

FOCUS

Reviving a Forgotten Tradition, Turning it into a Profitable Craft

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

As the world becomes increasingly environmentally conscious nothing could be more fashionable than the wide-range of environment-friendly products sweeping the global markets. Natural fibre garments, especially, have become extremely popular among developed countries. This spells good news for countries of the south in terms of increasing exports of such products.

The rising demand for environmentally friendly clothes has resulted in the revival of the age old tradition of making dyes from plants and vegetables. Indian experts have been experimenting with forgotten techniques lost over time managing to get only a few of the colours though not as vivid, that existed in earlier times. In Bangladesh, this process of revival began in 1981 when a preliminary study of the dye-producing plants of the country showed that natural dyes had a good commercial potential. This prompted the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation to sponsor the Vegetable Dye Project in 1987. One of the prime actors in making this research project a success was Ruby Guznavi, a dynamic businesswoman, largely responsible for reviving natural dye in this country and turning it into a commercial success. At present Guznavi is the managing director and creator of Aranya, the first commercial production and marketing organization of natural dye fabrics and products in Bangladesh.

Aranya, as its name implies, draws all its resources from nature, experimenting with indigenous raw materials such as leaves, petals, sawdust etc to make a wide variety of dyes that are colour fast. So far Aranya has come up with thirty dyes that are non-pollutant and non-carcinogenic thus ensuring higher environmental standards than chemical dyes.

The colours derived from natural dyes are subtle and

unique including shades of the palest pink (literally onion colour), deep indigos, light beiges and warm saffrons. The clothes themselves are simple, comfortable and traditional yet very contemporary, making them attractive to fashion conscious customers. Designs

that blend in with modern lifestyles of both the East and West.

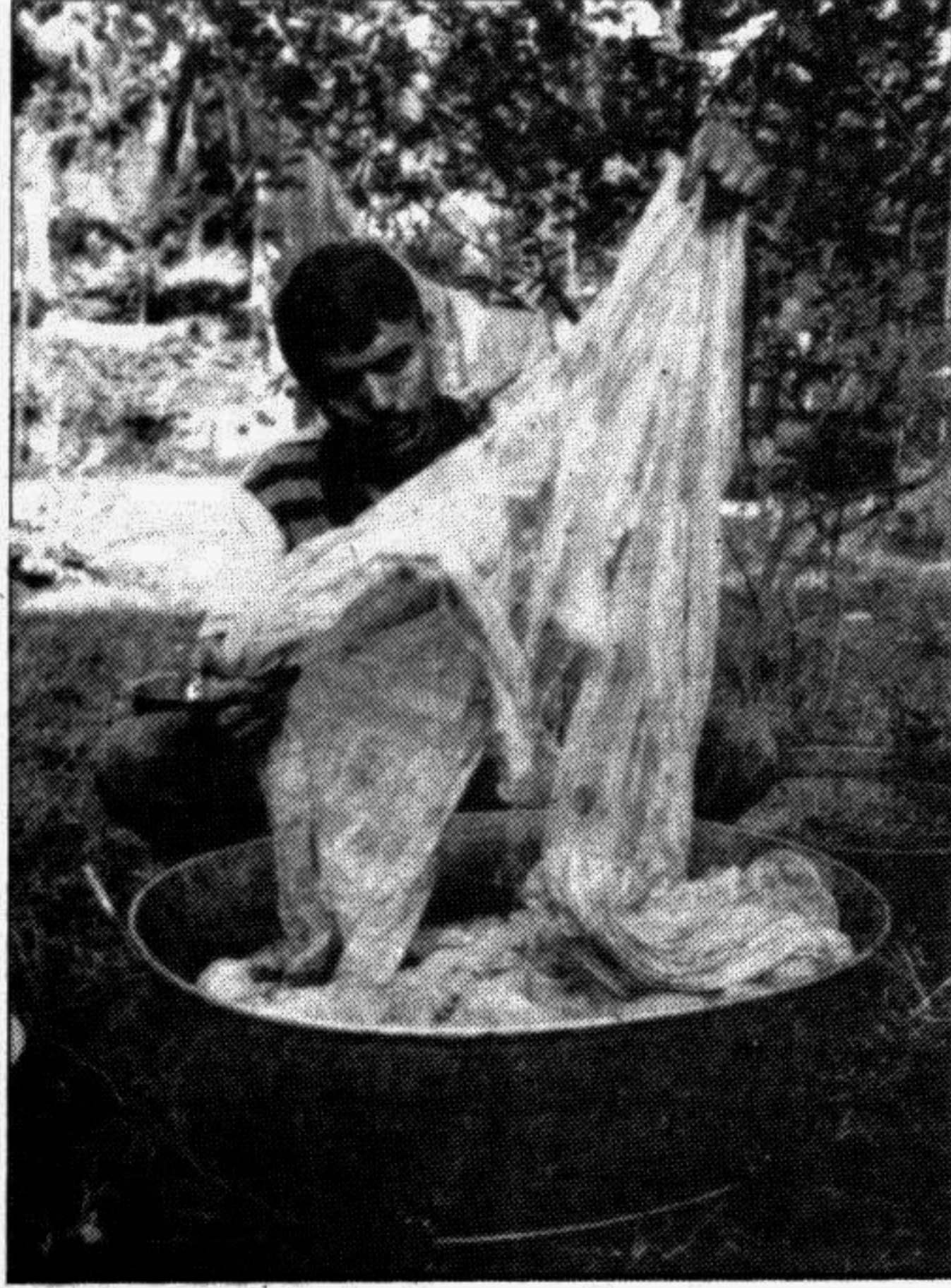
Adhering to high standards of quality, Aranya has attained a permanent niche in the global market exporting natural dye garments to the UK, France and Japan, where these clothes are sold

