

A Nostalgic Trip to Colombo; Tribute to Some Sri Lankan Friends; the Rains Have Come; and a Moving Letter from a Kind Reader

BEFORE returning to Bangladesh in mid-1989, at the end of my long—indeed, a little too long—stay abroad, I had drawn up a mental list of places we must visit at a leisurely pace to refamiliarise ourselves with South Asia. There were a few obvious spots in our own country, like the tea gardens in Srirangam area and the tribal belt along the Sylhet-Assam border. There were also places in other South Asian countries included in my list, which I knew pretty well (or so I thought, without realising how once familiar places could change beyond any recognition over the years) and some I had been hearing about, without having a chance of visiting them in the past.

Colombo was somewhere near the top of the list.

I became conscious of my lingering fascination for the capital of Sri Lanka a couple of weeks ago when I briefed one of our feature writers, S. Bari who was proceeding to Colombo to attend a seminar, on what she might just find interesting enough to write about. In this kind of briefing, I usually take a somewhat defensive position, conscious as I am that the new generation of writers have their own perspective, perhaps quite different from one that moves journalists of my age group. I do not worry about this generation gap, not certainly when it comes to writing, in the hope that this diversity in the choice of subjects adds more life and colour to a newspaper, that inexplicable vibrancy that makes one publication different from another.

Once when I was in Colombo (I was telling Bari), my companion one morning, when I was doing some window-shopping, was a graduate in Political Science, who, with his emaciated look, could be anything between early thirties to forties in age. He had no regular job. So he made a living of sorts as a freelance tourist guide, as he put it, earning modest commissions from the shops. Since I had no particular interest in buying anything that morning, I invited him to join me for tea and snack—and a long conversation—at a nearby restaurant.

It was in mid-seventies, only a few years after the then government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike had carried out a massive crackdown on ultra-leftists, thousands of whom were executed and thousands more were put on the wanted list. Talking to me almost in whispers and leaving me in no doubt about his political sympathies, my companion gave me a good briefing on the island's political situation, a situation which was part fascinating and part frightening, with the country, once described as a "land of lotus eaters", caught in a "no-win position".

Making one prediction after another, like some Marxists do even when it comes to the collapse of the Russian-type socialism, my companion saw the future of Sri Lanka in terms of a ceaseless turmoil. Many of his forecasts eventually came true. The Bandaranaike government fell in the 1977 election; the ultra-leftist insurgency resurfaced in parts of the island in a matter of years; and the northern part of the island was in a near-civil war situation in the bloody conflict between the Tamils and government troops, with Sinhalese and Muslims caught in crossfires. What he did not

say—perhaps did not even know—was that this beautiful island would not give in to insurgency and would fight on with its indomitable spirit, to bring back stability and progress to the strife-torn people.

As the conversation dragged on, we had little time to look at the shops. But we did go to one, selling old coins and stamps. There was one huge rouble, with the head of Lenin engraved on it, released by the former Soviet Union in 1917 to mark the revolution. "One day, it will be worth something," my far-sighted companion had said in his casual tone. But I did not get the message.

So, ending my little briefing to Bari, I said, "If you are approached by someone who has assumed the role of a tourist guide, take him (or her) to a roadside restaurant for tea. You may get some useful predictions of what lies ahead for Sri Lanka during this decade. But whatever you hear, do not lose your faith in the future of this island. And then pass by that coin shop."

continent. They were just Ceylonese. Now, they are South Asian, their country being a founder member of SAARC whose current chairman, President Ranasinghe Premadasa is assured of a warm welcome when he arrives here on Sunday.

True, some of them consciously cultivated the British ways and eventually settled down in the United Kingdom. But most were more concerned about being part of the new post-war world, sharing its promises, with their command over English and understanding of modern political thoughts as their assets. No wonder, starting with the fifties, Ceylonese filled in several senior posts in the United Nations system and took up high positions in newspapers in South East Asia, especially as sports editors.

That people with easy-going lifestyles, from a country which had not known such a grinding poverty as its neighbouring India, should also produce a sizable number of staunch

in all our rivers and then see a flood is something I do not even want to speculate about. We can only pray and hope that we won't be caught in that vicious cycle again.

Having said my prayer that we won't see another flood, I have a different nagging thought. Why is it that I see so few people using umbrellas, unlike in the past when the start of the monsoon saw us all rushing to buy this essential protection against a downpour? Maybe it is too expensive. Perhaps it is not much of a protection during a heavy rain.

We were discussing the subject in Kuala Lumpur a few years ago, with Sardar Swaran Singh, a former Foreign Minister of India, who was on a visit to Malaysia in his capacity as member of the UNESCO Executive Board.

