

WHEN the case of an employee accused of incompetence landed on his desk, Larry Alcantara could not help but wonder if his white superiors wanted him to deal with it because he was Asian and the employee was black.

His managers had long been unhappy with the employee's work, but they did nothing for fear of a discrimination complaint.

When the problem worsened, the employee was placed under him. "Having a minority supervisor over a minority employee, they no longer had that fear," said the Filipino-American, who ended up warning the black man to do a better job.

Asian Americans feel they sometimes play the role of a buffer of sorts in a society where a racial hierarchy exists.

Observers say this is not based on some grand conspiracy, but part of a social dynamic. This has been highlighted in the debate over affirmative action in which Asians are lumped with whites as victims of programmes meant to help people of colour.

Throughout history, Asian Americans have been used as a racial wedge. Howard University law professor Frank Wu recalls the post-Civil War period when immigrant Chinese workers were portrayed as being more obedient and industrious than the newly-freed blacks they replaced on Southern plantations.

Today, Asian Americans are a bigger, more visible minority group. But they still grapple with stereotypes. Since they are portrayed — often cynically — as more competent and reliable than other minorities, some get ahead and even rise to a status above other minorities on campuses and work places.

But others complain they are also stereotyped as too weak and unassertive for top leadership posts, so they get stuck in the mezzanine of the workplace hierarchy.

To be sure, Asian Americans have also risen into middle management because of education, skill and other qualifications. And supervisors of any colour, and in every field, learn quickly that personnel management is a delicate chore that often traps them between upper-echelon leaders and rank-and-file members.

For that reason, white managers might not recognise the unique dilemma that an Asian American manager might face. But many ask: At one point does a white manager's respect for hard work and loyalty cross the line into racial exploitation?

One Chinese American supervisor says many managers "are comfortable with Asians being in middle management" because they are assumed to be loyal to their superiors no matter what.

"It's a work ethic (in which) Asians will not watch out for themselves — they will watch out for their superiors," she says.



## The Asian American Limbo

Considered neither black nor white, Asian Americans are caught in a racial crossfire. Benjamin Pimentel reports for Inter Press Service.

riors," she says. "They're not going to speak up. They're not going to rock the boat. They're going to take the heat."

Cesar Esguerra, a Filipino American, took a lot of heat as a supervisor at a Los Angeles health insurance firm. And, he says, that was the way the company's white executives set it up.

He says the managers were careful in dealing with blacks, who would always complain to the labour board or the president of the company. "But they know an Asian will never do that," he says. "You can kick him and he won't complain."

The executives would send Esguerra to tell the employees, mostly Asians and blacks, to work harder and faster. Eventually, the demands at the firm became so untenable that some of the employees accused him of being unreasonable and insensitive.

"They were right," he says. "I was just a whore, a tool to do what the managers wanted me to do. It was a very uncomfortable position. Esguerra quit his job early this year."

Loida Noveloso, a Filipino American supervisor at a Los Angeles health insurance firm, said her white managers consistently described her in evaluations as a dedicated employee who would always take the management's side.

She was supposed to deal with problems involving staffers, mostly minorities, without involving upper management. "I was like the pacifier," she said, "a shock absorber."

One Chinese American woman found herself in a

similarly awkward position. When she was head of a New York City foster care agency, members of a black neighbourhood picketed her office, accusing her of insensitivity after she shut down a community programme that her office deemed ineffective.

She did not blame her white supervisors for these problems. But in a white-dominated hierarchy and an agency that served mostly blacks and Latinos, she said, she was treated as someone who was neither a minority nor white.

"I was just in between," she says. "I had to relate to Latinos and African Americans as minorities, but I wasn't considered one myself. I sort of didn't fit in."

Others were asked to become enforcers. Filipino American Aida Dimaranan was promoted to assistant head nurse at a Los Angeles hospital, only to find out that part of her job was to implement a controversial company rule requiring employees to speak only in English. The policy specifically affected Filipino nurses.

