

People and Places

Homeward Bound — after Twenty Years

by Nancy Wong

Changing Facades of Singapore



Modern Ropeway. — Photo Courtesy: Nash Uddin Ahmed

As the SIA pilot made a smooth landing in the early hours of dawn, at the Changi airport, I was filled with feelings of anxiety and curiosity mingled with doses of excitement and trepidation. What would Singapore be like after an absence of over two decades?

My last visit of any significant length had been over five years ago, an age past, in terms of the republic's rapid advancement. While I had visited the place quite frequently during our eight-year sojourn in nearby Kuala Lumpur, those had been all to fleeting stays, hardly long enough to penetrate the surface of external trappings offered by any city eager to show its best face to the passing tourist. Besides, visitors to the "Lion City" had been telling me that it is one of the fastest changing cities on the face of the earth.

Well, I found out soon enough for myself when I took off to the streets of this throbbing, thriving and bustling city of three million people (the population was half that just twenty years ago). Times, lifestyles and scenes have undergone a sea change. Handsome, highrise buildings taking polished maroon, grey, blue and all hues of the rainbow have sprouted along newly reclaimed land along the sea front where there was virtually nothing before. Ultra modern skyscrapers are continually piercing the skies as battalions of workers, architects and civil engineers work at transforming the hub of financial activity, Raffles Place, into the region's most vibrant commercial centre. What is remarkable about this whole exercise is that life goes on in these areas undergoing rapid transformation, with the minimum amount of nuisance caused by the piling and transporting of bulky materials, by huge trucks. Not surprisingly, strict laws see to it that the whole area is neatly cordoned off and the most sophisticated equipment used so as to cause the least environmental pollution.

A TV ad making the rounds presently shows two beautifully coloured parrots chatting gaily to each other about the amazing "glass covered" shopping mall at Bugis Street junction which is due to open its doors shortly. One chirps in astonished tones: "Do you know, before this there was nothing, absolutely nothing". This is just another example of how things are done in Singapore these days, quickly, quietly and efficiently. I have been to Bugis Street junction many times (for free cooking lessons after the purchase of a microwave oven) since my return, but have not noticed such an architectural wonder (as promised by the ad) taking shape.

Having experienced robust growth in its economy over the past five years, the private sector as well as the government have ploughed back a large portion of its earnings into real estate development. There has been an unprecedented build-

ing boom in both sectors — mainly because of rising demands spurred by matching incomes and prosperity, with the result that real estate prices have reached historical heights.

The mass Rapid Transit system has indeed been a catalyst in opening up outlying areas and the development of new towns, mainly for residential purposes. Districts such as Pasir Ris (near Changi airport), Boon Lay (the western end of the island) and the north (near the zoo) were considered the "boondocks" in my times — it justified a day's outing as a treat for students because of the "vast" distance from the centre of activities such as schools, shops, commercial areas and private houses. I remember clearly the number of frequent changes in buses (which were rickety, dirty and unreliable) one had to undergo in order to get to these places from the city and how very inconvenient and tiring it was to get from the east coast to the west by buses.

But now! Public transport is a different (and highly successful) story altogether. Of course, it is not as convenient and smooth a ride as having your own limo (more of this later), but it is stress free (except perhaps during rush hours) and one of the best bargains in town. Because of the horrendous cost of car ownership (a deliberate policy worked out by the government to avoid horrific traffic gridlocks as experienced by neighbouring cities such as Bangkok, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur), the majority of middle class travel by public transport. One also meets expatriate Caucasians in the "underground" as they have figured that it is just not worthwhile to buy a "second" car for their family use during their few years' stint here.

