Browsing in Lucknow and Delhi

Rukun Advani

WHEN I was young I spent a lot of time in my father's bookshop in Lucknow, browsing and reading. The atmosphere of the bookshop seemed to encourage this activity. It attracted a small clientele of people who were keen to feel up books, flip through pages, gaze at blurbs, scrutinize contents pages, look jackets up and down, rub fingers down spines, assess the depth to which gold embossings had registered on cloth, and decide after a good hour or two whether all this sensuousness pleased them enough to buy. Many of my father's friends were feelers and browsers who had browsed their way into his heart.

My father's heart, the heart of his bookshop, was on the floor above the stacks where all this loving activity was afoot. After they'd had their fill, the dedicated browsers would shuffle up the stairs with the books they wanted and look at the new arrivals piled around my father's desk, intermittently chatting about obscure authors or local politics and sipping the tea they were unfailingly provided. The names stuck in my head. They were always outlandish or double-barrelled — Levi-Strauss, Bronisaw Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Louis Dumont, Verrier Elwin, Radcliffe-Brown — which gave me the impression that a writer hadn't quite made it if he was only called something local like Dube or Mathur. The bookshop catered to anthropologists and sociologists, a few historians, miscellaneous visiting academics from abroad, well-read scientists from Lucknow's Central Drug Research Institute, coffee-house intellectuals, and generally the sorts of people who do not enter a bookshop to buy Robert Ludlum and Sidney Sheldon.

I was spoilt by my father's bookshop into believing that this ought to be the culture of book-buying anywhere. It was a realm of unreal, antiquated pleasure. I discovered that this sort of activity was a vanished aspect of the old world even within the more affluent parts of the globe, were browsing is commonly encouraged but seldom supplemented with free beverage. My father preserved, or perhaps created, an old custom. In his shop it was the tea that sold the books.

Though my father's shop sold his books all right, cash profits were far from being the only return on investment. The proprietor who sat behind his desk revelled in being the initiator and focal point of a culture within which books were being picked up, examined, thought about and perhaps bought. He believed in the value of readers whose furrowed brows were the product of thoughtfulness and a serious indulgence in leisure, and like all far-sighted businessmen he recognized that unforeseen dividends are yielded by tea, coffee, and sympathetic conversation. The ambience of his establishment made sense to book lovers and blended nicely with the small-town tehzeeb of Lucknow.

My father is now nearly seventy-five and his archaic, amiable activity as a bookseller has been going on for fifty years. Among academics, Ram Advani Bookseller is an institution in Lucknow. Recently Zamir Ansari, who is the low-key brains behind Penguins high-profile visibility, organized an exhibition to celebrate fifty years of bookselling by Ram Advani. Even without the tea, they managed to generate a very considerable response among the local populace. This surprised everyone.

The surprise was because over the years the price of books, the cutback in library funds, the moribund condition of UP's universities and the decline of academic institutions all through the state have combined to make Lucknow an intellectual backwater. The Biharification of Uttar Pradesh is in full swing and Lucknow, though not yet Patna, is on its way to wards becoming that sort of slum. Yet the inflow of characters into my father's bookshop continues unabated. A railway official whose job is less important to him than his personal library is to be found there frequently. A professor of history at London University who researches the ulema's outpourings in Firangi Mahal (an old theological house) makes his way there annually, or is stood in for by his students, or by his letters ordering books published in India. Someone turns up from New Zealand wanting J H Hutton's study of the Angami Nagas, long out of print but perhaps just procurable via Ram Advani. A lady from Gorakhpur engaged in a Ph. D. on Ivy Compton Burnett which she will submit to the University of Meerut descends from rickshaw and asks to be put down for a copy of the latest critical study of minor English novelists of the twentieth century by an eminent professor at the University of Hull who has published his to me through the University of Edinburgh Press. To all such customers-turned-friends my father says he'll get the book if it exists. Bookworms filter in and, coffee filled, filter out.

This is not a bookshop that can be replicated across the country; it is the unreplicable ideal made flesh in the most unlikely surroundings. My father pays a pittance as rent in a posh area of town. In Bombay, rents have pushed bookshops out of the city, or made the odd surviving shop huddle into cramped shelters. In Delhi, bookshops are sometimes pigeon holes crammed so tight that three customers make a crowd. In others, sentry like attendants ask you what you want before you have quite stepped into the shop : browsing seems suspiciously like the first move towards theft.