It used to rain almost every afternoon—it probably still does—and sometimes, we would see people running to get inside a building. I wonder why these people do not use umbrellas as we always do in India," Sardar Sahib—as I called him—once remarked and then came up with another of his stories from the past.

He said, "One day, Pandit Nehru was addressing a big public rally, somewhere in Punjab, with me sharing the platform with him. To start with, it was a cloudy day. Suddenly, it started raining very heavily. Then, everyone opened his umbrella. In a matter of minutes, we were facing perhaps several thousands of them. Panditji turned to me and asked, "Sardar Singh, am I addressing people or addressing umbrellas?"

THE daily mail from our readers gets bigger by day, full of diverse views and constructive ideas on national affairs. A few—indeed only a few—differ with our editorial positions on current issues and more often than not, our contributors and guest columnists get their share of appreciation from our readers.

In one such letter published on Tuesday, Parveen Anam has been commended for her recent good piece, titled, "Beginning of the New Season" used in our regular "Dhaka Day by Day" column.

The letter from Md Delwar Hossain who describes himself as an "Ex-student of English, University of Dhaka" also has a sad note which has touched me deeply.

After congratulating Ms Anam on her treatment of the subject, Hossain says, "Now, something about myself. I have been suffering from a brain disease for last five years. I am not expected to live long. In spite of the gradual decrease in my memory and thinking power, I try to read almost all the important and informative articles that appear in *The Daily Star*. After my death, the delivery of *The Daily Star* may be stopped as no other member of the family is appreciative of English reading habit."

All we can say in response to this moving letter, "Thank you, Mr Hossain, for your kind words about *The Daily Star*. May you live long, longer than you or your doctors expect, and may we, in the *Star*, serve you to the best of our journalistic ability. Let this paper remain your daily faithful companion that you can trust."

not so far discussed the question of court attire.

The risk is that they "will look ridiculous," says Pope.

"We haven't considered it as an issue because every country has a different way of looking at it," says an official. "I don't think that what happens in England and Wales will affect other countries. They'll follow their own course."

This will centre not on whether a male judge looks better in historic robes than a grey suit, or a wig-adorned female barrister resembles "a Botticelli angel"—One informal justification—but on whether such turnouts emphasise the identity, dignity and authority of individual courts.

NICOLA COLE, now a freelance writer, was staff writer and newsdesk executive on the *London Times* and *Financial Correspondent* with the *London Bureau of The Australian*.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

That huge rouble with the head of Lenin may be still there. Now, it will be worth something, perhaps a fortune after some years.

DURING the mid-fifties when I spent a few years in London, passing myself as a student but quietly trying to make a career as a journalist, some of my best friends were from what was then called Ceylon. When we teased them for getting their independence on a platter, thanks to the freedom movement in India, they would say, "The British were too scared to fight us" or

The Soviet Union has collapsed and socialism has disappeared from most of its former strongholds. But you can be sure, in one form or another, the Trotskyist Party still survives in Sri Lanka. Maybe it is just part of the indomitable spirit that moves this island nation.

something to that effect. We would tease back, "Why should the British fight their own people?", a reference to the English ways, especially in education and culture, of our pipe-smoking bearded Ceylonese friends who, years later, inspired the satirical book, titled "Brown Sahibs" by the noted Sri Lankan Magsaysay-winning journalist, Tarzie Vittachi.

Looking back, I suspect, many of my friends were not particularly comfortable calling themselves as people from the Indian sub-

continent. They were just Ceylonese. Now, they are South Asian, their country being a founder member of SAARC whose current chairman, President Ranasinghe Premadasa is assured of a warm welcome when he arrives here on Sunday.

True, some of them consciously cultivated the British ways and eventually settled down in the United Kingdom. But most were more concerned about being part of the new post-war world, sharing its promises, with their command over English and understanding of modern political thoughts as their assets. No wonder, starting with the fifties, Ceylonese filled in several senior posts in the United Nations system and took up high positions in newspapers in South East Asia, especially as sports editors.

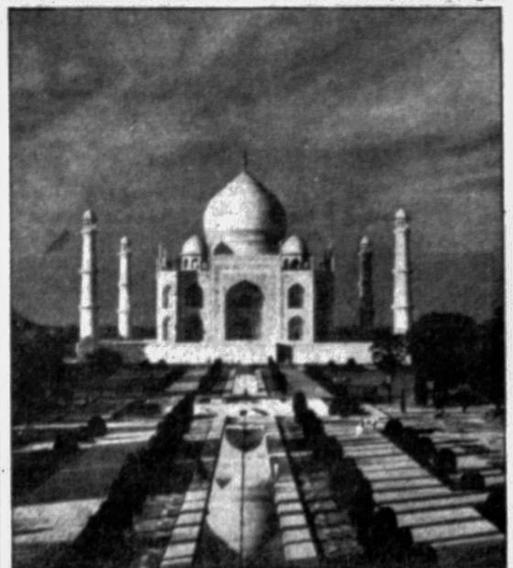
That people with easy-going lifestyles, from a country which had not known such a grinding poverty as its neighbouring India, should also produce a sizable number of staunch