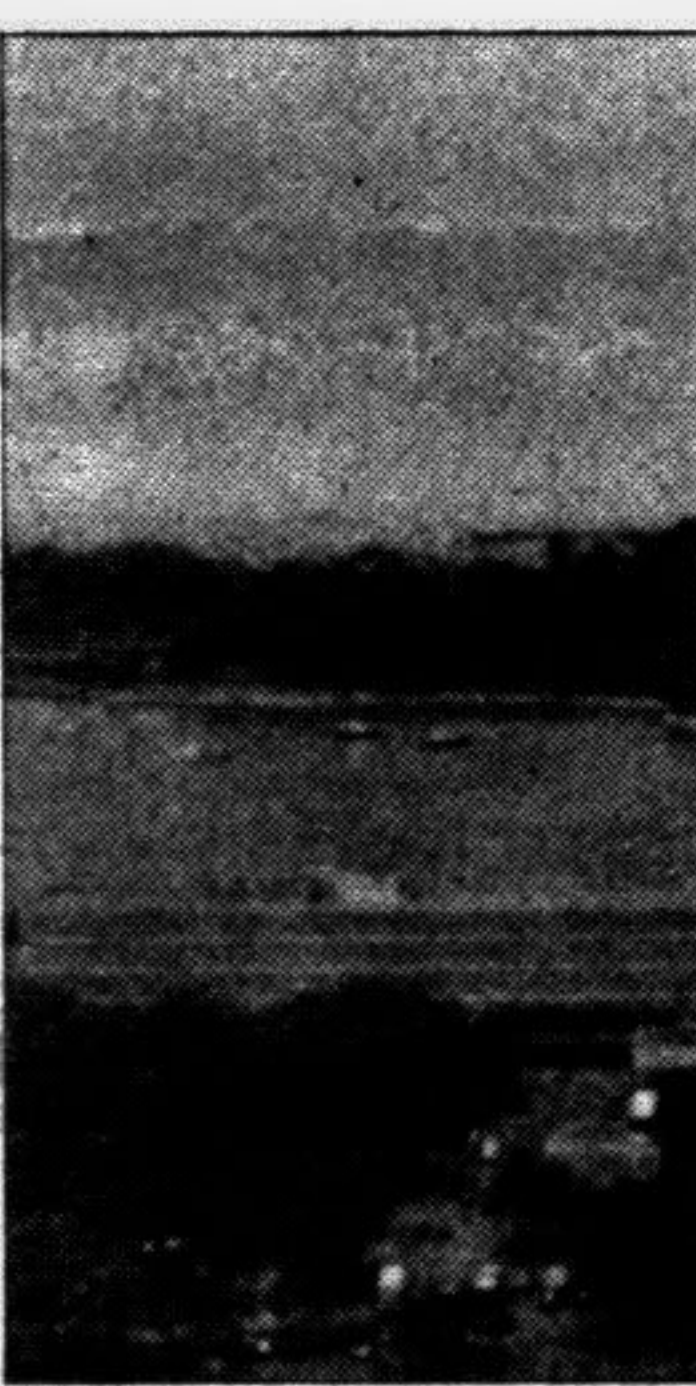
As such, a code of civilized behaviour among commuters had developed. A frequent traveller such as I, have noticed that people do not push and jostle for seats, men do give up their seats to the elderly and pregnant, and "molesters" trying to get their cheap thrill of the day do get apprehended and their identities widely publicised!

The phenomenal rise in the cost of cars certainly came as a rude shock and blow to an aspiring car owner. I can still remember with much fondness, the beautiful (to me) two-year old Hillman Imp I purchased just one year after graduation. After much consultation and advice from male colleagues (much more knowledgeable than I on such matters), I made the plunge and bought myself that beauty (from a British expatriate who had completed his term and

was leaving for home) — for the princely sum of S\$3,000.00! I went everywhere in it and delighted in showing off (to the less fortunate classmates who had not yet achieved the status of "car owner") by giving them lifts. I also gained immense popularity along the way, I might add.

These days, a young graduate would most certainly not be able to envisage car ownership in the foreseeable future! The prices of small to medium size cars have skyrocketed to the region of S\$70,000 (US\$47,945) to S\$80,000 (US\$54,795) — with the mandatory Certificate of Entitlement gobbling up half of the total price. The latest round of CoEs for large cars (2,000 c.c. upwards) has jumped to S\$100,000 (US\$68,493). For the uninitiated, the CoE merely entitles you to

buy a car and does not include the car itself, which is taxed some 100 per cent, not to mention road tax and insurance.

