

Feature

Looking for America

America appears perpetually caught in the paradoxical longing for stability and mobility, speeding and anchoring, writes **Kazi Khaled Ashraf**

MYTHS, fables and legends are the stock of every culture. They are what the mythologist Joseph Campbell terms, the engines of society. Whether they are true or not, factual or sensible, is irrelevant, what is important is that they provide the mystical grits of the collective life, and keep the societal machine going. (It is in this sense that the term "myth" has a double meaning, considered, on the one hand, as a falsehood, and on the other hand, as a cultural generator.)

Few things keep the American machinery moving as rapidly and gustily as the car. You might ask where it is going, but that's another thing. Mobility is the most powerful American fable, expressed in the euphoria of the automobile. Cars are everything, as is clear from the ubiquitous car advertisements. One announced recently, "Life is a journey... in the Main Street of America," Main Street being the mythic place of happenings in American life. The mythology is expressed in popular culture, as in the lines of a blues song: "I don't have a place to go, I sleep in my car."

America finds rootedness in mobility. From this paradoxical longing for stability and mobility, anchoring and speeding, America invented new dwelling types: the trailer home and the suburb. The trailer is the reinvention of home on wheels. Although its genealogy is in the frontier cabin — the rolling wagon becoming the little house on the prairie — it has spawned a whole new way of living: the trailer park communities (although, arguably, also the home of society's poorest). This nomadic spirit is present for example in the lifestyle of the so-called motor-cycle gangs. It also generates that obsessive theme that has flavoured so many films and fictional work: searching for America, that mysterious longing to take to the roads (I am thinking specially of the film *Easy Rider*).

The suburb is a modern condition of dwelling, realising its fullest potential in America by dint of the car. The car makes everything accessible, and consequently living in an isolated location poses no problem for the motorised mortal. In fact, the historical site of dwelling — the city — is now deemed unfit for a civilised living. In the areas ringing New York City and Washington DC, or Chicago and Los Angeles, there are these liminal zones, miles and miles of land pockmarked with apartment buildings, whose inhabitants form a sort of "bedroom community". People drive in and out from these places to go to work in the big cities. Locationality is very easily abandoned. One can, and many do, just pack and leave, for another town, another place. This immense mobility has totally redefined rootedness and the sense of place.

Jean Baudrillard, the noted French philosopher, sees the American continent as a "desert" milieu (as Bangladesh might be seen as a deltaic one).

And when the "desert" milieu is combined with the phenomenon of speeding, you get what Virillio, another French thinker, describes as the aesthetics of disappearance... that incandescent act of disappearing depicted poignantly in the last scene of the film *Thelma and Louise*.

The whole thing is about the geology and psychology of the desert milieu. Pure speed can be attained in the geography of the desert, and it is in the barrenness of speed, Baudrillard thinks, that "disaffection" finds its pure form. It is in that space that "... the trans-political finds its generic, mental space," and, "the inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic and ecstatic form." It does not matter where you are, whether in the actual desert of Arizona and California, or the swamps of Florida, or the pine forests of New England, America is in essence a desert matrix.

The desert milieu is an ecstatic critique of culture, culture defined in two thousand years of European history with its sense of proximity, collectivity, and sociality. The desert invites solitary existence, a sort of ascetic indulgence and asociality. Asociality is still part of human reality, it finds its truest expression and greatest glorification in the geological milieu of America.

This incandescent act of speeding and disappearing is in some way related to the other pervasive American theme — resistance to authority. The distrust of authority has historical, political, and mythical roots — the tussle with Europe, the rejection of European Classicism, and the lure of the frontier inhabitation, all emerge from the urge to be with oneself, to be one's own arbiter in a sort of elemental democracy.

All of America's finest icons emerge from this myth: from John Wayne to Clint Eastwood via Elvis Presley in the area of the most powerful icon-making machinery, the movies. There is Thoreau and Ernest Hemingway in literature. And, of course, the grandest of them all is the architect Frank Lloyd Wright who built a legend around his flamboyant rejection of authority, and by creating and living his own in the "hermitage" he built in the Arizona desert.