When she refused to enforce it, she was demoted by the hospital management who accused her of incompetence. Dimaranan sued and won a settlement in a federal court.

"The managers probably thought that because I am Filipino, I am easily swayed, easily convinced to do something even if I don't want to do it as a supervisor," she said.

The irony is that many Asian Americans buy into the stereotypes, making them vulnerable to being used as a wedge.

Some Asians come to the

United States with little knowledge of its history of racism, of the civil rights struggle, and of how a movement largely led by blacks won rights and opportunities for all people of colour.

"We don't have a collective history of how to get those benefits," said Lillian Galeo, executive director of Filipinos for Affirmative Action in Oakland. "It will take us a while (for our community) to catch community up."

But Bill Lee, regional counsel of the NAACP Legal Defence Fund in Los Angeles, says that may not be easy since immigrants tend to buy into the biases of the dominant group. "They want to identify upward. They don't want to identify with those at the bottom."

In identifying with white culture, many Asian Americans embrace the myth of a model minority. Abraham Viernes, a health insurance examiner, is critical of fellow Filipinos' picture of their "correct" place in the workforce.

"If you work for a white person, the picture is correct," he says. "But if it's a black man, it's weird."

Some immigrants go so far in identifying with white culture that they no longer see themselves as minorities, which others warn could only further isolate Asian Americans.

"The problem with Asian Americans is that they'll be squeezed out on both ends," said Viernes. "Asian Americans will be seen as too successful and too threatening. At the same time, they still won't be accepted as part of the general population. They simply will be left out." — IPS

## Terry Fox Run in Bangladesh

On 12 April 1980, a 21-year old man named Terry Fox began a courageous run across Canada. Two years before, Terry lost his right leg to bone cancer and wanted to raise money for cancer research. Half way across the world's second biggest country, after running 5,565 kilometres on an artificial leg, Terry was forced to stop. The cancer had come back and spread to his lungs. Terry died in 1981. But his

dream continues. The Terry Fox Run for Cancer Research is now an annual fund raising event in 44 countries. This article is the second in a two-part series on cancer to mark the second Terry Fox Run in Bangladesh. The run will be held in Dhaka, Khulna, Kishoreganj, Comilla, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Bogra on Friday, 3 November. Article by Peggy Herring.



### Smoking and Cancer

THERE are more than 8 lakhs people in Bangladesh with cancer, according to the World Health Organization. That number is expected to double in the next twenty years. It's a sobering statistic, especially considering that half those cases could be prevented if people made some simple, easily achievable changes to their lifestyle.

The most effective change a person can make to decrease his or her risk of developing cancer is to quit smoking and chewing tobacco. According to the Bangladesh Cancer Society, tobacco use is responsible for about forty per cent of total cancer cases in the country. Among men in Bangladesh, the top three cancers (lung, larynx and oral cavity) are linked with tobacco use. It is also a leading cause of cancer for women.

Cancer is a disease of the cell and tissue in which the normal growth mechanisms are disturbed. The result is abnormal cell and tissue growth which we call "cancer." Use of tobacco, whether smoked or chewed, affects the growth mechanisms and in many research studies, is clearly linked with development of cancer.

Smoking has been linked with lung, larynx, oral cavity and esophagus cancers, as well as with cancers of the pancreas, kidney and bladder. Whether you smoke high quality, imported cigarettes, locally made cigarettes or biri, or whether you smoke with a pipe or a 'hukka', the result is the same. All types of smoking are injurious to the health and clearly linked with cancer.

Chewing tobacco has been linked with oral cancers, which amount to about 13 per cent of all cancers in Bangladesh. Many people chew some type of tobacco, whether it is raw tobacco leaf, 'jarda' or 'kimam'. Use of crushed, raw tobacco leaf with lime, known as 'khaini', which is kept between the cheek and gum for a long period of time, may cause cancer in the gums or cheeks. Poor oral hygiene and dental care only add to the risk involved with using these substances.

