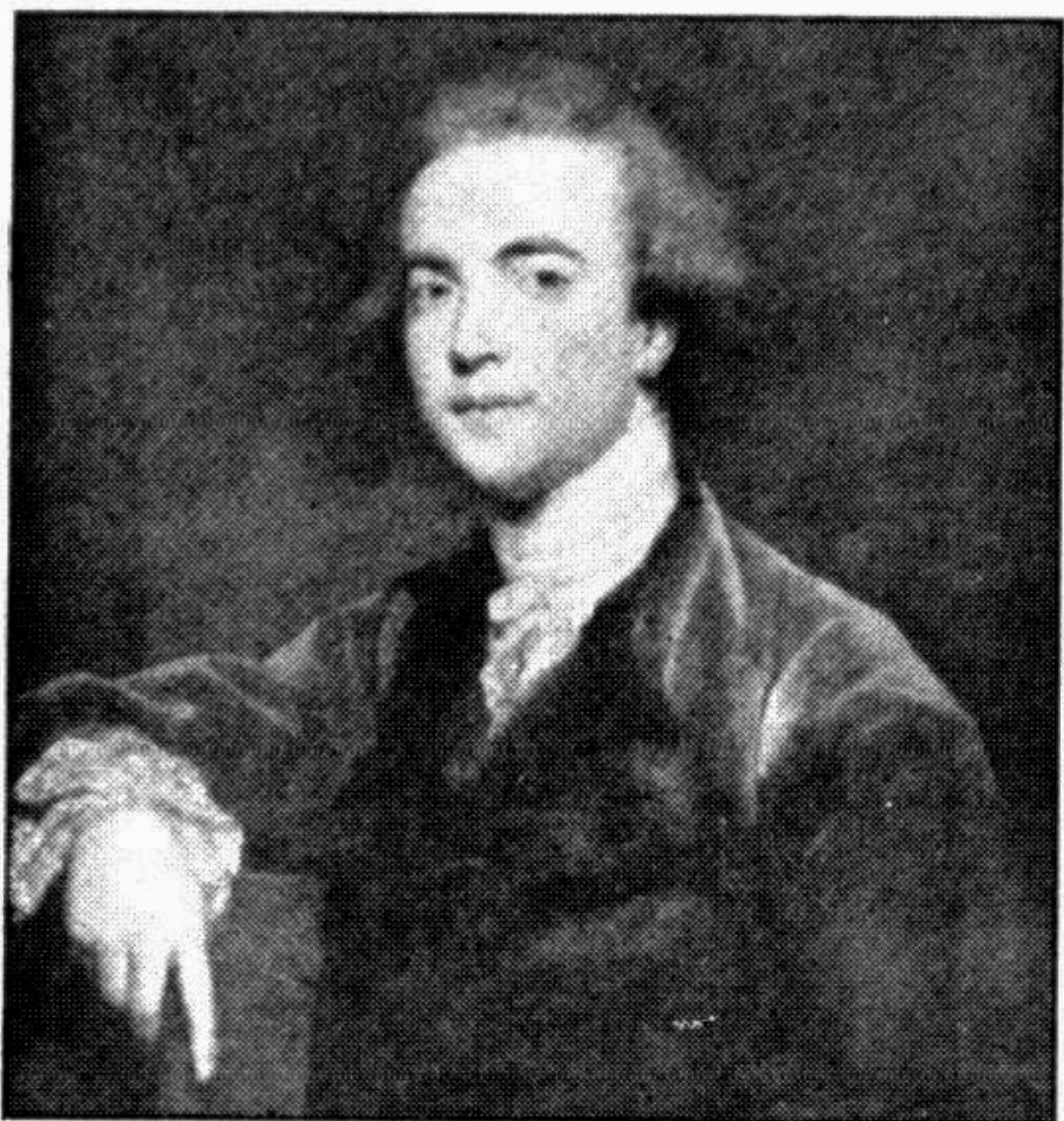


200th Anniversary of Death: Evaluating an 'Oriental Martyr' Orientalism and Sir William Jones

by Abu Taher Mojumder



Jones (1746-1794) at the age of 23; by Sir Joshua Reynolds

bureaucrats and other staffs who came in to consolidate the empire were some who were endowed with the humanitarian zeal for oriental arts, culture and civilization, and were the initiators and promoters of orientalism.

Charles Wilkins, Halhed, Sir William Jones were among the early British orientalist in India. Orientalism, in the true sense of the term, began when such Europeans with scholarly interests and an antiquarian spirit arrived in India and started exploring Indian culture and civilization and publishing about them.

