absent earlier. In the past, knowledge of Indian writing in English would have remained limited to names such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore and Nirad C. Chaudhari. And the inclusion of that generation of writers in English departments often occurred under the rubric of "Commonwealth Literature", with the intent of analysing the commonalities with the language and literature of Britain rather than identifying differences and points of departure.

All the same, as a corpus of literary writing that has found acceptance in the West, there is often the danger of assuming that the new Indo-Anglian writings represent an "Indian" sensibility. Often the products of multiple experiences facilitated by travel across geographical borders and cultures, the works of many of these authors reflect their "hybrid" contexts. Mediated by the experiences of migration and diasporic locations, their works reveal complex relationships between their protagonists and the political and cultural institutions of dominant urban communities. Thus, one often finds in Rushdie's novels the intersections of Bombay and Britain.

The Asian-American writer Meena Alexander brings in her own hybrid experience of living in and out of India ever since she was a child, as does Bharati Mukherjee who, because of her own location in the West and the subject matter of her fiction, prefers to be identified as an American writer. The locales

of Vikram Seth's writings veer from China to San Francisco to India to Vienna.

While the 'borderless' sensibility has accorded some writers (including those living in India who frequently gravitate to the West) global recognition, it also becomes necessary to be attentive to differences of class and experience. For even as their writings provide several windows to the social, political, personal and feminist concerns, such concerns may be limited to a certain class to which the writers themselves belong. As a language that was introduced by the British to produce an elite class of Indians who would serve as a buffer between the rulers and the rest of the governed, English in India continues to be the domain of the upper and middle classes. Some of the most prominent names for instance – Amitava Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor and Allan Sealy – are products of the prestigious St Stephen's College, Delhi. Another Stephenite is Vikram Seth who received his early education from the famous Doon School.

The important women writers, among them Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai, often bring into their work upper class settings and politics. In view of the class association of the authors, Arundhati Roy's identification by some in the West as the 'subaltern' Indian woman, therefore, may at best be simplistic and even misleading. Similarly, as Henry Schwarz, professor of English at Georgetown University, says, it is problematic to identify writers like Rushdie "as if *they* represented the long histories of their colonised societies". All this is not to minimise the importance of the new writings since there is no doubt that most do exercise tremendous literary and cultural importance as artefacts of the postcolonial condition and its intersection with issues of race, class, and gender.

Harvest

There are other problems that are overlooked in the euphoric celebrations that have accompanied Indian writing in English and its dominance in the contemporary Indian literary scene. Such as the gap that Indian writing in English, having become synonymous with the novel, imposes at the level of genre. Poetry continues to receive some recognition, as in the case of Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Aga Shahid Ali, but dramatic

Rohinton Mistry



writing for the most part remains to be recognised.

Writers such as Manjula Padmanabhan, whose fascinating play *Harvest* about the exploitation of poor nations by the rich through the sale of body parts still remain comparatively unknown in the West. Likewise, Mahesh Dattani writes and produces exciting drama on colonialism, gender and religion in postcolonial India, as does the dramatist Cyrus Mistry (Rohinton's brother), but they rarely receive the attention that their works warrant. Also barely recognised are those playwrights writing from within the West, such as the England-based Harwant Singh Bains, author of several powerful plays.

Even more problematic amidst the adulation of Indian writing in English is that the 'vernacular literatures' continue to remain marginalised. Such marginality can be ascribed to the global dominance of the English language, the paucity of works available in translation, and the lack of adequate publishing outlets for those writing in local languages. The contributions of writers such as Mahadevi Verma, Qurratulain Hyder, Mahashweta Devi, Shivani, Mrinal Pande, Sahir Ludhianvi, Amrita Pritam and others can enjoy wider dissemination only if they are translated into English. A few among these, such as Bengali writer Mahashweta Devi, have gained some attention in the West primarily because of the efforts of Gayatri Spivak, professor of English at Columbia University, but most are relegated to obscurity.

If the capitalist concerns of marketing and publishing networks are to be blamed for the invisibility of other Indian voices in the West, to an extent so too are writers such as Rushdie. In his much-controversial comment in the special issue of *The New Yorker*, celebrating 50 years of Indian Independence, Rushdie wrote: "The prose writing — both fiction and nonfiction — created in this period by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 18 'recognised' languages of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages' during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, 'Indo-Anglian' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half of the century has been made in the language

the British left behind."

Notwithstanding Rushdie's claim about the energy of Indian writing in English, which certainly demands celebration, his insertion of Indo-Anglian literature within a comparative frame that denigrates the vernacular does a disservice to the latter. The antagonistic response that his comment has drawn from several corners is not entirely unwarranted. Of note is Harish Trivedi's acerbic retort in his article "*Bharatiye Angrezi Upanyas: Hindi ki Drishti Mein*" ("Indo-English Novel: From the Viewpoint of Hindi") written for *Hans*, a leading Hindi language and literature journal published from Delhi. Chastising Rushdie, Trivedi likens his statement to a *fatwa* and calls it the worst insult to the vernacular since Lord Macaulay's declaration in 1835 that even a single shelf of European literature is better than the entire literatures in Sanskrit and Arabic.

I will not go as far as comparing Rushdie to Macaulay, whose rhetoric about the superiority of English language and literature was motivated by the imperialist aim of educating the colonised subject. As succinctly specified by Macaulay, the introduction of English would serve "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". Far from being a Macaulayan interpreter, Rushdie has produced a self-consciously innovative style and language that combine popular idioms, vernacular phrases and cultural particularities at a critical postcolonial moment, which, as Vijay Mishra, professor of English at the University of Alberta, says, ruptures the self-evidentiary standards of canonical Standard English.

In Other Words

It is precisely such innovativeness — bringing the particularities of the local to the international English language — that makes Rushdie a remarkable inspiration for postcolonial writers such as Anita Desai. An accomplished writer herself, Desai acknowledges Rushdie as the springboard which put Indian literature in English on the global literary map, as does Gita Hariharan, recipient of the Commonwealth Prize for best first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*.

Problematic as Rushdie's claim is, what made it really unpalatable was the irony that



the success of contemporary Indian writing in English itself can, in large part, be attributed to the incorporation of the vernacular. It is precisely Rushdie's own interaction with the vernacular that gives, in part, his writing its unique ability to capture and comprehend snapshots of cultural and political realities in what he calls "CinemaScope and glorious Technicolour". Rushdie's comment in *The New Yorker* aside, his own writing and most of contemporary Indian writing itself functions as a reminder of—or, for that matter, the ignoring of—the significance of the vernaculars.

Rushdie's comment should not lead us to blame all Indo-Anglian writing for being responsible for obscuring the vernacular. As a matter of fact, most writers themselves have self-consciously highlighted the critical importance of the vernacular to a more in-depth understanding of the multilayered sociocultural aspects of India. For instance, Anita Desai's *In Custody*, regarded by some as her best novel, does not make the issue of the vernacular merely inci-

dental. Its subject matter carefully deals with the loss of Urdu under the ever-expanding influence of English in India as well as across the globe.

Desai's preoccupation with Urdu began in the earlier *Clear Light of Day*, in which she reveals anxieties about the status of Urdu poetry in the wake of the subcontinental partition. Similarly, Vishwapriya Iyengar's short story, "No Letter from Mother", published in the collection of short stories, *In Other Words*, examines the cultural and personal fracture caused by the dominance of English through a mother and daughter's inability to communicate because of the mother's lack of English.

Such self-reflexive crossings into the vernaculars in order to discover and recover their significance, then, not only produces a new range of meanings and their social, historical, and linguistic significance: it imparts a sociopolitical depth to literary works that provides us with yet another reason to celebrate the arrival of Indian writing in English. ▲

Bored NRI Meets Fawning Local

One of the brightest new stars in the American literary firmament is Jhumpa Lahiri, author of a recently published collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*. The US-born Lahiri has been marketed by her publisher, Houghton Mifflin, as another young South Asian writer, but the label, in her case, belies the content.

The characters and settings in Lahiri's best stories are American, and they resonate as richly textured domestic portraits of alienation and loss. She includes details about Indian food, clothes and cultural taboos, but uses them only where they are relevant to a reader's understanding of the characters. In "A Temporary Matter", for example, a young Indian-American couple struggle under the strain of losing a child and have nearly lost the ability to communicate with each other. One day, the husband uses his wife's Indian cookbook to make her a special meal of *rogan josh* during a power cut. But instead of conjuring the exotic magic of a mistress of spices, the

meal sets the stage for an excavation of emotional secrets.

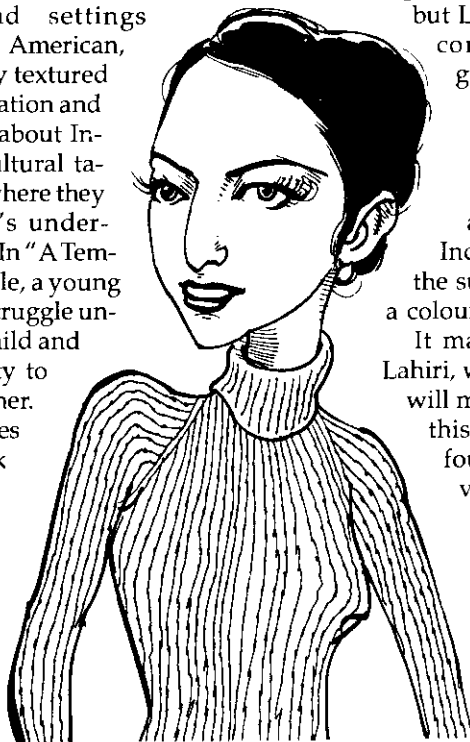
The title story, which won two major American short story prizes this year, captures the encounter between an Indian-American family and their tour guide on a trip to Konarak in Orissa. This scenario—crass, bored NRIs meeting fawning local—is usually played for laughs, but Lahiri uses it to expose the lonely core at the hearts of both the guide, a frustrated scholar, and the woman, a frustrated housewife.

But not all of the stories are so perceptive. "A Real Durwan", the story of a sweeper woman in a middle-class housing colony in India, fails to reach very far beneath the surface of a wise old woman with a colourful past.

It may be too early to tell whether Lahiri, who is working on her first novel, will make a permanent mark. But with this first collection, she has at least found a way for her clear, strong voice to be heard in the cacophony of American literary fiction, not to mention the cacophony of South Asian fiction. ▲

Jyoti Thottam

Jhumpa
Lahiri



Great Writer Who Was Greater

The ground beneath Salman Rushdie's feet is shifting. He emerged from his *fatwa*-induced state of siege last September, giving up his place as embattled champion of free expression in time to prepare for a mammoth publicity tour for his new book, released in April. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, in which Rushdie recasts the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice into the world of rock-and-roll, was supposed to be his claim to a piece of the vast American literary soil. It was supposed to be his chance to show the crowd of upstart South Asian writers what the master could do, and score a bestseller in the process.

Mirrorwork

But none of that has happened. Instead, Rushdie has ridden a brief wave of rave reviews that has not quite translated into blockbuster sales, leaving him now to occupy the uncomfortable position of a writer whose best work appears to be behind him. "He is a great writer, and earlier he was a greater writer," said Nina Mehta, a critic who reviewed *Mirrorwork*, Rushdie's selective anthology of Indian literature, for *Newsday* in New York.

With *Mirrorwork*, Rushdie effectively resigned from his position as ambassador from the imaginary homeland of South Asian literature. In the introduction to the book, excerpted in *The New Yorker* in 1997, he justified his decision to include only works written in English, with one exception, by arguing that South Asian literature in English was simply superior to any other South Asian language.

Having admitted on the same page that he reads only English, Rushdie unleashed a predictable torrent of criticism upon himself, and some of that ill-will has persisted. At a reading in Boston on his publicity tour for *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, one indignant student pressed him to justify his comments, but he stood his ground, blaming the lack of

good translations for the apparent poor quality of non-English South Asian literature. It is unclear, however, whether this controversy has affected the sales of the book, which has not quite lived up to expectations. Henry Holt, the American publisher, would not release exact sales figures, but spokeswoman Elizabeth Shreve said it has sold more than 100,000 copies, spending one week on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

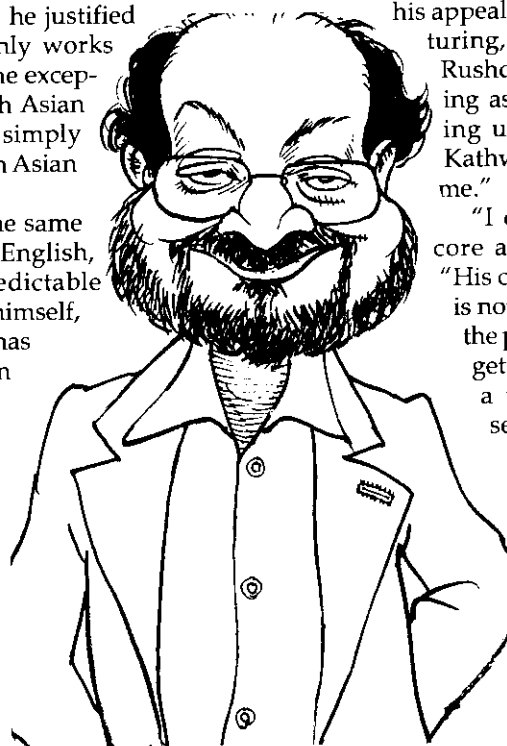
"It has sold more than any book [of his] since *The Satanic Verses*," Shreve said. But the massive publicity campaign, the glowing reviews, the interviews and prominent coverage in every major media outlet in the country, are usually followed by sales several times greater. Half of the book is set in the United States, and its dustjacket trumpets it as "a celebration of Americana", yet sales were stronger in the UK, where *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* spent four weeks on the bestseller list.

The arrogance of Rushdie's comments do not appear to have cost him readers among South Asians in New York. "I don't necessarily idolise him," said Saeed Rahman, who works for a non-profit organisation in New York City and bought the book last month. "He's really arrogant, but he's really smart, too. He's just a really smart, good writer."

Rafiq Kathwari, a journalist and poet who is translating Iqbal into English, said the vehemence of Rushdie's comments actually adds to

his appeal. "I like Rushdie's uneasy posturing, because that is what makes Rushdie palpable, scorching, burning as he searches for himself, taking us with him on the journey," Kathwari said. "He hasn't alienated me."

"I don't think he's alienated his core audience," said Nina Mehta. "His core audience, for all his books, is not Indian or South Asian." Even the publishers, usually quick to target books by non-white authors to a particular ethnic audience, seem to agree. Elizabeth Shreve said that Henry Holt has approached the marketing of Rushdie's book as it would the work of any other major writer of literary fiction. "He's an international figure



Salman
Rushdie

at this point," she said.

Rushdie's failure to hit a home run (not a sixer — this is an American story, after all) with *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* actually points to the deeper flaws within the story. He has failed to capture the American audience because he is not yet in a position to understand the American experience. Instead, he writes about the United States as a tourist would, perhaps taking inadvertent revenge on those Westerners who write about India guided by little more than a copy of *The Lonely Planet* guidebook and an unshakeable faith in their own cleverness.

With rare exceptions, Rushdie's observations about the United States are limited to lists of cultural references rather than real evocations of time and place. Instead of trying to describe the cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s, he invokes Duke Ellington, Elvis Presley and Simon and Garfunkel as if dropping these names is enough to conjure up the atmosphere that surrounded them. Rushdie forces Vina Apsara, the life force of the book, into the role of stand-in for the *zeitgeist* of any given era. In the 1960s, for example, "she wore the wisecracking, not remotely innocent, expression that was mandatory for the 'alternative' women of the period, especially singers who were politically involved". In the 1970s, she moves into more radical politics, and by the 1990s, Vina has embraced politics and the emotional exhibitionism of daytime talk shows.

In one part of New York City, Rushdie even finds a backwater to romanticise — "the thronged streets of Queens, its bazaars bustling with the polyglot traffic of the world". Even less successful is Rushdie's attempt to animate the spirit of rock music on the page. He is uncharacteristically tentative, asking at one point, "Why do we care about singers? Wherein lies the power of songs? Maybe it derives from the sheer strangeness of there being singing in the world."

But most disturbing is Rushdie's fantasy that it would be possible for someone like Vina Apsara, an exotic half-Greek, half-Indian Leftist with an insatiable sexual appetite, to become "America's sweetheart". This country, albeit of immigrants, is simply not as accepting of outsiders as Rushdie might like to fondly imagine.

The shortcomings of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* may, however, free Rushdie from the burden of his own reputation. Perhaps in his next book, he will forsake the technicolour mirages and give his readers more brilliant phrases and vividly wrought scenes, like the "art dekho" buildings of Rai Merchant's Bombay and the fearsome kites sparring with each other in an ominous sky.

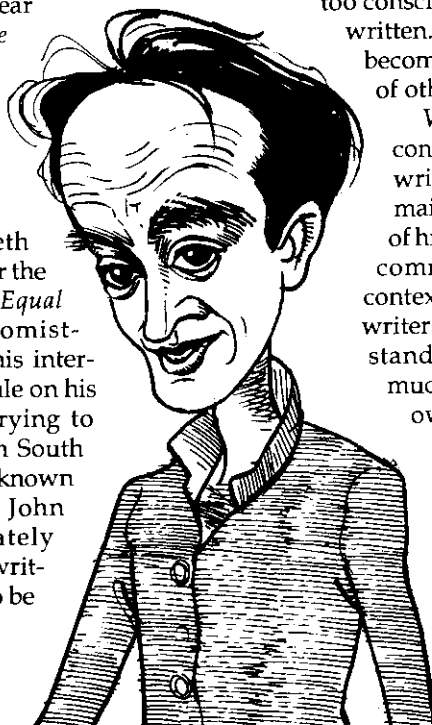
Once he finds his footing, where he chooses to stand — London, New York or Kalamazoo — will hardly matter.

Jyoti Thottam

Unequaled Music

Vikram Seth is surprised to hear that his bestseller, *A Suitable Boy*, is now part of the canon of postcolonial fiction taught in English graduate courses in the West. Especially as he rejects the idea of a 'canon' or a 'school' of South Asian writing.

I recently caught up with Seth during his North American tour for the release of his latest novel, *An Equal Music*. The 47-year-old economist-turned-novelist prefers to keep his interviews brief. With a packed schedule on his month-long tour, he is clearly trying to pace himself. "I don't read much South Asian fiction," explains Seth (he is known to enjoy detective novels and John Grisham). "In fact, I deliberately avoided reading it while I was writing *A Suitable Boy*. I didn't want to be



too conscious of what other writers had written. I didn't want my characters to become influenced by the characters of other writers."

When pressed, however, he confesses that his favourite Indian writer is R.K. Narayan. But Seth maintains that his work and that of his contemporaries have little in common other than geographic context. "The works of South Asian writers are very different and they stand on their own. There is not much consistency even within my own writing. And I set my books in different geographies deliberately. But I set them in places where I have lived: India, China, London, San Francisco. These are places where I've had the chance

Vikram Seth

to feel at home, and this allows me to write from the inside," he says.

What made an economics PhD student who comes from the Delhi elite suddenly become a writer? "I was at Stanford, analysing my data on economics from rural China. And one day while browsing in a bookstore in San Francisco, I came across a couple of translations of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—a novel in verse form. I was fascinated by how different and beautiful the two translations were. This inspired me to write my first novel, *The Golden Gate*, which uses the exact same stanzaic form, iambic tetrameter, as *Eugene Onegin*."

From Heaven Lake

Vikram Seth never did finish his doctoral dissertation. But his love for China found voice in *Three Chinese Poets*, the 8th-century verses of Tang dynasty poets like Wang Wei. He translated them from the Mandarin, a language he is fluent in. "Wang Wei's poems are very moving because they're about fundamental things: love, friendship, parting. I made a point of visiting the places where he and the other poets had lived."

Ironically, it is one of his China narratives which remains the most popular with Indian audiences. *From Heaven Lake* describes his journey through the minority regions of Xinjiang and Tibet in Western China and offers the unique perspective of an Indian-in-China during the Cold War era.

Unlike Salman Rushdie, who has developed a larger-than-life persona since the 1989 Iranian fatwa, Vikram Seth is a noticeably private person. Rushdie writes prolifically on everything from Kashmir and Indian and Pakistani politics to Thatcherism, but Seth is more frugal with his political commentary. Asked about the role of the writer in a region where freedom of speech does not always have full play, he says, "I'm not an overtly political writer because there is no point preaching to the converted. It's counter-productive to make overt statements like 'secularism is good', and so on. But a writer's political views are bound to come out in subtle ways. Mine come out in the obsessions of my characters."

Seth did, however, come out of his shell in 1992 by signing a statement in *The Times of India* condemning the destruction of Babri Masjid. "I signed it because I felt that far from being a triumph, it was a disgrace to

Hinduism. And it is the duty of any citizen to make such a statement," he explains. With similar conviction and urgency, he produced a poem for the victims of Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Seth positively bristles when asked about Rushdie's comment in *The New Yorker* that India's best writing is in English. "That doesn't pass muster with me. Given the rich tradition from the Vedas to Urdu poetry, how could he have said that? English writing is an important strand in all of that history, but to call it the greatest tradition is too presumptuous."

He is also dismissive of the emphasis on colonialism, marginality and the migrant sensibility that dominate classroom analyses of Indian writing. "I don't feel this burden of the colonial past," he maintains. "And while I suppose when one is living in a foreign land one is always partly absorbed in the culture and partly out of it, I don't want to make much of this migrant sensibility."

Suitable fellow

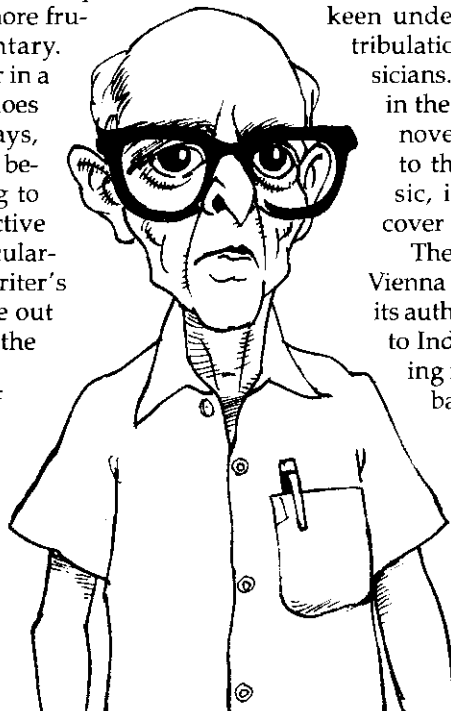
An Equal Music revolves around the love between two classical musicians. Seth's own love affair with classical music began when he practised the khayaal tradition of Indian classical singing under a renowned *ustad*. Economics and later writing compelled him to put his music on hold, but he soon found a new love. "When I was living in London and writing *A Suitable Boy* I would relax in the evenings by playing my *tanpura*. A friend of mine, the Austrian ambassador, suggested I listen to some Western classical musicians like Schubert."