Elvis Presley is a serious matter, the culture of "teenagers" had not arrived until Elvis, around 1955 or so. This pelvis-swinging mesmeriser ushered in a whole new generation. Before that time, teenagers were just young adults. With Elvis, one could say, teenagers have arrived: they either found themselves or reinvented themselves. From then on, "rebellion" became an aesthetic form, MTV being only its commodified version.

There are also extreme manifestations of the business of "rebellion". One may find them in the Oklahoma bombing, or the Unabomber case, or in that enigmatic story of Christopher McCandless (retold by Jon Krakauer in a recent best seller

Into the Wild). McCandless came from a well-to-do family, and was raised and educated in the Washington DC area. One day, he just walked away... giving away his \$25,000 savings to charity, abandoning his car, and rejecting the love of family. He was taken so much by the lure of "pure freedom" that he literally walked into the wilderness of America, travelling from state to state. He was found dead in a "shed" (an abandoned bus) in a desolate area of Alaska. McCandless was quite determined not to go through any kind of social mediation, neither a university life, nor a career, nor even his family. The irony is that an anti-urban recluse met his end in an invalid motor vehicle.

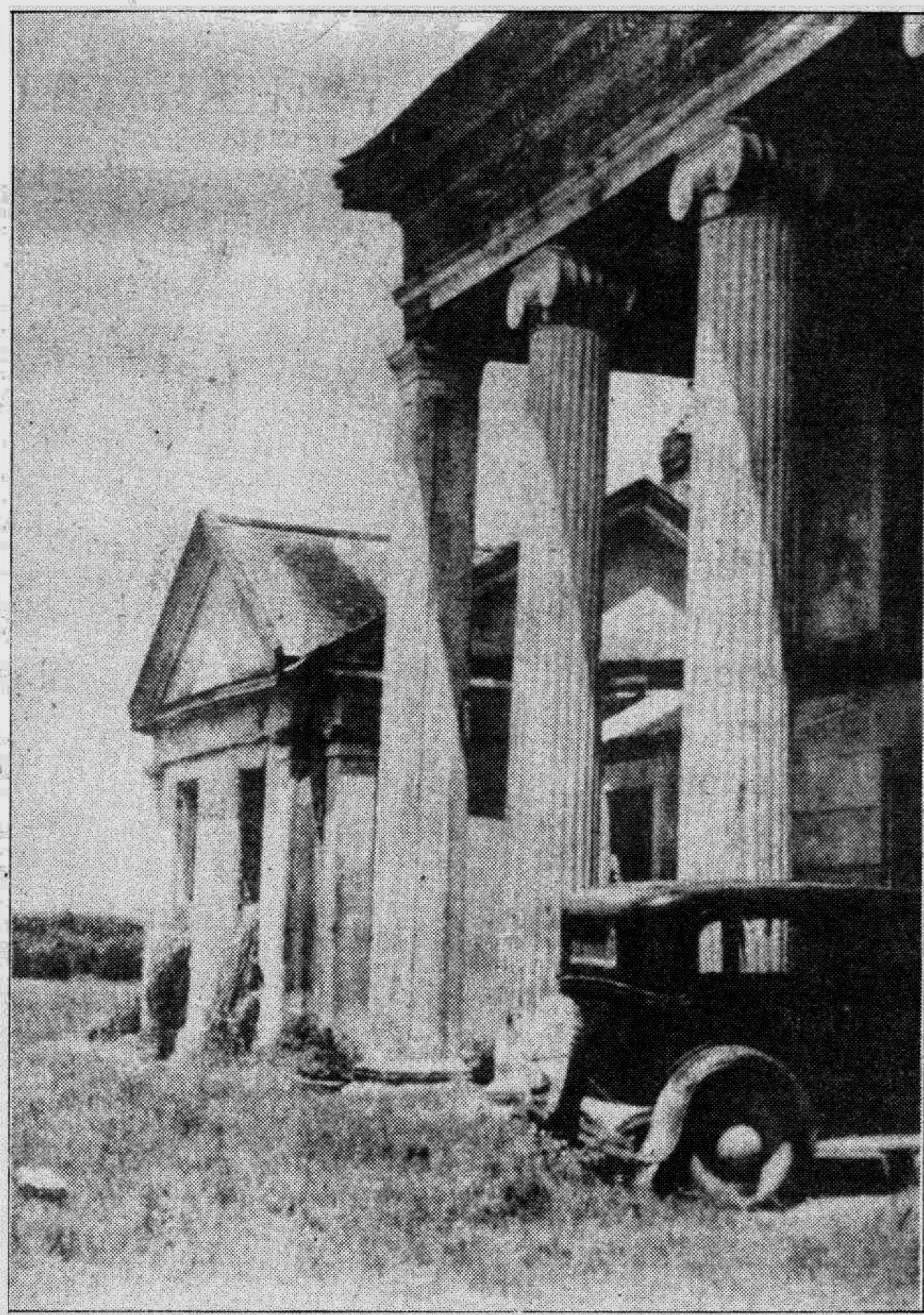
Every culture has its ambiguities, its oppositions and contradictions, by which it tries to negotiate with diverse desires and dreams. American has its own. Here, one of the most conspicuous cultures of the world finds the most ascetic values (the Quakers, Thoreau, artists like Escherich and O'Keefe), while the most private becomes the most public (TV showman Jerry Springer and Gerardo Rivera), the most venerable becomes the most trite (the Clinton affair), and the most mundane becomes the most theatrical (TV show *Cops*, where domestic violence becomes a spectacle).