There are several exceptions : Bookworm in Connaught Place has an excellent selection of books and a knowledgeable, helpful, welcoming proprietor. If the book is not in stock, he will order it for you. If you visit his shop regularly he will recognize you. This is also true of a couple of the Khan Market shops, though the range on display here is less catholic, and the kissing proximity of shelf and customer nearly obscene. In this respect, the appearance in South Extension II of a branch of Bombay's Crossword bookshop is reassuring, for here there is both range and elbow room. The other place good to browse in is the Rupa sales office off Ansari Road. For readers of fiction this is a haven from which it is difficult to escape without going broke. OUP's renovated showroom on the same road is suddenly attractive too, specially as it is located close to Manohar Publishers, whose office exists in a state of amiable chaos and attracts a great variety of academic browsers. Cambridge University Press, represented by Foundation Books, inhabits the same area. These are now the locations that substitute in some ways for the pleasures of browsing in an old-world bookshop.

One should count one's blessings, I guess. in Delhi books can at least still be had, for money if not for love.

The writer is editor, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Courtesy : The Book Review

Oddity in a Modern World

asian diary BY ARJUNA

"FORTUNATE is the one who can match two heads law fully," says an old proverb.

That tradition in the Arab world still holds, albeit not as much as it used to. There are still many match-makers — those who arrange marriages — in business today in Lebanon, Egypt and other Islamic nations worldwide.

One such oddity in this modern world is Beirut's Um Asaad, a large, friendly women whose numerous gold bracelets and necklaces prove that finding a Juliet for Romeo (and vice-versa) can be fairly profitable enterprise.

Um Asaad charges anything from $ 100 to $ 1,000 for successfully bringing couples together, her fee depending on the wealth of her client and the difficulties faced in accomplishing her mission.

Asked whether matchmaking it present-day Lebanon had changed from the way it was conducted in the past, she cited one variation in the business. She noted that photographs once played a major role but in most cases these are no longer necessary today. In fact, she said, this is just as well, for it is not unusual for partners to discover that the mates they were matched with were other than those whose photographs had been shown to them.

Typically, those in search of a bride provide Um Asaad with their specifications and, occasionally, their photographs. She then contacts various people she knows in her neighbourhood and if, after a preliminary meeting, the couple express as interest in one another, a second meeting is arranged. During this meeting the marriage contract is discussed and Um Asaad receives her fee, invariably paid by the man, especially if her family is wealthy.

Um Asaad claims that most of her couples remain happily married after they have been brought together, unlike those matched by others. She also remains on social terms with her clients after they marry.

Um Asaad would visit bachelors, singing praises of prospective brides and varying her descriptions according to the amount of money paid by the girls' families.

Matchmakers are often approached by anxious mothers wanting beautiful and rich brides for their sons.

The matchmaker would exploit such a situation, extracting as much money as she can by giving the impression that she had spent weeks looking for a suitable partner.

Once a girl is chosen, the next step would be a visit to her house by her prospective mother-in-law and the matchmaker.

This inspection ceremony is dreaded ordeal for the girl with her future depending it.

If she fails once or twice in such examinations, she could quickly earn a reputation for being poor, ugly or otherwise unworthy of marriage.

The girl is always well prepared for the encounter.

Her hair would be carefully arranged and her make-up applied with great care. She would be dressed in her finest clothes.

When the prospective mother-in-law arrives with the matchmaker, pleasantries would be exchanged, and the girl would serve coffee.

She would then walk round the room, displaying her figure, and making small-talk to show that she has a pleasant voice.

A suspicious mother-in-law would not be above playfully hugging the girl to make sure there was nothing false about her charms.

The girl is also tested on her ability as a cool. and house-keeper.

If the inspection turns out well, a date is fixed for the wedding and the matchmaker is rewarded by both families.

Matchmaking is not an easy job. The woman engaged in it has to be clever, active and above all, popular with those she deals with.

Lebanese dependence on matchmakers is likely to continue. While they are no longer needed to serve as a go-between in today's relaxation of rigid male-female relationship, they do provide an opportunity to broaden the field of possibilities beyond those traditionally provided by family and friends. — Depthnews Asia

The Death of an "Empress" of the Communist Era

I K Gujral

NOT noticed by the world media Brezhnev's widow — Viktoria Petrovna Brezhneva, passed away this month in the 88th year of her life. End of the 'Queen' of an era was pathetic. According to her niece, "she did not leave her bed for the past several years. She suffered from diabetes and gangarene, she lost her eye-sight and three fingers on her foot were amputated."