tas and sarees. Prices are quite high, though not higher than most boutiques in the city.

In spite of high labour cost (since the dyeing, block-printing, etc. is done manually) producing natural dye fabrics makes good business sense, says Guznavi, because

able.

"The greatest advantage of natural dye is that nothing clashes and the color combinations are always tasteful; with chemical dyes you have to be very careful" says Guznavi. Unfortunately, some enterprises, she adds, take a short cut by mixing chemical dyes with natural dyes and then passing them off as all

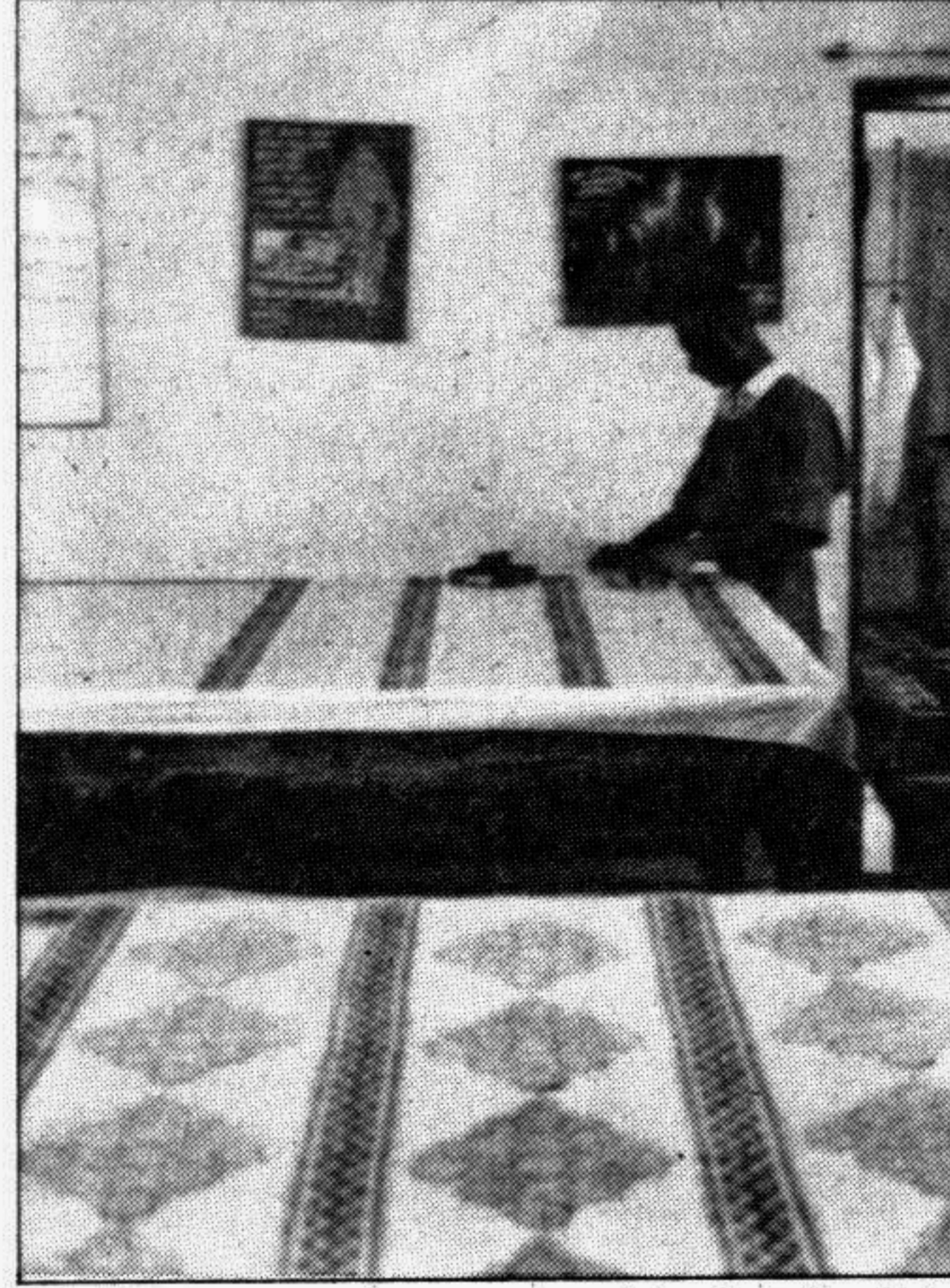


are also taken from pitta (rice cake) patterns and the intricate works on the tiles of old mosques.

With the intention of bringing back lost traditions from the past, Aranya has enabled crafts people to recreate the exquisite patterns in their weaves and embroideries by using Jamdani and Nakshi Kantha designs from private and museum collections. The organization also works with terra-cotta and silver developing products

in exclusive boutiques. Items include silk, half-silk and cotton block-printed kimonos, *salwar kameez*, shirts, waist coats and trousers with a wide range of embroidered products such as *kantha* bedspreads, cushion covers etc.

While exports constitute the bulk of Aranya's sales, a small quantity of clothes are sold locally in its Dhanmondi outlet. Here the garments mainly consist of 'tie and dye' and block-printed *salwar kameez* sets, *dupattas*, kur-



tas and sarees. Prices are quite high, though not higher than most boutiques in the city.

the cost of raw materials is very cheap. "The raw materials are all around us", she explains, "with 25 per cent from waste material such as petals of Krishna Chura or onion peels." There are, therefore, several lakhs of dollars saved by making natural dye products, compared to their chemical dye counterparts. Moreover, natural dyes, unlike chemical dyes do not run, and produce colours that are subdued, understated yet very fashion-

natural dye. Apart from being unethical, such adulteration takes away the special benefits of natural dye products.