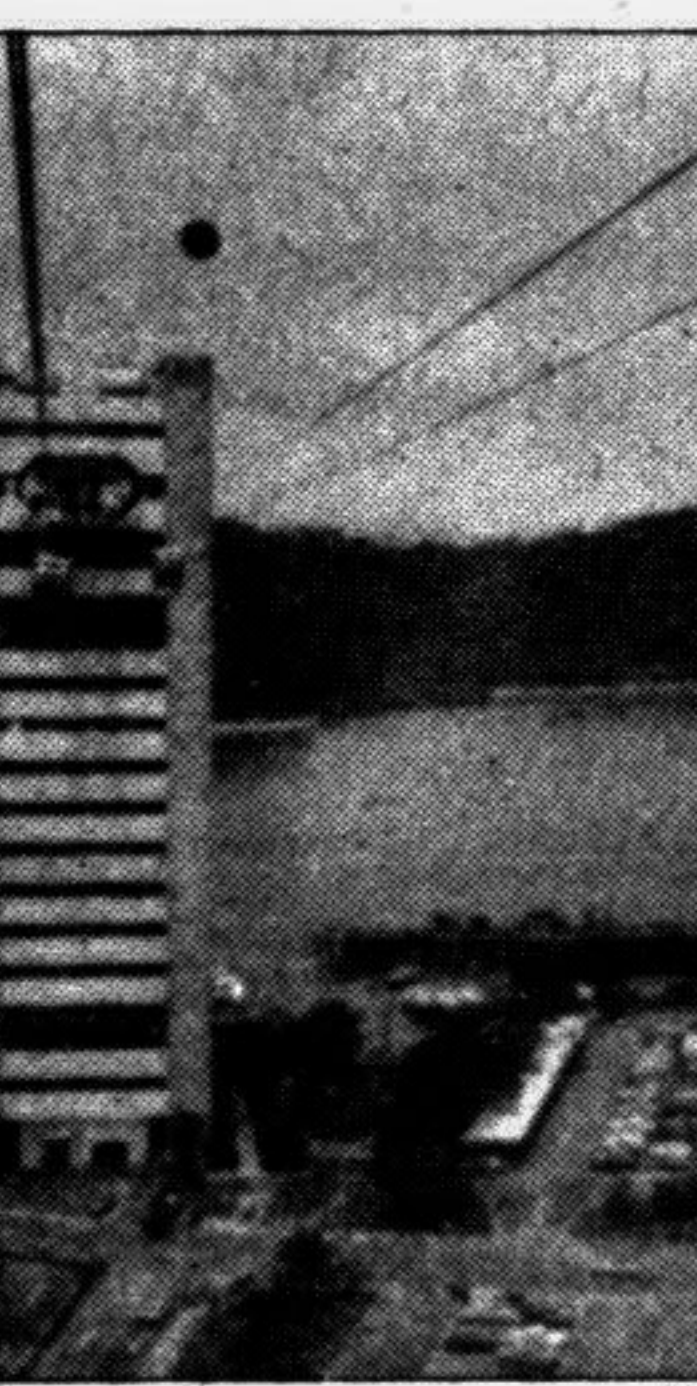


Modern Ropeway.