He had no formal training in the Western classical tradition, but Seth immersed himself in London's music scene and gained a keen understanding of the trials and tribulations faced by struggling musicians. This experience helped him in the writing of *An Equal Music*, a novel that is equally enlightening to the neophyte of classical music, inspiring the reader to discover the *gamba* sonatas of Bach.

The book is set in London and Vienna and Venice, a clear sign that its author refuses to be pinned down to India alone. But when the touring is done, Vikram Seth does go back to his home in New Delhi.

And he is part of something, perhaps not a 'genre' or a 'canon', that is breathing new life into English fiction. ▲

Tarik Ali Khan



Book Boom

Urvashi Butalia

In the month of May in Delhi, when temperatures routinely touch a high of 45 degrees Celsius, more than 600 people turned up to listen to Vikram Seth read from his new work, *An Equal Music*. The book launch, hosted by his publisher, Penguin India, made to all the major newspapers (and even some of the television networks). Avook Sarkar, head of Penguin's India part, the Ananda Bazaar Patrika, flew down from Calcutta to welcome the author to the reading.

The Everest Hotel

In July, India Ink, the most recent entrant on the Indian (English) publishing scene, and best known as Arundhati Roy's publisher, launched a (yes!) reprint of Allan Sealy's book *The Trotter-Nama* (earlier published by Penguin India). The launch—also with a reading—took place at a five star hotel and was followed by the mandatory cocktails. Attendance was once again in the hundreds. And publishers are hoping that the book, in its new and attractive cover, will once again be reviewed in newspapers and magazines. Good sales are expected, and the strategy is to catch the "new reader", more so in the wake of the success of Sealy's *The Everest Hotel*.

The Everest Hotel was the first recipient of the new, and prestigious, Crossword Literary Award for fiction written in English. And certainly, the award boosted sales. But the question remains: is there a new reader around? Has the book buying public actually increased? Are people buying more variety of books today than they used to, say, 10 years ago? Is there in fact a boom in Indian writing in English? Difficult to say. Does writing ever undergo a boom? Writers write. Sometimes they get published. At other times, they don't.

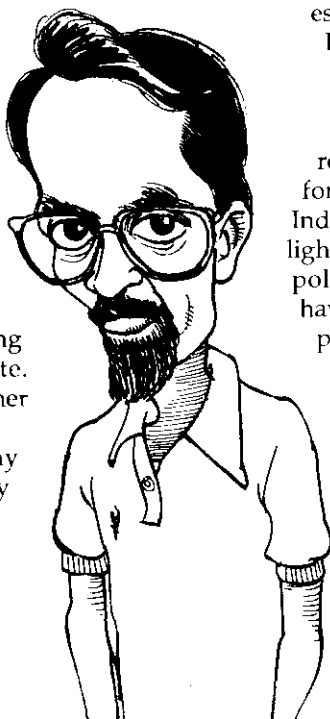
There are all sorts of reasons why writers get published and why they don't. For example, in the 1960s, as African nations became independent, a number of African writers

appeared on the international (mainly British) publishing scene. These included N'gugi wa Thiongo, Sembene Ousmane, Chinua Achebe, to name a few. Most of them were brought out by Heinemann, a British company with subsidiaries in Africa, which published mainly for the growing educational market. Many of these books were used as texts in Africa.

Some years later, the publishing house was bought by a British tyre company. One of the first casualties was the African Writers Series: very few new titles got picked up. Only those which had already been contracted, were published. As a result the myth spread that African writers had 'dried up', that they had stopped writing. Nothing of the sort had happened, and years later, as the political and economic context changed, new and different writers came on the scene, bringing with them books that had been written in this supposedly fallow period.

So too in India. Writers have been writing, but it's only now they have more opportunities to publish. This, however, is only valid for the English market. For writers in other Indian languages, the opportunities to publish (especially in book form) are still rare. This is not to say that things have not changed.

First of all, the conditions of publishing: India has traditionally been one of the largest markets for English books. For British and American publishers, the two most important markets are Australia and India—and not necessarily in that order. There are reasons for this: large numbers of foreign books can come freely into India because of a simultaneously enlightened and loophole-ridden import policy; and Indian book importers have been more reliable than most in paying for what they buy (this is partly because, barring the odd glitch, they have not had too many problems with foreign exchange). This is why, a decade and a half ago, if one walked into a bookshop in Delhi or Bombay, one would have seen piles of mostly imported



Allan
Sealy

books—bestsellers or books that are known as “remainders” (leftovers, usually from abroad where their shelf life is over, which are then dumped, at huge discounts, in Third World countries). One would have been hard put to find many Indian authors among these piles.

Today, things are different. Bookshops have many more books by Indian authors. But if you dig a bit, you’ll find there are some very mundane, practical reasons for this. One of them is the falling value of the rupee, against the dollar and the pound. When the value of the dollar, for example, rose from INR 15 to INR 30, the price of a one-dollar book doubled. Indian importers began to find it difficult to import in quite the same quantities that they could earlier. And a sort of space (what publishers call a “window”) began to open up. It was into this space that books by Indian authors made an entry.

Trotter-Nama

But how did these books get there? Where did they appear from? Around this time a small group (or more correctly, a number of individuals) of young and not-so-young publishing professionals made an independent entry into the market. Among the first of the small publishing houses were Seagull, Ratna Sagar and Kali, followed soon after by Ravi Dayal and Mandira, then Penguin (small at the time, now no longer so), Katha, Tara, Tulika and gradually many more. For many of the moving spirits behind these houses, publishing was not necessarily just a family business. It was something they believed in. To them the importance, indeed the necessity, of publishing good books, books that were good not only to read, but a pleasure to look at and handle, books that could take their place alongside others anywhere in the world, became a credo.

It was the entry, not so much of these publishers, but of this kind of publishing, that brought about a major change in the English publishing scene. The received wisdom (which still holds good today because of a good amount of truth in it) in Indian publishing is that the bulk of the market (estimates put the figure at roughly 80 percent) is taken up with educational publishing, that is, textbooks and supplementary readers for use in schools

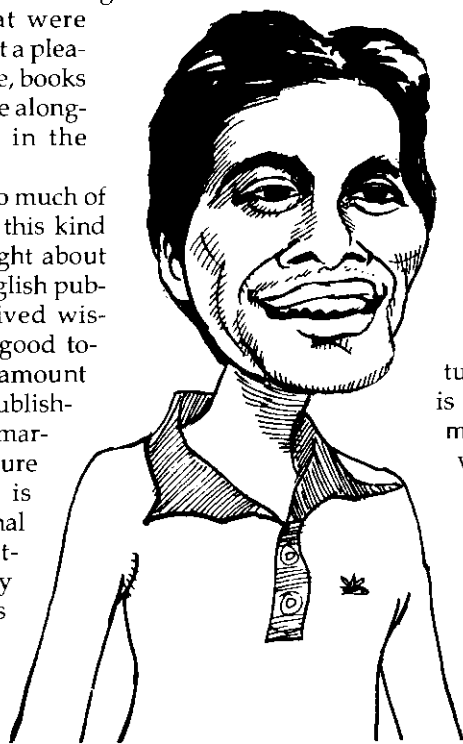
and universities. A couple of decades ago, the most ‘successful’ publishers would have been those who published textbooks. And not many publishers would have bothered with what is known, in technical terms, as the “trade” market, the market for general books (fiction, non-fiction) which caters to the individual reader.

Enter the small—and also the slightly larger—publisher, armed with books for the general reader, and armed as well with the conviction that somewhere out there, was a market waiting to be tapped. So the tapping began: it consisted of a search (still ongoing) for new authors and new subjects, new ‘niches’, new markets, new methods of distribution, promotion, sales.

Books began to look better: if they were to catch the attention of random readers, casual browsers, they had to be colourful and attractive. The old approach of simple, two-colour covers lay crumpled in the dustbin. Pressure was mounted on the increasing number of television channels to introduce book-related programmes. The ‘new! improved!’ book launch made its appearance. Authors were invited to read from their books, to answer questions about the art of writing and their choice of subject and language, to sign copies of books for readers. Not only were markets being tapped and ‘created’, but they were being ‘developed’.

So far, the strategy has worked. Not only are books in English by Indian authors more visible, they also sell more (even if the term is only relative) than they did earlier. Perhaps the best evidence of this is in the increasing number of bookshops that are opening up all over the country. R. Sriram, the brain behind the Crossword chain of bookshops, says that he hopes to have 30 Crosswords in different parts of India very soon. “Last year’s sales,” he says, “crossed the 30 crore [300 million] mark. Two thirds of these sales were from books.”

Sriram is optimistic about the future of general books in India. “There is so much potential,” he says, “so many areas publishers still need to venture into properly. For example, there are certain kinds of non-fiction titles, such as books on health, fitness, cookery, that could be really successful. Or there are books for children. We



do well with these—and the market is usually made up of young couples who are looking for interesting books for their children.”

However, Sriram cautions against complacency. For young and old people today, there are so many things on offer, and many ways of spending their time. For them to be attracted to books, publishers and booksellers need to put in quite a lot of effort to make books “not only sexy but also stylish, something that is in vogue, something that is ‘happening’”. It is precisely this that the new promotional strategies help do: for when Arundhati Roy or Vikram Seth go on a reading and signing tour, or indeed when Kapil Dev does so, the crowds come to listen, to see and hopefully even to buy.

Although for the moment the crowds are there, and publishers and booksellers are happy that the market is expanding, it’s just as well to remind ourselves that nothing lasts. Certainly Indian writers writing in English are much more visible in India and elsewhere today than ever before. This is not because they are more numerous. Nor is it because of the dreaded hype that everyone complains about. Instead, at least one reason is that the nature of the book market has changed, pretty much all over the world. Rather than working on a steady stream of (hopefully good) books, many publishers have adopted a pattern of peaks and plateaus.

The God of Small Things

The publishers concentrate on the “big” books—the ones that form the peaks and on which publishers go out of their way to spend money on selling—and then publish the “ordinary” ones which they do publicise a bit, but which mostly move into the market on their own merit, and are sometimes successful and sometimes not. The hierarchy that this sets up goes all the way: the biggies are automatically considered better books and get more coverage. The others suffer because of the comparison, though many of them may be better.

So, books in languages other than English don’t get as much coverage as those in English. The net result is that while writers in, say, Hindi or Malayalam or Marathi or Telugu continue to write, and also occasionally publish, the pecking order sets

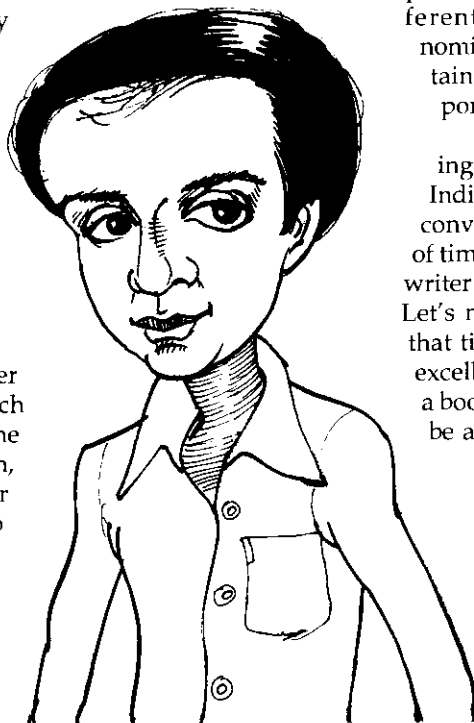
them somewhere below even the most mediocre writer in English. Or, if a publisher is not willing to promote a particular book as a “big” book, then chances are it will sink without a trace.

There’s another aspect to this publishing hierarchy that is important—and that is the advantage that comes from being published outside of India: advantage in terms of money, of importance, of coverage, and, of course, of sales. For no matter how rapidly Indian markets are expanding, for general books they are still minuscule in comparison to markets abroad. The best example is Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which sold close to 100,000 copies in hardback in India—something unprecedented for fiction sales of an English book in India. However, it sold far more copies in the UK, the US and even in European countries where it was translated.

That’s one way of looking at it. To try another, more cautious approach, look at this figure in terms of the potential size of the Indian market: we talk of a middle class that’s roughly 200 million. If even one million people of this supposedly well-to-do, literate middle class can make up the country’s reading public, and if even half of these potential readers are actually book buyers, one is talking of a much, much bigger market than we’ve actually been able to reach.

That’s why, even though it’s good news that Indian writers are getting noticed and some of them are earning fantastic amounts of money, it’s a little early and unrealistic to talk of a ‘boom’. Rather, one should understand that books are never produced in a vacuum, where “good” writing miraculously finds its way to the top. Instead, there are very many different conditions—social, economic, cultural—which enable certain types of books to become important at certain times.

That is what we are witnessing today: it’s the moment of the Indian writer in English. And I am convinced that it is only a matter of time before the day of the Indian writer in translation will be upon us. Let’s now start to look forward to that time—for if such a small (and excellent) output is being seen as a boom, what lies in store can only be an explosion. ▲



Pico Iyer

Damn Good Story

Qadri Ismail

Giving presents is fun, although not the drudgery of looking for them. So before coming back to Sri Lanka for a visit this year, I asked my friends what they wanted. The requests were mostly predictable: tea, of course, and spices; *batik sarongs* and devil masks also made the list. One asked for something that, in the jargon of the export sector, would be called a non-traditional item: a local novel.

No problem, I thought. The 1990s were a great time for Sri Lankan writing in English what with Michael Ondaatje endowing a prize, and it looked like everyone with a disk drive (plus many who stick to ribbon and paper) was inspired to write. If anything, I'd have an abundance of choice. So thinking, I promised her a good read.

But I couldn't just walk into a Colombo bookshop and browse the shelves. I am, after all, a literary critic with a theoretical bent. First of all I had to decide: what makes a good Sri Lankan novel?

The trouble with a literary training is that you can't avoid inhaling the aesthetic. Even if you take classes only with Leftists, quality has a way of corrupting your oxygen. For years, I gave my friends *Running in the Family* on their birthdays, for passing comprehensive exams, or as aeroplane reading for long trips. I loathed the book for its orientalism; but it was Sri Lankan and, more importantly, 'well written'. It didn't, as it were, let the side down. This time, I was determined not to add to Ondaatje's royalties. (I teach *The English Patient* in virtually every class, anyway.) This time, I was going to find something that took the question of form seriously *and* made the reader reconsider reality. Any good piece of Sri Lankan writing—journalistic, literary, academic, whatever—must make its reader see Sri Lanka, if not the world, at least slightly differently. It should give pleasure, but also tax the grey cells a little.

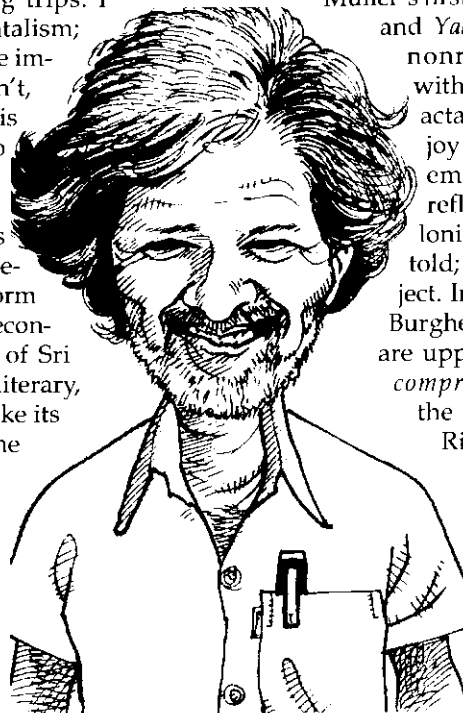
However, unlike other

modes, the novel doesn't work by content alone. Form counts. And the novel form moved away from realism a century ago because—to soundbyte a long story—the novel realised, well before post-structuralism, that language was constitutive of the social; that language did not, simply and transparently, reflect it. Conclusion: a good Sri Lankan novel will contest the story Sri Lanka tells of itself in some way, shape *and* form. Theory in hand, wallet in pocket, smile on face, I was ready to hit the bookshops.

Yakada Yaka

I would have fared better expecting the cricket team would win the World Cup. While the issues it takes on shows promise, every now and then, formal innovation has kept its distance from the recent Sri Lankan novel in English. Ondaatje may have endowed a prize, but inspiration isn't guaranteed by money alone. The Sri Lankan writer is yet to think his/her way out of realism and its collaborator, humanism. With one and a half exceptions. Rajiva Wijesinha, who does magic realism with semicolons: he deploys Victorian prose, and a humanist vision, on an essentially post-modern spin on the world. The consequence is a complete lack of fit between form and content. Then there is Carl Muller.

Muller's first two novels, *The Jam Fruit Tree* and *Yakada Yaka*, are funny, daring, nonrealistic and 'peopled' with characters—I prefer the term actants—one is supposed to enjoy and think about, rather than empathise with. They demand reflection upon how the postcolonial Sri Lankan story has been told; upon who constitutes its subject. In the dominant narrative, the Burghers—when mentioned at all—are upper-middle-class, professional *comprador* and copped out of the country after Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike replaced English with Sinhala Only as the official language in 1956. That stereotypical Burgher is confronted in these novels with the von



Michael Ondaatje

Blosses: blue collar urbanites who wouldn't, or couldn't, or just didn't get out of the country; who stayed and struggled and made their peace with Sinhala nationalism; who knew how to have fun. Not a heroic story, the way it is told, but sufficiently – to abuse a metaphor from somewhere else – subalternist. Besides, Muller can tell a damn good story.

The limitation of these novels (apart from needing a sharp blue pencil) is their politics, which is restricted to that of inclusion. All they say is: I live here too, please admit me. Not an unimportant message to a story that would like to continue being exclusively Sinhala Buddhist; that only admitted the Tamil nationalist after much resistance. But it is not one that taxes those grey cells, either. Still, the first two novels promised of better things to come. Perhaps, I thought, the next ones would take a long, strong and laugh-laden look at how the Sri Lankan story itself was constructed, not just seek to add the Burgher to it. However, Muller's more recent output – *Once Upon a Tender Time* and that formal monstrosity, *Colombo* – have lost their humour, daring and imagination; politically, they are content with whitewashing Sinhala nationalism. If the Burghers can live with it, we are told implicitly (and disregarding those who emigrated), why not the Tamils? So I crossed Muller off my list.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is the most promising thing I've ever read by a Sri Lankan novelist; an excellent first novel. It tells the story of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young boy growing up in southern Sri Lanka in the 1980s, who discovers what it means to be Tamil and to desire those of his own sex. Given the writer's location in Canada, I expected some discussion not only of Sri Lankan sexuality, but also of how it differs from sexuality in the West. But *Funny Boy's* homosexual politics are just plain queer – that is to say, North American.

The logic of the narrative compels Chelvaratnam to leave a homophobic Sri Lanka by the tale's end, in search of identity in sexual community – such identity being found, given the said logic of the text, only in the West. The narrative does demand that the reader contemplate Sri Lankan homophobia, but the account would have been more compelling if its other gay actant, Chelvaratnam's lover Shehan Soyya, was allowed some narrative prominence. Soyya – who is, not incidentally,

anti-racist – seeks only pleasure, not identity, in sexuality. A complex analysis of Sri Lankan (homo)sexuality could have followed; but we are never given Soyya's story – the narrative cannot endorse it. By tale's end, Chelvaratnam is safe in Canada; we are not told what happens, or even what might happen, to Soyya. Perhaps the text doesn't care.

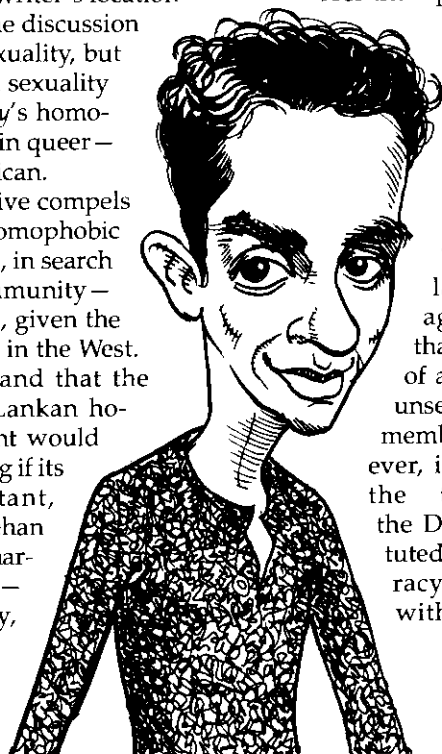
If, in its treatment of sexuality, *Funny Boy* sanctions identity politics, its treatment of nationalism is radically different. It approaches Tamilness not as a given but something to be learnt, discovered; in this instance, during the commencement of armed conflict between Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. Here, identity is not essential but conjunctural. Tamil separatism distanced itself from Southern Tamils as the struggle escalated. In depicting the Southern Tamil predicament at this conjuncture, *Funny Boy* doesn't just seek to admit to the record the story of a group silenced by the larger Sri Lankan story, whether Sinhala or, now, Tamil nationalist. Rather, without condoning/exempting the horrors of Sinhala nationalism, this novel calls attention to the liberating potential of the Tamil, which uses the victimhood of Southern Tamils to justify its case against the Sinhala state, while excluding the same from its project. Thus raising the general question: is the nation an enabling form of community?

Cinnamon Gardens

Despite the above, I found *Funny Boy* only promising because its identity politics were not thought through; its form was neorealist; and its actants all too human – we are supposed to feel their pain or, rather, that of the narrator, Chelvaratnam. Still, one doesn't expect first novels to have figured everything out. These problems would be solved, I thought, in Selvadurai's second effort. So I eagerly bought *Cinnamon Gardens*.

The second novel takes up the same themes as *Funny Boy* – Tamilness and homosexuality, now in late-colonial Sri Lanka. It is told, again, largely from one perspective: that of Balendran Navaratnam, the son of a 'high-caste' (the text uses the term unselfconsciously) Tamil Mudaliyar and member of the Legislative Council. However, interrogating colonialism is not on the text's agenda; even though the Donoughmore reforms, which instituted British-style parliamentary democracy in the country, is the framework within which the plot develops. Elite

Shyam
Selvadurai



Tamils, the novel tells us, were nervous of these reforms since they intimated Sinhala dominance. Whether this is historically 'accurate' is not my concern. What's disturbing is the coincidence: the same story is told of the past by separatist Tamil nationalism—that our present condition is/was inevitable. The text, in other words, is complicit with that nationalism (the trite quotes from the Tirukkural, which open every chapter, reinforce this).

