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People and Places

Vietnam: The Country Not the War

A Star Special

Story and Pictures — by Peyton Johnson

HANOI — To most people the word "Vietnam" flashes instant visions of desperate combat, invariably fought with no quarter asked or given in deep and apparently endless jungles of impenetrable green.

This "TV and movie" view of the ancient nation of Vietnam fosters at least two major misconceptions: that the Vietnamese people, proud to a fault, are forever at war with some one or other, if not with themselves; and that physically Vietnam, the whole of it, is "jungle country" par excellence.

Like so many impressions spawned by the television and movie industries, both premises are dead wrong.

The whole world has come to think of us as just a battleground. Vietnam is a nation and we are a people. We have a history and dreams and hopes like everybody else. The quicker everybody gets over this obsession about the wars, the better for all of us," said a ranking official of the Ministry of Forestry.

The only war going on in Vietnam is the war to put the economy back on its feet and to save our national environment. Unless we work very hard and are very careful, this is a war we could lose.

"Rather than too much green," he added, "every year now we have less and less. The highlands are more denuded than at any time in our long history. As for the lowlands, there is little, too little, jungle left."

About 80 per cent of Vietnam's terrain, the official pointed out, is not tropical rain forests, "jungle" to the insistent, but mountain, hill and highland. Once these upland areas were heavily forested. Now they are fading fast in colours of increasingly oppressive hue. Some have already become wastelands. Many more totter precariously on the brink. The more visibly tropical areas of the lowlands are also shrinking and are far less green than they were less than a generation ago, far less so in fact than they were during the most ferocious periods of the hellish wars.

Vietnam, in short, is facing the same major and relentlessly growing problem that threatens practically every other developing nation — and not a few of those designated as "developed" — the world over: massive deforestation and

swallow entire villages.

All along this painful pilgrimage — the condition of Highway One itself, Vietnam's principal, indeed only, major north-south route is perhaps commentary enough on the unhappy state of the country's problems — to many towns and hamlets lie listless in the killing sun hammered senseless by erosion, desertification, salination, water-logging or new and unwelcome aridity, at once the consequences of past deforestation and the advance agents of more to come.

It is not that the Vietnamese are unaware of these problems. They are at least as aware as their fellow developing Asian neighbours. Vietnam has, in fact, one of the most ambitious reforestation, or "regreening," programmes of any Third World nation.

The trouble is that major efforts to save an already badly damaged environment is an expensive business, prohibitively so for many Third World nations. If there is one thing the Vietnamese do not have in abundance it is money.

"A cabinet minister once asked me just how much it would cost to do everything necessary to put our environment into healthy shape," said the forestry official.

"When I told him, I didn't know whether he was going to faint, cry, scream or fire me on the spot," he said. "But the problem is still there, more massive every year. It threatens our very future as a nation. It cannot be solved on the cheap."

Yet the vast amounts of foreign aid and investment that the Vietnamese optimistically expected to flow in once the fighting was over have so far been disappointing. They have come not as a river but a trickle.

Funding for protection of the environment and reforestation the country has been particularly parsimonious. These activities, though inescapably necessary, do not readily attract investors, private or governmental. Profits, if any, usu-



Rice workers on a state owned large farm in northern Vietnam.

ally do not register for decades.

Governments themselves too often show a marked distaste for committing heavy funds for "initiatives" that require endless and not-easily-hyped maintenance, development money that can only be justified as "an investment in the nation's future." The "future" is hard to sell to average citizens. Usually they have already made too many sacrifices in the past. And here comes the government again demanding yet more sacrifice for some hypothetical "national future." What the average citizen, to say nothing of the private investor, wants to hear about is NOW.

"Easily the best of our few friends in dealing with this problem has been, and is, the World Food Programme," said the official. WFP doesn't have to worry about profits and the agency's officials understand long-term public problems

that simply have to be solved."

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the United Nations specialized agency that uses food commodities and services as development aid. To qualify for WFP help a nation has only to convince the food aid agency of the urgency of a major public problem and the government's determination to deal with it.

WFP has assisted Vietnam since 1984 through 48 long and short term projects, six still in operation, with food aid valued at \$320 million. This aid has addressed a wide range of difficulties — refugee resettlement, rehabilitation of damaged rubber and crop lands, postwar reconstruction, assistance to vulnerable groups, WFP emergency projects. 21 in all, have helped victims of floods, drought, typhoons and other natural disasters throughout the unlucky coun-

try. Broke indeed, Vietnam's per capita income last year was just \$200, slightly above that of Asia's very poorest countries —

Bangladesh, Burma, Bhutan and Nepal — but not by enough to brag about.