I am not quite sure whether all these are not paradoxes spun out of the television, out of the "spectacular" dimension that also pervades America. But Baudrillard does write about how one of the wealthiest places on earth struggles passionately with contradictory things like recycling, solar heating, minimal living, etc., a struggle between two urges, the consumptive and the ascetic.

The city is another big theme in American city. It is now the global perception of what an urban culture is like. Two cities frame American urbanity, two cities like gigantic beacons locking the continent at either end: New York in the east coast, and Los Angeles in the west.

In the 1920s, when the French-Swiss architect and father of the modern city, Le Corbusier, came for the first time to New York, the city of tall buildings, he declared in his characteristic irony, "The New York buildings are not tall enough." This only highlights the world's, even Le Corbusier's, dream of New York. It is the mother city of all modern cities, and yet it does not fulfil its own expectation. The tallest city in the world is not tall enough.

The other Frenchman, Baudrillard, rhapsodises in the 1990s: "New York, heir to Athens, Alexandria, Persepolis, heir to all other cities at once. Here the games get more intense. It's always like this when you are getting near the centre of the world, New York... it is a world, completely rotten with wealth, power, sensuality, indifference, puritanism, and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aim-



Speeding and anchoring, a perennial American paradox. — A photograph by Edward Weston (1886-1958)

less violence, and yet I cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe. Perhaps because the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it."

Los Angeles, on the other hand, is the culmination of western urbanity. It is where the baggage of European sociality breaks down, and the "other" is embraced — Mexican, Chinese, Vietnamese... The film *Blade Runner* could not have been visualised anywhere other than LA.

It is this dawning of a new universe combined with the image of these cities as impending doom, that makes them compelling dreams. There is something deeply menacing in the fascination for blowing up New York architectural icons, especially the Empire State Building, in a crop of films made in the last two years: *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Godzilla*, and *Deep Impact* (I heard movie crowds gasp in awe when the alien ship blows up the Empire State Building in *Independence Day*). New York in the east coast, and LA in the west coast, suffer the same ex-

pectation. They are the future dream of the world, and they are the vortex of the coming apocalypse, archetypal and apocalyptic at the same time.

Finally there is the melting pot scenario, or what radio personality Studs Terkel prefers to call, the salad bowl situation. It is about that most sensitive and volatile question of races and cultures, of integrity and ethnicity, of unity and distinction. It involves the philosophy of amalgamation, juxtaposition and synthesis in a curiously American way. The best emblem to understand that is jazz music.

At a concert at Prospect Park in Brooklyn some years ago, Branford Marsalis played along with a Chinese musician who was playing a thousand years old string instrument in a traditional Chinese mode. In Philip Glass's recent production *Monsters of Grace*, a high-tech digital-aural presentation of opera, he weaved in the work of the Persian Sufi poet Rumi, avant-garde music, along with his own experience in Indian classical and African music. One could say the same thing for Paul Simon's experimental

extravaganza, where he brought musical forms from South Africa and South America into the rock-pop-jazz genre. Old and new, east and west, amalgamated and distinct in the cauldron of jazz.