As for sexuality, the novel informs us, through Balendran, that there were always (closeted) gays in Sri Lanka, who were compelled to be closeted. This is nothing new; we know it by definition. As admission-ticket style history, it might serve a purpose. But, as a literary argument against homophobia, it has all the relevance of an air-conditioner in the Arctic, a sauna in Saudi Arabia. That case is to be made on ethical, not historical, grounds.

Stylistically, *Cinnamon Gardens* is painfully realist. The narrator laboriously recreates houses, gardens, cars, clothes and codes from elite colonial Sri Lanka. Language speaks, not shapes, the real here; it strains after the representational status of the photograph—denotation without connotation. Reading *Cinnamon Gardens*, whose prose is clearly allergic to metaphor, it appears that Joyce and Djibar and Rushdie (to keep the list short) had never happened. The promise of *Funny Boy* is broken formally as well: the prose of this text is pseudo-Victorian. Sri Lankan history, the novel's object, looks no different at the end of the 389 pages.

When Memory Dies

As it does after Ambalavaner Sivanandan's 411 pages (albeit in a smaller font). Reading *When Memory Dies*, three books in one, requires patience—or Prozac. The first book, again, is promising, if not actually good: it tells the story of the rise of the labour movement in Sri Lanka. While this has been done already by Kumari Jayawardena, whom Sivanandan draws liberally upon, a case can be made for the fiction. It asks the Sri Lankan reader, whose history lessons these days are fashioned by nationalism, to remember that there once was a robust, non-communal Left in the country; a Left that was organised, active, militant—and is depicted as such in this novel, unlike the marginalised status it receives in *Cinnamon Gardens* (which also draws upon Jayawardena). A Left that—if one

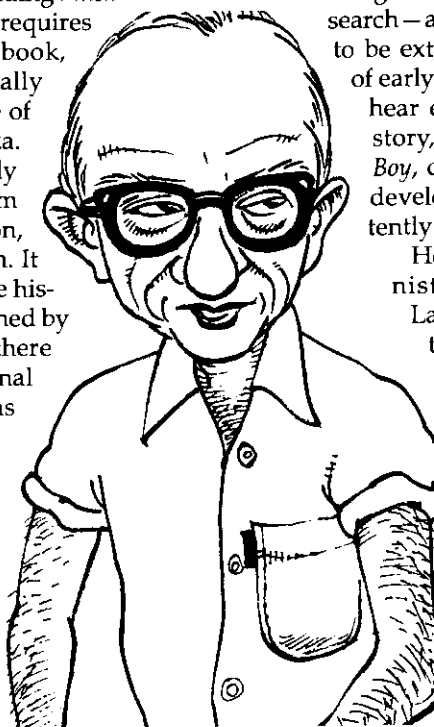
is looking for causes—may actually have prompted the Donoughmore reforms with its movements.

The novel should have ended at book one. Alas, *When Memory Dies* seeks the status of an epic in the grand old tradition of socialist realism that the novel form, I thought, left behind ages ago. It must tell the story, the whole story, of 20th century Sri Lanka. Every single political event of any significance seems to get a mention in these pages. There are other—metonymic, allegorical—condensed ways that the novel has adopted of depicting history. But this text can't take that route. It must write a narrative history in fictional guise. However, the closer it comes to the present, the further it gets from the question of memory—and therefore the more it loses its direction, focus, perspective. Indeed, by book three, written in the third person, the narrator seems to have even forgotten that the other two books were written in the first.

Given its epic ambition, *When Memory Dies* demands a cast of thousands. The narrative's socialism makes the actants, those who cause history, 'ordinary' people, not the 'elite'. If this is salutary, as is the narrator's refusal to be humanist (I do not remember the name of a single one of the actants let alone feel for them), what is troubling is that the characters actually depicted causing change in this text are exclusively male; all that the females of *When Memory Dies* do is cook, clean or care for their menfolk—something the narrative accepts matter-of-factly.

If 'true memory' was indeed the project of *When Memory Dies*, it could have taken a cue from *Cinnamon Gardens*: the latter novel's most intriguing actant is Annalukshmi Kandiah—once again inspired by Jayawardena's research—a woman agitating for franchise to be extended to women: an instance of early Sri Lankan feminism we don't hear enough about. But Kandiah's story, much like Soyza's in *Funny Boy*, doesn't get adequate narrative development; its progress is consistently pre-empted by Balendran's.

Her fate mirrors that of the feminist woman's story in the Sri Lankan novel in English. Something quite remarkable when one considers that the country has not suffered from a lack of women writers. But, surveying the shelves, the closest thing available to a good feminist novel was Punyakante Wijenaike's *Amulet*. The heroine



Carl Muller

Shyamali's story is a difficult one for feminism: to present, without accusing or excusing, a narrative of the 'traditional' woman—superstitious, uneducated, married off young to an abusive husband, alienated from her 'modern' children; someone to whom autonomy was never an option. This is even more difficult to accomplish without demanding empathy from the reader. Humour, or metaphor, are useful devices here, but asking prose to do any work has never been a characteristic of Wijenaiké's style. Still, *Amulet* does tell a story that doesn't often get told, it enlarges the corpus of feminist writing and makes one think about what gets counted as history.

The novel is a privileged arena: it can make arguments without evidence, without being bur-

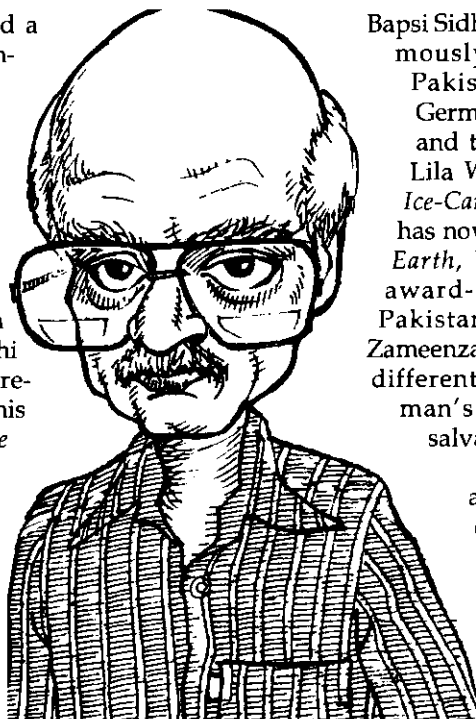
dened by the facts, or 'reality'. Without, in short, respecting the record that passes for history. History, let us not forget, is also a story, or for that matter, stories. If it gains its authority from being allegedly about the real, the true, the facts, we know from Marxism, from feminism and anti-racism that the record of history has also been partial. Thus, one can say that history is no more than just another story—if a very powerful one. The potential of literature is that it can contest this story, its power, and draw attention to its partiality. The recent Sri Lankan novel in English gives every indication that it is about to keep its promise—even if by someone who is yet to publish. I can wait.

As for my friend, I suppose her present may turn out not to be so novel after all. ▲

From *My Beautiful Laundrette* to *This Other Salt*

Muneeza Shamsie

Pre-Partition Pakistan had a tradition of writing in English, but only in recent years have Pakistani English fiction, poetry, and some drama started to come into their own. The distinguished Zulfikar Ghose has a considerable body of work behind him, including several books of poetry, ten novels and a collection of stories. Hanif Kureishi made his name as playwright, received an Oscar nomination for his screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* and went on to write three successful novels, including *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which won the 1990 Whitbread Award for best first novel.



Bapsi Sidhwa, who remains an enormously popular author in Pakistan, is the recipient of Germany's 1991 Liberature Prize and the 1993 Reader's Digest's Lila Wallace Award. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* about Partition, has now been made into the film, *Earth*, by Deepa Mehta. Other award-winning novelists of Pakistani origin include Adam Zameenzad, whose novels are set in different continents and explore man's search for dignity and salvation.

Tariq Ali has moved away from politics, to become a successful playwright and novelist, which has enabled him to

Zulfikar
Ghose

express different facets of himself: his interest in South Asian and Islamic history and in the universal ideas of communism and enlightenment. The short story writer Aamer Hussein is exploring quite a new dimension for Pakistani English fiction by trying to bring his English narrative closer to the literary traditions of Urdu. Then there is Sara Suleri, who forged new dimensions for Pakistani English prose, with her remarkably poetic and creative memoir *Meatless Days*.

There is also a promising younger generation: including two novelists who published their first novels at 25. One, *The Season of the Rainbirds* by Nadeem Aslam, received the Author's Club award and was shortlisted for two more. The other, *In The City By The Sea* by Kamila Shamsie, was shortlisted for the Mail-on-Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys award.

The years of oppression under successive regimes in Pakistan both hampered and heightened the commitment to freedom of expression. An example can be seen in fierce feminist consciousness that permeates the English writing of poet Hina Faisal Imam and the fiction of Talat Abbasi, Rukhsana Ahmad, Tahira Naqvi and Bapsi Sidhwa, which came as a reaction to the draconian anti-women laws of the 1980s.

In Bapsi Sidhwa, Pakistan had its first resident English writer—other than Ahmed Ali (1908-1994) who wrote the famous *Twilight in Delhi* (1940)—to receive international recognition. Sidhwa's first novel *The Crow Eaters* (1980), revealed her wonderful eye for comedy, a facet that is also evident in her other novels, *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) and *The American Brat* (1983), and to a lesser extent, *The Bride* (1983).

Ice-Candy-Man, about the Partition riots, remains Sidhwa's most powerful and polished work. She shows very clearly how Sikh/Hindu/Muslim tensions arose and religious differences crept into people's lives. Linguistically, the novel is important because it successfully employs a Pakistani English narrative. Furthermore, it is the only Pakistani English novel in this genre to focus on the bloodbath that irrevocably changed and brutalised South Asia.

Partition also features in Zulfikar Ghose's *The Triple Mirror*

of *the Self* (1992), a complex, magic-realist tale about migration, exile and prejudice, which goes back in time through three continents and revolves around the chameleon-like migrant's need to reclaim a part of his core, his essential self. Ghose has consistently produced poetry and prose of high quality. He is very conscious of language, style and structure and is probably the only Pakistani English author to have written experimental fiction.

The Incredible Brazilian

Ghose has based only one novel in Pakistan, *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967), in which he makes a lively exploration of dialogue to capture the Pakistani sound as he weaves the story about a traditional farmer who is destroyed by a ruthless industrialist. Later, the author received particular acclaim for his trilogy, *The Incredible Brazilian* (1972/75/79), a historical romance with a mystical element, set in South America, a region Ghose knows well and which, he says, has a definite resonance with the Subcontinent.

Adam Zameenzad is another expatriate writer to have written only one novel set in Pakistan, *The Thirteenth House*. Otherwise, he wrote of war and famine in Africa, where he grew up. His Afro-Pakistan experience of social inequity provided him with insights for *Love, Bones and Water* (1989) set in South America. He then garnered together elements from all these for his major work, *Cyrus, Cyrus* (1990), a bawdy, ambitious, wordy work, revolving around a man's search for dignity and salvation across four continents. Zameenzad too has a great eye for comedy, although all his books are about the dispossessed, central to which is the concept of redemption through suffering.

A Mirror to the Sun

There has been increasing interchange between writers living in Pakistan with those in the diaspora and both have been influenced by trends in world English literature. Many Pakistani English writers have also identified with writings other than Anglo-Saxon. Aamer Hussein has been influenced by European and Afro-American writing, as well as contemporary Urdu literature, a subject he teaches. His



Bapsi Sidhwa

accomplished first collection, *A Mirror to the Sun* (1996), brought together a myriad of cultures, timeless tales and modern conflicts. His second, *This Other Salt* (1999), which includes fiction that he, as an expatriate, living in Britain, perceives as an imaginary discussion with contemporary Urdu writers about issues of history, migration, exile, etc.

He has said, "I haven't discarded notions of commitment and belonging. But a modest lack of ideological dogma is crucial to the engaged writer. I claim with fiction as my only instrument, the native's right to argue and discuss my history with my compatriots. I guess that makes me a Pakistani writer."

Redemption

A distinctive aspect of Pakistani English writing is that several writers are English translators of Urdu or other indigenous literature, including Taufiq Rafat, Athar Tahir, Shuja Nawaz and Daud Kamal. But in Britain and America, both the translation and the writing of English fiction has been a process of reclamation and the search for an identity. This is true of Tahira Naqvi, Rukshana Ahmad, Aamer Hussain and his screenwriter sister, Shahrukh Hussain. The extent to which this will have an impact on Pakistani English writing, remains to be seen. The diminishing of linguistic boundaries is already apparent in Aamer Hussein's work and in Tahira Naqvi's first collection of short stories, *Attar of Roses*, filled with reflections and vignettes of Pakistani life.

All Pakistani English writers live between the East and the West, literally or intellectually, and express it through their work. Those living in foreign lands have also been irrefutably shaped by their Pakistani heritage. This is evident in the works of the British-born Hanif Kureishi. He had already won the George Devine Award for his play about Asians in Southall before he made his first trip to Pakistan. Shortly afterwards, he wrote his famous screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which deals with racism and unemployment in Britain, while linking up and contrasting the lives of British Asians with relatives from Pakistan. His subsequent novels, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), *Black Album* (1995), *Intimacy* (1998) and his short stories in *Love in A Blue Time* (1997) all provide an alternative narrative to

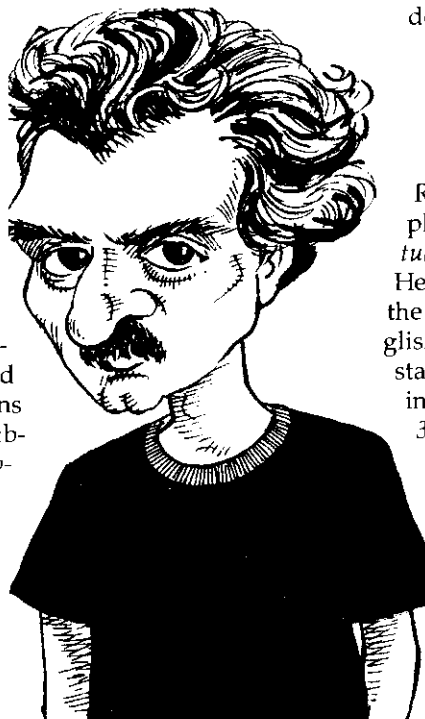
mainstream British writing about Asians.

Tariq Ali's political activities over decades made it impossible for him to live in Pakistan but he kept in close touch with events there and wrote three analytical books about it. In the 1980s, he became a filmmaker and a playwright. His first novel, *Redemption* (1990), is a spoof on Trotskyism, his second a historical novel, *The Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1992), is about Andalusian Islam. He has followed this up with another, *The Book of Saladin* (1996), focusing on the Crusades. Both are part of a planned quartet based on the encounter between Christianity and Islam, and are particularly strong on historical information. Tariq Ali's political writings have influenced the fiction of the Pakistani-born Nadeem Aslam. His subtle, clever and poetic novel, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), revolves around strong-arm politics, religious bigotry and terror in a small Punjabi town in the 1980s.

Kamila Shamsie's first novel, *In the City by the Sea* (1998), set in a fictitious town, similar to Karachi, is also remarkable for its use of language and its insight into a child's fantasy world as well as political tyranny. Pakistan's politics and its history are quietly interwoven into the narrative of Sara Suleri's remarkable and original memoir, *Meatless Days* (1989), a collage about love, memory and loss conveyed through metaphor, and written in dense but beautiful, surely another milestone for Pakistani English writing.

The Hope Chest

Pakistani English fiction has shown a much greater response to political events in Pakistan than its poetry. The fiction of Moniza Naqvi's first novel has a political content as do some short stories by Javed Qazi, Sorayya Khan and Moazzam Sheikh. A political commitment as a feminist and an Asian in Britain, runs through the work of Rukhsana Ahmad. Her many plays include, *Song for a Sanctuary*, about battered women. Her novel *The Hope Chest* links up the lives of three women: an English girl, a well-travelled Pakistani girl and her maidservant in Lahore. While Zeeba Sadiq's *38 Bahadurabad* (1996) is a rich and clever tapestry of interlocking stories and sketches about her family and its independent women. ▲



Tariq Ali

English Voices in Monsoonland

Afsan Chowdhury

Himal calls from Kathmandu. They want a piece on English writing in Bangladesh. Deadline is not so long away. Is it possible? I suppose so. Dhaka e-mails are all knocked out or virused to death. Infecting global networks and friends. Life is a bit unsettled as usual for me here. I pine for the Valley so much. Never been away from it for so long.

I call Asha Mehreen Amin of *Daily Star* who runs an excellent weekend magazine. Get a load of phone numbers from her including that of her mother, Razia Khan Amin, who is one of the recognised bilingual writers in town. Asha is putting the magazine to bed and has little time to talk till after the deadline. I start practising being brave about deadlines. The magazine she edits is a good example of what is wrong and right with English writing in Bangladesh. It is a potpourri of columns, some sweet and some pedantic. Travel pieces, *belle lettres*, art and literary reviews, occasional fiction and practically everything else that fit into the weekend insert of any major daily.

Some of the columns are very popular. The English varies from expat Bangladeshi to the more home-grown *chatpatti*. Asha herself is very good. Genes? But the essential weekend nature of the magazine determines style and ambition. It serves the purpose of the newspaper and goes no further. Most of the contributors write modern, and one believes that given a chance at least some could graduate to more sustainable stuff. But most offerings are primarily one-two pages. Heavier stuff has to look for other parking lots. Still, to say that it's the best place to catch mostly correct English is saying a lot.

Hanif Kureishi Poems, fiction and translation, and, increasingly, 'lifts'

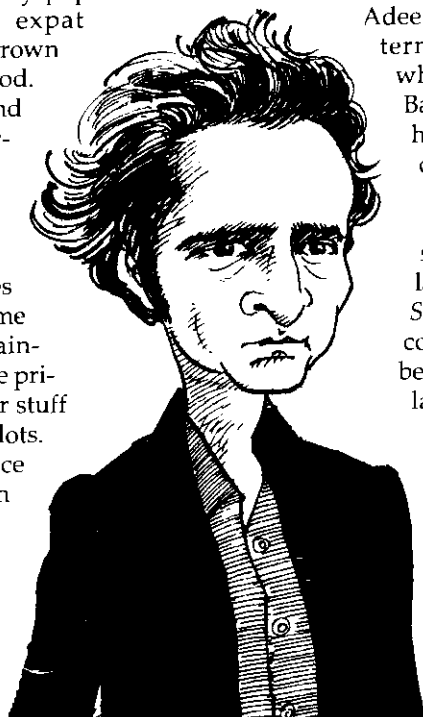
and excerpts figure in the literary section of *Daily Star* every Saturday. It's managed by Ziaul Karim but he proves elusive. Ten calls later, he is still just in and just out. Wonder whether he will figure in the piece.

A few evenings later, I talk to Razia Khan Amin. She is a writer taken seriously by all and sundry, and to top it all, teaches English at Dhaka University. Years of toiling without a satisfying readership appears to have taken its toll. Who would read English, she asks? Not a single 'serious' review of her work, even in her own land. "A lady in India wrote a piece on me but it went unnoticed in Bangladesh. Did you read my English novel *Draupadi*?" I confess I had not.

She asks about a few other books. Some I have, some I don't. The novelist Adeebuzzaman who won the Commonwealth Writers Award for his novel, *Seasonal Adjustments*, was her student. Yes, I have read that. His father looked like Ashok Kumar and would sit in the Calcutta University hostel and sing Ashok's hits. A friend of my father's.

Seasonal Adjustments

Adeebuzzaman Khan is the most internationally successful novelist whose 'roots' are in what is now Bangladesh. At least we can claim him though his passport can't be carrying that dreadful green which promises no hope but stony rubbish. Adeeb is now settled in Australia and irregularly commutes to his homeland. *Seasonal Adjustments*, based on the coming to terms/adjustment with being an outsider in one's homeland and a shattered home life, was reprinted in Dhaka but, as expected, found few readers. The valiant publisher was Taher Quddus, a retired columnist and businessman, owning the largest security



services company as well as a bookshop called Bookworms, which stocks a solid list of English language books from different lands.

Few know about Adeeb and his achievements when I ask around. Notices appeared in the dailies after his prize, a few pieces also, but cricket, cinema and politicians stole the very sky in which his star shone. And of course he isn't exactly your leisure writer.

Syed Monzurul Islam, also of Dhaka University's English Department, is a big help, as always. One of the most prolific writers in the country, he walks with ease in both English and Bangla genres and in many other fields. Arguably the country's most sought-after art and literary critic, he has three collections of Bangla short stories published, including one from Calcutta. Teaches English to admiring students year after year. Mentions names, telephone numbers and flags me an article by Niaz Zaman of DU's English Department, exactly on the topic I am working on.

Argus Under Anaesthesia

I call *The Independent's* magazine section. Jamal Arsalan, hacking at English literature for the last 30 years, promises to hold on to a copy of the Niaz Zaman issue for me. Learn from him that his collection of short stories *When Swans Sail* was published in 1970-71. Is he our first published writer in Albion's tongue at the beginning of the 70s? Why don't you write anymore? I do, he says, but who will publish my work? And who'll read? Tough questions to answer. It's a refrain I will hear as I talk to more and more people.

Couple of evenings later I talk to Manzurul Islam again. He is dismayed at the lack of quality of English writing here. He laments the absence of a "culture of culture", the cosmopolitanism that is so essential in nurturing a global language literature. I don't ask whether the vernacular writer is also burdened by the same sin. But we all know how powerful provincialism can be. Why are there so many celebrated writers from West Bengal while the Eastern version seems to be trailing behind? Manzurul Islam has one answer: "In India all the people learn to use English well because that's the common language of a billion people. We have no such situation. So the language rusts and decays."

Not too many users. West Bengal, part of India, us in a state of isolation. List the writers, the poets who show an early promise and then disappear: names like Firoze Ahmeduddin, Nuzhat Amin, Azfer Hussain and a few others. Showed promise, showing promise, knows will show promise. Nuzhat is good and is writing. Teaches English at DU. How many will make it in the end? This land shouts down the poet?

