

REFLECTION

# Sponge Sandals and Patriotism

by A. Mawaz

I have started maintaining a Pessimist's Diary. When I feel depressed about the state of the nation, I get it out of my system through this outlet. Here is an extract.

Each nation stands on some foundation. We stand on sponge sandals. Therefore we have developed a spongy philosophy of life. Our outlook is as spongy as our sandals.

Sponge sandals do not present a firm stance. Doctors recommend *kharans* (wooden sandals) for firm feet and balance — a medical requirement; akin to walking barefoot on hard soil (recall the rise of acupuncture and reflexology in the west). The soft cushioning of the sponge soles causes a mild precession (of the human equinoxes) which builds up a certain orientation patterns in one's life. The pants must be tight at the waist to induce self-confidence. How to shoot the bull's eye standing on sponge sandals? The sole has its effects on the soul.

The sponges (the synthetic one is the cheapest) has other well known attributes. It absorbs when used as a wiper — the dirt, or the dirty water on the wet floor (of life). In fact

the sponge does not discriminate if used indiscriminately. "He is sponging them", is a term with which we are all familiar.

Our alluvial soil, rich and fertile (so are the imagination and the womb), is soft and muddy during the monsoon. Hence the spongy steps match the spongy soil; and the dampened voice of the leaders, flooding the choked the deafened ears gently swaying on air-conditioned foam beneath each individual's feet. Note the lean, mean, and hungry look.

We are the human sponges, the great modern grabbers since the days of Chenghis Khan. Life is drab, drab, drab; so the chanting is grab, grab, grab — all along the path of *maya* to materialistic self-salvation. I am the new society — how dare you ...?

We need firmer footwear to uphold the jewel on the crown. Mud is grey, so is grey matter — at least there is no colour matching problem. But on the way up, there is a communication mixup near the region of the heart. Long ago there was a coup there; and we are still being ruled by the heart. Further up, the computer is working

fine, but the input is a lot of garbage. Garbage in is garbage out. QED.

Once, at a party many years ago, I had a midnight confrontation with our then minister-in-charge. He was in an affable mood, and the protocol barriers were down. He introduced the topic of discipline. I implicitly interrupted him to ask whether discipline should come from the top, or expected from the bottom (while the leaders maintained double standards, with a tin of 555 in hand, and visions of Bananal). In response, he asked me two irrelevant questions: my district, and what was my father. I replied that a cultivated mind could easily hide left abruptly, leaving behind several seers of sweets he had brought to be chummy with the boys on the evening shift. Officially he was not wearing sponge sandals at that time.

Foam sandals introduce a little bit of unsteadiness or disequilibrium to the body frame, diverting a little bit of energy, therefore concentration, from the higher and purer goals of a practical, not ideal, life. Multiply this disturbance or distraction by the

number of adults (60 million voters) in the country; and we get an idea of the staggering waste in the nation's constructive efforts.

These efforts are scattered in wide areas of daily activities, physical, moral, and spiritual. The sharpness of the conscience is blunted; so is the drive towards stable principles in life. The tendency to compromise sets in — to meet immediate needs and fulfillments. A need is a temptation; and a pressing need might well result in a sellout. Bitterness and envy sprout in the undergrowth. Without regular gardening, the weeds take over — and begin to show.

"Jungle may mangal hat" is true when the jungle ecology is not disturbed, and one is in tune with the environment of nature (no man-made unnaturalness). Materialism is an antithesis, with the shopping list getting longer and longer.

Before we can learn to use the head (wisdom), we have to use the hands (work) — but first assuming that we can feel warm, and the head cool. It cannot be the other way round.

I had seen to it long ago

**Before we can learn to use the head (wisdom), we have to use the hands (work) — but first assuming that we can stand firmly on our feet. Keep the feet warm, and the head cool. It cannot be the other way round.**

that there were no sponge sandals in the house. Crazy fellow, my family members say. Spongy brains, I retort.

The cup of tea had arrived. I showed *gnani* the heading of this essay. She wants a new pair of sandals. Must be leather. I assert — meekly. I am not allowed to go shopping with her. That's how I get time to write trash such as this piece.

Our alluvial soil, rich and fertile (so are the imagination and the womb), is soft and muddy during the monsoon. Hence the spongy steps match the spongy soil; and the damp spirit rises to meet the dampened voice of the leaders.