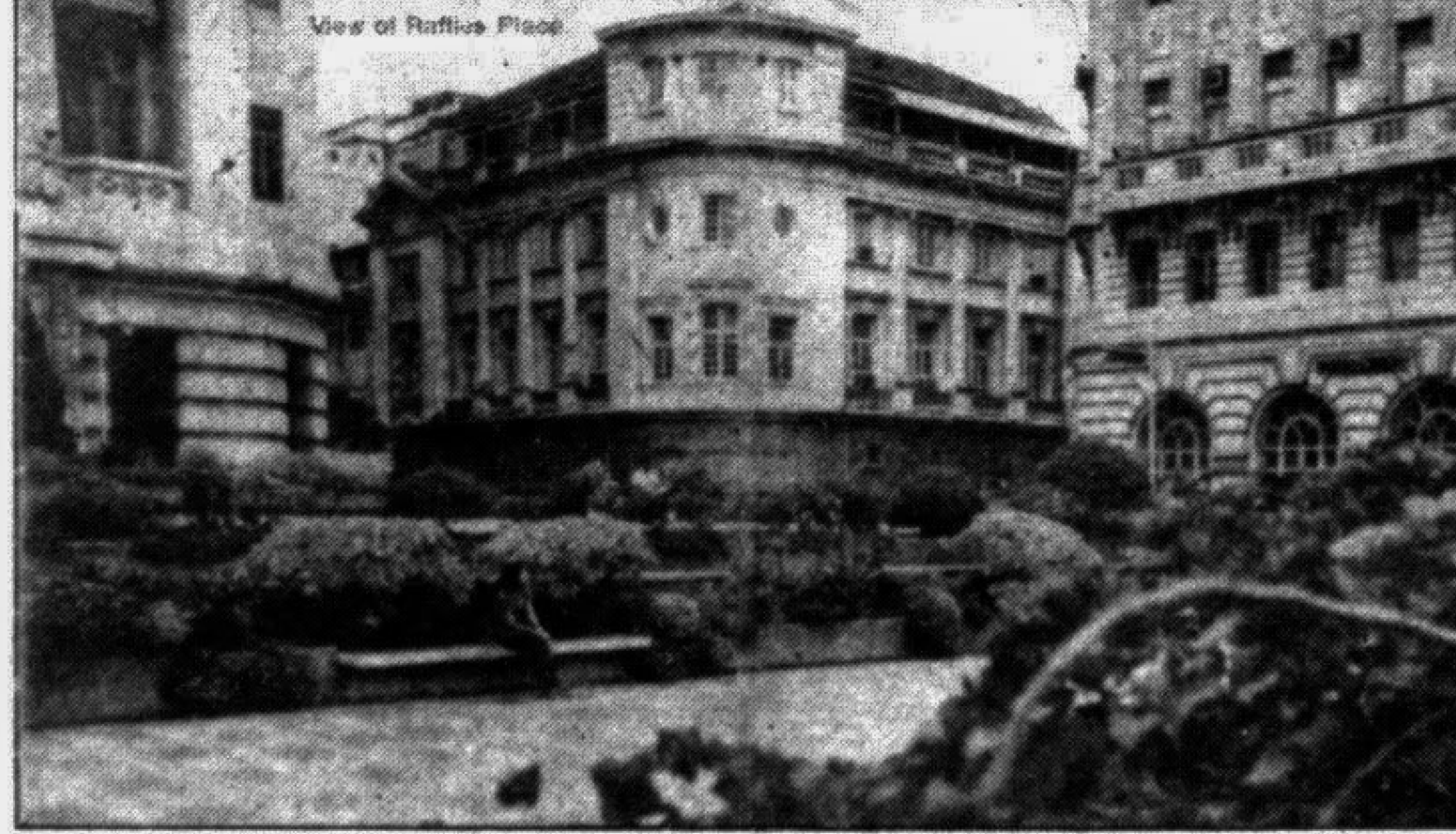
ance. This system was introduced three years ago when the average CoEs cost a mere S\$3,000. (US\$2,055) and had Singaporeans grumbling about this novel concept of overtaxing car owners. Contributions from this source earned the state coffers S\$4 billion last year and judging from the state of the economy and laws of supply and demand, the price of CoEs can only go up.

Realising the political risks involved, the government is taking great pains to explain this draconian policy, the ultimate goal of which is to keep gridlock to a minimum, so that everybody can travel smoothly

to work and leisure and the economy keeps zooming at high speed towards the next millennium. For the middle



— Photo Courtesy: Nash Uddin Ahmed



View of Raffles Place

Raffles Place

A T M Walie Ashraf: Alive for a Dream

by Mizanur Rahman Shelley

HE is one of those who pass away in quiet only to renew continuing life's commitment to itself. A T M Walie Ashraf (56), journalist, social worker and politician with a difference throbbled with the pulsations of vibrant life as long as he lived. He breathed his last on the 19th of November 1994 in Dhaka, the capital of his beloved homeland, hours after his ailing body in the deadly grip of galloping cancer was brought back from a hospital in Singapore. Later, he was buried in his village home, Domrakandi, in Bancharampur, Brahmanbaria.