There is also a risk of developing cancer if you live with or spend a lot of time with someone who smokes — even if you don't smoke yourself. Research has shown that sidestream smoke, or the smoke which is present in

the atmosphere of a room where someone is smoking, is a serious threat to health. It is believed that 20 to 30 per cent of non-smokers lung cancers are caused by exposure to this type of smoke. It is known as 'passive smoking'.

Passive smoking also has serious health effects on children. Respiratory diseases among the children of smokers are more common during the first year of life. As well as acute respiratory infection (ARI) is responsible for about one third of all deaths of children under five in developing countries. Smoking is one of the factors contributing to the infection.

There are a number of organizations in Bangladesh which have taken positive steps in this regard by declaring their offices as "smoke-free workplaces" or "no smoking zones". Most airlines now ask passengers not to smoke while on board. It is important that we all respect these rules. If you are a smoker, you should not smoke in a no smoking zone. If you see someone smoking in a restricted area, you have a right to ask them, politely but firmly, not to smoke. It is important for your own health.

In order to avoid cancer caused by using tobacco, you should quit smoking or chewing tobacco. If you must continue to smoke or chew, you should be aware of changes in your body, such as sores in your mouth which cannot heal, or development of a deep, chronic cough. These may be signs of the

early stages of cancer. You should seek help from your doctor immediately.

If you have never tried using tobacco, don't start now. If you must live with someone who is a smoker, avoid spending time together in enclosed spaces. Try to keep your children away from the sidestream smoke. Better still try to persuade the smoker of the benefits of a tobacco-free lifestyle.



## Caricatures by Shishir Bhattacharya



## The Off-beaten and Divergent Paths

Continued from page 9 ago, he said readers had no knowledge of comics.

They'd ask: "Why doesn't 'Tokai' grow up?" I used to say, "In cartoons, it happens they don't grow up," I told the readers, "In cartoons, one day might be 10,000 years." Readers are very simple minded. They don't bother about wit — whether it is in the cartoon. They take the cartoon information and ask, "Is it for the people or not?" and they make it their own.

Political cartoons have come on strong again, attributable to another tumultuous period — the downfall of the Ershad regime in 1990. Since then, some

dailies feature six or seven full front page political cartoons monthly; others use smaller cartoons more often. Asif Huda draws seven socio-political pocket cartoons weekly for *Dainik Bangla*, while Shishir Bhattacharya does a front page editorial cartoon on alternate days for *Bhorer Kagol*.

Cartoonists still work under many constraints, according to Nazrul and Huda. Among them are threats, pressures, and subtle controls from government, political and religious groups; self censorship brought about by editors who brief cartoonists, and the lack of encouragement from newspapers and respect from the public. Nazrul said cartoons are afterthoughts of editors who

use them to fill space, while Ranabi and Saiful Alam pointed out that newspapers pay poorly and slowly. "I can earn enough for smoking, not to support a family," Saiful Alam said. Because cartoonists normally are not retained as fulltime newspaper staff members, they work at other jobs, such as painter, sculptor, muralist, teacher, professor, development officer, and interior designer.

Such conditions make it difficult to attract and retain young cartoonists. Add to this the problem of parents not wanting their children to consider such a low status, low income profession. Huda told of the stigma attached to cartooning:

If I apply for something and list cartooning as my profession, they laugh. When I try to get married, parents of women I date

laugh at my position. They are looking for engineers who can make much money.

The situation has changed for the better in recent years and is likely to improve even more, with the freer political atmosphere, the competitiveness of some dailies to use front page cartoons as circulation builders, the continued development of the comic book field, and the building of respect for cartooning among young people at the Kingfisher Art View School, run by famous artist/cartoonist Khondokar Abu Sayeed and his wife, Gemy.

A professor for more than 33 years, Dr Lent has taught in universities in the Philippines, where he was a Fulbright Scholar; Malaysia, where he started the first mass communications programme in that country; and the United States.