Since Brezhnev's death in 1982, she lived alone in her Kutuzovsky Prospect Apartment. All perks of the high life were gone and so were "the relatives who rarely came to see her". Even the funeral service — held in a Government Hospital, drew a few family members. Her grand son — for whatever reasons, further played it down. When the rites were over one of the kin whispered to another, ".. What a lucid, quiet person we have lost. We almost forgot about her". And these were the ones who had grossly abused their relationship with the deceased. No one — in the Communist era, ever talked about misdeeds of the family though the diplomats did gossip about the scandalous behaviour of Brezhnev's daughter — Galina. The *Moscow News* did not say if she was still around though her husband — she had married more than once, Yuri Churbanov was there to tell the media that he was presently working as "Vice President of a major company called Rosstern that delivers cement, asphalt and other construction materials in Moscow". Time has made him 'reconcile with changes.' He "looks at life with open eyes. And one has to be sober..". When the service was over, Churbanov drove away in his own small Ford Car. One wonders what happened to the fleet of imported limousines that Brezhnev had so fondly accumulated.

Viktoria despite her high position, was a very circumspect person. During five years of our residence in Moscow, we seldom met her. My wife and ladies of the diplomatic missions, used to see her at the Annual Women's Day receptions that she regularly hosted. She did not accompany her husband at the official banquets. Not even the one in Mr Gandhi's honour. The Communist Party — from the very day of October Revolution, had laid a rule whereby wives of the leading Bolsheviks did not participate in social activities of their husbands unless the merit of their own position so warranted. The matter of marriage was not considered of importance to be inserted even in the Party's *Who's Who*.

As is now known, Stalin's wife used to work in a Silk factory, the wife of Kalanin who was Head of the State, was manager of a State Farm. Stalin's Foreign Minister Molotov's wife headed a Soviet Trust. Even Lenin's widow — Krupskaya worked in Kremlin as Assistant Commisar of Education. Gorbachev's wife Raisa was the first to end this practice. The revolutionary code of conduct discarded several other practices of the 'decedent bourgeoise culture'. No one in the diplomatic corps — not even the Communist Ambassadors, knew private addresses or residential telephone numbers of the Ministers or Party dignitaries. One had to go through the Foreign Office who in turn arranged for a ring back.

An early part of my ambassadorial assignment in Moscow coincided with that of Ambassador Maltsev's in Delhi. Both he and his wife were our personal friends. During their sojourns to Moscow, they used to visit us in the mission. We knew their personal address and telephone number. All this changed when he came to live in Moscow; Mrs. Maltsev politely told my wife that her telephone number had changed.

Such odd practices would not permit even the official biographers to write about the family life of the leaders. Svetlana — Stalin's daughter, was the first to lift the evil and write about the miserable plight of her mother. Lenin's wife — Krupskaya was a leading personality in the revolutionary movement and much has been written about her. Khrushchev's wife Nina was never in the public eye. Despite his garrulous nature, he did not talk about her even in his widely circulated memoirs dictated after his exit from the power.

By 1978 Brezhnev had abolished the collective leadership of trioka that had helped him in ascending to power. With Podgorny and Kosygin gone, a media hype was launched to build his personality cult. '*The Pages from His Life*' was an officially sponsored biography that cleverly edited the history to make him shine. But Viktoria did not find any place in it. No one knew even the date of their wedding or their children's birthdays.

John Dornberg's biography of Brezhnev briefly mentioned her: 'Brezhnev likes to be known as a family man and, on the whole, he really is. He and Viktoria Petrovna, a motherly looking woman who stays out of the limelight and appeared bewildered when a herd of journalists, photographers and cameramen closed in on her and Patricia Nixon in May 1972, have been married more than forty years. Reputedly her influence on him has been enormous. Even when younger she was probably never a striking woman physically but she is reported to have come from a bourgeois family and set standards in the Brezhnev household that went far beyond those of his own proletarian upbringings. Her selections in furnishings, it is said, reflect her background and over the years she has inspired Brezhnev to emulate her..".

While in Moscow, one often heard whispers about Galina, who was ".. Brezhnev's greatest problem. Her penchant for men from the circus and her romantic escapades were the primary reason why her daughter Viktoria lived not with her but with Brezhnev's.

"Their son Yuri — by all accounts, was believed to be "virtuous". He worked as a Metallurgical Engineer. In the post-Communist era stories about his corruption erupted.

Some relations in Viktoria Brezhneva's funeral service, were keen to preserve the past: "It is very important to collect all the photographs connected with Brezhnevs in one place. To make posterity know about him."