Before we can learn to use the head (wisdom), we have to use the hands (work) — but first assuming that we can stand firmly on our feet. Keep the feet warm, and the head cool. It cannot be the other way round.



Happiness is when a child gets a ride on his mother's back: A Santal belle and her offspring set out for a day's earnings, in Dinajpur. — Photo: Mohsin/

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the tango is "a fast, sensual, and irreputable Argentine dance."

## King of 'Tango' Relives

The elegant ballroom dance, with its closely choreographed steps and swooping dips, grew out of Andalusian (Spanish) roots borrowing from the way from Cuba's equally stylised habanero.

Around now — no one is sure of the exact date — is the 100th anniversary of the legendary idol of the tango, Carlos Gardel, who died in a mysterious Colombian plane crash 55 years ago.

Gardel was a cult figure, in his day the equal of James Dean and Elvis Presley, and recently his followers descended on Mexico for a World Gardeliano Congress.

They argued about his actual birthdate and place, the existence of unreleased recordings, the authenticity of the 679 singles released under his name, his love life (he never married), his political views, and the clouded circumstances of his death.

Dozens of position papers were presented that settled little. There were extravagant poems and elaborate floral tributes, a special postage stamp issued by the Mexican government, the unveiling of a statue, a day at the races (the Carlos Gardel Handicap), and nightly exhibitions spotlighting the melodramatic dance the suave Argentinian made famous.

Simon Collier, perhaps the world's most astute non-Hispanic Gardel scholar, traces the tango's origin to the tightly-knit macho structure of Buenos Aires's *compadrito* underworld.

At the turn of the century, the Argentine capital was a sinful, seething thieves' kitchen where European immigrants seeking their

More than half a century after his death in a plane crash, Carlos Gardel remains one of the idols of South America. As the great exponent of the tango he became a cult figure. A total of 679 singles were released under his name and they are still heard all over South America. To mark what is believed to be the centenary of his birth, reports Gemini News Service, a congress has just been held in Mexico City. By John Ross



fortunes mingled with knife-fighting gaucho "payadors" and tough urban "lunfardos" (hoods). As with North America jazz, the tango grew up in the warehouses of a bustling port city.

Beginning in 1917 with his first officially recognised recording *My Sad Night*, Gardel transformed this "disreputable" dance music into international craze that cut a sophisticated swath from South American to Paris and Broadway.

Gardel was almost certainly born in Toulouse, France, the illegitimate son of a French ironing woman. He said only that he "was born in Buenos Aires at the age of two and half" — when his mother, Bertha Gerdes, presumably emigrated to the Americas.

He grew up in a city where hundreds of thousands of immigrant European men outnumbered their female counterparts by two to one. He sold newspapers in the brothels lining Corrientes Street and sang for the coins of seamen to help his mother make ends meet.

As he grew into young manhood, his ingratiating smile and sweet, melancholic voice captivated the immigrant population.

By the second decade of the new century, Gardel and the tango had passed into middle-class respectability on the legitimate stage and in the studios of a burgeoning Argentinian recording industry.

In Madrid he was toasted by the great bullfighters of the day. In Paris the tango parLOUR became a permanent fixture. Maurice Chevalier and Charlie Chaplin were ardent

fans and Bing Crosby once testified that he had never heard a lovelier voice.

The Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, immortalised the Argentinian singer in his work — although Gardel's own adopted countryman Jorge Luis Borges said he had upgraded a low-life dance form, replete with flashing knife blades, into "a sentimental stroll".

Gardel's death was the final romantic twist that elevated him to mythic status. At the second World Gardeliano Congress — the first was held in Cuba in 1988 — the circumstances were hotly debated. Some blamed an overloaded aircraft. Other scholars suggested a gun battle with the co-pilot.

Thirty thousand Medellin citizens immediately descended on the tiny airfield when they heard what had happened. Enormous mobs greeted Gardel's body as it made stops in New York and Rio. In Buenos Aires the largest crowds ever seen there accompanied the cortege to Chacarita cemetery.

Today fresh daisies are still laid on the tomb each morning and a newly-lit cigarette placed between the fingers of the bronzed image that tops the grave.

Gardel's name still lives in daily speech in Buenos Aires. A "Gardel" designates top quality and "tell it to Gardel" is the way people tell each other to quit complaining.

Today Carlos Gardel belongs as much to the South American continent as he does to Argentina.