The nature of the state determines the trend of literature. The language demands undivided loyalty, and literary expressions are close to political identities. Post-modern, postcolonial, pre-globalised literary landscapes. One imagines the agony of the unread writer. Yet people push on. And so he pushes on. Niaz Zaman is one of the most committed English language writers in Bangladesh. In 1996, the country's largest publishing house, UPL, published a collection of her short stories, *The Dance and Other Stories*. She has been noticed abroad and topped an *Asiaweek* literary contest. I read a piece by her which was a summary of a paper she read at a conference. "One might date the beginning of English creative writing from the mid-1970s which was also the time that Razia Khan published two books of English poems, *Argus Under Anaesthesia* and *Cruel April...*"

The Inner Edge

She mentions four more: Nafisa Jamal, Feroze Ahmeduddin, Khawja Moinul Hasan and Kaiser Huq. The first two have apparently disappeared. Writers' Workshop in Calcutta published Khawja Moinul's *The Inner Edge* a few years ago. But it's only Kaiser Haque who rows on. I call Kaiser. His answering machine answers back. We then take another look at Niaz Zaman and a few others. In fact, except for Kaiser, the rest have faded out into private oblivions. The US swallows so many of the possibles who could have added a line here, a paragraph there. Obscurity in Macdonald-land has its own joys. Must be the vending machines which act as a balm for the lesions caused by exile and writers' block as large as Manhattan.

As I gather the few facts resting like crumbs on a table here, I see that English writing is certainly clustered around the campus. Niaz Zaman notes that many of the



Kamila Shamsie

major Bengali writers are/were themselves students of the English Department. Manzrul Islam had echoed that feeling too. Called it the "dividend(s) of exposure". The world expands with the right language it seems.

Niaz Zaman mentions in her article what many also see as a critical point. The standard of learning and teaching in the English language has declined. For a long time after 1971, it wasn't the language to be close to, and Bengali was the *kosher* medium of learning. "But between 1981 and 1990 there was a perceptible change. The small coaching centres had become full-fledged schools offering O levels and A levels. There was an increasing English reading public."

AVA

These are facts. The better stuff is written by children with English medium schooling, whether in this city or in colder climes. They have a natural advantage, and it's common to step into any office and hear various twangs which belong to boroughs running from the Queen's in New York to Brick Lane in East London. But Dhaka's schools haven't done too badly either. A girl barely past her teens has already made a mark as a journalist and writer of promise. She has a novel titled *AVA*. Nothing teenage about the book. A tale about women in the seriously feudal era of the past. And she hasn't entered university yet. But Sayeem Hasan Tori has been writing for more than half a decade. Future?

So located too are the many who populate the magazines. They rarely get the nod for quality. Who reads whom? Who is a writer? Perhaps the enormous burden of being successful in a socially, politically and mystically sanctioned language overwhelms. Razia Khan Amin talks about the propensity of Bangladeshis to dislike complex narratives. She became famous while still in university with a novel called *Bat Tolar Uppanayas*. It would best translate as "The Penny Novel". Nowadays, simple love stories or narratives of small middle class crises which don't disturb the lunch hour are hot favourites. Middle-aged fathers and school-going daughters enjoying the same literary innocence. English writers in Bangladesh haven't caught that fish as yet. It's literature with a meal.

Nobody mentions

or remembers Thomas Ansell, a solitary Englishman who settled in Bangladesh and taught in schools, and later wrote editorials, ultimately dying in misery hounded by cancer and poverty. Was a mentor to many young ones including Azfer whose first collection, *Chromatones*, has a foreword by him. Was influenced by Wordsworth. Oh, well. Houseman too?

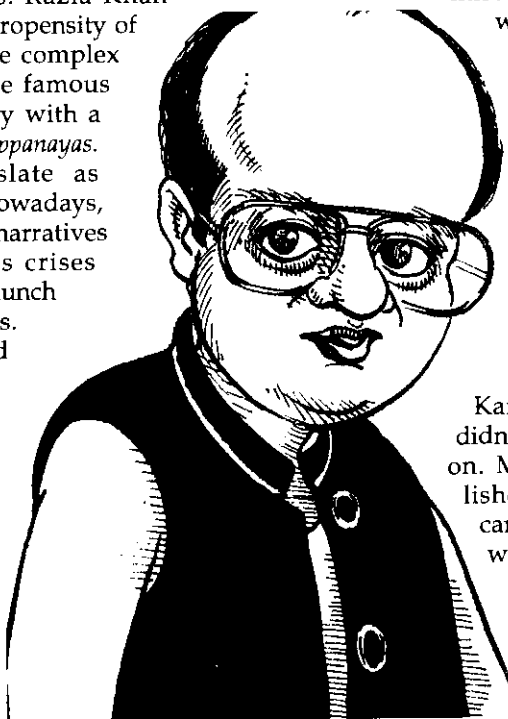
Got Kaiser Haq just before midnight. Primarily a poet with an occasional jab at translations. *Starting Lines* and *A Little Ado* were his first two volumes of poetry. Dhaka 1978. In 1994, UPL published *A Happy Farewell*. In 1996, *Black Orchids* was birthed by Aark Arts of London. *Arnold's Anthology of Post-colonial Poetry* (1997) included him as did an OUP collection. *London Magazine* publishes him regularly and so do others. He is on anthologies in the States and he adds, a little amused, one in Norway.

Chromatones

Kaiser looks like the proverbial man who has tigers for breakfast. He is a war hero. Returned to mufti life after 1971 to return to his studies. Strange that such men should be gentle as lambs. "I write because I want to. There is a simple urge to write. Face the fact that we don't learn the language from the womb. It will be different from the natural writers. Environment, culture, other factors influence. Must know limits."

He laughs easily and there is no self-pity, disappointment or resentment in his voice. I feel the dismay that I have collected dissipating a bit. Just write on. Nobody has to write to win a prize or even a large number of readers or even recognition. "If you ask me about the future fate of mankind or life itself I would give a pessimist answer because I am that. But within the frame of individual realities, I must do the best I can, relate to the realities." He is undeterred by the enclosures, he enjoys writing a little more than the fact that he will have to find a few readers as well. Or maybe not. He sounds like his poetry. Laconic, illusionless but not cynical, emotional but not ear-bending. Knows the facts and keeps his counsel to himself.

One last attempt to locate Ziaul Karim fails. I decide the extra day didn't help get him. Must send the stuff on. Might have left out many published/self-published authors who care about writing, but HIMAL can't wait.



The Sound of Yakking Indians

Amitava Kumar

In Vidia's India: A Million Mutinies Now there is little landscape and hardly any weather. There is no smell, no heat or dust, no sweating men, no lipping saris, no honking traffic, nothing except the sound of yakking Indians.

Paul Theroux in *Sir Vidia's Shadow*

In the summer of 1998, India—and then Pakistan—suddenly exploded on the front pages of the newspapers around the world. The nuclear bomb tests were a culmination of a heady season of self-assertion, a year during which the 50th anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence came to life in a flurry of literary acclaim. By December, it was clear that the South Asian demonstration of literary force in the West rivaled the power of the other Third World product of the year, El Nino. Breathless, magazines like the *New Republic* almost begged for mercy: Macaulay, who had said that “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India”, has been pelted with masterpieces for this ignorant denigration of Indian literature. His punishment has taken a form which he could not have imagined, the vivid prosperity of an Indian literature, and a Pakistani literature, written in Macaulay's own language.

In the ice-cream parlours of New Delhi, a lot of Indians were happy to receive so much notice in the pages of the *New Republic* and *The New Yorker*. I was happy that *Granta* magazine sent a reporter to my own home-

town, Patna. He found Conrad's Mistah Kurtz there in the figure of our Chief Minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav. In the story, Yadav was called by his first name, just like Saddam. But the reporter must have made an impression on the Patna leader. Yadav took him for a walk through his vegetable garden and offered friendly dietary information: “This is *satthu*,” he said. “Very good for wind.” Such characters also made their appearance in the fiction by Indian writers, published in the same magazines around this time.

As these publications were all in English, the ordinary person in the West could be forgiven for believing that all Indians wrote only in English. Some Indians almost believed this too. Salman Rushdie weighed in at that time that the writing in English in India far exceeded in quality the writing in all other Indian languages. He admitted that he didn't know those other languages, and there had been a genuine problem with translations, but, of course, nevertheless, given that, and regardless, an instance of magical realism, and, in the end, as we all in the West know, et cetera.

Hullabaloo

One novel that Rushdie believed was “welcome proof that India's encounter with the English language continues to give birth to new children” was Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. It has plenty of yakking Indians who populate a landscape filled with heat and dust, sweating men, lipping saris, and honking traffic. In order to escape them, the novel's day-dreaming hero, Sampath, climbs a tree and finds him-

Chitra
Divakaruni



self suddenly transformed into a holy man. Salman Rushdie, meet Deepak Chopra. Sampath wants to escape the "ugly sea of humanity" and find refuge in a world "where there was not a trace of civilisation". He duly offers mindless platitudes, some of which were culled by the author from *Bhargava's Standard Dictionary of the Hindi Language*: "Dab your mouth with honey and you will get plenty of flies... Sweep before your own door... Many a pickle makes a mickle... Talk of chalk and hear about cheese."

Eccentrics are equally numerous in the novel and all events remain odd but harmless. Like the reporter from *Granta* in Patna, the reader of Desai's prose finds in those pages an absence of folks who might have any reason to think. No poets or historians, union leaders, women doctors, teachers, people filled with purpose. They lead closed, walled-off lives. You couldn't imagine them protesting, say, the arrival of Kentucky Fried Chicken in a million years. Largely inoffensive and mildly cretinous, the Indians in Desai's novel pose no threat to anyone, least of all to the West. The novel never quite escapes the moral economy of the pleasant.

Manu Smriti

Consequently, the reader is forced to inquire what the hullabaloo around the novel is all about. Even without having published this novel, Desai (along with her mother, Anita, and Rushdie, of course, commanding the centre) was among the eleven writers presented as "India's leading novelists" in the group-photograph in *The New Yorker's* fiction issue on India in 1997. But, there is nothing here that exceeds the quaint fabulism of R.K. Narayan that had charmed readers for the past several decades — before Rushdie gave it the poison of history to drink and, overnight, it grew a tail and claws.

In spite of the Narayan-like fidelity to the pastoral, Desai, like Rushdie, does betray an instinct for the more troubling aspects of the social. She is able to zero in very well on Sampath's mother, Kulfi, her flowering neuroses and her private, unsettled grief. We expect a moving report on gendered existence in India. The novel even offers a couple of remarkable passages on the institution of marriage and the demands it makes on many women in India. In its two or

three best pages, Desai mocks at once Jane Austen and the *Manu Smriti*, the reactionary Hindu code of law. Yet, like Rushdie, lacking any powerful sense of social engagement, Desai is quick to pathologise Kulfi's non-conformity. Like Sufiya Zenobia Shakil in Rushdie's *Shame*, Kulfi is quickly condemned to a murderous zeal and madness. It is soon revealed that she belongs to a family plagued by mental illness. The narrative finally tames the woman by giving her a stove of her own. Don't worry, cook curry.

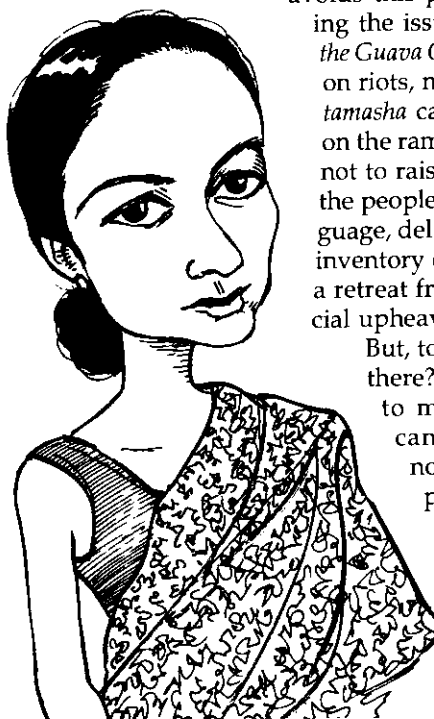
The Moor's Last Sigh

In Rushdie's novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, although his attention to fundamentalism is fascinating, Rushdie's fear of 'the masses' comes to the fore in his portrayal of a rural populace thirsty for blood. The writer treads a fantasy landscape of fear in which all outside the city's familiar walls is condemned to barbarity. Thus, the villagers of India are portrayed as Hindu worshippers of the god Ram, and only superficially secular, when, in fact, all recent riots in India have been largely concentrated in the urban quarters. (One wonders whether, with the quote below as evidence, Rushdie has sacrificed secular ideals and fairness in the interest of a pun.) In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie had written:

In the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram. And they say Ishwar and Allah is your name but they don't mean it, they mean only Ram himself, king of Raghu clan, purifier of sinners along with Sita. In the end I am afraid the villagers will march on the cities and people like us will have to lock our doors and there will come a Battering Ram.

This could be understood as a distant cosmopolitan's dread and ignorance. Desai avoids this problem, but only by evading the issue entirely. As *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is too serene to touch on riots, nothing more raucous than a *tamasha* caused by drunken monkeys on the rampage, it is a bit too sanitised not to raise suspicion. Where have all the people gone? In any case, will language, delicate and lyrical, building an inventory of spices and fauna, provide a retreat from the driving forces of social upheaval? Perhaps it can.

But, to what are we to return from there? Desai's language is unable to map that space. Perhaps it can't. When Sampath, at the novel's end, feels cornered, he pukes on his cot. And, then, like the man in the story about the Indian rope trick, he disappears into thin air,



Anita Desai

while his mother Kulfi keeps cooking, bent on the quest for finding a monkey to put in her pot.

There is another character in the novel who demands attention, the "atheist" who remains sceptical of Sampath. At the novel's conclusion, he meets his end by accidentally falling into Kulfi's simmering cooking pot. The critic, in effect, is shown to be a monkey. This was the only lesson I could retrieve from the novel: when it comes to deciding the fate of critics, even genteel plots can take a surprisingly chilling, brutal turn.

The Mistress of Spices

Let me now turn to the outpourings of one Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a poet and novelist who lives in Sunnyvale, California. *The New Yorker*, in its very brief review of her novel *The Mistress of Spices*, noted that "Divakaruni's prose is so pungent that it stains the page..." Remarks like these help you understand why Indian writers based in the West fall prey to the grand themes of spices and cooking. To his credit, Rushdie had used his tale of the Indian Sub-Condiment to provide a punchy narrative about colonialism. Divakaruni sets her sights firmly lower. In her story, Indians are postcolonial chicken coming home to roost—as spicy, well-barbecued tandoori.

As the following passage shows, Divakaruni is only in the process of "bringing news" to the West. This is a Kashmiri man's account of how he came to leave his birthplace and settle in America, very early on in *The Mistress of Spices*:

One day the fighting started, and tourists stopped coming. Rebels rode down mountain passes with machine guns and eyes like black holes in their faces, yes, into the streets of Srinagar, the name which is meaning auspicious city. I am telling father Abbajan we must leave now but grandfather said, Toba, toba, where will we go, this is the land of our ancestors.

I have yet to meet a Kashmiri who talks like this. When in an opening discourse on Kashmir, instead of discussing extra-judicial killings by the Indian army or the factionalism and the treachery of the Kashmiri leaders, one is provided a linguistic glossary for the meaning of "Srinagar" and "Abbajan", we receive all the tell-tale signs of goods marked "For Export Only". But,

more than that, we need to ask what is it that is lost in this act of literary and cultural short-changing, when a people are cheated of the complexity of their lives, and their voices. Let's return to the novel for our answer.

Divakaruni's narrator, Tilo, is an Indian spice-girl in Oakland, California. From her grocery store, with the help of her magical spices, she carries out her divine aid-agency for diasporic Indians in need. And there are many of them. Our narrator, suffering from a rare bout of self-reflexivity, does remark on her narrow focus on the pedagogy of the depressed: "You must not think that only the unhappy visit my store." On the next page, however, the ones who are without suffering are pushed out of the frame by this Mother Teresa of the San Francisco Bay Area. "But already they are fading from my mind, already I am turning from them to the others. The ones who I need because they need me."

This feeling of being needed, which is only the desire on the part of the writer to not continue to be marginal in the new country in which she has settled, is the reason why people appear so helpless in *The Mistress of Spices*. The cabbie who has been assaulted, the battered woman in a brutal marriage, the young woman who wants to marry a non-Indian, the young Punjabi boy who has joined a gang—their real need is for a novelist they can call their own in this strange land. That is the underlying myth of the novel, and like all myths, it has a grain of truth in it. Though I cringe at the sentimentality that Divakaruni introduces even in her depiction of a racist attack, or the maudlin pathos that she injects into a purchase of even a pack of cinnamon sticks, my spiritual inner-child smiles in repose. I calmly await the future.

Sub-Condiment tales

Divakaruni's melodramatic prose reminds me of nothing more than those earlier figures who animated the immigrant fictions of Israel Zangwill and Anzia Yezierska at the turn of the century in the US. *The Mistress of Spices* is an addition to an Indian history and presence that has been fairly brief in the US. I remind myself that this ventriloquism will soon end. Here is one of Divakaruni's diasporics: "No

Kiran
Desai



A Young Literature

Let us quickly concede what must be conceded. It is true that most of these writers come from the educated classes of India; but in a country still bedevilled by high illiteracy levels, how could it be otherwise?... It is true that there tends to be a bias towards metropolitan and cosmopolitan fiction, but, as this volume will demonstrate, there has been,

during this half-century, a genuine attempt to encompass as many Indian realities as possible, rural as well as urban, sacred as well as profane. This is also, let us remember, a young literature. It is still pushing out the frontiers of the possible.

Salman Rushdie in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*.

one told us it would be so hard here in Amreekah, all day scrubbing greasy floors, lying under engines that drip black oil, driving the belching monster trucks that coat our lungs with tar." This is not the speech of immigrant Indian labourers in London or Los Angeles, but their children in the ghettos of England and America, who if they are lucky enough to garner both literacy and leisure, will soon make Divakaruni redundant. These future writers might also, of course, have their addresses in the well-to-do homes and middle-class suburbs of Western nations. We see it already beginning to happen here. That's how I understand the reach and the assuredness of a writer like Hanif Kureishi across the Atlantic, and, in this country, the recent arrival of young talents like playwright Aasif Mandvi of *Sakina's Restaurant*.

Video Nights in Kathmandu

But, what of all the other writers born in India and settled in the West? (In *The New Yorker* photograph I spoke of earlier, almost all of those novelists live and work outside India.) Am I implying that the best we can do is await their progeny? No. But, I am indeed suggesting that these writers should admit into their writing those concerns that I am yacking about here: who are they writing for? and with?

At the end of Divakaruni's novel, Tilo offers her American lover a lesson in Orientalism 101: "Don't you see why

it would never work? Each of us loving not the other but the exotic image of the other that we have fashioned out of our own lack, our own—". But, such openings remain clumsy exercises in bad-faith if they have been built precisely upon orientalist, not to mention despotic and unfeminist, fantasies:

I could make them empresses. Oceans of oil and honey to bathe in, sparkling palaces of rock-sugar. Leaf of water-hyacinth laid on the palm to touch to gold. Unguent of lotus root touched to the nipples for men to lie enslaved at their feet. If I wished.

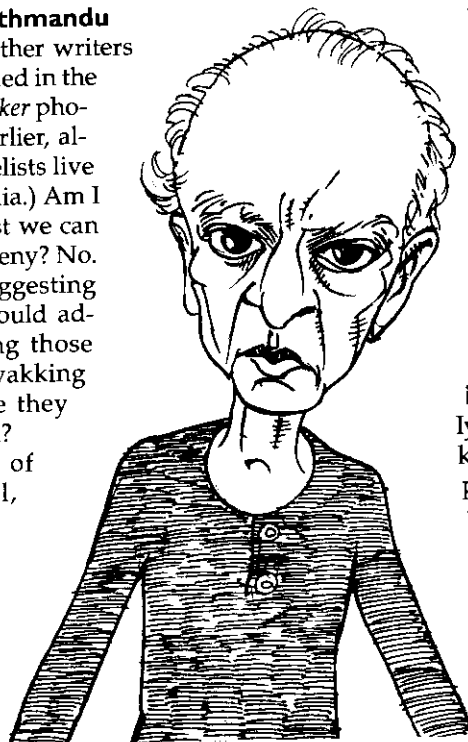
I have nothing against flawed fantasies—I include in them regularly myself—but a point needs to be made here. An awareness of who we share these fantasies with, that is, how collective they are, can lend insight into their formation and their limits. And this takes us beyond the landscape of orientalist fictions

to the terrain of oppositional politics.

The voices raised in protest by Indian writers—who because they use English are also recognised by the West—allow us to ask what the limits of their fantasies are. As far as fantasies are concerned, Pico Iyer writes in *Video Nights in Kathmandu* that India "suffers from a kind of elephantiasis of the imagination".

Love and Longing in Bombay

Iyer approvingly cites John Russell yacking about yacking Indians: "Indians are prodigious, irrepressible, never-tiring talkers." For Iyer, this national trait is emblematised by its loud, vulgar, masala films—the 800 or more "epic concoctions" made in India each year.



He writes: "When it came to the production of dreams – or gods – India had the biggest, busiest, noisiest industry in the world."

In the set of stories collected in *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Vikram Chandra inflects his stories with the – uh – spice of Hindi films. Chandra, who teaches creative writing at George Washington University, makes no pretence of producing radical fiction. In shedding that middle-class impulse to always speak in the voice of the underclass, he, paradoxically enough, produces writing that is radical in the sense that it bares the bones of India's urban elite. The only drawback with this approach is that, swayed by the delusions of the ruling class, Chandra can reach conclusions that are rather vain. He ends a story with the dramatic announcement that it was a marriage among two leading families that by itself determined the flows of transnational capital and the longevity of governments in India.

Ronald Reagan

Perhaps because Chandra narrates these stories from the position of the secure, fairly independent, Indian *bourgeoisie*, they convey a confidence that is lacking in the fiction that addresses itself to the lives of Indians living outside the national borders. Additionally, in some of the better stories like "Kama" and "Artha", there is a quality that can only be called contemporary. The lucid ease of a female software engineer cleaning the syntax of her computer programme, the names of the city's bars, the register of a gay relationship, the untranslated bits of Mehdi Hassan ghazals. There is a bold ordinariness to this presentation that was hitherto lacking in Indian fiction in English.

The India of these stories is one in which neither tradition nor modernity hold unchallenged sway: its urban centres have been irredeemably altered by migrations and industry, slums and high finance, crime and films. And, in these tales of love and longing, the irruptions of urban speech carry that newness which is at once more crude and complex.

