

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

People and Places

The Moment, the Music, the Movement

by Azfar Hussain back from Hyderabad

On December 30, 1993, at around 8 o'clock in the night, while standing in front of the travel tax counter at the Zia International Airport, I reflected on life itself: "life is a life-long mess." It indeed troubles me to have to say that I was hurrying to get into my flight-British Airways 144, scheduled to leave Dhaka at 8:30 pm. While I was trying to connect things with things, it so happened that I had a head-on collision with a middle-aged, bearded, bony gentleman — yes, it was a bone-to-bone contact giving birth to a scream irresistibly shot forth by the bearded gentlemen who communicated well that I had committed an unpardonable sin of blindness, and that he did not.

Thus, with annoyances mounting inside and with steps hurrying forward, I was passing immigration, and what happened all on a sudden was that the belt got lopped off from the sidebag I was carrying. Managing to catch hold of it, I thought it was nothing but a beginning of a messy journey. However, as I found later, my journey was no way an unpleasing one.

In fact, I had been to Hyderabad via Bombay to attend, as a USIS-scholar, a month-long workshop/course on American Studies organised by the American Studies Research Centre, popularly known in its acronym as ASRC. I should mention here that the ASRC, founded in 1984, is the largest library and research centre on American Studies in Asia or Africa, and one of the two or three largest outside the United States. It maintains a growing research collection of over 160,000 books, periodicals, documents, data-collections, audio-visual materials and micro-forms on American history, politics, economics, education, geography, literature, sociology, law and art. Located in its own recently expanded 44,000 sq ft facility on a five-acre plot on the campus of Osmania University in Hyderabad, this research centre administers a programme of grants supporting research at the ASRC by more than 225 Indian scholars a year and a USIS regional grants programme supporting research at the Centre by about 50 scholars a year from other countries in Asia and Africa. In fact, the course that I attended at the ASRC was an intensive one, meant exclusively for young scholars — university lecturers and researchers including M Phil and Ph D students. Apart from the participants from India and Bangladesh, there were scholars from Nepal and Sri Lanka, and the total number of participants in the course stood at 30. The faculty, exclusively formed for this course, consisted of distinguished Americanists from Indian, South Asian and American universities, who taught and evaluated the course — participants. And I feel very happy to say that Bangladesh was number one in the list of the outstanding group, and that it had won the highest award in the form of a four-week scholar-in-residence grant.

Now, let me come back to British Airways 144 that I got into with a somewhat routine, smiling welcome from one of the attractive airhostesses on duty. But, a little later, I had yet another round of collision — this time, a leg-to-knee contact — with a German anthropologist (I came to know about his nationality and profession later) and discovered that a German knee can be as strong as German philosophy itself. This gentleman did not scream, but he certainly looked annoyed, and smiled only later, when I said "sorry" to him. I came to know that he was going to London, and that his short visit to Dhaka was purely an anthropological interest. What particularly fascinated me about this middle-aged, baldy anthropologist was his irresistible child-like curiosity about everything Bengal and Bangladeshi.

The airplane left Dhaka not precisely at 8:30 pm, but a little later. Dwarving the city of Dhaka, and making it look like an easily chartable microcosm of roads and buildings underneath, 144 started piercing the darkness in a rhythm of its own. The German anthropologist, seated next to me, suddenly yawned, and I, at one point of time, tried to concentrate on a film being shown as part of British Airways services, but it did not interest me.

After a few hours of flying, when the plane was descending on the city of Bombay so endearingly described by Salman Rushdie in one of his novels, I tried to take an eager look at it for me, the window was the medium, and the window was