But just how bad is Vietnam's environmental situation?

"As bad as we can bear," said the official. "If we don't solve this problem, we might as well give up on everything else."

A few discouraging statistics would seem to bear out the official's lament. In 1943, Vietnam's forests totalled 13 million hectares covering 42 per cent of the national territory. By 1982 the forested area had shrunk to 7.8 million hectares or 23 per cent of the land area. Vietnamese forests today are estimated at no more than six million hectares or about 20 per cent of the land. To make matters worse, the forests are still shrinking at the annual and calamitous rate

of 240,000 hectares a year.

"If this goes on another generation we will have literally no forests left," said the official. "And if we lose our forests we are certainly going to lose all our watersheds and then our agriculture as well. There is nothing hypothetical about this. It is as certain and inevitable as two plus two equals four."

"We are and always have been an agricultural people, a nation of farmers. If we don't stop this environmental disaster we will one day face starvation. I don't see how it is possible to come to any other conclusion."

The official said this not so much with anger or grief but with the grim conviction of a man obsessed by an arithmetic he found horrendous but impossible to refute.

"And then there's the popu-

lation problem," he added glumly. "We've made progress here, but not nearly enough."

In 1921, Vietnam, then under French colonial rule, had just 15 million citizens, or 45 people per square kilometre. Half a century later, in 1971, despite war losses on a horrific scale, the population had soared to 52.5 million. By 1986, the shooting long ceased the population was some 63 million, or 190 people per square kilometre. Today there are just under 68 million Vietnamese, or above 200 people per square kilometre.

Thus in the last 70 years, demands on the land, with erosion growing annually, and on the forests, shrinking ever faster, have swollen by 400 per cent. A growing number of foresters and environmentalists around the world now believe that these two factors more than any others account for the dangerous deforestation going on throughout the Third World: population

growth and the accompanying need for more cropland and fuelwood, both supplies at the expense of the forests.

"The fuelwood problem alone is acute enough," the official said. "It seldom gets the attention it deserves. Maybe it's not glamorous enough. You're not talking about setting up some attractive wood-based industry, just about how to save the trees you have left and hopefully to plant new ones."

So long as fuelwood is the only source of energy a majority of the rural people have for cooking and heating, they are going to continue to steal from the forests and chop down trees, the official added. After all, they too have to eat.

"We must provide them with some alternative source of energy at a price they can afford," he said. "We must also plant millions upon millions of new trees, both to reclaim lands we've lost and to rebuild our forest. Unfortunately, all these things cost money we don't have," he said.

"That's why the WFP aid is so important to this country. We know it is by no means a panacea, but at least it allows us a start. It gives us a chance."

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A bombed-out street in the port of Vinh in northern Vietnam. In the background is all that is left of the once imposing Catholic cathedral.



Street scene from Hanoi, capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

all its accompanying woes and ills.

A 2,000 kilometre car ride from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City over bone-jarring "roads," if that indeed be the word, puts irrefutable evidence of this before the most sceptical of observers.

Tall hills and rolling highlands once cool and deeply green with pine or Chinese fir strain wearily up from the wounded earth in long hot stretches of stony grey, dusty tan or baked-out brown. Every 100 kilometres or less of this seemingly endless via dolorosa great slashes of rock fall and landslide cut like unhealed scars through what was once good pasture or farmland. In all too many places along the coast, the beauty of the beaches with their clean white sands and clear blue-green sea gives way to the even clearer menace of shifting dunes inexorably marching inland to smother rice and fruit fields,

ally do not register for decades.

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Calcutta Cinema Houses : More Pain than Pleasure

by Rahat Fahmida

THE latest tussle between owners of the 400 cinema halls in West Bengal and their employees, who number 20,000 or more, is, by all indications, a proxy war for the bigger battle that leaders of the film industry have been waging with the State Government for many years. If the cinemas did come under lock-out, as was threatened at one stage because employees had resorted to frequent one-day strikes, the cinema owners would probably have little to lose. Indeed, if what they claim in private is correct, running the exhibition business is a losing proposition and many of them would only be too happy to put their establishments to other uses.

What other uses? In Calcutta where about 100 of these cinemas are situated, the most popular centres of screen entertainment might well be turned into shopping complexes, hotels or restaurants. One cinema in central Calcutta with a huge tower as a familiar landmark was at one time a great tourist hunt. Its floors were superbly carpeted and the air-conditioning had a delicate perfume that made Saturday night show a perpetual attraction.