India's debt to Orientalists is very great. In his Preface to the translation of *Asoka's Edicts* by Amulyachandra Sen (The Indian Publicity Society, Calcutta-4, 1956) Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, a great Indian scholar, wrote: "In India, and outside India too, we are eternally grateful to the curiosity of Europe in bringing us back the historical Asoka by discovering, reading, translating and disseminating the inscriptions which form the most precious relic of this great man" (Preface I). He spoke eloquently of James Prinsep who first succeeded in reading the script of Asoka's inscriptions in 1838 and referred to other scholars who came from Europe and America and "busted themselves with the interpretation of Asoka's inscriptions" (Preface II). Chatterjee added, "These inscriptions are of paramount importance in the study of ancient Indian history and its life, thought and culture. They have made the great

and economic interests, advancements in technology, and regional approach to issues, but the orient, with its vast antiquity and present prospect will continue to stimulate the imagination and inspire the enquiring spirit.

In this context the name that looms large in our minds is that of Sir William Jones, the greatest orientalist of the 18th century and one of the greatest of all times, whose bicentenary of death were observing now. The founder of one of the greatest societies of the world — The Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784), the editor of the *Asiatic Researches*, the first Oriental journal to be published from any country of the world, a great translator of many epoch-making eastern classics and law-books, who was later described by eminent scholars as 'Harmonious Jones', 'Selling Jones', 'The Founder', 'Oriental Jones', 'Persian Jones', envisioned an East which was a great source of knowledge in his famous First Anniversary Discourse to the Asiatic Society entitled 'A Discourse on the Institution of a Society for Inquiring into the Sciences and Literature of Asia'. During the last part of his voyage to India Jones was very happy to be very close to the land of his heart's desire. He wrote: "when I was at sea last August, on my voyage to this country, which I had long and ardently desired to visit, I found one evening, on inspecting the observations of the day, that India lay before us and Persia on our left, whilst a breeze from Arabia blew nearly on our stern. A situation so pleasing in itself, and to me so new, could not fail to awaken a train of reflections in a mind, which had already been accustomed to contemplate with delight the eventful histories and agreeable fictions of this eastern world. It gave me inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheatre, almost encircled by the vast regions of Asia, which has ever been esteemed the nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the production of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified, in the forms of religion and government, as well as in the features and complexions, of men. I could not help remarking, how important and extensive a field was yet unexplored, and how many solid advantages unimproved".

Jones himself greatly contributed to the exploration of the important and extensive field and improvement of the 'many solid advantages' till his death in 1794. He was an

'oriental martyr'. He worked hard himself and, by his enthusiasm, devotion and example, inspired others to do so. His already gained European reputation as an orientalist, his position as a judge of the Calcutta Supreme Court, as the President of the Asiatic Society of Bengal — his monumental achievement, and as the editor of the *Asiatic Researches*, lent weight and credibility to his pronouncements about oriental matters and exercised a great influence in altering western attitude to the East. His frequent juxtaposition of western and eastern authors, cultures, literatures and mythologies raised the status of the east in the eyes of the west and, at the same time, instilled a strong sense of pride and nationalistic zeal in the minds of the easterners about their own past, culture and literature. In such a context Jones can very well be described as a blessing of the West to the East. Subsequent Orientalists carried on his tradition and, in many respects, some of them superseded him by their achievements, but Jones remains unsurpassed in his zeal, admiration and enthusiasm for the East.

Another important point about Jones is that he was one of the major precursors of English romantic movement and he forcefully represented its oriental aspect. In his 'An Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations', he ardently advocated the value of Arabic, Persian and Turkish literatures, the learning of oriental languages and the study of the principal oriental writings, for the purpose of revitalising the moribund neo-classical literature of his time which, in his words "has subsisted too long on the perpetual repetition of the same images, and incessant allusions to the same fables", by introducing "a new set of images and similitudes" from eastern literatures. Some of the major romantic and Victorian poets derived inspiration from him and used Oriental literary materials in their poetry. His influence on many European authors was also very considerable.

In conclusion it can be asserted that the future of Orientalism will continue to be bright for the East's inexhaustible cultural resources and riches as outlined in Jones's First Anniversary Discourse while Jones himself deserves the richest and highest tributes and appreciation for being, in Prof A J Arberry's words, "The Founder" of Orientalism.