SO, at long last, the rains have come, reminding us of the saying, "Better late than never." Whether we will have downpour every day, watch the water level rise

Danger to the Taj

by Samir Dasgupta

EVER since the beginning of the construction of a six-million-tonne capacity giant oil refinery at Mathura, about 35 km from Agra, journalists, environmentalists and others have been crying hoarse that the great Taj Mahal would be seriously threatened by the resulting pollution. In fact, the magnificent monument had been subjected to pollution even earlier by the existence of several foundries in the vicinity, a 20-MW thermal power station and coal-burning railway engines engaged in shunting operations, as well as a big transport station with numerous passenger buses and trucks belching out smoke throughout the day and night. The immaculate white marble



for which the Taj has been known far and wide was already turning yellowish with brown patches developing at places. But this could be expected to happen anyway. The great monuments, cathedrals and works of art in Europe have suffered more damage in the last 50 years than in the previous 300 years. What we could have done, however, was to learn about the complexities of industrial pollution from the experience of the West.

The story of the Mathura refinery is a tortuous and murky one. When the project was first announced, some environmentalists protested that it was likely to damage not only the Taj but the entire complex of Agra-Sikri-Bharatpur, including the Ghana bird sanctuary. What appears strange in retrospect, though, is that the terms of reference of the very first officially constituted expert committee, which was asked to suggest measures for protecting the Taj and other monuments from the harmful effects of the proposed refinery, did not include the possibility of shifting the project itself to another site away from Agra to the downward winds. The recommendations of the report, still under the consideration of the government, is not mandatory. Meanwhile, the construction work on the refinery was never halted, even temporarily; and, by the beginning of 1980, when the waste gases and liquids emanating from the partially activated refinery had very clearly taken a big toll by further discolouring the Taj.

Technico, the surface alterations of the marble are due to algae, which have penetrated some microns deep into the stone. The algae have produced black spots which, a lot of experts feel, may have imprisoned some particulate matter within it. These Technico reports, have a good coverage and are corrosive due to the presence of oxalic and muramic acids. They are accompanied by decomposing microorganisms. Some of them cause disintegration and perforation of the stone; some fix atmospheric nitrogen to produce nitrogen compounds; while others are used by the nitro-bacteria which cause further corrosive action. The algae, it is further pointed out by Technico, foster sulphur and ammonifying bacteria which might swell in number with the passage of time. The reddish grey, brown or yellowish dust from the marble contain salts and a number of microorganisms. Sulphates, chlorides and nitrates are present in the

Continued on page 11

After Two Centuries Wig and Gown are on Way out

Nicola Cole writes from London

The wig and gown, traditional dress in English courts, and still worn in many Commonwealth countries, may be on the way out. Judges and barristers are increasingly shedding traditional attire. Now even England, where wigs and gowns originated more than two centuries ago, is debating the case for more modern dress.



coats and white trousers. Changes of the kind proposed in Britain "never happen in a vacuum," declares Jeremy Pope, director of the Commonwealth Secretariat's legal department.

The trend is more and more towards greater informality in general and it is "all one way... I am not aware of anyone who has reinstated wigs and robes."

ceremonial robes and full-bottomed wigs (albeit at nearly \$1,600 a time). Zambia and certain Australia states are cases in point.

But are they not frightfully uncomfortable in temperatures that cause horses to sweat and ladies to glow? "I think you can draw the relevant inference, sister," comments a Jamaican Government spokesman.

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association, representing 120 law societies and 700 individual jurists, says it has

BBRITISH author Evelyn Waugh put his finger on it, gleefully observing how it is "very hard for a man with a wig to keep order." The heartlessly brilliant novelist was referring to balding teachers with a penchant for toupees, but his words are being remembered for their relevance to an issue now gripping an allied profession.

That profession is the law, and the issue is whether judges and barristers should make the final leap from the 18th to the 21st Century by abandoning their bygone wigs and gowns and adopting contemporary clothes in court.

The question has become an issue since the two most senior judicial figures in England and Wales have now declared themselves in favour of more modern, simple legal attire.

In a seemingly unprecedented move, the Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, and the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Taylor of Gosforth, have thrown the matter open to public debate.

The reform-minded pair want to hear the views of all sane adults from prosecution counsel to prisoners, from the innocent and the guilty alike, before the end of the year.

One outcome can be predicted with certainty—the two law lords are going to be deluged with advice and opinions from far and wide.