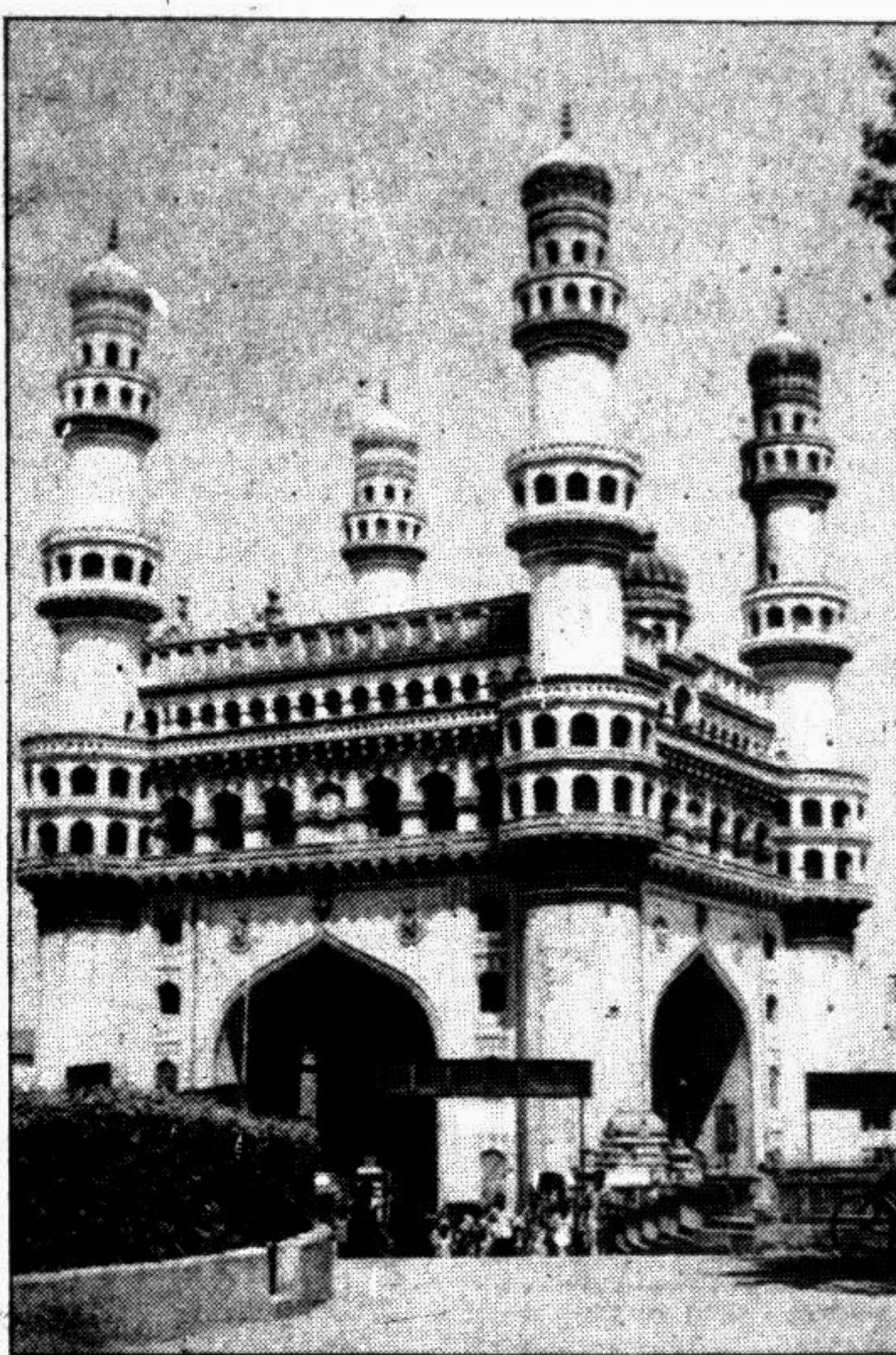
the message. This city of film-hits — hits as they are also in Bangladesh, this city of Amitabh Bachchan and Madhuri Dixit as some of my students love to think, looked like the kind of Dhaka that was earlier dwarfed by sheer height, but, Bombay looked certainly bigger, than Dhaka. Landing at the airport, I found Bombay celebrating God's plenty. The airport was brimming with people of varying sizes and colours and languages; it was full of polyphonic clamours and busy movements. It is said that Bombay is one of the busiest airports in the world. But, God saved me. Despite Bombay's untrammelled business, I did not have a single collision with anyone and anything. I had to wait for a couple of hours at the Bombay Airport to catch Air India 606 to go to Hyderabad. I reached Hyderabad at midnight; the temperature there did not conceivably vary from that in Bangladesh. Mr Kabir of USIS-Dhaka already suggested me that I should not move out of the airport at midnight so as to avoid any unpleasant troubles on the way. I was reminded of those miscreants in Dhaka who