This, of course, was during the best days of American films in the city, when entertainment was clean, bright and lively. Those were the days when Hollywood appeared on the Calcutta screen with stars of the calibre of Gregory Peck, Omar Sharif, Charlton Heston, Anthony Quinn and the ex-patriates from other countries — Richard Burton, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and the rest — appealed to all sections of audience. The weekly change in about half a dozen cinemas around central Calcutta brought at least three new films every week.

Times have changed. The weekly fare has dwindled to a minimum. The video circuit has eaten into audience support and the kind of perverse thrills that emanate from films making the best use of sex and violence only draws a particular section of audience which is hardly interested in the cinema as a form of either art or healthy entertainment. That is probably why one of these cinemas is planning to provide something that will concern the people's health more directly: a large portion of its first-floor lobby is being turned into a bar.

Many of the "old palaces" in Calcutta, however, had bare licences since British times. The New Empire, was an opera house long before it was converted into a cinema after Warner Bros took it over to renovate with funds they

earned from showing films in India but which, under the Government of India's law, they could not repatriate fully to their parent body.

The agents of Twentieth Century Fox did much the same to the Globe which was converted from the shabby establishment in the late fifties to a centre of 70 mm luxury. In the old days, the Elite was probably the only house with 70 mm facilities but attention soon turned to the Globe after The Sound of Music and My Fair Lady left a stunning impression.

Memories of these films linger in the minds of old-timers for the simple reason that Calcutta does not respond to such classics as enthusiastically. Or, it might simply be that such classics offering

simple and wholesome entertainment, embellished with generous doses of delightful music, are no more made in Hollywood. Technology has taken over films and Calcutta has been left way behind. The craft of the cinema has probably nothing to do with the way general audiences react — and the cinemas have only to fall in line.

But the trouble really started in the early seventies when the Government of India decided to curb the import of American films. Those were the days when the wholly untenable idea of getting an Indian State-run organization to decide on the kind of films that should be imported began to take shape. Naturally, the American distributors cried off and the foreign film market

was flooded with B and C-grade entertainment. The audience profile in the cinemas changed drastically and many of the cinemas reserved for the screening of foreign films began to offer the Indian "masala" as well.

It went on for more than 10 years and matters became infinitely worse with the Government deciding to allow NRIs to import films. These consisted of sleazy, shady and sensational pot-boilers that drew people inclined towards voyeuristic delights. The cinema in central Calcutta never had it so good — commercially. But in all other respects, particularly in the standard of clientele and maintenance, they suffered miserably.

Never till then had the dividing line between good clean entertainment from abroad and Indian "masala" been so clear. The dividing line was evident even in the upkeep of the cinemas. The Metro, Globe, Lighthouse, New Empire, Elite, even the Minerva, tucked away in a conglomeration of shops and eating houses near New Market, for all their colonial connections, represented cultural attitudes quite distinct from the atmosphere prevailing in other cinemas in Calcutta, and definitely those in the districts.

There was air-conditioning even then in the cinemas showing Hindi and Bengali films but nowhere did one experience the thrill of one's feet sinking into the thick carpet laid out at the Lighthouse as one slid down the sloping aisle to one's seat. And remember the signature tune, that the cinema made its very own, as the curtains went up?

Managements that now advertise the dubious excitement of "all about sex and violence" do not consider the comforts of cushioned seats, proper air-conditioning, clean carpets or

signature tunes of any consequence at all. The content takes care of the rush at the box-office — and that is what really matters.

The condition of the houses showing Indian films is infinitely worse — and probably less to their fate with a vengeance. That is primarily because their owners have been crying themselves hoarse that they should be given relief in the payment of amusement tax or allowed to levy a maintenance surcharge on audiences.

The trouble is that they are in no position to rationalize their ticket prices without the permission of the State Government, and hence are left to their own devices which are often by no means ethical. Many of them, for instance, have virtually withdrawn their air-conditioning plants.

Cleanliness, or the criminal lack of it, does not seem to bother the managements at all. In summer the atmosphere inside the halls is insufferable, particularly during noon shows. But there is just no way the managements can help. "What are we to do when electricity bills have shot up and box-office receipts reduced sharply after the attractions of weekend films and sport on television," they say.

To be sure, television has eaten into cinema attendance to an extent that cannot now be set right by the revival of Hollywood films. The Government of India has, through a recent agreement, allowed the American film distributors to import their films without the supervision of public sector corporations like the National Film Development Corporation. Even so, there is little hope of restoring the old atmosphere in the cinemas which are now in sorry shape and have been hit by spiralling prices. Ask the



Whither cinegoers? Sorry facade of a Calcutta cinema house.