One of the disadvantages of producing natural dyes is the time and patience required in the dyeing process. The fabric has to be first washed and bleached thoroughly after which the raw materials (petals, leaves etc) are boiled to get the dye solution. To ensure colour fastness, special mordants are used, and other techniques

are applied depending on the type of raw material. A lot of sunlight is also required to dry the dyed fabrics and ensure long lasting color.

It is therefore quite difficult to dye on a large scale and most dyeing units are small and compact like Aranya. Even so, says Guznavi, it is still profitable to have such small units spread all over the country. "If there are many small organizations producing natural dyes Bangladesh will be able to earn a lot of foreign exchange, given the high demand for such products."

The positive world-response to natural dyed fabrics, she explains, indicates that Bangladesh should concentrate in developing a lot of garments-people producing such products. "We should find the technical means of such large scale produc-

tion; machines could be used for the dyeing process, for example," says Guznavi.

Government support is also important. There is, points out Guznavi, a special weavers' service centre in every state of India, that supports weavers in every possible way including helping them to produce and develop natural dyes. Bangladesh could have similar centres to promote such a valuable tradition.

One of the most interesting side effects of developing natural dyes as Aranya has proved, is that it has helped revive the traditional skills of indigenous people all over Bangladesh. Different types of dyes are made by different tribes. In Jamalpur, for example, the Koch tribe specialize in *telanghole*, a yellow dye made from a tree

root. The Garo tribe of Mythenstingh make a black dye from the *ziga* fruit, a process that includes burying the dyed yarn in clay soil for 24 hours to get the black colour.

Similarly, the Khasia tribe of Srimangal, make a red dye called *ranger gach* from a root, the Mogh tribe of Maheshkhali make pink from the Goran tree bark, and the Murong tribe of Bandarban make a blue-black dye from the *Serum* tree leaves.

For Guznavi, managing a successful business in natural dye products is not enough. She wants others to develop these techniques and form their own dyeing units, thus spreading this unique craft all over the country. Reviving vegetable dyes is not just recreating a forgotten tradition, but a profitable one as well.

Tour Operators Prepare Their Moon Brochures

by Nicola Cole

The recent US Shuttle/Russian Mir link-up demonstrated the growth of cooperation in space. Next, reports Gemini News Service, comes the development of space tourism — and some travel companies are already preparing the way.

MOON jaunts may soon replace round-the-world luxury sea cruises as the ultimate vacation for the rich and famous.

"It's a possibility within 10 years", declares Dwayne Brown, a senior spokesman for the National Aeronautics & Space Administration (NASA) in the United States.

Some tour operators are already preparing for lift-off as the prospect of weekend breaks on the moon draw nearer, even though firm dates remain a gamble. British bookmakers Ladbrokes quote odds of 100-to-one against space packages before the century's end.

Prominent among the enterprising entrepreneurs is Globetrotter, a Scandinavian Airlines' affiliate. Globetrotter has been fuelling people's imagination by advertising space flight packages — lasting from 14 to 21 days — for \$200,000.

Promising tour guides and sumptuous meals, the company says each tour will be undertaken in a spacecraft about the size of a large modern jet.

Crewed by four flight-deck astronauts including two pilots, it will have a 30-tonne payload, allowing room for 20 or 30 tourists. "We assume the passenger capacity would be very small at the start", Brown says.

Blasting off vertically, the craft would leave the Earth's residual "pull" at a height of around 200 miles, and level out for normal flight and orbit at between 17,000 and 18,000 mph — the same speeds as the recent joint US-Russian mission.

The views for space tourists will be fantastic, way beyond tour-brochure superlatives. Cavernous darkness takes over from around 20 miles upwards — but travellers will see at close quarters the vast panorama of the "Milky Way" (our spiral-

shaped galaxy), pin-pricked by hundreds of billions of stars.

Below, through swirling white cloud-masses, the Earth, with its azure oceans snaking around continents green and brown, may be glimpsed.

Having re-entered Earth's gravitational field, the spacecraft would resume conventional flight altitude and land like an airliner — but using parachutes in addition to reverse engine-thrust in order to brake to standstill.