— at night or at noon or in the morning, either in the dining hall or in the lounge, either in the lawn or in the room. I particularly remember the boisterous 31st night with drinks and togetherness. After moving out of the party that was held in the special dining hall upstairs, I came down to the scholars' lounge. The famous Indian poet Shiv K Kumar whose poems I first read when I was a college student was talking to me about Urdu poetry. Professor Isaac Sequeira, one of the academic fellows on the faculty, and a very sharp mind and an unusually witty person quite conversant in Latin, was also there. All on a sudden, Ashok Acharya, one of the course participants who teaches Political Science at North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, dragged me to a discussion on the politics of postmodernism. I must mention that postmodernism happens to be one of the pet-subjects of discussion at the ASRC today. Meanwhile Sajag Rana, with feet staggering and eyes

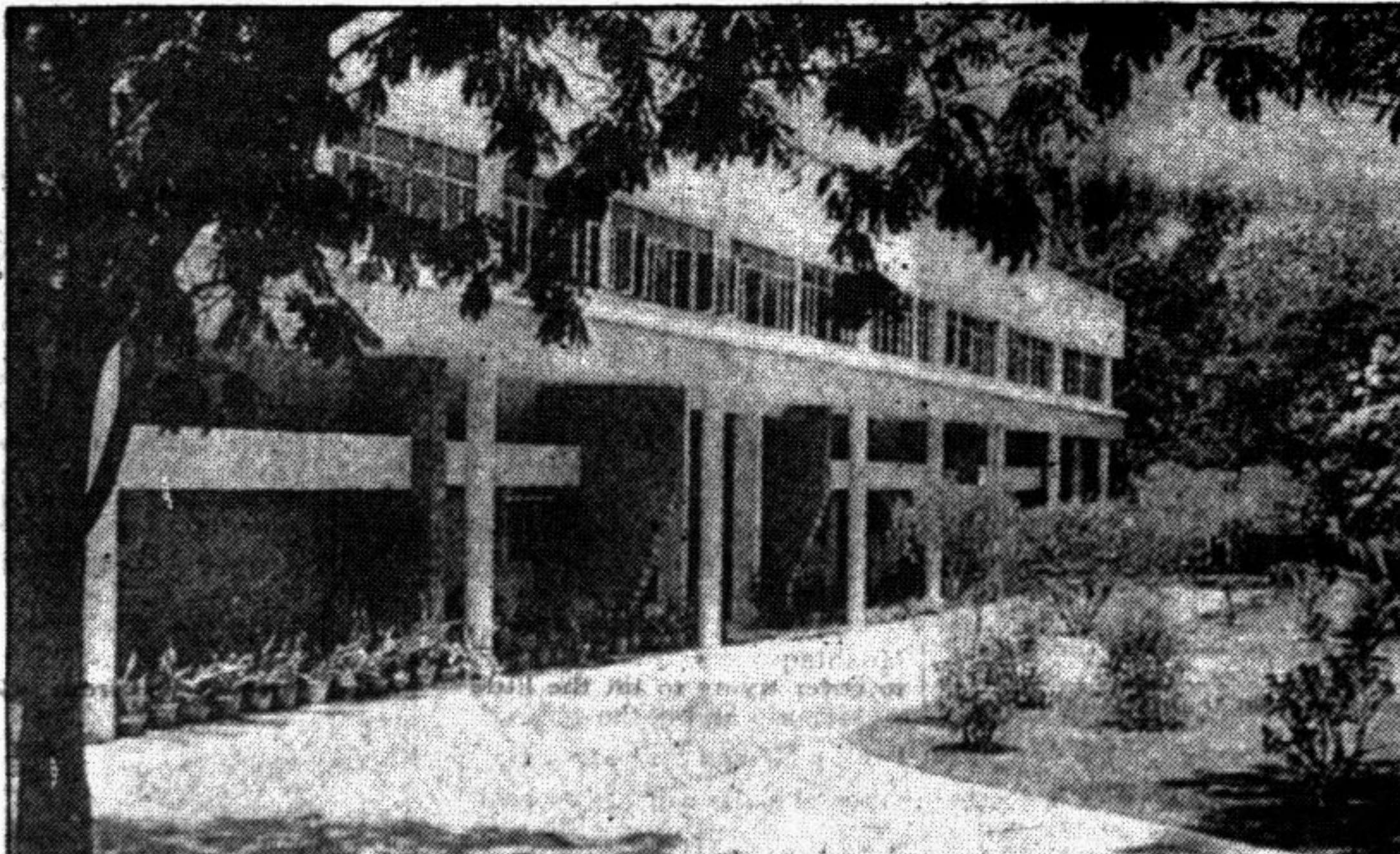
postmodernism lies in dismantling it." At this point, Ashok Acharya was trying to quote something from Jacques Derrida, the French deconstructionist, while Rana instantaneously shouted at the top of his voice: "Derrida is a dangerous man. We must resist him." Suddenly we found a number of pro-Derridean and anti-Derridean scholars flocking around. But a few young women — whose areas were perhaps William Carlos Williams and Ernest Hemingway — managed to ignore the whole battle. What was particularly interesting for me to notice at this point was that Ms Sreemala, a course participant whose area of work at the Centre was treatment of history in literature, was trying to dial some number standing in a corner of the lounge, even in the midst of the continuing din and bustle. Indeed, throughout the whole month, we were involved in debates and discussions of varying scales and scopes and degrees.