Like the Hindi films which provide this book its dramatic backdrop, Chandra's stories paint the fantasy of urban glitz, heartbreaking romance and petty intrigues. And, like some of the contempo-

rary Hindi films, their surface too is rent by the explosion of fundamentalist violence. The stories attest to the fact that, in the course of their daily life, people lead lives that are unavoidably mixed: Hindus and Muslims do live as lovers, Christians and Hindus help each other as workers, one Hindu is different from another...

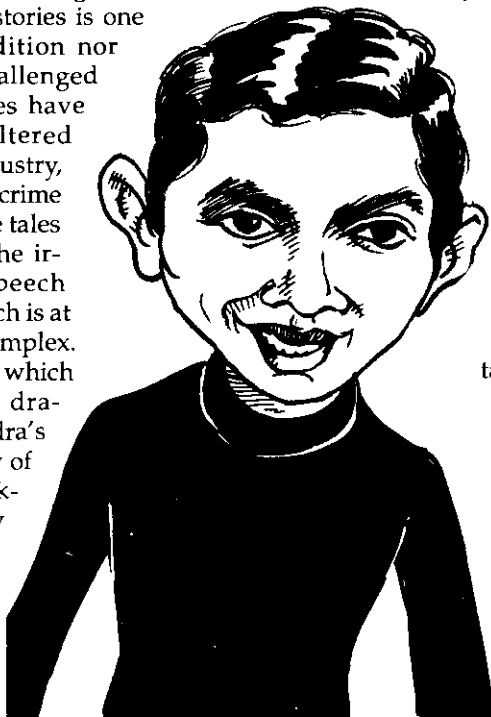
One Indian writer, however, I am very happy to report, understands that fact very well. This writer, rather than sticking with Bollywood, chose the best and brightest produced by Hollywood. He is none other than the very ordinary Dinesh D'Souza. Sir Dinesh of the American Enterprise Institute, long feted by his conservative Republican supporters, has produced another banality, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*. It is a thick book.

There are a lot of non-Indians yakking at length on the dust-jacket about the book's worth. Rush Limbaugh tops the list. Lower down the page is Tom Wolfe. He writes: "This marvellous book will drive the intellectual establishment – the conservative cadre as well as the liberal legions – straight up the wall. It convincingly demonstrates Ronald Reagan's moral, political and – yes! I'm afraid so! – intellectual superiority to the entire lot of them."

I bought the book but have been unable to read it. I stopped many times, but after page 40 I could not go on. On page 40, however, where my adventure with the book ended forever, D'Souza cited a poem by Reagan to illustrate his "gift for hope":

*I wonder what it's all about, and why
We suffer so, when little things go wrong?
We make our life a struggle
When life should be a song.*

Believe me, dear reader, I would not have inflicted this jaunty ditty on you if I didn't have a moral: bad writing, like good writing, is not limited to any nation alone. It is not a national trait. If it were, I would have asked Dinesh D'Souza to wear a large sign around his neck saying: "I'm Indian, and I write in English, but I'm not talented." ▲



A longer version of this article is forthcoming in *Transition*.

Dinesh
D'Souza

Goodbye, Calcutta

Will renaming the city get rid of a lingering colonial hangover?

by Sujoy Dhar

A rose by any other name will smell as sweet. Calcutta by any other name will be as chaotic." These words in the lead story of a Calcutta daily summed up the mood of an immobilised Calcutta held to ransom by a Mamta Banerjee political rally on 21 July, a day after the self-anointed champions of Bengali culture rechristened Calcutta "Kolkata", following the example set earlier by Bombay and Madras.

One would have expected that given the Bengali's well-known language chauvinism, the renaming would have generated considerable enthusiasm among the people of Calcutta. This was not the case. A few gawky Calcuttians approached by television channels on the streets said that they were happy about the change. But a more scientific opinion poll conducted for *The Telegraph*

newspaper showed that 52 percent of the city's denizens are against the name-change. More significant was the fact that an overwhelming number of those surveyed were young.

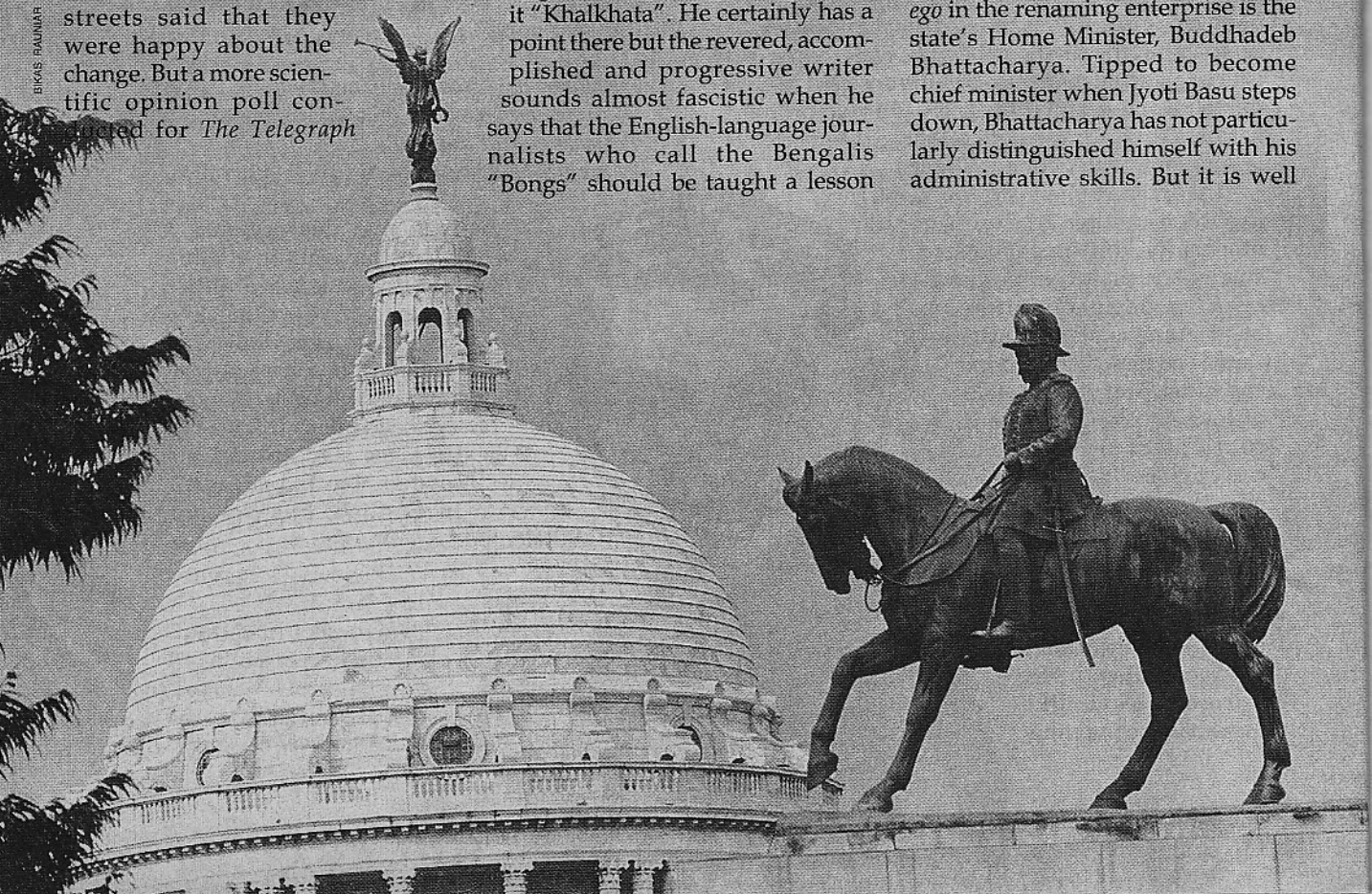
Leading the charge for the 'Bengalisation' of the name of this 300-year-old city was the well-known writer Sunil Gangopadhyay, who had been demanding the change through various newspaper and magazine articles. His write-ups attempted to rouse the Bengali-speaker to his support and were laced with polemic. A recent one stated that though the British had named the city "Calcutta" 250 years ago, the Bengalis continue to pronounce and write it Kolkata in Bengali. Only the brown sahebs call it "Khalkhata". He certainly has a point there but the revered, accomplished and progressive writer sounds almost fascistic when he says that the English-language journalists who call the Bengalis "Bongs" should be taught a lesson

or when he calls for publicly ridiculing Bengali children who speak English among themselves and socially boycotting the parents who neglect teaching of Bengali to their children.

In a way, Gangopadhyay's outburst only serves to underline the collective frustration felt by writers at the declining readership of Bengali literature. Even a prolific and talented a writer as Gangopadhyay must have been affected by this. And their way of getting back at their vanishing readers seems to be forcing Bengali-ness down the throat of the present generation, something which, they feel, is accomplished to some extent by renaming Calcutta.

Gangopadhyay's political *alter ego* in the renaming enterprise is the state's Home Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. Tipped to become chief minister when Jyoti Basu steps down, Bhattacharya has not particularly distinguished himself with his administrative skills. But it is well

BIKAS RAJNATH



known that he is fond of rubbing shoulders with the Bengali literati and has on occasions been embroiled in controversies over his attempts to 'preserve' the Bengali culture. Thus it was that the would-be cultural czar of Bengalidom introduced the resolution for the renaming of Calcutta, and got it passed. (The resolution also proposes that West Bengal be called Bangla but that is a matter that can only be decided by the Centre.) The opposition Congress too fell in line to "correct the historical wrong". Never mind if the move represented nothing more than an exercise in parochialism to subvert the historical legacy of the British who founded the city in the closing years of the 17th century.

Unlike many big cities of India, such as Delhi or Madras, Calcutta does not have a recorded history prior to 1690 when a British East India Company merchant called Job Charnock formally integrated the three villages of Kolikata, Sutanuti and Govindopur to lay the foundation of a new settlement. The British

took the name Kolikata and called their new town Calcutta. In 1706 the place had only two streets, two lanes and eight pucca houses. By 1756 this had become 27 streets, 52 lanes and 498 pucca houses. Later it became the seat of British power in India, ultimately emerging as the second city of the British empire (after London) by the end of the 19th century.

It was under British patronage that the city metamorphosed into a torch-bearer for art, culture, literature, journalism, social reform and progressive thinking. It was also owing to British support that renaissance figures like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and others could bring about momentous social changes in Bengali society, changes that were to have a ripple effect throughout India. While the architectural history of post-Independence Calcutta is one of a tasteless decline towards an unsafe concrete jungle, the now-crumbling buildings of the metropolis built by the British had once earned it the epithet "city of palaces".

The idea of Kolkata does not

seem very amusing to some die-hard Calcuttans, of whom, a recent report from the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority says, ethnic Bengalis account for only 57 percent. Eminent filmmaker and one of the city's cultural icons, Mrinal Sen, says he is at a loss as to how the change in name would bring about a change in Bengali culture. "They say this is how we can get rid of the colonial legacy. This is one thing I don't understand at all. How do you do that? To stand shorn of the colonial legacy is not that simple. The only thing I can foresee is that in these days of growing poverty some more money will be spent in effecting the change across the state and at the Centre."

Shyamanand Jalan, a non-Bengali Calcuttan playwright and vice-president of Sangeet Natak Akademy, feels that forcing the city to a single-language identity will only lead to isolation. Hopefully, Calcutta is made of sterner stuff and a mere name-change will not make it lose its soul. ▲

22 years of Jyoti Basu

The Left Front may win another election, but the time has come to look beyond Basu.

by *S.N.M. Abdi*

The communist government of West Bengal may have managed to become the longest-serving popularly elected government in the world, but if the lack of enthusiasm among the common people for its 22nd anniversary is any indication, longevity is probably the only distinction it has managed to achieve. Spontaneous celebrations were absent both in Calcutta and elsewhere in the state in the month of June which

marked the completion of 22 red years in West Bengal. The festivities remained confined to receptions and get-togethers hosted by the government. The masses were left to despondently contemplate an uncertain future.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) captured power in West Bengal in 1977 heading a coalition of broadly socialist parties known as the Left Front, in the first post-Emer-

gency elections held in India. Its performance in the intervening years has been nothing to crow about. In education, West Bengal has slid from 6th to 17th position in the country. Contrary to the government's tall claims, the state lags behind others in business and industry, occupying the 14th position in the industrial table. Investors, once driven out by the militant Left-backed trade unions, are refusing to return fear-



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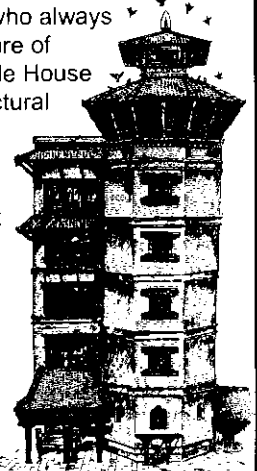
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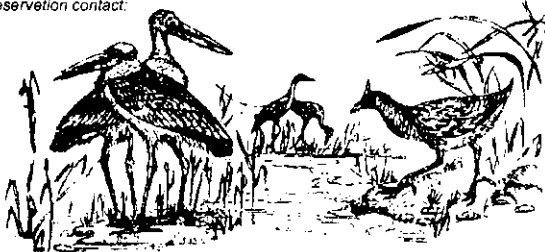
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ing a repetition of the turbulent 1960s, and this despite chief minister Jyoti Basu's all-out efforts to lure big industry into the state.

The question, however, remains as to how the communists, "tamed and co-opted" as they were by political realities and constitutional norms of behaviour, have managed to maintain their hold over West Bengal, winning election after election against an established national party like the Congress. And also how the party's helmsman, Jyoti Basu, has emerged as India's longest-serving chief minister, heading the government for five consecutive terms since 1977. The answer may lie in a deeper look at the Jyoti Basu phenomenon.

JB, WB and CPM

Not too long ago, an advertisement for J&B whisky went "ingle ells, ingle ells... Christmas is just not the same without J&B". One could almost say the same about West Bengal without JB—Jyoti Basu.

The man who failed in the Indian Civil Service examinations and sub-

sequently returned from London with a law degree from the Inner Temple, to then embrace communism, has become a cult figure over the last two decades and more of chief ministership. He in fact has virtually replaced the hammer-and-sickle as the CPM symbol and provides a pan-India respectability to the party. Even his refusal to smile in public, his bored and disinterested look, have added to his personal aura. "Apart from being its charismatic leader, Basu is the central force that draws together the coalition's warring factions," says Aweek Sarkar, editor of the *Anand Bazaar Patrika* daily. "Without that central force, the personal ambitions of the Front leaders would tear the coalition apart."

Parallels have been drawn between Basu and Deng Xiaoping as leaders who abandoned 'class struggle' to emerge as flagholders of the market economy. Says columnist Shankar Ghosh, "Like Deng, Basu does not mind the colour of the capitalist cat as long as it is prepared to invest in his communist state." Not

surprisingly, West Bengal's search for foreign investments long preceded overtures made in that direction by the central government in the early years of this decade. Few communist leaders have rubbed shoulders so often with the international bourgeoisie as Basu has, or solicited capital and advocated free market reform. And he has done it with the red badge on his chest, telling industrialists how they had failed to grasp the importance of land reforms in giving a boost to industrialisation: "Seventy percent of our people live in the villages. Unless their purchasing power improves, who will buy your things?"

Basu's admirers are legion. They are indignant that his own party, the CPM, prevented him from becoming prime minister not once but twice. He was chosen to lead the nation by 12 squabbling political parties in 1996, and then in 1999 he was the consensus choice once again, with an even more disparate group pleading with him to accept the hot seat. The party overruled his ascension in both cases. With Basu now announc-

Land reform vs Industry

The Left Front's revolutionary land reforms programme, which helped establish its electoral stranglehold over the countryside, has now come in the way of West Bengal's rapid industrialisation, so says an official report prepared by the state's Land and Land Reforms Department.

Since 1977, under "Operation Barga", the Jyoti Basu government has distributed excess land of landlords to hundreds of thousands of poor sharecroppers (*bargadars*) and the landless, thereby creating a formidable vote-bank for the communists in rural Bengal. But now the government, which is according top priority to the state's industrial revival, is finding it difficult to persuade the allottees to give up their tenancy rights on the land required for setting up plants and factories.

The official report, entitled "Background Paper on Tenancy Reforms: West Bengal's Perspective" is extremely critical of the emphasis on land reforms, particularly Operation Barga. The paper bluntly points out that the legislation enacted to protect the rights of sharecroppers and to empower the landless is impeding the acquisition of land for setting up new townships and industrial units in the state. Land is also urgently required not only for factories and plants, but also for building roads, including the big-budget multi-lane north-south corridor linking Darjeeling district and Jalpaiguri to the industrial hub around Calcutta.

The official document proposes an amendment to existing laws, which do not have provisions for control reverting from the beneficia-

ries of Operation Barga. The anti-eviction safeguards were considered necessary two decades ago to protect the interests of the rural poor. "But today, when the emphasis is on providing infrastructure for setting up industries, the laws must be changed without delay." The land reforms wing of the state government says the amendment will enable the beneficiaries to sell their land. This, it believes, should help encourage investors, as government agencies like the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation and the Infrastructure Development Corporation will be in a position to buy land in any district for meeting investor demand.

▲
—S.N.M. Abdi

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ing his retirement from politics, it seems the 87-year-old communist is destined to go down in history as the best prime minister India never had.

There were periods when his popularity plummeted, but his recovery was swift. A long-standing criticism has been that members of his family have not exactly been squeamish about exploiting their connection, with son Chandan Basu leading the way. In a society where commerce and trading are looked upon with distrust and contempt, the pursuit of profit by the chief minister's family is grist for established prejudices.

Questions have also been raised about his sagacity in allowing a bunch of wheeler-dealers to hover around him. But these are probably barnacles that latch on the ships of state the world over, since the patriarch himself appears to be impregnable. "His absence is going to be a major loss, as there is no similar figure of authority in West Bengal. But Basu or no Basu, realistically speaking, there is no reason why the Left Front should not romp home again in 2001," says Partha Chatterjee, director of the Centre of Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta.

Over time, the CPM's hold on power has had less and less to do with the appeal for communist ideology among the electorate. In fact, the party is communist only in token terms, for its ideology, policies and programmes are typically social democratic. As far back as 1977, soon after coming to power, Basu had said to a Reuters correspondent: "What we are saying to the people, is 'Yes we call ourselves communists, but that is for the future'."

The CPM's repeated election victories have come through the party's popularity among agricultural workers and peasants—whom Karl Marx once described as a sack of potatoes—who benefitted immensely during the first decade of the Left rule. This was the result of the party's most successful programme, "Operation Barga" (see box), started the same year the Left Front came to power. The

communist government also decentralised the flow of development funds to rural areas, giving sweeping powers to village panchayats. In the CPM's first decade in power, the panchayats boosted production in small farms by providing subsidised loans and fertilisers, and by turning mono-crop areas into multi-crop fields.

But for all that, the CPM did not really take on the rural rich, adopting a non-threatening approach towards the property-owning classes. With radicals in the party gradually marginalised in the power struggle with the centrists, and with just a handful of them in positions of leadership, the CPM failed to confront the dominant rural elite with class demands and programmes. It was a shocking about-turn by a revolutionary party that had broken away from a "revisionist" Communist Party of India.

Beyond ideological hair-splitting, however, the fact remains that the CPM's development inroads in the rural areas, and its successful establishment of a village-level party infrastructure, has turned the state's vast rural population of around 65 million into a vote-bank that has been impenetrable by any other political party. The penetration of the countryside, however, has not impressed analysts like research scholar Ross Mullick, who has written off the Left Front as a "failure", citing that "even a Secretary of the West Bengal government when asking his Indian Administrative Service colleagues if they could think of a single successful programme the Left Front could claim credit for, received no suggestions, though they were themselves in charge of implementing policies."

An even more damning indictment lies in an inner-party document of the CPM's Burdwan District Committee, which candidly admits



that "the Left Front has not been able to meet the aspirations of the people, who feel that even the limited powers at the disposal of the government have not been properly used".

So what has been the singular achievement of the Left Front in its more than two decades in power? Political scientists like Partha Chatterjee are impressed by its success in containing popular discontent and keeping in check agitations along caste and communal lines. Says Chatterjee, "Compared to the turbulent situation in the 60s and the 70s, West Bengal is relatively quiet today, although its actual industrial economy has been rapidly declining." The next stage of development hinges on the regeneration of this industrial economy, something that is recognised in the thrust given by the Left Front to attract investments and improve conditions in the capital, Calcutta. The success of this agenda would depend on how well it is pursued by the government. Without the towering presence of the soon-to-retire Jyoti Basu, it won't be easy. ▲

It's going to be a long, expensive

As the guns fall silent in Kargil, New Delhi is preparing for the awesome and expensive task of permanently manning the previously unguarded and desolate mountainous frontier. More than two divisions (nearly 40,000 troops) based in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar have been diverted to the frontier, leaving a vacuum which is weakly filled by some 20 paramilitary battalions inexperienced in dealing with the insurgency in Kashmir.

Since 1972, when the ceasefire line between India and Pakistan became the line of control (LoC) after their third war, the Indian army has been manning observation posts in the Kargil area for around four months after the snows melt in June. Patrols used to be sent out along the craggy ridges, but these were infrequent since the army was confident that the pact between the two en-

emies and the geography itself were a guarantee against any intrusions.

That has now changed. The 140-km-long line of control (LoC) in the Kargil region now needs constant supervision. The resources of India's 1.2 million-strong army will now be stretched not only in terms of manpower but also financially, says a senior military officer involved in the re-organisation.

And unless the deployment of counter-insurgency (CI) forces gets an entirely new "doctrinal approach", the officer says the army's resources and resilience would be weakened. Two-thirds of the length of India's land border are mountainous, but with a *detente* holding out with China for years and no real trouble along the LoC since 1972, there had been a winding down of the army's focus on mountain fighting, other than on Siachen.

The change in doctrinal approach would mean that the Indian army would have to concentrate more on mountain warfare once again.

Having fought so hard, the army has no choice but to man the area heavily, says another senior military officer: "India may have won the battle against the intruders but it has lost the war." Several battalions of the 8th Mountain division which fought to evict the intruders from several key features have been asked to remain behind and move up to positions along the LoC. They expect to be stationed there through the harsh winter, till relieved in mid-2000.