At the end of the service a journalist curiously asked a relative about one Nikolai Ivanovich who was there in his well-ironed Soviet era uniform. The response was indeed quotable:

"Young man, you would have been in trouble if you had asked this question, say, 15 years ago. This was Nikolai Ivanovich Bandura, Brezhnev's Private Secretary..".

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Niaz Zaman

MY Lai, Kent State, Agent Orange — a terrified child, her clothes burnt off her, fleeing the horror behind — a co-ed wailing over the dead body of a fellow student shot dead by state troopers — American Marines using rifle butts to thrust back a terrified mob desperate to escape the fall of Saigon while helicopters whirl overhead — the names and images of Vietnam, of the war and of opposition to the war, were imprinted on the mind of America as they were on its psyche. A director choosing an equivalent for Conrad's Heart of Darkness chose Vietnam. And a generation seeking to revolt against their fathers chose Vietnam as a symbol of all they opposed. "Make love, not war," they cried. Vietnam became America's wheel of fire, the stone of the American Sisyphus.

Vietnam became added to all the other reasons for homelessness in a land of affluence. The stereotype of the Vietnam veteran, unlike veterans anywhere else in the world, was more easily imaged beside street people than on a podium. One of the reasons ascribed to the disease of Vietnam veterans was that, when they returned home, they were not given a hero's welcome. They slunk back to take up the lives they had left behind when they found that they were considered not heroes but murderers, fighting a cruel and futile war. And the ones who died, died inglorious deaths, their remains brought back in ignominous body bags like so much garbage. A song written by Brenda Simpson called "Welcome Home" — in a cassette of Songs of the Wall — describes the harsh welcome the Vietnam soldiers received on their return.

You came back and had to face
A nation's angry glare
You had served your country
And your country didn't care
Disillusioned heroes
Left to heal your wounds alone
You were strangers back at home.

The image of Vietnam has not changed, not yet, not completely — but the process has begun. Perhaps the first step was the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The idea for a memorial for the Vietnam veterans was proposed in April 1979 as a symbol of overdue recognition by America to the service of Vietnam veterans. Congress sanctioned the use of two acres near the Lincoln Memorial as a site for the monument. A competition was held for a suitable design for the Memorial, the criteria being that it should be reflective and contemplative, in harmony with its site and environment, that it should contain the names of the 57,939 dead or missing in the war, and that it should make no political statement about the war.

On May 1, 1981, from the 1,421 entries received, the jury of artists and designers selected the design of Maya Ying Lin, a 21-year-old Chinese-American architecture student at Yale. The design, however, met with disapproval and controversy. Tom Carhart, a Vietnam veteran, called the open v-shaped, black granite monument, a "black gash of shame." The jurors were described as anti-war activists and the Memorial a "peace sign." The black granite was seen as too stark. The Memorial was considered not patriotic enough. The controversy was finally solved with an addition to the design: a statue-cluster of three soldiers, belonging to the different ethnic groups that had fought in the war, to be placed at the entrance to the Memorial and forming part of it.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial — often simply called the Wall — was finished in November 1982. The sculpture of three soldiers was added in 1984. But the Memorial was not yet complete. The entire process of the Memorial seemed touched by the controversies surrounding the war as well as by the new American environment. Now that the men who had served in the war had received their belated recognition, it was time for the 265,000 women who had served in the auxiliary services during the war to get theirs. On November 11, 1993, the Vietnam Women's Memorial was dedicated to honour these women. The bronze sculpture portrays three Vietnam era women, one of them caring for a wounded soldier.

An average of 10,000 visitors a day come to the Memorial, some out of curiosity, but many more to remember the men who died in a war nobody wanted. The Memorial stands in sharp contrast to the graceful, white Grecian monuments that grace the Mall. The v-shaped black wall, tapering from the central apex to the wings, etched with the names of the dead and missing, is a moving reminder of the pain of war. The effect of the Memorial, unlike the effect of other war memorials, is that no visitor, not even a critic of the war, can remain a disinterested bystander. The reason is very simple: as visitors pass the wall, they see not only the names etched into the black granite, but also their own reflections in the polished stone. Thus, each visitor, by the simple act of walking past the wall, becomes a participant in the drama, in the cathartic ritual.

A casual visitor to the wall gradually grows aware that among the tourists, are the mourners who finally are allowed to grieve for their dead. There are touching scenes. Simple tokens of love left at the foot of the names. A posy of wildflowers. But not all the memorials are to the Americans who died. The wall has become the recipient of those confessions that no one wanted to hear, a place of reconciliation. Someone leaves a wedding band with a note reading, "I took this ring off a dead Viet Cong soldier. I've been carrying it for 18 years. It's time to lay it down. This boy is no longer my enemy."