In fact, what we were trying to do over a four-week period

way with lectures on American poetry and fiction and literary theory, American music, popular culture, film, education, ethnic writing, women studies, etc. These were not simply lectures, but most of the times they turned out to be engaging debates and discussions on various issues and concerns. I remember Dr D E Harrell, the ASRC Director and an eminent historian who is professor of History at the University of Alabama, threw his class to an open discussion which generated stimulatingly conflicting views on the very definitions of history ranging from the classical, conservative styles to contemporary post-colonial, neo-historicist ones. Dr Tutun Mukherjee, whose guidance for my paper was invaluable (each of us had to write a paper and present it in a panel discussion), carried the postmodernist debate from the conference hall to the coffee-break, to the lawn and the lounge. Dr Joseph Plakkottam, a fine Indian scholar who is presently Deputy Director of ASRC, was largely responsible for generating an over-all atmosphere and climate of lively scholarly interactions and de-



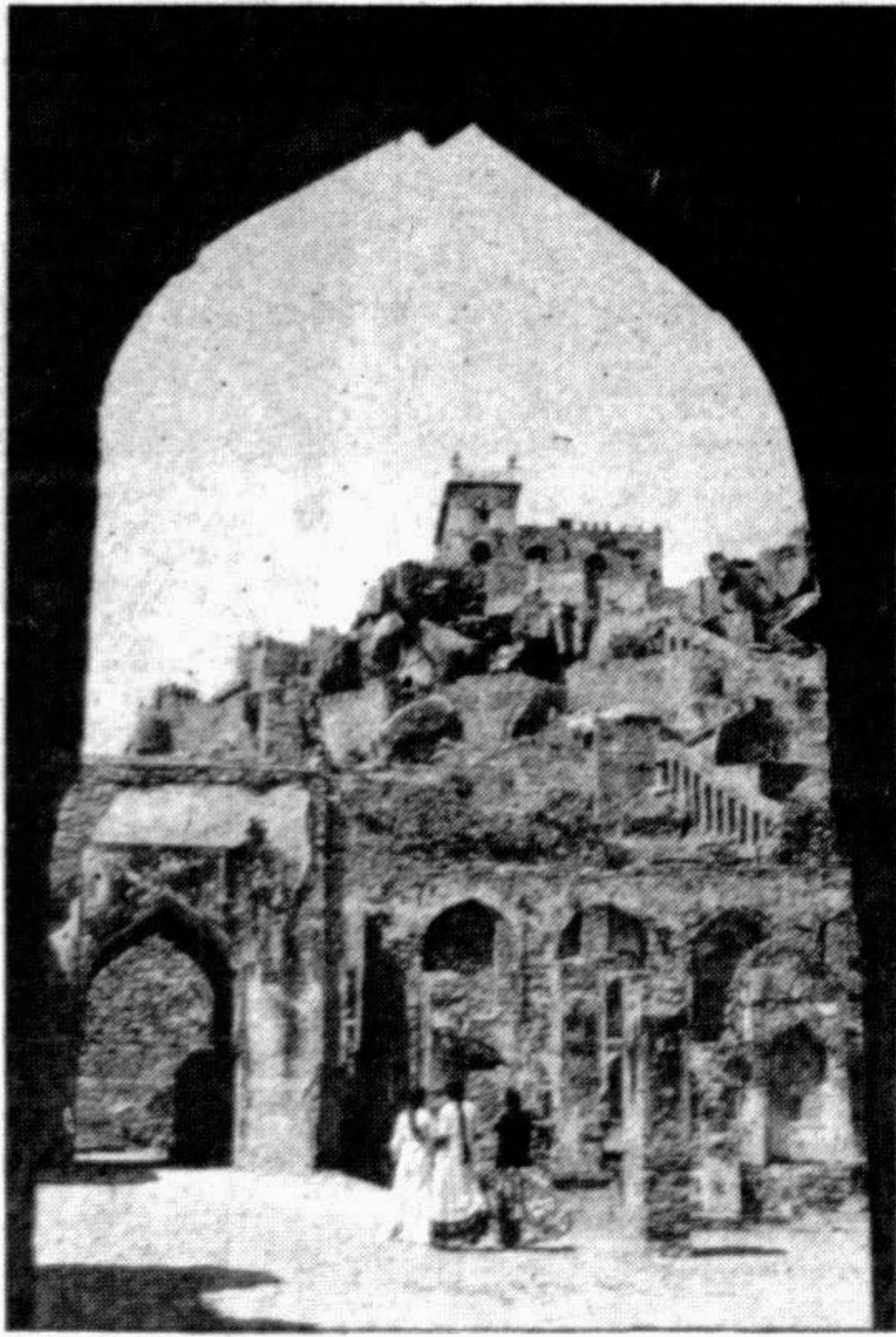
Charminar, Hyderabad city centre



American Studies Research Centre, Osmania University Campus, Hyderabad



Osmania University



Golconda Fort

snatched away my money and my watch more than once. Waiting itself was an unbearable, lonely, nocturnal journey I had to undertake. However, only intermittently, I was warmly accompanied by cigarettes. It was the last day of the year, 6 o'clock in the morning, when I reached the ASRC and found it sleeping in the midst of the attractive, tranquil, sylvan verdure. What is particularly attractive about the ASRC