(The author is a Professor of English, Jahangirnagar University. The paper was read out on April 4 last by him as a delegate of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh to the International Conference organised by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, in observance of the 200th anniversary of death of Sir William Jones)

A Fighter on Two Fronts

A Conversation with Ashok Mitra

by Azfar Hussain



Known for his politics of commitment and for his brilliant insights into Bengali culture and history tellingly exemplified in his writings, Dr Ashok Mitra, the former Finance Minister of the West Bengal government and presently a Rajyasava member, came to Bangladesh only recently, and exchanged views and experiences with politicians, left activists, economists and intellectuals of the country. The present piece is an outcome of the writer's discussions with Ashok Mitra who spoke of the role of left politics in West Bengal and the experiences of economic reforms in India, among other issues and concerns.

It was June 5, around 10 o'clock in the morning, when we met Dr Ashok Mitra at Dhaka University. Clad in a milk-white kurta and a dhuti, Dr Mitra was seated casually in a chair, and was surrounded by a few academicians and university teachers, mostly young, who were listening to Dr Mitra with a somewhat rapt attention. His eyes were emitting almost metallic sparks as it were; his voice, fairly husky, had a tone befitting a man speaking from the depths of intensely lived experiences, and struggling animated optimism and commitment. With his fine Bengali and his style full of clinching anecdotes, spicy metaphors and effortless allusions, Dr Mitra easily stole the show, though it was later punctuated with observations and questions by the small, informal audience at the Centre for Social Studies. Ashok Mitra's style, always coruscating, never flagged in brio.

To know Ashok Mitra as a politician is, understandably, not sufficient. True, it is politics which comes first when we speak about him; for, he has long been involved in the left political struggle in India, particularly in West Bengal; for, his contributions and commitment to CPM have also proven significant, with his wealth of experiences he gathered from his underground struggle. He was an advisor to Indira Gandhi, though he withdrew himself from such advisorship for differences of opinion. Dr Mitra also acted as

Finance Minister of the West Bengal government, and presently he is a member of the Indian Rajyasava. Yes, thus, politics brings Dr Mitra right to the heart of his own activity. But, then, he is also an economist; in fact, he had his formal academic training in economics. He has written fairly intensively on economic issues and concerns, and on politics certainly. But, would it be surprising to know that he has written on Rabindranath Tagore, and that many feel that he is an authority on the poetry of Jibanananda Das? In our discussion on June 5, Dr Mitra was now and then quoting lines from poetry to clinch, rather animate, the points he was trying to hammer home. In his writings on a spectrum of cultural and historical issues, one cannot miss his sharp, penetrating analyses and insights which, of course, have direct bearings upon his political imagination and vision. Indeed, his continuous, irresistible interweaving of politics, economics, social history and culture accounts for the distinctiveness of the kind of politics he is involved in.

The points that culture is not politically neutral, and that politics has to be continuously activated and animated by culture itself were emerging out of the comments Dr Mitra was making. A committed socialist as he is, he maintained, "socialism is not sufficient; what we need is the creation of socialist man." This creation is no doubt both a cultural and political activity, indicated Dr Mitra, while underscoring the need for constantly raising soul-searching questions, echoing in a way Marx's favourite maxim of *de omnibus dubitandum* (one must doubt everything). Dr Mitra said, "The struggle cannot be strengthened and matured without doubts and suspicions and self-searching." Understandably, this struggle, for Ashok Mitra, has always been both political and cultural, and at one point of time, he could very well bring out one of the guiding principles of this struggle by saying: "Religion used politically can never solve the problems of the oppressed." Thus, in fact, Dr Mitra was indicating the need for a political culture responsive to the needs and aspirations of the oppressed in this part of the world.

On June 5, one of the major foci of Dr Mitra's discussion was concentrated on the administration and politics of the left government in West Bengal. It needs noting here that the triumph of left politics in West Bengal is well-known in terms of its abilities to command electoral power. The left government in West Bengal has so far spanned a life of seventeen years since 1977 when the left government first came to power. This government was elected successfully for the three terms — in 1982, 1987 and in 1992. Dr Mitra indicated that with every election held, the number of the *Bidhansava* members increased in favour of the *Bamfront Sarker* presently in power.

Dr Ashok Mitra, in his discussion, was trying to provide an outline of what their government did, when they first came to power. "It was a stark realization we started with", maintained Dr Mitra, "and we felt that to launch revolution overnight was no easy and pragmatic task, given the existing constitutional framework and power-structure.