Such is the future vision that has fired public imagination. Coupled with scientists' prophecies of passenger space-flights within a decade, it has prompted certain travel agents — especially in the US — to accept down-payments for inaugural trips.

Assuming basic integrity, it is a legitimate business initiative — the deposits are usually refundable after a set period. "Agents meanwhile have use of the cash, earning interest in the bank. It's wonderful way of making money!" observed one radio astronomer at Britain's Jodrell Bank Science Centre.

The view at Jodrell Bank is that pioneer passenger-carrying space flights will not happen for perhaps another 40 years with voyages to further planets unlikely for 150 years after that.

Although the moon is already reachable on a four-day round-trip, the return journey to Mars — one of our next nearest planetary neighbours — would take at least four years.

On existing technology, reaching the centre of the Milky Way would require about 80,000 years for the outward voyage alone, reducible to 4.3 years if travel speeds could somehow be accelerated to the 186,000 mph speed of light.

It all sounds like space fiction, but Mark Williamson, editor of the international scientific journal Space,

maintains: "Anything is possible technically — if there's a commercial reason".

Mineral extraction, one of the likeliest reasons for the development of space travel, may be needed to supplement our own dwindling resources.

A "gold rush" to the stars, followed by colonisation? Perhaps; but the chief prize would more probably be elements like titanium, one of the strongest and lightest metals, which is currently used in spacecraft construction.

What is certain is that instead of the "space race", we will be talking about "space collaboration".

With national priorities changing and budgets being cut for economic or social reasons — NASA's alone has been cut by \$5 billion over the next five years — no country can now afford solo space projects.

Exploration programmes are cooperative cross-border efforts involving not only the US and Russian but also Canada, China, the 13 member-states of the European Space Agency, India and Japan (which is particularly interested in stellar tourism).

Cost is not the only factor in building larger spacecrafts: there are unresolved legal and logistical questions.

Special safe-passage agreements will be needed to avoid collisions and conflicts. Insurance risks will have to be assessed and covered.

Higher heartbeats, sleeping difficulties, acclimatising to weightlessness, coping with boredom and eating food out of squirly tubes will be among the challenges confronting travellers.

"They'll need training. Going on a space-flight is not like getting on a bus," NASA's Brown points out. — GEMINI NEWS

Nicola Cole is a British freelance journalist.

Burma: On Freedom's way

Released at last and with the world's eyes on her, Suu Kyi looks to dialogue, not confrontation, with her country's military rulers

Bertil Lintner writes from Rangoon

AMONG all the various vehicles which have entered the compound of Aung San Suu Kyi's Rangoon home since her dramatic release on July 10, two stand out. The first carried personnel from the US Embassy in Rangoon and two Congressional aides who had flown in from Washington to express their support for Suu Kyi. The other was an Indian Embassy car. Evidently, New Delhi wanted to show Suu Kyi and her supporters that although it maintains correct diplomatic relations with Burma's military Government, its sympathy lies with Suu Kyi and her democratic ideals.

At first, Suu Kyi's release raised hopes of national reconciliation in this strife-torn country. Suu Kyi herself was also surprisingly conciliatory. She declared that she bore no grudge against the State Law and Order Restoration Council (better known as the SLORC) and the military authorities who had confined her to her home for the past six years. Some of them, she said at a press conference in Rangoon a day after her release, were even "charming". On a more serious note, she went on to declare: "Once bitter enemies in South Africa are now working together for the betterment of their people. Why can't we look forward to a similar process?" But Burma's military rulers are no F.W. De Klerks, at least not yet, in the official media, Suu Kyi's release — after 2,190 days under house arrest — has not been given more than a few lines. An Information Ministry official even called it "a private affair", refusing to make further comments to reporters in Rangoon.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy once had branches all over the country, but following its election victory in the May 1989 polls — the results of which were never honoured by the SLORC — the military regime closed the party's offices and cowed its activists into submission. The tense relationship between the SLORC and thousands of silent but angry Suu Kyi supporters across Burma, with its population of

45 million, could prove disastrous if the SLORC lets the lid open.