is its "Scholars' Hostel," as it is called. A two-storyed building located adjacent to the Research Centre and the Library, it looks like a picture with trees around it, and with rocks in front of it, onto one of which I found an Indian woman lying seated now and then I heard that she was researching on Toni Morrison. This hostel, as I found it, was full of gaiety and warmth and wit; full of debates and interactions between resident scholars — both old and young

blood-shot, appeared. Rana teaches English at Tribhuvan University in Nepal. He is a film-addict, and he worked, at the Centre, on the Vietnam films of Hollywood, and I found himself constantly engaged in discussions with Dr Ramaswamy, his guide. This grey-haired scholar Dr Ramaswamy, who was until recently Professor of English at Bangalore University and who also taught at Cambridge, Yale and Harvard, was rightly called a moving encyclopedia of films and theatre by Professor Sequeira. After Rana had shown up came Sashidharan, a research scholar from the University of Calcutta. His area is Wittgenstein. What Sashidharan did almost in a flash was that he dismissed the whole enterprise of postmodernism declaring that Wittgenstein is the only philosopher of the twentieth century. Looking at Acharya, I said, "well, this is intellectual fascism, and the politics of

was that we were looking at the totality of American experience beginning with 'colonial America' and 'Puritanism' and ending with contemporary American issues. This course was supplemented along the

bates. I particularly remember his interesting ways with data and statistics, while he was lecturing on American family and on America as a technoeconomic power. It was at his initiative supported by that of