However, certain tasks could be easily accomplished through making the best use of the system at work." Yes, it was no direct confrontation with the system hitherto kept alive by the politics of the Congress, nor was it a simple compromise; but, it was a discriminating exploitation of the blank spaces and voids left by the system itself. For example, the three-tier Panchayat Act which was formulated by the Congress back in 1962 was actively revived by the newly elected left government of West Bengal in 1977, with the objectives of initiating the process of democratisation at the grassroots on the one hand, and dispensing need-based goods and services to the common people, on the other. The Panchayat system, he noted, consists of three levels: the district level called *Zila Parishad* where its elected chief is called *Sabhadhipati*; the thana level known as *Panchayat Samity* with its elected chief called *Sabhapati*, and the village level (encompassing 8-10 villages) called *Gram Panchayat* whose elected chief is known as *Pradhan*. Ashok Mitra informed us that with the operation of the Panchayat system, the left government of West Bengal had not only been able to ensure an effective flow of resources and facilities to the grassroots in a way that was unmistakably democratic, but also succeeded in decentralizing power-relations, increasingly involving the farmers and the common people in the political and development processes ranging from planning and decision-making down to implementation. Priorities, as Dr Mitra informed us, were never determined and imposed from above; priorities were spelled out by people themselves. Priorities, so far envisaged, include education, health, communications, employment opportunities, and of course, agriculture including land-reforms.

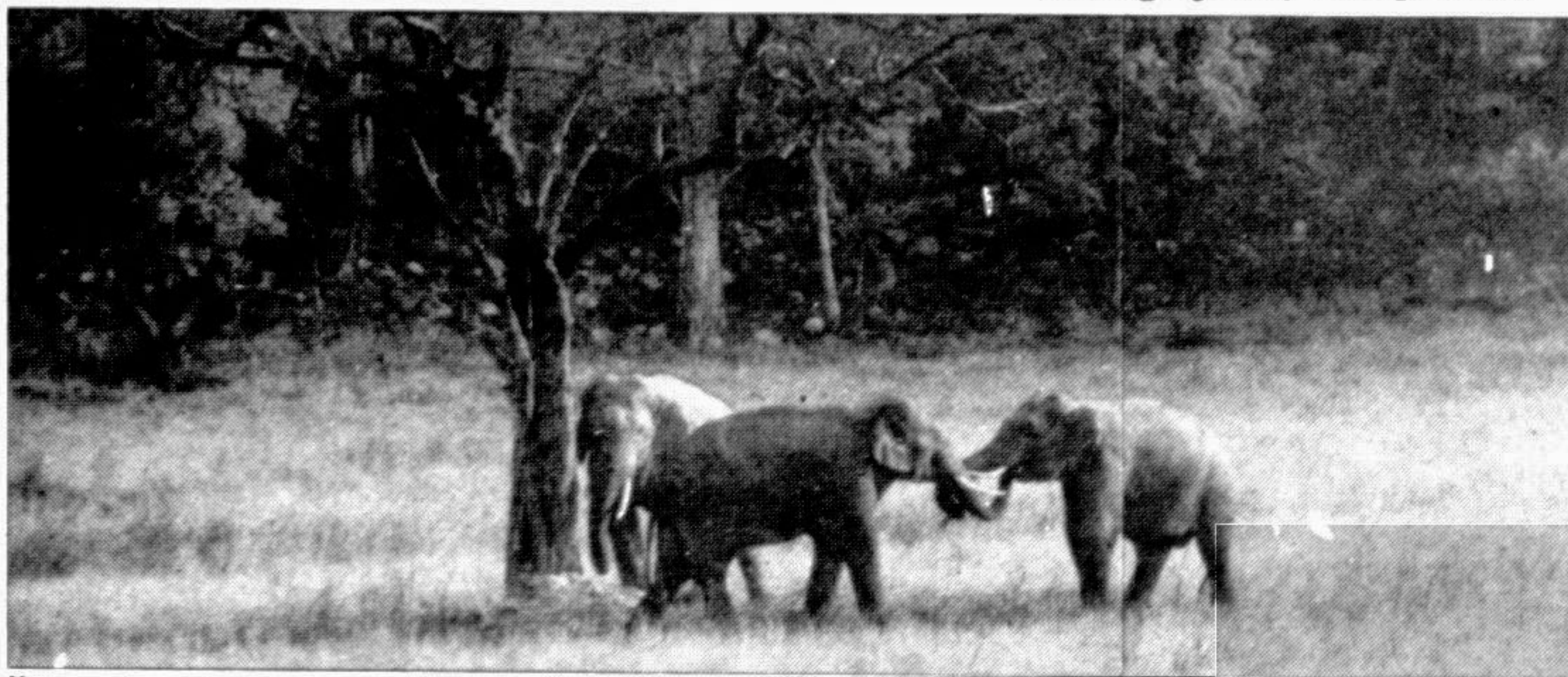
"One of the visible outcomes of the Panchayat system has been progress in agriculture," noted Dr Mitra, adding, "West Bengal outstrips any part of India in terms of agricultural development." Moreover, the Panchayat system has yielded changes in what is called economic power-relations exemplified in the fact that the share of the Panchayat in the development budget has exhibited a spectacular gallop from an amount of only 4 crore rupees to 2000 crore rupees which the Panchayat itself can spend, informed Dr Mitra. In other words, almost half of the development budget of the Rajyasava is spent by the Panchayat itself. The dynamics of development expenditure, he noted, does never assume the state of a swampy marsh, metaphorically speaking; but, it's a matter of random but planned, people-controlled flow-and-re-flow. For example, the *Zila Parishad* is no way in a position to stagnate the flow of funds. Noticeable as it is, one of the activities of the West Bengal government has been a constant crossing out of the space and scope for bureaucracy within politics, economics, development and administration, despite the fact that the current politico-administrative system nourished by the political culture of the Congress leaves ample space for bureaucracy.