Reactionaries are horrified to think that the end may be in sight for the picturesque panoply of judges' robes—the Lord Chancellor's own gold-decked black damask, the scarlet-and-ermine of the High Court's "red judges," the fur-trimmed violet of the circuit judiciary—to say nothing of full-bottomed wigs, knee-breeches, lack jabots and silver-buckled shoes.

Opponents of pomp, ceremony and the arcane can hardly wait for the demise of juridical uniforms, including the short wigs customarily worn by barristers—and fashioned in well-curled style from that equally traditional material, horsehair—along with

the "black cap," the silk triangle which a judge dons when passing the death sentence (retained on Statute in Britain for treason and piracy with violence; the last set of working galleys, at Wandsworth Prison in London, is tested every six months).

The critics contend that such trappings are anachronistic and unnecessarily intimidating, reinforcing suspicions that the law is remote from and out-of-touch with ordinary people in exists to serve, also that justice is less accessible than it should be.

Lords Mackay and Taylor are already showing sympathy with such views. They say that what matters to the public is the quality of justice—and that this does not appear to be enhanced if those involved give an impression of wishing to live in another age.

The matter may not generate a much heat as that of whether the Duchess of York—"Fergie"—should be snapped cavorting au naturelle in St Tropez, but will reverberate more widely.

For British court dress was part of the baggage exported with British-style justice in colonial days to all countries within the old Empire—and it lingers on in a perhaps surprising number of Commonwealth nations.

Singapore courts retain wigs and robes. So, too, does the Supreme Court in Jamaica.

And the High Court in New Zealand (though updating is sought there as well). And the courts of New South Wales in Australia.

In the world's second-largest country—Canada—lawyers appear wig-less in federal and provincial courts alike.

British Columbia has actually made the wearing of wigs in its courts a punishable offence. Jurists are however, free to wear gowns in all courtrooms.

Wigs have likewise been discarded in the Republic of India, though judges still wear robes. Barristers favour black

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
I refer to the women who complained about becoming a grandmother. This is the problem with modern working women, they forget our tradition and want to blindly follow the western model which has failed to work. The reason for their unhappiness is the lack of feelings for each other in the family. People are too selfish and self centered to help anyone one else even their own children. We do not want that to happen in Bangladesh, we want to look after our children even if they are grown up and married. What is your opinion on this, or are you as modern as the lady in question.
Rashida Alam, Naya Paltan, Dhaka

Dear Rashida,
I do appreciate your sentiments, we certainly should not follow the western model blindly. But as more and more women join the workforce certain changes in the family pattern is bound to take place, this is a reality one has to accept. The lady in question is just raising an issue which we will all have to face sooner or later. There is no getting away from the fact that women in our generation will never have as much time to give to their grandchildren as our mothers did. This is not because we are less affectionate or feel less for the family, it is because we have other duties and responsibilities that our mothers did not have. Our children will have to understand that, we will have to learn to strike a balance between the western model and our own values and culture.

Dear Mita,
I don't understand how you could support the women who wrote that she does not want her daughter to have children. I think she is very selfish and interfering mother who wants to stay young and does not want to accept the fact that she is getting old. Usually mothers look forward to the day their children will get married and have a family, this women seems to be very different from the rest. You should have advised her not to interfere in her daughter's life because she will cause unhappiness.
Sultana, Eskaton, Dhaka

Dear Sultana,
My answer to the above letter should make my position clear on this issue. I however agree that after children become adults and get married, the less parents interfere in their lives the better and that is what I did advise.

Dear Mita,
After much hesitation I decided to write. I was in love with a man but my parents were against it and forced me to marry someone else. This was 5 years ago. I slowly learnt to adjust as my husband is kind and considerate. Few months ago the other person phoned me and said he wanted to see me, I agreed and over the months we have become intimate again. He wants me to divorce my husband and marry him. My husband still does not know anything about it. I am very confused, what should I do? I don't want to destroy my family, but at the same time I feel very attracted to this person. This is a very difficult decision for me to take alone and I need your help.
Anonymous, Chittagong

Dear Anonymous,
Yes, this is a very difficult situation which needs a lot of thought and some serious thinking. First, there is no scope for you to be confused. You have to decide what your priorities are and before you do that who do you really love and want to spend your life with. Can it be that you attraction for this person is just an attraction and nothing deeper? Or, you are confusing what you felt for him before with what you feel for him now. The other important question is, your present life, him now, and your husband. What do they really mean to your family and your husband. What do they really built you, will that person be worth leaving all that you have built over the last 5 years? I am not trying to discourage you, but just directing you towards a certain chain of questions which you will have to ask yourself and find answers to. My only advice is, please don't rush into anything because the decision you take will affect the lives of many people.