Apparently realising this, Suu Kyi — daughter of one of the heroes of Burma's independence movement, General Aung San — has, since her release, been consistently calling for talks with the sloric to break the impasse. "We have to choose between dialogue and utter devastation," she warned. "I would like to believe that the human instinct for survival alone, if nothing else, would eventually lead us to prefer dialogue."

That call has yet to be answered, and the more pessimistic Burma observers point out that the military has a poor track record when it comes to the give and take of a dialogue, either in dealing with the outside world, which has consistently condemned Burma for its human-rights abuses, or its own internal rebel forces, which have been offered cease-fire agreements and business opportunities, but no political concessions. "It takes two to tango. A face-to-face exchange of ideas between her and the generals appears unlikely," says a Rangoon-based diplomat.

India, which shares a sensitive, 1,600 km border with Burma, has played a cautious and diplomatically skilful game in dealing with the SLORC. Border trade is booming, especially in Manipur, and in May last year, the then army chief, General B.C. Joshi, paid a highly publicised visit to Burma to discuss bilateral relations and security-related issues. As a direct outcome of this visit, the Burmese turned a blind eye to Indian troops pursuing Naga rebels across the border into their territory later the same year.

India has balanced these security concerns with support for Suu Kyi and her democracy movement. At the same time, Suu Kyi has always had a very close relationship with India. She is an alumna of Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi, where she studied when her mother Daw Khin Kyi served as Burma's ambassador to India



in the early 60s. It was during that time, when Suu Kyi was still in her teens, that she acquired her lasting admiration for the principles of non-violence embodied in the life and political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. These ideals earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

India's stance was demonstrated clearly in May this year when Suu Kyi was given the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award for her struggle to bring peace and democracy to Burma. The jury that awarded her the prize was headed by Vice-President K.R. Narayanan, whose wife is Burmese, which again emphasised India's special relationship with the country's democracy movement.

Most Burmese seem to admire India's cautious but tactful position much more than the smash-and-grab attitude of South-east Asian — mainly Thai and Singaporean — businessmen, who are rushing into the country encouraged by their governments to take advantage of the SLORC's opening up of the economy.

As for India, initially it was inclined towards sup-

porting the democratic forces against the junta. But later, goaded by the increasing western and Chinese interaction with resource-rich Burma, New Delhi decided on a more pragmatic, if cynical, two-track approach. Accordingly, it improved relations with the SLORC. And increased trade and economic exchanges as well as military coordination along borders where the two neighbours are locked in a four-decade-old war with insurgent groups which happen to be ethnic cousins.

Simultaneously, however, India kept channels of communication open with Suu Kyi and her supporters. The Ministry of External Affairs says it drew some useful lessons from the earlier fiascos in the Gulf War (when it initially tilted towards Saddam Hussein) and Russia (where hasty pro-Communist statements were made after the abortive coup) and decided on a more pragmatic approach.

In the long run, India's policy may pay off, according to diplomats in Rangoon. It is also possible that the SLORC

may be compelled to hold talks with Suu Kyi, sooner or later.

Those hoping for something similar in Burma might have taken heart when, on July 17, a long line of National League for Democracy MPs and local organisers came out of the woodwork and walked into the compound of Suu Kyi's house. The MPs, who were elected in 1989 but prevented from taking power, came dressed in the clothes that distinguished them during the pro-democracy election campaign six years ago: dark longis, traditional Burmese jackets and badges with the party emblem. At the same time, a new telephone line was being installed in Suu Kyi's house to replace the one that was literally cut with a pair of scissors on July 20, 1989, the day she was placed under house arrest. Those who wish for democracy in Burma hope that once lines of communication are restored, anything would be possible.

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