It will cost India about INR 125 million (USD 2.9 million) per day to maintain the 8000-10,000 soldiers along the LoC in the Kargil region. This is in addition to what it already spends in defending Kashmir and

The jihadi spell

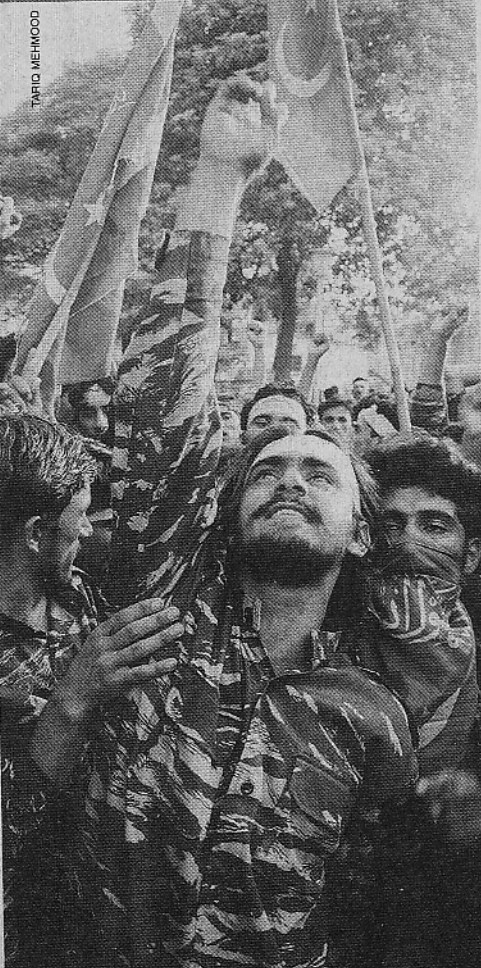
Leaders of Pakistan's radical jihadi organisations have been touring Pakistan. "We will stop only at Srinagar," boasted one of the commanders. Another made a rather more ambitious announcement of annexing not only Kashmir but the whole of India.

But when the 'capitulation' finally came, most of the jihadi groups chose to relent. Only Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Pakistan's most influential religious party which also godfathers the Hizbul Mujahidin, called a million people to march in Lahore on 25 July. The event was to mark the beginning of a movement to throw out Nawaz Sharif who had committed "an unpardonable sin". However, the

charged crowd that gathered outside the colonial building of Punjab Assembly in Lahore was a fraction of the target. More importantly, other than Hizbul Mujahidin, none of the other groups attended.

Organised along sectarian lines, other organisations appear deeply suspicious of the JI and its political ambitions. The Harkatul Mujahidin, formerly known as Harkatul Ansar, is so close to the Taliban that inside Afghanistan their militants are called the "Pakistani Taliban" and take an active part in that country's fratricidal warfare. Due to a Taliban offensive against the Northern Alliance within Afghanistan, it was perhaps not very feasible for the Harkatul to indulge itself in a clash

The "Million March" that failed.



ensive, cold war

counter-insurgency operations (CI Ops). (Indian intelligence officials estimate Pakistan spends around INR 20 million—approx. USD 4,65,100— a month annually to sustain Kashmir's militancy, whereas India's daily expenditure on CI Ops in Kashmir is itself around INR 20 million. India also spends INR 30 million—approx. USD 6,97,600— a day in maintaining troops in the Siachen glacier.)

Following the experience in Kargil, billions of rupees more will be spent in the purchase of new equipment, such as hugely expensive ordnance, high-altitude clothing, radar, surveillance hardware and ground sensors. A three-member Indian army team from the Weapons and Equipment (WAE) Directorate is presently negotiating with Israel, South Africa and Russia for INR 2 billion (approx. USD 46,51,16, 27)

worth of ordnance, weapon-locating radar and artillery rockets with a 15-km range.

India also plans to build up an inventory of 10 to 12 weapon-locating radar through local manufacture. Two years ago, the defence ministry had finalised the 'purchase' of similar radar from the American company Hughes, but the economic sanctions which followed last year's nuclear tests put an end to that deal. Negotiations are also underway with Israel and South Africa for immediate purchase of at least two Long-Range Observation and Reconnaissance System Tripods with day and night capability, for INR 15 million (approx. USD 3,48,830) each.

That's a heavy shopping list and it is one that will have to be continuously upgraded. Like the army officer said, it is going to a long war.▲

—Rahul Bedi

with the Islamabad government. The organisation is already in the bad books of the government due to its links with the Sunni sectarian militant groups Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

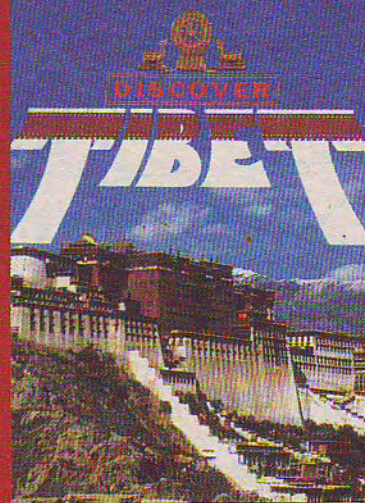
Rather than initiating hostilities, Harkat's strategy at this point is to wait for the government to strike first. It fears that the government may move to restrain its activities on the behest of the US, which has declared it a terrorist organisation. Harkat's leaders made a not-so-indirect threat by declaring that they would call the Taliban to their aid when and if they felt the need for it.

The country's largest jihadi organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba, has concentrated its energies on making the best of the unprecedented glorification provided by the Kargil crisis. Lashkar, which has its headquarters in Muridke near Lahore, intensified its movement during the Kargil crisis, holding well-attended rallies and guerrilla

shows all over the country. When the prime minister of Pakistan signed on the dotted line in Washington, it joined the opposition chorus, but at the same time it refused to become part of any concerted move against the government.

Lashkar appears to have decided to go soft on the government because it is confident that the latter will not try to restrain its activities in Indian Kashmir and also because it has no short-term political agenda. The group seems satisfied with the incredible strength it has mustered over the past five years and realises that any clash with the government at this time can only jeopardise its position. But once a clash takes place, it will be far deadlier than the JI's perennial protests, for Lashkar is crucially different from the JI in one area: it does not believe in the democratic system, which it considers completely un-Islamic.▲

—Zaigham Khan



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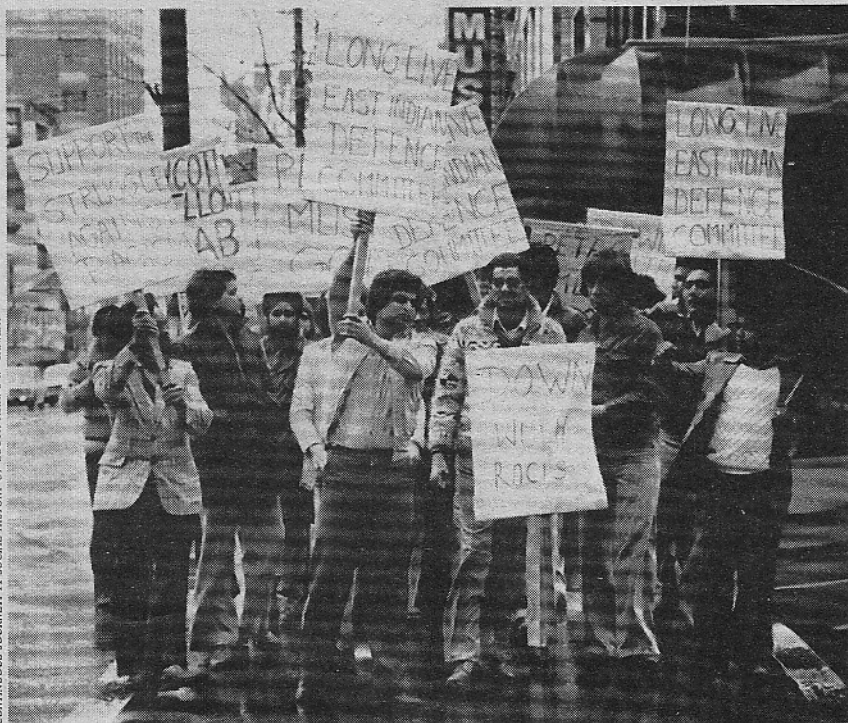


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We were all Pakis once

Piali Roy reminds the South Asian diaspora that this is a time for coalition-building, not name-calling.



Anti-racist demonstration, Vancouver, 1980.

This June while checking my e-mail from a South Asian discussion list I was stunned to read messages from Indians in the US littered with a word from the past—"Paki".

Paki-bashing is back and it is NRIs (non-resident Indians) and Americans of Indian origin who have reclaimed that racist slur to denigrate Pakistanis. This summer's conflict in Kargil unleashed a torrent of rage, reaching a feverish peak after the story of the mutilated Indian soldiers broke.

Even the media picked up this disturbing phenomenon. *India Today* columnist Dilip Bobb cavalierly mentions how Paki-bashing is a safe electoral bet for the "ruling party". Rediff on the Net, a web magazine, casually carries a headline on an Indo-Pak tea summit, punning on

the *Hindi-Chini bhai bhai* to come up with *Hindi-Paki chai*, while a few of its columnists actually use it as an insult. *The New York Post* joined in with a too-prescient headline—"India: Pakis Killed POWs" (although it caught the *faux pas* in time for its daily edition, its electronic version carried the slur).

Once the domain of epithet-shouting skinheads in England, the indiscriminate use of "Paki" by the very people who were once thus targeted is highly incongruous. Name-calling in such a highly-charged atmosphere is expectedly juvenile but hardly exceptional. To anyone who grew up South Asian in the West, particularly in Canada or the UK, who was beaten up, chased down a road, had their home set on fire—all because of their accent and skin colour, this is an abomination.

The out-of-context return of a word so charged with hate and ice-cold fear feels like a slap in the face.

Originating in England, "Paki" was the kind of word that would easily spurt out of an English racist in an early Hanif Kureishi film. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first usage in print to as late as 1964. The term crossed the Atlantic to Canada in the early 1970s. By the 1980s, "dothead" and "curryhead" had been coined as American alternatives to "Paki". And now, some Indians have chosen to appropriate this term of abuse and partition its meaning.

To be called a Paki was, ironically, the great leveller, transcending all boundaries—your local racists kindly ignored class, creed, colour, country of origin and caste when it came to the hunt. The histories of nations were wiped clean by a steel-toed boot, a *tabula rasa* created by young men blinded by hate. They knew nothing of Partition, the wars between India and Pakistan, the civil war in Sri Lanka and the fight for Bangladeshi independence. It didn't matter whether you were Parsi or Christian, working-class or filthy rich, Sinhala or Sikh, Bangladeshi or Guyanese.

Many of us recognised the slur's inclusiveness, but others preferred to see it as the penultimate case of mistaken national identity. "I'm not a Paki, I'm an Indian" is the typical refrain. "I remember the differences, the turmoil of the Subcontinent, I know with whom I identify." As American writer Bharati Mukherjee wrote in 1981 in the Canadian magazine, *Saturday Night*: "For an Indian of my generation, to be called a 'Paki' is about as appealing as it is for an Israeli to be called a Syrian." Would "bloody wog" be better?

That indignant denial is the an-



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thesis of the coalition-building that South Asians need to fight discrimination in the West. It steals from the solidarity of the various South Asian communities in the UK who have built an 'Asian' identity; from organisations like Toronto's Desh Pardesh which seek to create a new identity among the diaspora; and most importantly from those kids, sometimes but not always Pakistani, who have made the word their own (after all, long before we became hyphenated citizens in the West, we were all Pakis once).

Subcontinentals abroad have always received and assumed new goodnames, nicknames, slurnames. We were the negro and the nigger; we were shades of black—black, black Indian, East India tawney black, the black Hindoo; in the UK, we morphed from Asiatics to Blacks to Asians; the US couldn't decide if we were Caucasians or whites for one moment; we ourselves couldn't decide whether we were our ethnicity, our religion, or just plain *desis* to outsiders; and the unimagi-

native simply said wogs, towelheads, and ragheads. We even became East Indians because we weren't West Indians (well, some of us were) or Red Indians.

Farangis

What has happened in the present instance is the mis-appropriation of a word imbued with our oppression in the West. To paraphrase Salman Rushdie, Indian immigrants could have "adopted the demon-tag the *farangis* hung around their necks," but they did not turn "insults into strengths...to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn."

Are Indian immigrants, sojourners, and expats so removed from our cumulative pasts beyond the Subcontinent? Is it the fate of the newly arrived to believe that history begins only after their plane lands? The innocent claim is that in Bharat Mata, "Paki" is a common enough word, part of cricket short-hand with a "Made in India" stamp of approval, while others are adamant that they had never heard of it back 'home'.

Are we as culpable as the racists—our experiences made null once more by the ignorance of others? We demonstrate an incredible selective use of memory to remember past wrongs on the Subcontinent and highlight current troubles, but are not as vigilant about our history in the West.

The NRI who chooses to use "Paki" as his verbal weapon of choice only sees, hears and thinks of how Pakistan has wronged his country of birth. He arrives abroad, links Paki with Pakistan, knows nothing of the word's past and if he does, claims it only applied to badly behaved Pakistanis, then uses it. He sees no connection between his rage and my history. I may understand his rage, but not the disavowal of my past.

When we use "Paki" against each other, we lose. We disrespect every migrant before us who suffered the indignity of prejudice. To appropriate a Western slur used against all of us to attack some of us—is true degradation. ▲

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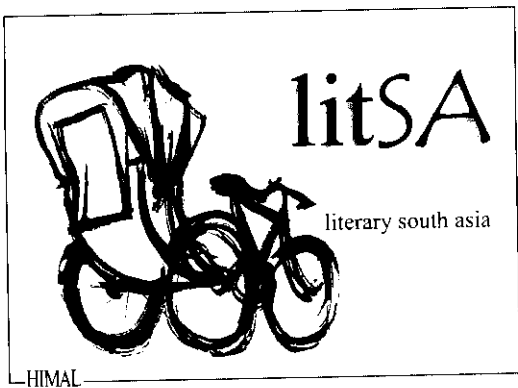


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Announcing the arrival of Himal's Literary Pages

Something is lost when stories from different parts of South Asia are not shared. litSA is short for Literary South Asia—a new department being started by Himal in an effort to bring together the literary talent of the

Subcontinent. The creative voice of women and men from all over the region, we feel, are as necessary to share as the journalist's presentation or the social scientist's analysis.

The first of litSA's pages appear in this issue and will thereafter appear as a regular feature.

Himal hopes that litSA will develop as an important forum for writers—contemporary and traditional, and from everywhere, inside and outside, the centre and the margins, and from all sides of the barbed wire that attempts to divide the South Asian people. Besides featuring a wide range of literary styles, litSA will encourage experiment and adventure. Above all, it will champion the writer's right to be irreverent.

Over the years, Himal believes litSA will help develop an indigenous appreciation of the region's creative talent, free from the shackles of power publishing and marketing hype. We also aspire eventually to bring to readers anthologies and collections culled from the best writings that feature in litSA.

Call for Submissions

Himal invites writers and poets, whether established or new talent, to send their submissions to litSA at:

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email: mole@dte.vsnl.net.in
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GUIDELINES

1. litSA prefers unpublished material in the form of short fiction, poetry, memoir, travelogue, literary and photo essays or literary criticism. We also welcome book reviews and literature-relevant interviews, as also book extracts which can stand alone.
 2. Nationality or regional origin is no criterion, so long as the submission has a link to South Asia.
 3. We prefer receiving submissions by email or on diskettes. If submitting on paper, please do not send in the original. Prose should be typed double spaced, and poems should be submitted individually.
 4. Translations should specify the source and, wherever possible, the author's consent.
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 6. Submissions may be edited.
 7. Remuneration for published works will range between USD 50 and USD 150.
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litSA

literary south asia

HIMAL

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

ABANDONED TEMPLE

A brambly thicket of blackberry canes
squats, a votary, before it.

Another autumn slowly ticks away.

Veils of mist smile on nervously
at this victim of unmoving grass.

A wandering boy hurls a rock through
the ruined entrance. Shadows in retreat fly;
of serpent-girls, elephant-gods, fiery birds.
Mosquitoes slap the Siva *linga* in ignorant stillness,
a long shiver running down the shrine.

A ghost holding its gaze to a distant tenderness.
In an expanded pupil of stone
a whitened hibiscus twists its way
along the phosphorescent wake of a moonbeam
toward a winter-life of ritual and innocence. ▲





in search of a READER

Over a dark and quiet empire
alone I fly—and envy you,
two-headed eagle who at least
have always yourself to talk to.

-Andrei Voznsensky

Whatever the concerns of seeking writing of substance in litSA pages, it still leaves unanswered the crucial and oft-neglected question about south asian writing in English: who, or rather, where is the reader? Would comparison between Latin American literature and the more recent south asian literature in English prove fruitful? Only perhaps to the extent (with deference to their un-shared histories, different colonial pasts, the status of Spanish as the *lingua franca* of the region) of their respective entries into world literature.

All are agreed on the point that south asian literature in English is, to requisition a phrase from the past, of recent vintage. By contrast, before its 'discovery' by the English-speaking world, the literature of Latin America already enjoyed immense popularity with readers in South America and the writers (such as Borges, Neruda or Paz) themselves were already distinguished by their publications in the original Spanish. The project in bringing Latin American literature to global consumption was thus mostly preoccupied with the problems of translation of the original works into English.

Not so however in the case of literature south asia in English; barely a decade and a half old in terms of successful commercial publication (as evidenced by the huge advances to authors) as well as international recognition in the form of awards, prizes and screenplays, writing in English has been almost the exclusive preserve of the literate south asian in a land where literacy is at a premium. And as Rushdie rightly pointed out, inevitably such writing has been

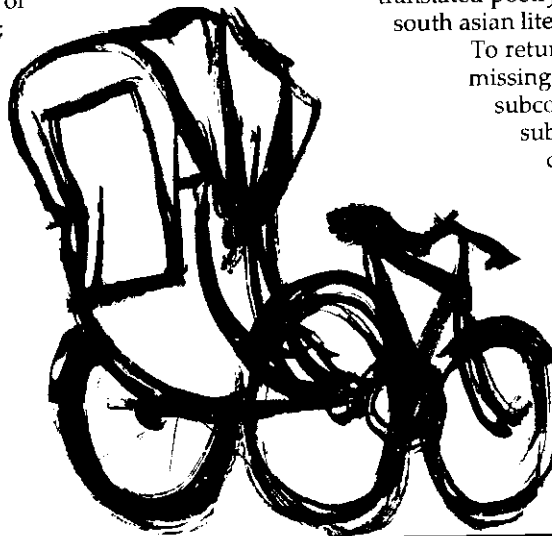
concerned with themes urban and elite. A matter further compounded by the fact that a great number of writers are working from the diaspora, sometimes addressing an immediate audience more often than not obsessed with the idea of an exoticised 'East', and often themselves caught up in nostalgia for a homeland they-for whatever reasons—left behind.

Others, caught in the call-and-response bind of certain forms of cultural theory and migrant writing feel compelled to address themes of exile and dislocation. Indeed some of the international book-reading public organises itself down into cyberlists of south asian literature-watchers. Wherein it is observed that a dichotomy is drawn, often overtly, between diaspora and non-diaspora writing. Anxiety detected in the matter of representations of the country of non-residence to the outside world, is manifested in the form of, say, a spirited rally to the defence of Rabindranath Tagore against his critics and detractors on one of the lists.

Meanwhile, readers back home, shut out from compatriotic literatures by the sheer inability to master a vast number of languages, take recourse to the scanty and largely ineffectual translations in English from the vernacular. Having said that, let it go on record here that whilst the debate rages on about the musicality (or the lack of it) of the English language, litSA stands firmly committed to the publication and collection of translated poetry and fiction which is as important to south asian literature in english as original works.

To return to the theme of the reader, what is missing perhaps within and without the subcontinent is the space to create a substantial readership favourably disposed to the somewhat old-fashioned notion of a good read in the first place; a readership given to the eager anticipation of the arrival of stories that escape over barbed wire and minefields, over the death-filled lagoons and high glaciers. Perhaps litSA will, in some measure, fill that role. ▲

—anmole prasad





JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

AFTERNOON

The harsh afternoon skin of the summer sky
lies in flakes on the dry river bed.
There, the raped and dismembered body
of another thirteen-year-old girl, stilled,
beyond the tremblings of the sands.

Only shadows in the God's hands
endorse the despair
haunting the report in the day's newspaper.

Meanwhile, under the blank sands,
a frail flow of hope goes past, as always,
carrying our women's uncertain future.
And elsewhere, the musclemen
of a country's leaders
keep asking
under their breath: What happened?

Late afternoon I saw a young widow
strip herself naked by the water.
Just dark bruises all over her fair body
made by a world's lust-filled eyes
kept turning helplessly toward the river:
the tide on a dark beach somewhere
washing a worn-out wood bench on the sands. ▲



JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

DARKNESS

The darkness kept on its gentle murmur
Peeping out from piles of refuse
From tips of brooms that sweep every floor
From the posture of litter after the party's over
From the exhausted yawn of someone called God
Darkness recited the tables of the earth's turning

From a window here and a door there
Darkness lifted its head and looked
Who would show it the way?
It slipped past reason and knocked on the Minister's heart
It flaunted its shape, gathering moments
from the light of hostile history
Then came and stood out there
in a middle-class neighbourhood, stark naked

Does the dark hide a distant tenderness?
An air of healing?
For years it has mumbled the song of the senses,
growing older with each night;
but now keeps alive the desert moon of the soul
in the endless self-betrayal of the waking sense of things
though the clock's ticking on the bookcase

Darkness, evening song.
Root of startled light.
Good may come out of it.
But the mind is too small a room
and I don't know where the dream can go.
Just a bank of coloured lottery tickets
crosses the darkness of an ill-fated man. ▲



The IDLE lover

—Moazzam Sheikh

*'The loneliness inside me,
the duality of my person'*

—Kishwar Naheed

In a recurrent dream, appearing sporadically and nearly always unchanged, he would recognise himself—more from the intimacy of the dream than from his own face—in the midst of a prolonged, abysmal fall. But before he could die, he would wake and sit up in bed, a shriek burning in his throat, panting and soaked in perspiration, wondering why none of the other soldiers in his barracks had been awakened by his scream; then, just then, two dark eyes of a woman would appear and stare at him from the darkness, and as if taking a cue from those eyes, he would then turn on his side, afraid but still half-asleep, learning once again, that he had just dreamed a dream within a dream. A scorpion of fear would flex its tail in his heart, forcing him to keep his eyes closed.