It was a befitting end for the physical remains of a man who had to spend the prime of his youth in a foreign land always lovingly thinking of the people of the area of his birth, Bancharampur and constantly dreaming of serving them. It must have also been deeply satisfying for him that during the closing years of his relatively short life he could serve the people of Bancharampur for six full years as their elected representative to the national legislature of Bangladesh.

Ashraf has come home finally. He will never leave now. He never wanted to; but then life has its own ways of separating one from one's abiding love. That was why perhaps, from the late sixties till early eighties Walie Ashraf, Ashraf Bhai (Elder Brother Ashraf), as we of the class of '63 of Dhaka University called him, lived and worked in the United Kingdom. He belonged to that generation of the

educated youth of Bangladesh who went to London of the 'Swinging Sixties' to equip themselves with higher education, training in law, business and sciences which would help them to serve their country later. Many of them could not complete their mission. Imponderables intervened. The process of Liberation of Bangladesh began. Walie Ashraf knew where he belonged. Along with other dedicated Bengali youths of Bangladesh he fought for the emancipation of Bangladesh.

"Janomat" (the Opinion of the People) virtually the first and longest-lived Bengali-weekly in the UK was founded by him during the late sixties. It played a significant role in sensitising the Bengalis of Bangladesh in the UK and elsewhere in the Western world to the need for Bengali liberation. Once the war of liberation started in 1971, Walie Ashraf and Janomat became the source and focus of inspiration and morale for the cause of Bengali emancipation.

2 Temperley Road, a modest corner house between Balham and Wandsworth Common in London, was home for both Janomat and Walie Ashraf. It was also transformed into the virtual headquarters of the Bangladeshi youths in the UK who fought for Bangladesh. That was where the "Students Action Committee" for the liberation of Bangladesh made its beginning. Mohammed Hossain Marju now a resident in Britain was the Convenor. Dr Mosharrar Hossain at present

group congealed around Janomat. I found the entire group as a solid body radiating confidence and infinite hope for our newly-liberated land when I arrived in London during October 1972. Ashraf Bhai was the guide and mainstay of the group instinct with the hope of immense possibilities for our homeland.

He was an incorrigible optimist. Like all optimists, he was blessed with infinite trust in human beings and abiding self-confidence. There was an enduring self-pride in him, call it 'ego' if you like, which sought constant and continuing fulfillment in lifting oneself up in others' estimation by unfailing service and unflinching loyalty to others who deserved these.

He started early. He was a political activist and prominent social worker during his years as a student of the Dhaka University (1958-1962). He was our senior in the university and I met him first in 1959. We belonged to different political platforms. He was a member of the then united and left-leaning East Pakistan Students' Union (EPSU). I belonged to the centrist (virtually defunct after 1964) Students' Force. Neither years nor difference in political angles of vision could separate us. We became close. The ties of affection became stronger as we shared a common interest in and commitment to voluntary social service.

Starting from the late fifties through the early sixties Walie Ashraf and we participated in service towards the society, especially its poor and the otherwise disadvantaged segments through working together in and some time building and managing such organisations as the Work Camp and Students Work Camp Associations and the Service Civil International (SCI), chapter of the international amity volunteer exchange programme for peace, understanding and dignity of manual labour.

As university students we participated in work-camps, digging and carrying earth to build and repair roads and digging canals and waterways in Domrakandi, Shahrashli and Assim of rural Bengal. For Walie Ashraf, the dirt roads in Domrakandi, and Shahrashli in Comilla and Assim in greater Mymensingh led eventually to the streets of London which were not paved with gold. However, the "work camps" which he organised and sometimes led in rural Bengal stood him in good stead when he faced the challenges of eking out a dignified existence through pure hard work in the Britain of mid-sixties and early seventies. He never faltered. He believed in his destiny and mission and never forgot where he belonged.

By 1969 he had founded the weekly Janomat and started working decisively for the cause of assertion of Bengali rights in the pre 1971 Pakistani structure where East Bengal — today's Bangladesh — was a virtual internal colony. It may be mentioned here that after leaving the university he



He knew where he belonged. He loved and served his fellow human beings, fully aware of the limits of human strength and endeavour.