Professor Sequeira that a poetry reading evening was organised at the ASRC. Mr Masud Taj, a young architect and poet from Bombay and Dr Rupendra Guha Majumder, who teaches English at Delhi University,

took part in this poetry-reading session. I, too, read my poems. Shiv K Kumar only tellingly made himself conspicuous by absence, inadvertently though.

Now, a word about the his-

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Patently Speaking

by Syed Maqsud Jamil

fully patient spirit. This was remarkable, considering the frail condition of his health. He sings of a hallowed height of patience where hope dwells. He sings, "Shed no tear — O shed no tear! The flower will bloom another year / Weep no more — O weep no more! / Young buds sleep in the root's white core. / Dry your eyes — O dry your eyes. / For I was taught in Paradise / To ease my breast of melodies — Shed no tear." There is indeed great salvation in fortifying the ramparts of patience which can withstand the remorseless onslaughts of adversities of all kinds.

It is the amazing power of our mind which has put us on the highest echelon of the living world. The fecundity of its ideas is prodigious, the obsession for self-preservation, the hunger for fulfilment is enormous. Fulfilment through wealth, power, honour, fame, love and security. These are the riches of life. Human beings pursue them with relentless zeal. But there is an elusive character of the rewards of life. In the words of Hardy, "Destiny is coquettish in nature." It has a capricious way of choosing the subjects of its favours. There is no ironclad assurance that destiny will always reward those who apply themselves with great diligence, are indomitably brave and have matchless merit.

Look around yourself. The world is full of so many examples where many unworthy, cowardly, mediocre underlings with indolent habits have been rewarded with fabulous riches.

On the other hand, there are equally numerous examples where many hardworking, brave and talented persons are languishing in obscurity.

Whatever be the nature of the dispensation of destiny, they rarely carry the mark of permanence. Everything runs its course. Be it prosperity or adversity, success or failure. It

is therefore wise to hold on to the anchor of patience. For these have been the ways of life since time immemorial. But they could not subdue mankind into abandoning themselves to drift with time.

Many great men persisted with impregnable patience and irrepressible will to tower above the banalities of their existence.

For them patience really paid. Jean Jacques Rousseau observes, "Patience is bitter but its fruits are sweet."

History of all ages abounds with examples where leaders, men and women in different stations of life have reached exalted positions by coupling patience with enterprise. A recent example is Nelson Mandela. He spent 26 years in prison, a long part of it in solitary confinement. The fountainhead of his indomitable will was the patient spirit of his faith in the justness of his struggle. Without it, the long periods of incarceration would have easily subdued him into compromising his principle and honour for position and power dictated by the practitioners of apartheid. Patience has chiseled him into an avatar of just struggle for freedom.

Babar lost his father's kingdom when he was only 13. He wandered from place to place to regain it. The patient spirit of his untiring endeavour brought him a greater prize — the crown of India. Humayun, was in a way more helpless than his father. He lost his father's kingdom, to Sher Shah. His brothers deserted him in the cruellest manner. His infant son Akbar was held hostage by one of his brothers.

The meaning of his name was "the lucky one". But he received a grossly pitiless treatment from destiny. Yes! he was lacking in perseverance. But did he retire into obscurity or blundered into reckless acts?

No. He persistently persisted in trying to redeem his honour and regain his crown. Destiny

was however not irrevocably unkind to him. He outlived Sher Shah and ultimately wrested his crown from Sher Shah's weaker progeny. The message is clear: Learn to wait for your chance in life.