Naib Subedar Prem Lal Singh was of proven Rajput stock; his forefathers were the Hindu warriors who, under Raja Ranjit Singh "Kana", had held off the British from entering the five rivers. According to family legend, some of his forefathers had achieved martyrdom while defending the Punjab, and the knowledge of this profound sacrifice made Prem Lal hold his head high with pride. A century later, his ancestors once again had proved their mettle, not just in India but in the Middle East and Africa, fighting for the British. The list of martyrs was longer than that of the ones who returned, some with missing limbs like his uncle Mukhan Singh "Tunda".

Prem Lal stood out from the other non-commissioned officers of the 502 Punjab Corps in the Delhi Cantonment because of his dark, bluish-copper skin, ever-glinting, sweat or no sweat; he also left an image of his face stamped indelibly in people's minds due to his unusually high cheek bones, his broad forehead, the slightly mismatched Chinese eyes, but above all, for his oil-tweaked, proudly twirled moustache that curled upwards to touch

the overhang of his cheekbones. A veteran of two wars with Pakistan, once on the western frontier and once on the eastern, his stock was always high among his peers no matter where he was stationed. One could safely assume that he had seen Dacca; and indeed he had even seen the great General Arora rip the medals off the shirt of the Tiger of Bengal, Gen Niazi. The experience had left a shiver of memory in his spine, like a permanent taste of poison.

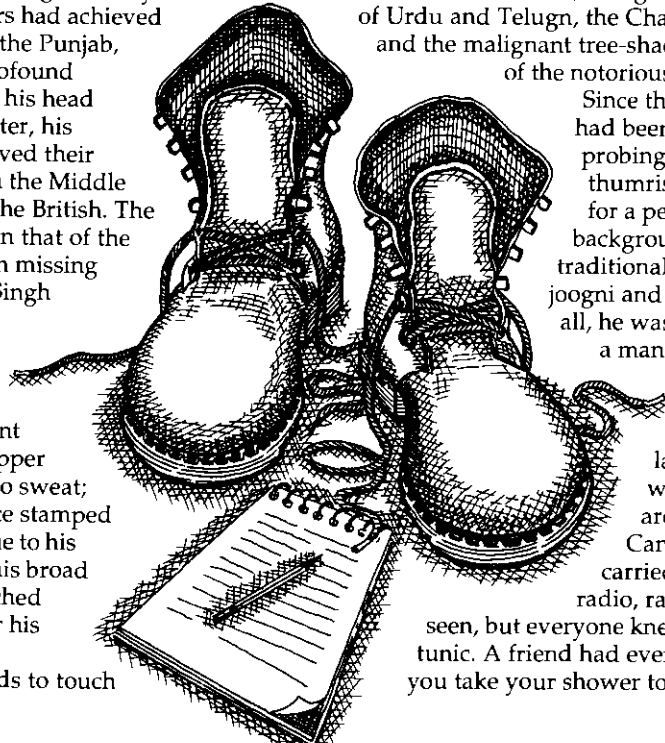
He had been stationed all over the country in the service of the Indian Army, east, west, north, south, you name it, and yet there were only a handful of places he considered worth remembering: Lucknow being the best, and Hyderabad of the Nizam, a close second. The worst was Calcutta, he would snidely tell an acquaintance, but when asked why, he would have to admit reluctantly that it was more a feeling perhaps than any particular experience; it's like not being able to breathe easily, he would say, or sleep well. "But ah," he would sigh deeply, "I'll always remember wah! Lucknow and the delicate balconies of the houses there, and of course the women. He would also recall, though fleetingly, the intermingling of Urdu and Telugu, the Charminar, Nampally Station and the malignant tree-shadows in the sweltering heat of the notorious Hyderabad afternoons.

Since the beginning of adulthood, he had been drawn to classical music, probing into the mysteries of raags, thumris and ghazals, quite unusual for a person of his rugged background, the son of peasants who traditionally loved bhangra, sang joogni and listened to qawwalis. After all, he was only a senior Naib Subedar, a man without a college degree. He

became the butt of jokes behind his back for his obsession. Yet another

layer of ridicule was added when it became known around the vicinity of the Cantonment District that he carried with him a small transistor

radio, rain or shine. It couldn't be seen, but everyone knew it was tucked inside his tunic. A friend had even joked once, "Oe-hoy, do you take your shower too with it, eh? Bhai saheb?"





"I'm a religious man, Mian ji; this is my pocket-sized Gita, made in Japan," he had answered with a smile.

But Mian's hair hadn't gone grey from the sun alone, and his kind knew precisely how to lash back. As expected, he retorted, "Bhai saheb, the Gita-shita is fine, I agree one hundred percent, but kabhi kabhi one should, I say, step inside a temple as well, naheen? And offer a pranam to the gods made in Hindustan with Hindustani materials." There had followed a roar of laughter from the bench-sitters, tea-sippers. The sister-fuckers! Prem Lal bestowed them with the appropriate appellation silently.

"What can I do, Mian ji? Your gods won't let me inside their home," he'd replied. "Their scorn stays my feet at the door. Besides, I'm a lover, not a worshipper; my sins are too heavy for any God to forgive."

One tea-sipper had shaken his head and exclaimed: "Premji, you're a lost soul, lost."

Another, aged and toothless, had added good-humouredly, as he constantly picked at his gums, "Go, go, listen to your ghazals, Mussla bhainchod!"

Walking away, smiling, he repeated, "Not a worshipper, mussla bhaen."

With the greyness of four decades in his hair, Prem Lal remained a bachelor—such odd behaviour for a man with a steady income and government privileges spawned spicy tales of impotence, betrayal and unrequited love. One rumour was that ever since he'd seen *Bhoomika* he'd been hopelessly in love with Smita Patil, who had recently died during labour; another version had it that their distracted Subedar adored Shabana Azmi because she was not only an actress but also a social worker and a poet's daughter. A young chaiwalla went so far as to claim that he had actually spotted a Shabana Azmi poster on Prem Lal's wall with the faces of all the male actors scissored out.

But then, frequent stretches of imagination such as these was what the country was all about. Reality, however, was quite different from what entered those idle ears: Prem Lal Singh had been born in Lahore, and while only a year old had lost both his parents to the madness of partition. He and his relatives had managed to reach India alive as beggars, uprooted like trees in a storm, some half-insane and a few beyond recovery.

Orphaned, he managed to finish high school somehow and then joined the army as a rifleman. In the beginning he would hide his face under the bed sheet and cry, missing his estranged half-mad relatives, while the other soldiers slept soundly in the same barracks amidst occasional snores. He especially missed his young uncle, Makhan Lal Singh tunda, who'd gone insane after the partition and hung about the neighborhood during the day chasing stray dogs or being chased by them in turn. Sometimes Prem Lal would have to go down to the neighbourhood in search of Makhan, and find him sleeping by the roadside, his mouth ajar for inspection by the flies, dried snot blocking his nostrils. Prem Lal would wake him up, dust his clothes, and cajole him back to the house. The two wars took him further and further away from his relations, and now he would only receive the occasional letter written by a relative usually announcing the death of a family member. Replying, he would pay his condolences and add "I am deeply grieved to hear...I am

sorry to say that I cannot come to attend the cremation, yours obediently, Prem Lal." And as time went on he finally lost the sense of ever having had a family, and soon became quite disenchanted with the idea of getting married and making his own little nest.

Many years before in Lucknow, however, he had had a short, bitter-sweet love affair with a Muslim school teacher. She taught at the Cantonment High School, inside the military compound, and coming to work, or on her way out to the street, she would walk past the window of his office twice a day, five days a week. The steady and determined click-click of her heels against the pavement alerted the men, distracting them from their work. Along with the other soldiers, he admired her youthfulness; as discreetly as possible, his eyes, too, ravished the cut and trim of her figure. He couldn't behave vulgarly, the way others did, with their whispers and moans, straight out of the Hindi movies, of wah ji wah! Or hai ram! margya ji! Nevertheless, she had caught him looking at her with the subdued flame of longing in his eyes. His blood had burned with embarrassment every time. Nevertheless, the very next day, as soon as he heard the click of her heels, his head would turn to her in defiance of his own shyness. This game of looking, and not looking, of averted glances and hesitant invitations, of curved lips, the beckoning of her curves written in the ancient language of loneliness across the blackboard of his screaming desire went on for a few months, and then, on one of those rainy days when the streets of the old city become small rivers and clouds pump continuously, our Prem Lal, clad in the best of Lucknavi attire, his moustache freshly oiled, curled, and pointed, found himself standing outside her door on two shaky feet, distractedly gripping an umbrella, suffocating in the indecision of whether to knock or turn away gracefully.

A few years later, in Hyderabad he had seduced with manly persistence a Christian woman with big dark eyes, eyes that could cut and heal at the same time. Her eyes were a knife, he believed, that entered the flesh with balm on its tip. She was the wife of the gardener who tended the grounds of the premises. Prem Lal once brought her silver bangles from Agra and a pair of silver anklets from Jodhpur. She would wear them only when she came to visit him. During one monsoon he slept with her almost every day for a whole month, and yet he felt alone and lonely at nights. While the husband mowed the grass, tilled the small patches of earth, and watered the mulberry trees close to Prem Lal's window, Prem Lal would lie beside her, dissolving in her presence, listening to the swish-swosh of the lazy sickle. He would examine her dark skin for long moments, like a soldier mapping out a dangerous territory at night, and savour the clove-like odour of her back. He was mesmerised by the absorbency of her skin. Is it the colour of nothingness? Is there such a thing as nothingness? Is death nothingness?

Only occasionally now did he think of the Muslim schoolteacher, her voice and its sadness echoing in his mind. Then he would remember how much he had enjoyed the sight of her narrow waist and small, shapely hips as she would get up in the morning to bring him tea, and often with it, Ghalib's, Dagh's or Momin's ghazals to



recite in bed. But strangely enough not much of a memory remained of the Christian woman, and every time he tried to conjure up scenes of the sweltering Hyderabad afternoons when their bodies lay locked like mating snakes, all he could muster was a nostalgic whiff of her odour in his nostrils like a scent of death. If these thoughts came to him when he tried to sleep, he would turn on one side, then the other, oppressed by the heaviness of the memory. Or the lack of it. Yet, when asleep he would dream of her dark eyes.

When Premji, or Premiya, or Premi, as he was sometimes called, received the movement order one day, he was sunning himself outside his barrack in Delhi. Holding the paper in his hand, he felt an unfamiliar tinge of melancholy; the lower lid of his right eye fluttered a few times, as it did when he had something on his mind. He wasn't afraid of going to the Kashmir, nor was he afraid of death. He attributed the restlessness of his heart to the young prostitute, Baby Madhubala, to whom he had been growing quite attached. If he had been married in time, his daughter would have been her age, but this thought did not bother him. The young thing had auditioned for All India Radio twice and, not unexpectedly, failed, yet it was her determination that had impressed Prem Lal, as had her succulent lips and her unrestrained way of planting a kiss wherever he desired. When a little tipsy, our Subedar would ask her to sing a ghazal. Her voice did not negotiate the contours of nostalgia the way the Muslim teacher's had. At best, she could sing songs from the films *Pakeeza* and *Mughal-e-Azam*, also acting out the lines from her favourite films. Once she startled Prem Lal with such seriousness, "I am not a phantom, but a reality," that it took him a full moment to realise that this was a famous line from the movie *Mahal*. She could be Meena Kumari one minute, and Nutan in another. This acting business of hers bothered him, though he pushed the thought to the periphery of comfort in his mind. He had moved out of women's lives before, and would again, without apology or excuse, with no promises to return or to write a prepatr, without regret, without even guilt. He steeled his heart, reprimanding himself silently: "O bhainchodaa! You can't lose your heart to a bazaari woman. Snap out of it, oy Babber shera! Move on. Hulla hulla hulla!" Within a week he had packed and was off to the Valley in a jeep with two Subedars, Anand Hira the pakora-nosed and Ranbir Malik the chinless: one stiffer than his uniform and the other a sagging quilt; neither with the slightest taste for Hindustani classical music or courtesans; now leading a trail of a caravan of mud-green one-tonners bearing the five hundred men of the Five-0-Two Punjab regiment.

For some days after his arrival, he felt unsettled by the impossibility of holding anyone's gaze on the streets for a decent minute; their downcast, averted eyes made him want to approach them and order, "Look up! Look at me, saaley!"

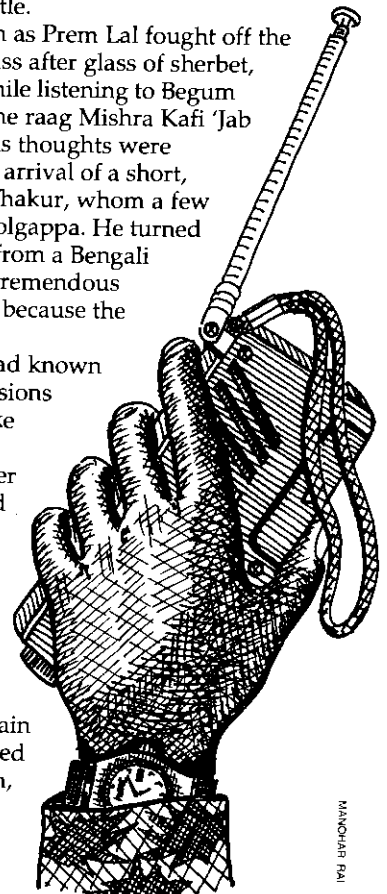
Initially it made him want to strangle them. But that cold anger had dissipated within a week, leaving an iciness behind in his fingers, and now he too kept his eyes wandering, a restless pair of hawks, as if searching for the lost childhood of his memory. People emerged from the masjids and mandirs, shops and houses, faces devoid of

any desire to offer a salaam or pranam. It was as though he had been stationed in a graveyard full of wandering ghosts and shadows. The shuttered windows frightened him. Looking up at the balconies where the washing fluttered on a string, he would be reminded of the people missing inside these clothes.

On his day off he would venture outside the barracks in the afternoon and look up at the famous sky of the Valley, which now appeared colourless to him. He felt that people had polluted the sky as well. As he walked back to his room, plucking a flower here and a leaf there, the very air he breathed stifled him as though evacuated of its fragrance and music. He was a man who kept his thoughts to himself for the most part, and conversed only with his own demons during the long, lonely nights. He had been ruminating on how to meet up with a tribal woman from the nearby hills, if there was such a thing here, Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist, anyone with firm thighs and breasts and a pussy like swarg; religion was nothing to him but a hurdle to getting in bed with someone, a potential deterrent which he desperately tried to avoid. Every evening, he would trim, oil, and twirl his moustache to his heart's content, and once done, sally forth for a lazy stroll, listening to his little 'Gita'. Early next morning he would be patrolling the streets and city outskirts with fellow soldiers, sometimes in an Army jeep, leaving behind at sudden bends, an agitated ghost of dust. Sometimes he was ordered to maintain a tight checkpoint at a certain fork of streets where one of his men manned a machine gun from a bunker, his helmeted head visible through the hole like a turtle.

One very hot afternoon as Prem Lal fought off the suffocating heat with a glass after glass of sherbet, sucking on pieces of ice while listening to Begum Akhtari sing a thumri in the raag Mishra Kafi 'Jab se Shyam sidhare, ho...' His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden arrival of a short, stocky corporal Subhash Thakur, whom a few soldiers had nicknamed Golgappa. He turned down his radio. Subhash, from a Bengali peasant background, had tremendous respect for Prem Lal Singh because the son of the Rajput had been promoted twice since he had known him. He had on a few occasions earnestly attempted to strike up a friendship with his Premji, but nothing had ever materialised; they remained no more than acquaintances.

Undoubtedly, Prem Lal was to blame for this failure, as he was extremely cautious by nature. Also he had unconsciously adopted certain prejudices, beliefs uninformed by direct experience. To him, all Bengalis were brainy, intrigue-driven, cowardly





and lazy, and even when he saw Thakur sweating under the sun digging a trench or carrying a heavy sack, he could not reconcile Bengalis and hard work in his mind. But Subhash had his own analysis of the unrequited friendship: he ascribed it to Prem Lal's inability to appreciate the river-song aesthetic of Bengali poetry. Subhash assumed uncomfortably that Prem Lal thought of him nothing more than a bong, a simpleton.

Now Prem Lal smiled. "Aao, bhai subhash ji, ki haal aye?" "Durga maa's grace, bhai shabeb. Accha ji, listening to gojols?"

Prem Lal, embarrassed, shrugged his shoulders as he clicked off the sound. Then he asked, "How's family-shamily, Thakur?" "Maa's blessing, shaheb." Then he added, "Wife's letter arrived today; all is fine, ji."

"Well, what brought you to my humble abode, bhai?"

"Oh ji, Naib shahab, tushi ko Caapitan shaheb is calling, ji," said Thakur.

Prem Lal went to his room and changed into his uniform, took one quick look in the mirror, mainly to check his moustache, then hurried to present himself to the newly arrived Captain Khanna. Dank and dimly lit, the new Captain's headquarters was a temporary office, situated on the other side of the Mess Hall, which Prem Lal visited, to his acute displeasure, twice a day. He preferred eating out in the mixed company of civilians, as the rare sight of a woman late in the evening pleased him immensely.

As he now crossed the untended garden which separated the two pale-yellow-bricked buildings, his eyes scanning the overgrown grass and weeds and dried hedges, he caught the intermittent sound, in the depths of his mind, of rusty scissors going swish-swosh, swish-swosh. But instead of the image of the scissor-blades his mind conjured up the misty memory of the Christian woman's dark legs curling around his. As he ran up the entrance steps, he felt that he was somehow carrying the extra weight of someone else's existence inside him. Eh, he shook his head to clear it of its distractions, then opened the door. At least for the next hour, his country needed him, and the Captain must have his attention.

A young, handsome Captain Khanna sat behind the desk, files on one side and an ashtray on the other. Prem Lal Singh halted after entering the door and saluted. Khanna motioned him to stand easy and he reluctantly relaxed. The red glow ringed by ash at the burning end of the cigar between the Captain's teeth set a sudden bright corona briefly over his face. Prem Lal Singh then realised that Subedars Malik and Hira were also present in the room; anticipating that he was about to salute them, Hira shook his head and winked at him. The Captain stood up, leaving his cigar slowly burning in the ashtray.

"Our country needs us again, Singh sahab," said Khanna.

"Yes, sir," answered Prem Lal. He stole a glance at the other two men in the room. The weakly lit room resembled a hospital ward. Captain Khanna's briefing began: five experienced soldiers of different ranks had been selected by the High Command; under Prem Lal's leadership they were to leave the following evening for a highly strategic point near the border in a combing operation to capture,

dead or alive, a band of infiltrators trained in Pakistan about whom the Army Intelligence had been tipped off. Captain Khanna scrutinised his face for any reaction—there was none, and satisfied by Prem Lal's stolidity, he then spread across the table a large map, detailing the zones of activity. Holding the end of the mahogany cane, he tapped with its pointed tip the crucial points of intersection, inviting the other two Subedars over for a look. A dust-covered light bulb above their heads shed a dismal light on the map of the two Kashmiris. Prem Lal's eyes travelled with the tip of his Captain's cane along the curly red lines, and he nodded whenever he felt Khanna's eyes fix him. Throughout the briefing, Singh remained focused and silent except for once when he caught himself sniffing rather unconsciously; at that moment a sudden faint but sad giggle of Baby Madhubala of Dilli broke into his mind. Was she doing her Sharmila Tagore routine? He sniffed it out, hunh, hunh! And then rather comically squinted his brows, but no one in the room noticed. "Is everything clear, Sahab?" the Captain asked, concluding.

"Yes, sir."

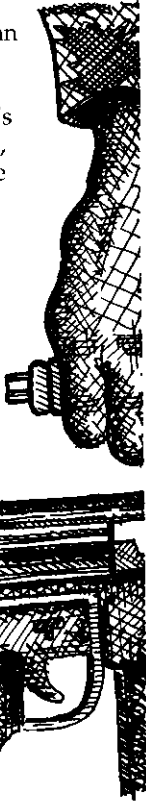
"Good luck then."

"Thank you, sir."

As he stepped out into the harsh light of the day, he felt mildly perturbed for no apparent reason, and as he walked off he decided the scorching heat must be responsible for the sudden discontent in his heart.

The next day just at sunset an Army jeep picked up the six men from the Intelligence Headquarters and after a long zig-zagging journey dropped them off at an abandoned looking check-point bunker. Instantly, two riflemen appeared and saluted them. The six men returned the salute; the Jeep made a u-turn, awakened another agitated ghost of dust, and soon disappeared.

Within minutes the five commandos and Prem Lal were walking southward in search of the desired trail. They walked for more than three miles, meandering along the waists and hems of the hills to arrive at the edge of their mission zone. All six of them kept a ready finger on the trigger, holding their guns tightly on the uneven paths. They knew they could be finished off here, ambushed in the dark by an already alerted enemy. Two hours later they reached the spot taken as their main compass-point. Under the glow of a mini torch held by a Tamil soldier, Prem Lal Singh unfolded on a fairly flat rock a map showing hundreds of thin black and red and green lines intersecting each other all across the crumpled surface. Twenty minutes later, the precise details of their mission set and memorised, the five strong men branched out in five directions like a trembling human hand only to criss-cross each other every forty to fifty yards. The men were under orders to return before sunrise. The quintet soon disappeared behind the trees and bushes, into the





MANOHAR HAI

jaws of the night. Naib Subedar Singh looked at his wristwatch with a mild pang of guilt and sighed, "An hour still!"

An hour later he pulled out his little transistor radio from the inner pocket of his green-khaki jacket. In one movement he flicked it on and brought it extremely close to his right ear, running his finger expertly over the black dial. It was Wednesday night, and Islamabad Short Wave One transmitted a two-hour-long programme of ghazals every Wednesday and Friday night. The stations from across the border were hard to pick up in the Valley, but back in Dilli the sound poured in like a stream of clear water, even during the

monsoons. After he had arrived in Srinagar he had intimidated a dozen or so people by asking them if they knew of a local station that played ghazals or classical music sometime during the week. It

was like trying to engage ghosts in a conversation. But one night, as he was sipping Kashmiri chai at the Sheikh bhai's stall, Sheikh bhai raised his hand

automatically to the big radio set into the wall to change the station where a few tired voices

were discussing the political calamity in Afghanistan. Sheikh bhai himself liked ghazals, but settled for what Prem Lal would prefer to call pseudo ghazals. Still, owing to Sheikh bhai's restless hands Prem Lal discovered the local station that played them. Islamabad Short Wave One—which he was now trying to tune into—he had found by keeping the radio on for long hours, fiddling with the dial as he strolled along the verandah, fending off the boredom that always threatened to overwhelm him in the absence of a woman's intimacy.