Dr Mitra, in his discussion, emphatically maintained that

RECALLING THE GREAT HUNTER AND CONSERVATIONIST A Visit to Corbett National Park

Text by Sujan Chinoy

Photographs by Pushp K Jain



Young tuskers

growth on both sides of the jungle road as we headed for the forest rest-house at

Dhikala, another 31 kilometres inside the reserve. Along the way, we passed by the area where the famous British wildlife photographer David Hunt was killed by a surprised tigress in 1987, when he strayed off the trail in pursuit of a rare bird and stumbled upon the big cat. The tigress is now believed to be in the Kanpur Zoo.

After intense conservation efforts initiated in 1973 under Project Tiger, the reserve is now reckoned to have some 93 tigers, spread over 521 square kilometres of pristine, primordial jungles on the undulating Garhwal and Kumaon foothills. Besides some three hundred elephants, fauna such as the wild boar, hog deer,

cheetah, sambar, panther, sloth bear, marsh crocodile and over 585 species of birds along the Patlidhri Valley around the fast-flowing Ramganga.

It was almost dusk when we reached Dhikala. The complex is situated in the middle of a very large clearing, atop a ridge overlooking several streams of the Ramganga. In between the flowing waters lay large tracts of lush green grass. Beyond the vast expanse of the river-bed, the jungle of sal, sheesham, palas, bahunia and semal trees rose abruptly, over the rolling hills, forming a mosaic in green, yellow and scarlet. The bright sunlight danced off the wax-like sheen of the young leaves.

On the riverbed in the dis-



The elusive Tiger

tance were two large herds of wild elephants, crossing the streams back and forth in search of tender shrubs. We watched them through binoculars till their mammoth contours became invisible in the fading light. With the darkness enveloping the jungle, the sound of the birds gave way to the ceaseless cacophony of the crickets and the croaking of a million frogs from the riverbed.

We arose early the next morning. The sky was beginning to turn grey. As I opened the door, a cool fresh breeze wafted into the room, bringing with it the perennial rushing sound of the river waters and the frenzied chirp of birds. Soon after, we went off to spot the tiger from a safe perch on Roopkali, one of the camp's several elephants. Roopkali strode about majestically, her big feet flattening the tall grass

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THE Corbett National Park in Uttar Pradesh of India is the legacy of one of the greatest conservationists of his time, Jim Corbett. It is better known as the setting of Jim Corbett's book 'Man-eaters of Kumaon and Other Tales.' Named Hailley National Park in 1936 after Sir Malcolm Hailley, the British Governor of Uttar Pradesh, it was re-christened after independence to Ramganga National Park and later, in 1956, to Corbett National Park following the death of the legendary hunter.

We started off one morning for the Park hoping to catch a glimpse of that most elusive animal, the tiger. Some 275 kilometres from Delhi lies Dhanghadi, the entrance to the Park. The Corbett Museum here houses some fine specimens of the tiger, the taxidermist's skills apparent in the life-like postures. One, a particularly large cat, had been killed some years ago in an all-night fight with a big tusker. A baby elephant stood in another corner, the plaque below the glass case simply stating that it was the victim of a stampede, of its own kind.

We kept our eyes open to intently scan the thick under-



A young Sambar