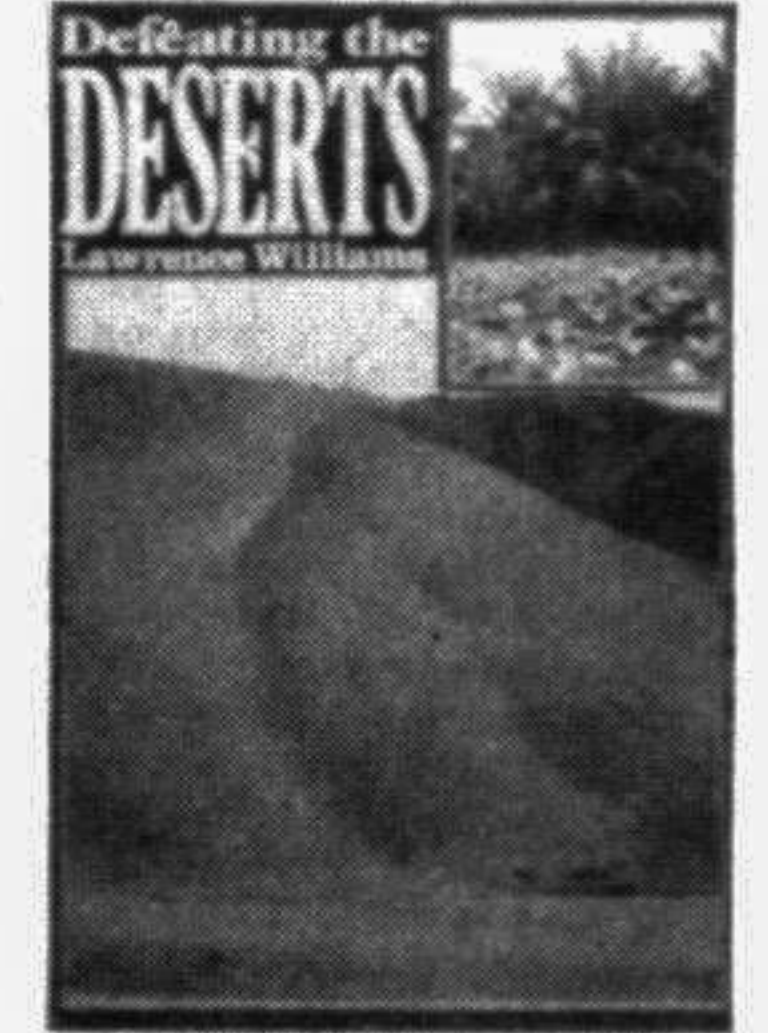
Oddly one reason for Gardel's sustained popularity has been the frequency of military coups in Argentina. Political exiles fleeing harsh dictatorships there "travel with Gardel — not only his tunes but the actual records — as proof of the land that is our inheritance," explains Uruguayan writer Eduardo Paysse Gonzalez, an exile himself.

## BOOK REVIEW ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES FOR CHILDREN

- **Defeating the Deserts.** Lawrence Williams. Evans, London. £ 6.95
- **Conserving the Jungles.** Lawrence Williams. Evans, London. £ 6.95

THESE books are part of the 'Last Frontiers for Mankind' series, aimed very specifically at younger teenage readers in the developed world. They are hard-covered, glossy books with carefully chosen and placed colour photographs and graphs. The writer and publishers have tailored the books' appearance and language to their market and maintain their approach throughout.

The author makes no attempt to hide his view that



and the spread of deserts. He describes the plants and animals and human populations in his chosen zones, and specifically relates the text to the excellent photos, with a glossary of key words on most pages.

The books are not, however, pessimistic, and include practical steps that governments and even readers can take to stop deforestation and desertification. Also supplied are addresses of organizations needing support in their ecological campaigns (the author assumes his readers are most likely European or North American) and a list for further reading. The series also includes books on polar regions, oceans, mountains and space. — O. P.

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,  
Please give me your advise. We have been married for two years; but we are not happy. My wife and I are completely opposite to each other. Whatever I like she does not like, and whatever she likes I do not like. We are completely mentally incompatible. I have heard many marriages break on account of mental incompatibility. I am trying hard to save this marriage, but it is a very difficult exercise. Give me your frank advise, what we should do.

Rashed Khan, Ulon, Dhaka.