Leo Tolstoy, one of the all time greats in world literature, was destined to be extremely unhappy in his conjugal life. His wife was of nagging, suspicious and domineering nature — a Xant (h) ippe of a sort. Tolstoy tolerated the indignities of her nasty tantrums, silly suspicions and disgusting domination with the equanimity of a saint. He was patient, impervious to the frailty of his wife and did not allow it to jeopardise his literary pursuits. In fact, he absorbed himself even deeply with the subjects of his writing. True, patience could not save him from a tragic death. But it did not diminish his literary greatness.

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historic beautiful city — Hyderabad. It is one of the beautiful cities in the world, the fifth largest city in India, the capital of Andhra Pradesh. This city was originally founded by the Nawab of Golconda, the fifth king of the Qutub Shahi dynasty, Mohammad Quli Qutub Shah, in 1590. Formerly known as Bhagavanagar after the name of Quli Qutub Shah's beloved Bhagmati, and originally founded on the bank of the river Musi, Hyderabad today has expanded so much that the river now bisects the city. In fact, we have twin cities here — Hyderabad and Secunderabad, with their suburbs extending up to sixteen miles and their population standing at more than 15 lakh.

Hyderabad is situated on the plateau of Deccan which is almost 1660 above the sea-level.

There are as many as 13 gates for entrances into the city of Hyderabad. There are five bridges on the river Musi — the old bridge known as Puranapul, the Muslim Jung bridge, the new bridge known as Nayapul, the Salar Jung bridge and the Chaderghat bridge. Besides this, the city of Hyderabad is renowned as the seat of historic places, monuments, notable buildings, recreation spots, fashionable residential localities, modern buildings, government offices of learning — some of which I visited during my four-week stay in Hyderabad.

To begin with the Golconda Fort. It appeared, to use Goethe's words, like the "frozen music" of history. The fort, with its light-and-sound show, took us back to the earlier Hindu periods of Deccan history, namely, the Yadava dynasty of Deogiri and later Kakatiyas to Warangal. It is to these periods that the origin of the Golconda Fort can be traced, though there is no recorded history of Golconda prior to 1364 AD.

The Golconda Fort was once proverbially known as the "House of Kohinoor" — the world's most precious diamond which once illuminated this fort. This fort is built on a picturesque granite hill, about 400 feet high, surrounded by the three-tiers of loopholed and battlemented ramparts. This is a spot which attracts tourists from all over the world. The fort contains eight huge gates.

About 3 furlongs north-west of the Golconda Fort, surrounded by a fine garden known as Ibrahim Bagh, are the tombs of the Qutub Shahi kings and their relatives — Hayat Bakshi Begum. His greatness. Mary, on the other hand, died a mentally ill lady after bringing further disrepute on her by entering into litigation with his son Robert Todd Lincoln.

There can however be another interesting but different aspect about the interpretation of patience. This particular line of observation holds that patience sends conflicting message depending on the financial status of the person. For the rich this may be readily treated as a mark of humility, while for the poor, considering the bleak prospect of their options, it is essentially a hypocritical stance. This can apply in specific cases, but does not have the merit of general summation. Humility and hypocrisy are human attributes and are matters of personal cultivation. Financial condition can exert influence but can never be the only arbiter. It will not therefore be proper to observe that humility and hypocrisy are the exclusive preserve of a particular class.

Both rich and the poor can be humble and hypocritical in their personal conduct. Patience definitely adds lustre to the riches of the wealthy. While for the poor, patience can extenuate much of their pain and can be a strong weapon in their armoury against adversity.

A good society cannot be built without the flowering of decency, civility, rationality and discipline. These virtues cannot be contemplated without patience as their bedrock. If decency, civility, rationality and discipline are to enrich a person, a family, a society, a country, patience has to be cultivated with religious attention. Erosion of this prime quality can expose decency, civility, rationality and discipline to the atrocities of intolerance and chaos of pestilential proportion.

The practice is indeed arduous and bitter but can you deny the sweet and relief derived at last? For a civilized world, for a great society, for a decent family, for a sensible person, patience does always pay.