The Boyhood Vow that Turned into a Lifetime's Work

Atiya Singh writes from Bangalore, India

The day before the razzmatazz and international politics of the Nobel peace prize ceremony, and out of the glare of the media spotlight, the Right Livelihood Award will be presented (Award ceremony, December 9). Gemini News Service profiles the Indian doctor who shares this year's award with a Nigerian activist and a Trinidadian voluntary organisation.



Dr H. R. Sudarshan: 'No substitute for service'

AFTER helplessly watching his father die for want of medical aid in an isolated Indian village, 12-year-old Hanumappa Reddy Sudarshan vowed to dedicate his life to the provision of medical care to people in remote rural areas.

Now 44, Dr Sudarshan has won the 1994 Right Livelihood Award — widely known as the "Alternative Nobel Prize" — for 15 years of pioneering work among the Soliga people in the south Indian state of Karnataka in which he was brought up.

He shares the \$250,000 award with Ken Saro-Wiwa, president of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People in Nigeria — who has been in prison for months — and Service Volunteered for All, a Trinidad-based organisation.

He will receive the Award today December 9, the fourth Indian winner. His predecessors were Medha Patkar, Sundarlala Bahuguna and Vandana Shiva, all involved in environmental work.

In 1980, Dr Sudarshan opened a small clinic in a thatched hut among Soliga "tribals," as they are known in India, living in the Biligiri Range Hills. The clinic has expanded into a 10-bed hospital with a well-equipped laboratory and a mobile medical unit. Gaining the confidence of the shy and reticent Soliga was not easy. They had led an isolated existence for centuries, living off forest produce and shunning outsiders — including, initially, Dr Sudarshan. But the soft-spoken doctor, convinced that "there is no substitute for service," did not give up.

His compassion broke down the barriers. They began bringing cases of snake bite and other ailments to him. As people got cured, their trust

grew. By 1990, infant mortality among the 20,000 Soliga people had declined from 145 to 28 per 1,000, immunization against common diseases had increased from 5 per cent to 95 per cent and literacy from 3 per cent to 41 per cent.

When he started working with the Soliga he found that the village of Yelandur was disrupted by leprosy.

With help from the government and the World Health Organization, he has almost eradicated the disease. Its incidence has fallen from 21 per cent seven years ago to less than one per cent today.

In 1918 he founded the Vivekananda Girijan Kalyana Kendra (VGKK) to provide education and training for Soliga youngsters, part of a move into broader areas of social work while maintaining his main task of medical care.

He wants the Soliga to preserve their culture as they integrate into the Indian mainstream. He has developed a special curriculum for the schools, with emphasis on their reverence for nature. Health workers are encouraged to use traditional Soliga medicines and remedies.

His team is now busy documenting the rich flora and fauna of the Biligiri Range Hills, besides helping the Soliga to conserve medicinal plants and herbs in the forests. "We are making every effort to see that the folklore and the environment-friendly lifestyle of the tribals is perpetuated," says Dr Sudarshan. But the workers have to deal with corrupt government officials, in league with business interests who want to mine the hills for granite. Dr Sudarshan has had to fight legal battles to save the hills from mining companies.

Despite the odds there are encouraging signs. Students educated at secondary schools set up by VGKK have enrolled in colleges. Some of those who had migrated to the cities have returned to join Dr Sudarshan's team as paid volunteers. "He has identified himself totally with Soliga," says Bangalore environmentalist TP Thomas. "And they with him."

In 1992 he was given the state award for the protection and conservation of the environment. Now it is issues like how to empower the people and provide leadership training to help them become self-reliant that occupy his mind.

The Award comes at a time when Dr Sudarshan has been considering expanding operations to other parts of Karnataka. The prize money will be used to set up a new trust.

His greatest contribution lies in inspiring young doctors and professionals to work in remote areas of the country. International recognition for Dr Sudarshan's activities in the form of the Right Livelihood Award will probably encourage others to follow. The ripples from his boyhood vow continue to flow.

ATIYA SINGH is a freelance Indian journalist and lecturer