He hated modern Hindi music, which one heard at every establishment, and it depressed him to reflect on the kind of music people had fallen prey to. For this reason alone, he would always remember his time with the Muslim school teacher, her impeccable taste in music and poetry; he would always remember the love with which she sang Mir, Ghalib, Dagh, Faiz, Munir, Kaifi Azmi, the way she would explain a verse from Kishwar Naheed, "with wounds it chisels the figure of decline".

He had learned to ignore the constant static that tended to underscore the music—a curse for the sins of the listener from his past lives! Only on rare occasions, when the sky was clear and the wind was quiet, did the radio capture the clear sound of a voice. And even that would suddenly wax and wane, fading in and out. The vanishing voice in the midst of a recital made him pull his hair; he would imagine crushing that cockroach of a radio under his heel. But then he would think twice before doing that, and so his holy 'Gita' remained untouched.

Now he moved the dial forward with his index finger and waited, then ran it backwards. He repeated this a few times at different speeds, but without luck. He had to keep

the volume extremely low. He recalled the second time he had gone to the teacher's house in the evening for tea and ended up staying the night: they had to speak in whispers because she lived with her grandfather who in his old age was going blind but not deaf. No matter how carefully and slowly he moved the dial all he got was a crackling sound, as if the enemy was mocking him from inside the radio. He grew flustered, shifted the radio up and down around in an imaginary axis, tilting it left, tilting it right. He had to suppress again the urge to smash the radio against the jagged edge of a rock some ten feet away from him.

He remembered that it had begun to drizzle towards the end of that evening, and as he observed the light rain through the fluttering curtains she had asked him if he would like to see her room; they could talk in with their normal voices there she had added, and giggled softly. Her mouth at that moment had made him think of Punjabi rosebuds. After that night he addressed her in his mind as Gulab, or simply Gul. It had been the most fulfilling night of his life. Yet he'd never fallen in love with her. But he would often recognise the red-tiled verandah of her house in his dreams, and sometimes felt her presence behind his ears...

He clutched the radio tightly in his grip. He realised he was beginning to sweat, and then, as he shifted the radio to his left hand the tip of his thumb slipped off the dial and he fleetingly caught the sound of a human voice that sent a jolt to his heart. His body tensed with heat, as though engulfed in the flames of a chitaa. This time he caught the voice and did not mind the evil crackling that normally wounded his heart more than his ear. Mehdi Hassan! He recognised the voice instantly, a voice so deep and tranquil he thought he would weep. There must be some truth to what Lata had said, he reflected, that Bhagwan's chariot had passed through his throat. To him the voice seemed to emerge from the depths of the Indian Ocean. What if he was caught with the radio at his ear? He would certainly be court-martialled; a sweat of worry pearly on his forehead. But he had hardly lowered his hand when the singer's voice, smooth as the morning breeze, reached the end of a famous verse with a latent tremor and then rose like a wave, drowning every other thought in him. The fear of getting caught or having his head blown off by an enemy bullet dissipated. The hand clutching the radio moved back to his ear. "I like your skin, I'm fascinated by its deceptive shades," she'd whispered into his ear after kissing the lobe. The memory almost made him move the radio away. Getting out of bed, she would involuntarily hum a half-forgotten ghazal, and her voice in its morning huskiness would waft like smoke to his nostrils as though he could smell the voice, the words, even her moments of silence.

He recognised the notes of the raag in which the ghazal was being sung: Basant Bahar, a night raag of the Purvi tthaath, sung slow and in the lower notes of the scale, with a long alap. Basant Bahar's dominant note was pa with a flatted ma and ma ga ma ga in the ascending scale and the addition of ra in the descending; the raag's primary concern, if he recalled correctly, was to heighten the sense of longing with a tinge of joy. He noted that



Mehdi Hassan was throwing the sam, the cyclic stress on the word 'andaz', making Prem Lal's entire body react at the point, as if in a spasm, to the closure; a pair of invisible hands was playing the set of tablas inside his mind. "Umr to sari kati ishq e butaan mayn, Momin akhri waqt ab khak mussalman hongey." All my life I spent adoring idols, Momin!

Prem Lal remembered explaining this particular couplet to Subhash Thakur and Kashi Nath one night in the barracks.

At the last hour, I cannot pretend to be a Muslim.

Thakur had nodded his head and Kashi Nath swayed his torso, though Prem Lal had thought that both had failed to grasp the essence of the couplet. Now Prem Lal Singh suddenly found a new meaning within the meaning; such was the world of ghazals, and so much, he mused, depended on how long one had known the couplet and how deeply or crudely, the singer interpreted the verse. He was drowning in his own universe of music. The combination of the voice and the harmonium was like two ancient rivers falling into an embrace. O, this would leave him drunk for days. In the singer's voice resonated a unique relationship between the consonant notes of Basant Bahar and the soul of the couplet. The voice, he felt, poured from a silver decanter filling the goblet of his solitude.

Big, dark eyes, silent and forgiving Christian eyes; he often called them the eyes of Jesus, and sometimes the eyes of Mariam. He hated her shyness though, her stubborn refusal to sing—even *Bande Matram*. When she lay next to him she would suddenly close her eyes, as if she were closing the doors and windows of her house to him. And her silence on the day of his transfer was like the fangs of a cobra poised an inch from his heart. The fact that he never felt any remorse in lying to her, in telling her that he was leaving on a temporary assignment surprised him. But her silence, he knew, would hurt him once he had left; yes, her silence: he would scream *bhainchod ki batchi!* Silently, knowing those dark eyes knew his lie.

It was past midnight. He had drunk in an hour of ghazals like an addict, the radio back in his pocket. He looked at his watch, then up at the sky, finally resting his gaze on the thin crescent floating in the dark. The weak moonlight added a thin coating of silver to the landscape, the mysterious peaks of the distant mountains visible. He glanced casually at his rifle, which he had left leaning against a tree a few inches from his feet. The bayonet had dug into the wood, leaving a shallow gash. He grabbed the rifle and gripped it as though ready to spring an ambush. The absurdity of this urgent stance brought a soft smile to his face. He let go of the weapon with one hand and lowered its butt onto the ground.

"Taab e nazara hi naheen, aayina kya dekhney."

The words of the ghazal flowed back in his consciousness, then slid down to his lips.

"You cannot bear the sight, how can I let you see the mirror; you will become a portrait struck with wonder."

"Take me to a mandir someday, Premu," she had asked him. "Divali is coming." They stood under the tin-roofed shelter on the back verandah of her house. It was dark except for the faint glow from the lantern

hanging by the doorframe; the smell of kerosene oil hung in the air. Holding her face in his strong hands, he had tried to read her eyes, their past, their many mysteries. "I don't go there, haven't been to one in such a long time I wouldn't know the difference between a mandir and a gurdwara," he had answered with neither guilt nor contempt.

"Why?" she had asked.

"Why? Because I hate gods, or perhaps I'm scared of gods and goddesses, scared of their stony eyes. Those hardened stares stifle me."

It was then after a long silence, that she told him that she had been married once, that now she was a widow, a young widow. His hands had slid down to her neck, her shoulders, and then he had held her, and the limpness of her arms around him made him ask how her husband had died. She remained silent. He had insisted on knowing. Her husband, she told him then, clutching his shirt's fabric, had been a journalist who worked for *The Hindu*, and she had loved him. He released her to hold her face between his hands once again.

She continued, "He was killed as he was returning home from work on the 10th of Moharram when he ran into a Hindu mob which had recognised him and the shouts had erupted: Catch that sala harami, that son of Babur! Get the Mughal bastard!"

By the time Aurangzeb died Rajput blood had already claimed Mughal veins: Prem Lal had read that in a book. She had stopped crying for her husband a few years back, she believed in life, not death, she told Prem Lal. In the pungent smell of the kerosene, he uncupped his hands from her face. Perhaps he should have held her, comforted her, planted a caring kiss on her half-moist lips, he had thought hours later, but he hadn't been able to muster the desire. That moment of apathy gradually had turned into the memory of cowardice that tugged at his conscience from time to time.

It was two in the morning now, and he glanced up at the moon, which seemed to be growing.

"Navak andaz jidhara," he caught himself singing quietly again. Midway through the ghazal he thought: what kind of a soldier have I become? He was seized with a sudden uneasiness, and the unpleasant sensation of having been used and cheated by a higher authority. Governments? Gods? Fate? Who? Whom could he blame? He questioned himself quite loudly in his mind. Whom could he blame for this inertia of soul? All his life, it seemed, had been put to useless goals, and all he was left with was his loneliness and the heaviness of being. The fact that he had never said goodbye to Qurrat-ul-ain, the teacher, weighed on him now. He spat on the ground in mild disgust and began to pace back and forth, keeping a vigil in the pale darkness as he strove to avert the thoughts that poisoned his mind, to re-focus on his soldiers, his precious men who would be returning soon. He even forced his fingers to his mustache to give it a twirl.

The thought of not being able to go to Pakistan, to go and visit Lahore, the city of his birth, to walk through the Anarkali Bazaar or sit by the bank of the river Ravi crept over him with sadness. Looking at his boots, quite visible in the moonlight, gave him a sudden feeling of nakedness.



Uncomfortably, he shifted his gaze away from his boots.

A bit later, he realised that he had been staring at a crawling insect as it inched ahead with remarkable slowness. He watched the insect with the utmost seriousness and in that moment of absorption he noticed that the insect was carrying a smaller insect in its mouth. Prem Lal considered the kind of fight the victim might have put up. Could it be still alive, and in fact struggle out of the bigger insect's mouth? Before he knew it he lowered himself almost to a squat, observing the hunter and its prey. He had put one knee on the ground to stay closer to the insects when his ears pricked up at the sound of a faint rustle. He froze, his neck tensed; a lump formed in his throat.

He gripped his rifle with both hands ready to fire instantaneously at the slightest sign of danger. His eyes darted frenetically in the darkness, suspiciously interpreting every ambiguous pattern of light and shade. One knee glued to the ground, but he stayed where he was. He heard the soft rustle again, shorter by a fraction of a second this time, so that even by concentrating hard he was unable to detect the direction from which it came. Suddenly Prem Lal was gripped by a fear, of being killed by the enemy before he could even spot him. He felt the sweat break out on his forehead; a drop actually slid down the side of his nose and disappeared into the abyss of his mustache. His ears caught the sound again, and for a second he thought he'd caught a subtle movement, quite a distance off, but he couldn't be sure. Holding the rifle in his hands, closing one eye, he sighted through the target-lens. He narrowed one half-Chinese eye, closed the other and penetrated the fabric of the night with his burning gaze. Ha! He detected a human form lying flat on the ground. His heart began to pound, beating a particular tabla taal: bhoom bhoom babhoom. He squinted harder. There! He spotted the half-luminous head of a man, then the entire body stealthily crawling up the side of the hill like a maggot. He surveyed the landscape around the man, hoping to catch sight of his fellow infiltrators, but he spotted none. Swinging the sights back to the man's head, Prem Lal adjusted the rifle's aim to a bull's eye.

He wanted to wait for the enemy to finish his climb, arrive at the little clearing: that way he would have a better chance of capturing the bastard alive. He waited with a tortoise's patience.

"Is my enemy Kashmiri?" A strange thought at a very inappropriate time. "What if he is one from our side? Then? Humh! Then the bastard is my countryman, isn't he? And what if the harami is from Muzzafar Garh, or Pakistan? Oh, the Babur's son is still an enemy infiltrator and a big maderchod on top of that."

Prem Lal was aware of an unsettled sense of happiness at knowing he had the fool pretty much in pocket. Suddenly he aimed the muzzle to the sky, catching the moon in the sights, but quickly trained the weapon back at the crawling head.

"What if he is Punjabi?" The thought amused him, but as it faded it left an unsettling trail. Prem Lal shook his head to derail the undesired train of thoughts.

"Navak andaz jidhar deeda e."

Mehdi Hassan's voice awoke in his mind without any

warning, curving and rising with every closing on the sam with the 'andaz'—splitting it, "an...da...aaz"—and the fingers of the tabla player were following him like maddened snakes. The thoughts he had tried to banish earlier crawled back into his mind again. "So what if he is a Punjabi, so what if he is a kanjar Rajput, he's still a bhainchod Mussla and the murderer of innocent Hindus." Bam! Bam! His mind fired two bullets. Didn't they stain their hands with our blood? With a surging pain the thought which he had tried to bury a thousand times was resurrected in him: the vague memory of his parents the partition's conflagration had consumed. "Look," he had pointed to his eyes, "Look deep into my eyes, Qurrat-ul-ain Begum, do you see the flames way back in them?" She had at first nonchalantly looked into them, then, as if a little frightened, she had withdrawn from him still staring at his face, understanding, though obscurely, the depths of his pain. He spoke again, "Those are the fires still burning from my childhood. Bhagwan is my witness, I have tried to put them out, I have tried and tried and tried, but they keep flaring up again. I am a volcano, Qurrat-ul-ain."

Prem Lal saw the man approach the plateau and tightened his grip on the rifle. He prayed, "O Bhagwan, give me shakti!" The infiltrator seemed young even at that distance. Prem Lal tried guessing his age. Unlucky bhainchod!

"Freeze! Whoever you are, or you'll be shot," Prem Lal took a few strong steps forward, then heard his own echo shout back at him, "—be shot/shot/shot/shot..."

"Now put your hands up and stand up slowly. No smart moves, you hear me?" he yelled, " - me/me/me/me..."

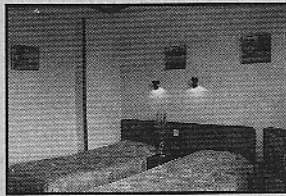
The man put his hands up in the air, as he half stood, but then, as if judging the direction and distance of Prem Lal's voice, he started running downhill, veering away.

"I said freeeeze!" But the man kept running. Prem Lal ran out from behind the bush, tracking the running man's head with the muzzle. Bending his knees a bit, he curled his index finger on the cold trigger, and squeezed it. Bam! A Rajput, a warrior, an excellent marksman, he had awakened the night. His finger still pulled against the trigger. He felt as though the bullet had pierced his own lungs. His body, drenched by a monsoon of sweat, was suddenly made of holes. Yet in the midst of the fury raging inside him he detected a dim voice singing, singing something in his mind...Qurrat-ul-ain's voice? Mingling with the vicious pounding of his heart... He noticed the smoke still curling from the end of the barrel like a crack in the mirror of night. And as he peered straight into the darkness, he felt he was staring straight into the Christian woman's dark eyes. Into Mariam's eyes. He was suddenly afraid that she would close them, shutting the doors and windows of her memory's house on him. A burning howl lodged in his throat and he wished it were only a dream within a dream.

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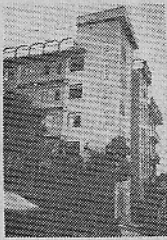
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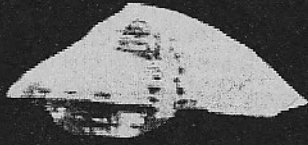


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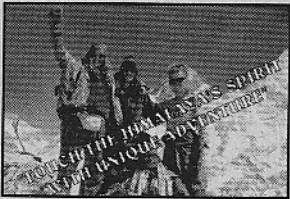
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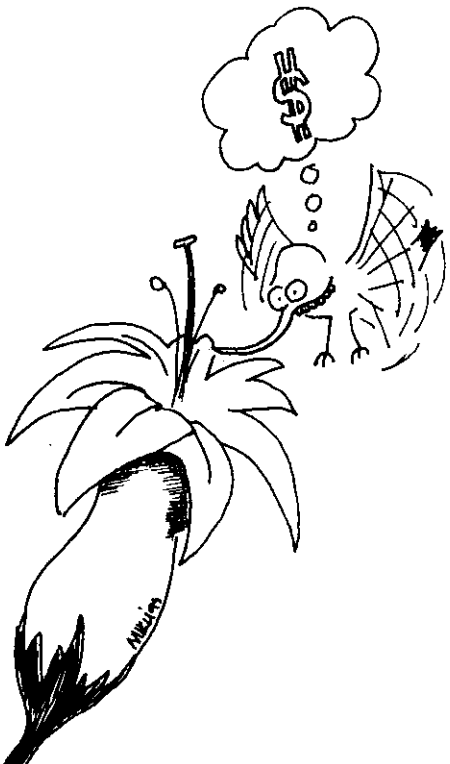
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As everyone is knowing, the corruption is spreading an ugly tentacle across our beloved Subcontinent. Unless firm measure is undertaken with utmost emergency then this social hankie pankie is going to be tearing up the fabric of our society as we know it. I am becoming more and more convicted that at this junction of human history, we need to sound a clarion call to bring to heel and exterminate this danger germ eating into the innards of present day public life and private life not only in South Asia, but also in the Community of Man. Unless this tidal wave of corrupt behave is uprooted from our grassroots, we cannot hold our high head among the international world. If we are thief, why for any one will care that we are having atom bomb as well as having weaponised missile capability with intercontinental ranges? So, if government machineries we don't want grinding to halt, we must all work hardly toward this ending. In my mind, not even an iota of doubt there is that if we are not destroying corruption, then corruption is destroying us in the very near future surely.



Easier said than done. The time has come to decriminalise corruption, and recognise its true importance to GNP growth in the Subcontinent. Corruption gets a bad press, but it is actually the best method yet devised to spread wealth around. It is the lard that lubricates the creaky cogs of the bureaucracy, and percolates money from prime ministers to peons. Corruption is also one of the few transactions that is completely dependent on market forces. This is what business would be like in a true *laissez faire* economy: no restrictions, no regulations. The corruption multiplier would then have the chance to work its miracle: inject cash into the middle class augmenting its purchasing power, which in turn will benefit the consumer industry leading to a growth in manufacturing and job-creation.

Many people write to me Masking: what does it take to be corrupt, I want to be corrupt too. I have to break to them the sad news that corruption is not something that can be taught—you are either born to steal or you aren't. Bribery follows the laws of Newtonian physics: there is no free lunch in the universe, you can't get something for nothing. You want licence, then give me something. Propensity to steal is actually already in our genes, and we inherit the specific DNA code for greasy palms from our early vertebrate ancestors (not that our invertebrate ancestors were saints).

The Archbold Bowerbird which lives in the jungles of the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea has an amazing courtship ritual whereby the male bowerbird actually bribes the female bowerbird to have sex with him. Competition is fierce, and the female is given an added incentive to allow herself to be seduced. The bribe in question is a rare Bird of Paradise

plume, which the male bowerbird takes great pains to steal so that he can gift it to his to-be. Female inspects feather, surmises that partner has no scruples to speak of, which convinces her that he will take good care of her in old age, and willingly succumbs to his sleazy charm.

Similarly, the hibiscus flower bribes the hummingbird with honey so that it (the hummingbird) will take its pollen and deposit it in the gynaecium of its sweetheart. Corruption is nature's way.

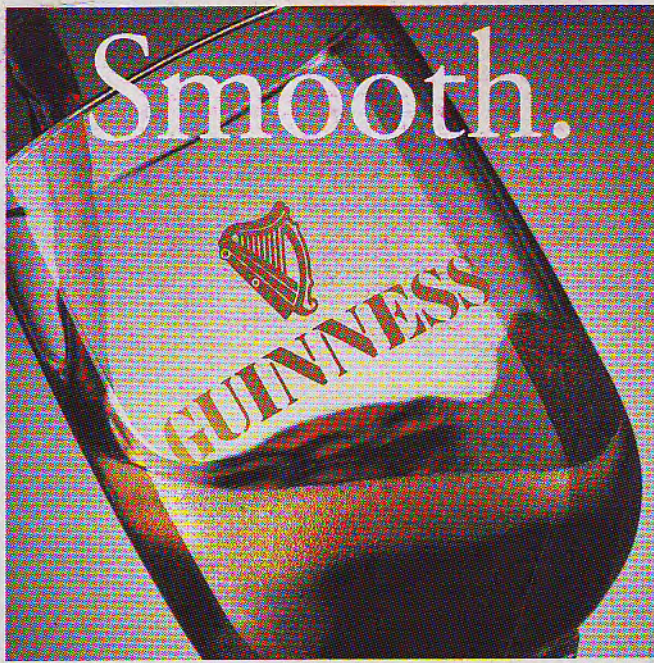
Replace hummingbird with doucats and what do we have? We have Gaius Verres, the Roman Governor of Sicily (115-43 BC). When Cicero charge-sheeted Gen Gaius, this was the list of his crimes: extortion, plundering the Sicilian exchequer, bribery, rape, sexual exploitation of other men's wives, treachery, murder, looting works of art, selling public offices, taking part in shady deals with Swedish howitzers bound for India through an Italian bagman, stashing stuff in Helvetia, embezzling wills of the deceased and even extorting bribes from relatives of those condemned to death so that the lions would be really, really hungry, and death would be swift. No wonder the mafia was invented in Sicily.

The only other way would be to create genetically modified South Asians by splicing the relevant DNA code for Integrity in Public Life from Lee Kuan Yew's chromosomes (I'm sure he'd agree to donate a bit of his fingernail for laboratory extraction and replication) cloning it into the human genome so that the next generation of the Community of Man will not be indulging in social hankie pankie, and the whole international world will be Singapore, where honesty is best policy.

Cool.



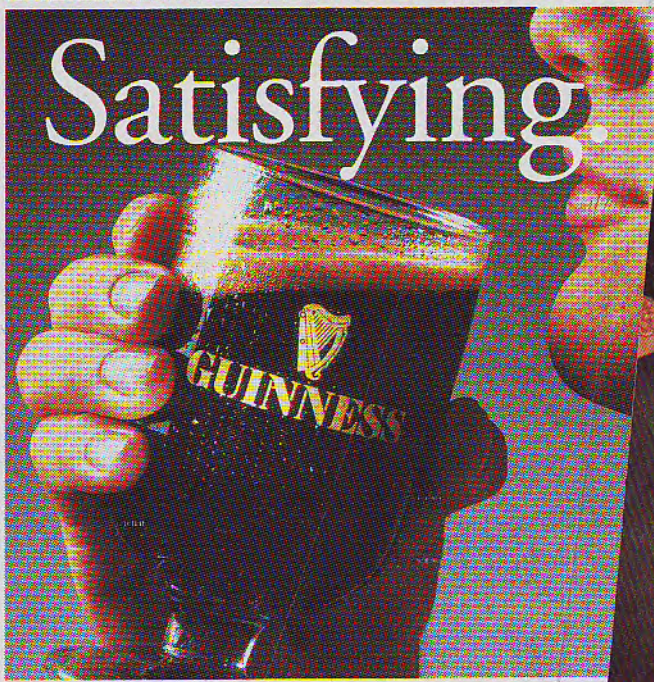
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