Vietnam veterans help people look for names down the columns. Someone makes a rubbing on paper of a name to take back for someone who could not come in person. An elderly couple holds hands, grieving for a son lost in Vietnam. A young man looks at the name of the father he was too small to remember. The wall reminds us that the war might have been unjust or ignoble, the deaths remain painful. Like Brenda Simpson one hopes that wars like Vietnam will not be fought again.

Your suffering has taught us
And the movement has begun
To stop the senseless loss of life
In wars that can't won.

No, the Memorial makes no political statement. It does not need to. By being there it is statement enough. It acknowledges the deaths of those who died, acknowledges the pain. It helps in the healing process, but by doing so, it also rehabilitates the dead and makes space for the war. Perhaps even changes our perspective. One wonders whether in the process, the lesson of Vietnam will be remembered, whether the v-shape some distant day might not even become a victory sign.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial

SHORT STORY

A Silent Question

A S M Nurunnabi

THE adolescent stage of life is generally characterised by a new kind of curiosity and emotional upsurge. At such a stage, it is not unusual for a boy to be attracted to a girl of the same age. Such a thing happened to Sumon. Rima was the girl who lived a little distance away from Sumon's home. The reason for the boy's attraction to the girl was not obvious. Rima was not particularly beautiful in the accepted sense, but no doubt presentable on the whole. Her most attractive feature was her thick tresses which no one could fail to observe. The strange aspect of the affairs was that, though they were close neighbours, they never had occasion to come close or talk to each other.

The silent infatuation deepened as the girl sometimes appeared on her open veranda to dry her hair in the sun. That sight left the boy spellbound. As was inevitable, the girl slowly came to understand the boy's interest in her, but she had no idea why, particularly since there was no verbal exchange between them.

Notwithstanding this, the silent love affair continued. Sumon used to wait patiently on his veranda for Rima's return from school. The same waiting game was also played by Rima when it was time for Sumon to return from college. There were other stray events which contributed to intensifying their mutual relations. As Sumon prepared for his final examination by studying late into the night, Rima kept awake during the whole period by keeping her light on in her room.

Sumon was old enough to know that this kind of romantic relationship could not last indefinitely. That apprehension proved true after a couple of years.

A close relative of Sumon who had a good job in a big commercial enterprise, wanted to marry the girl. The parents of the girl welcomed the proposal, but none could know the silent pangs of suffering of the two loving souls.

Only after the marriage, Sumon found an opportunity to talk to the girl, as she became the wife of his cousin. Some days after the marriage, the cousin invited Sumon to dinner at his home with some of his other relatives. The event that took place in course of the dinner was sudden and unforeseen for Sumon. While the host, his wife and the other guests were taking food, Sumon felt a soft pressure on his foot under the dining table. He instantly realised that the move was from Rima who sat near him. As Sumon looked at her furtively, the subtle look in her eyes made it clear that the move was not accidental. Sumon left the place with a storm in his heart.

Thereafter life flowed in the normal course. With the passage of time, Sumon became a doctor, married and raised a family. Then after about thirty-five years, the two characters of the story met in an unusual situation. At a big shopping centre of the city, Sumon came across Rima in a book-shop making purchases for her accompanying grandson. After an initial expression of surprise at meeting each other after a long time, Sumon noted that changes had taken place in Rima's appearance with age, as was normal. But Sumon was not prepared for the change that came over Rima's wealth of lush tresses which once exercised magnetic attraction with him. What was more shocking for Sumon was the change that turned the tresses completely white, though they were much reduced in volume.

Sumon could not check himself from saying : "You don't seem to take good care of your hair. There is no harm using some hair dye," as if desperate to visualise her old image.

Rima said in reply plaintively: "What's the use."

After exchange of information about their address and telephone number, Sumon went home with a heavy heart.

Some days later, a telephone call came for Sumon one evening. It was from Rima's husband. He invited Sumon and his wife to dinner at his house on the next holiday. Sumon was curious about Rima and accordingly accepted the invitation.

On the appointed day, Sumon and his wife came for dinner. After the usual social talks, they all came to the dining room. After helping to serve food, Rima sat down near Sumon at the dining table. Then a bolt from the blue seemed to strike Sumon. While he was engaged in eating food, he felt a soft pressure on his foot again under the table. This time also there was no doubt where the pressure came from. As he drove back home in a state of bewilderment, a silent question assailed him :"How can any vestige of love survive over a gap of thirty-five years?"