Dear Mr. Khan,  
I will need more information in order to give you any advice on saving your marriage. You must let me know how long you have been married, when did the problems start and what are the main areas of difference between you and your wife. When two people come together in marriage differences of opinion, taste, likes and dislikes are very common and normal. The challenge is to find similarities in the differences, and slowly build a relationship based on trust, respect and tolerance for each other's views. Please try to begin again and not with an attitude of confrontation, accusation and conflict but with love, understanding and adjustment.

Dear Mita,  
As some of the letters addressed to you have been from men I feel encouraged to write also but without revealing my identity. The problem is my wife who spends too much and refuses to live within our means. We have had arguments and fights over this but nothing has changed. She buys impulsively even when she does not have enough money and then makes me pay, lately she has even started taking loan which is causing me embarrassment. I really do not know what to do about this because otherwise my wife is a very nice person. She finds me very stingy and without any ambition. I am happy with my situation and content with the things I have. Please advise because she is becoming impossible.

Hamid (not my real name), Dhaka.

Dear Hamid,  
Conflict over money is one of the most common problems among couples and often turns into more serious problems if left unresolved. As you have seen threats, arguments and fights will not solve anything, your wife has acquired the habit of overspending over the years which will not go away just because you say so. You will have to go back and find out the origin of this problem. Probably it is her family background. It can work both ways, either she had too much to spend or too little. Your attitude could also be aggravating the problem. It is difficult to comment after hearing one side of the story. Maybe if she is given more responsibility for handling money she will be careful with it. Her behaviour sounds immature so I would advise you to tackle the problem from that angle. Talking things over frankly and putting all the facts of your financial situation in front of her is your best bet.

## WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toyne Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.

## Women and Power

From the preceding page during the Roosevelt administration, and for many years afterwards continued to command much support in the corridors of power. Allied with her dynamism and charm, however, there were other qualities; she was extravagant and luxury-loving, imperious and arrogant. She was so highly-strung that she would break out in hives if she got upset. Consequently she was obsessive about having nothing but silk next to her skin, to the extent that she carried her own silk bedsheets with her wherever she went.

But for the many Chinese women who have attained power and privilege through the judicious use of their beauty and whatever talent they possessed, there were others who proved their worth in a harder school.

There were thirty women cadres on the Long March. Along with the men, they suffered hunger, thirst, cold, and the hardship of marching all day, and sometimes all night. The terrain was rough; stony mountain trails bordering precipices, treacherous grasslands and swamps into which a man could sink without a trace.

There was a women's combat regiment which fought some serious battles. During one engagement two thousand women were killed, tortured and otherwise disposed of. Of the thirty women cadres, a few of them are still alive today, including Deng Yingchao, the wife of the late premier Chou En Lai. Kang Keqing, another noted Long Marcher, was a combat soldier and marksman. A robust woman, she habitually carried two pistols and a Mauser. Sometimes she would carry three or four rifles to help out her tired colleagues and to set a good example. Cai Chang, one of the most outstanding women members of the Long March



'I don't know much about art, but I know what I can't afford.'

died recently in Beijing. While women as well as men get a chance to show their mettle in times of crisis or emergency, in normal times the old attitudes prevail. For the average Chinese woman, some of the cast iron rules of conduct laid down by tradition and the teachings of Confucius still carry weight today. Even now it is considered inappropriate for women to display emotion, smile broadly or laugh loudly. They are expected to maintain their composure at all times.

Although certain social taboos may still exist, the traditional roles of men and women have undergone a change in response to the economic reality of contemporary life. In China today half the work force consists of women. Legislation has guaranteed them certain rights. Their consequent economic emancipation has gradually led to an altered perception of their role in society. Single women are no longer subject to social pressures and have the confidence and the freedom to make their own decisions.

Among married people, where in most cases both husband and wife have full-time jobs it is an accepted fact that men must share all domestic chores good and bad, with their wives. With a little bit of prompting from women's groups, the social revolution in China has come so far that in a recent interview even the wife of Premier Li Peng said that Li was a good husband who always did his share of the housework.

Indeed, a competition was held recently in Beijing to find the model husband. A spokeswoman for Beijing television which sponsored the contest said that the winner should be "a hard-working family peace-keeper with good values and management skills who helps with the housework and satisfies his wife sexually."

Confucius must be turning in his grave.

Nasrin Sobhan is a freelance journalist who is currently resident in Beijing, China, with her diplomat husband.