Jazz is the unmistakable signature of America, its history and aesthetics, its vigour, and its dark side. It is the rejection of the "father", of Europe, and the forgetfulness of Africa. Jazz is modern in so far as it forms no (direct) lineage with any tradition — but jazz is supremely post-modern in the sense that it is constantly transforming, constantly moving away from the centre. Jazz is embrace-ful, not apprehensive to reinvent itself; it is urban and it is rural, it is urbane and it is tragic, it is the autobiography of America.

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Social break-ups

Governance has not only to keep pace with the changes in the turbulent society, but it should also be several steps ahead in judgement, foresight and planning; otherwise the situation gets out of control, writes **A Husnain**

IN these days of faster communication, both social regeneration and degeneration are taking place at a faster rate, putting pressure on the traditional and creaking administrations, led by the bureaucrats or the civil service. The corrections are not fast enough, and the reforms get bogged down. Thus the established official monitoring mechanisms cannot cope with the increased demands to feed the policy-makers deliberating on the annual, five-year and perspective planning exercises.

The pending list of corrective measures get longer and longer, resulting in hasty decisions under pressure or public criticism. The process is further slowed down by political instability and frequent changes of regimes (the latter is a usual feature in developing countries).

A politically sensitive period is not conducive to routine administrative exercises, away from the limelight. Also, the new masters, looking for quick impacts, respond casually to in-depth appraisals. We live by the present, recall the past, and hope for the best. A kitchen is required to prepare the food; but all the scenes are acted in the dining rooms. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating, but the pudding has to materialise first.

A traditional slow bureaucratic system has to trim itself to compete in the race to chaos or orderliness (the familiar law and order situation, and the moral degradation eroding at an alarming rate). The new policy-makers have to display high IQ, quick grasp, and quicker decision-making aptitude and attitude. The next phase is to push the teams to deliver the goods. This ability must be backed by nimble programming in a modern system. The system and the human operators must be reoriented to the quicker way of rendering public service. To roll the ball, the field must be level.

Such is the vicious circle: the uncontrolled public get tainted, watched helplessly or indifferently by the law. The visible styles of games invite open criticism, but the inner circles and/or the hidden side continue to work at greater systems loss. The cat is there, but the size of the bell is not big enough for the environment; or there are fewer volunteers to toll the bell outside the neck. Vested interests continue to play the hide and seek game, and the cats continue to pounce upon the mice (who wrote the novel *Of Mice & Men*?).

Hence the governance has not only to keep pace with the changes in the turbulent society, but it should be several steps ahead in judgement, fore-

sight and planning; otherwise the situation gets out of control, as it has been doing for years. First is the will, then the way; and then the maintenance of the way. The bug is in the latter system.

Frequently the consequences of the displays of indiscipline in the society are not apparent immediately; hence the administrative garbage pile up, and act as danger flags. Some awaking takes place after some damages are identified. By then, it may be too late, or the situation had reached the point of no-return. Foresight and hindsight are familiar terms to the civil servants, administrators, and managers. The lame excuse offered in most cases is that day to day ad-hocism stands in the way of dishing up solid solutions. Establishing solid bases take time. Changing the established foundations (reforms) take more time away from the colonial pattern, the usual cliché.

The problem is deeper than political concurrence, and separate from it. To reform the vast, unwinding the unwieldy civil service is a huge task, needing more than a modern blueprint. Lacks of civil servants have to be motivated. The inertia of a bureaucratic system is high; hence greater external energy is needed to change the size and speed of the flywheel. So there are two targets: the motivation, and the flywheel effect.

Successive regimes, with the best intentions in the world, got bogged down after balloon-flying initial ceremonies. The deflated balloons is another name for the "frozen" reform reports and recommendations resting (eternally?) in the secretarial archives. These models are ceremoniously rejected as being outdated, and new commissions are set up, armed with fresh public mandate. The preparations are elaborate, but the actual wedding ceremony (*akhfi*) is postponed indefinitely.

Why these new commissions are so popular with the politicians and the bureaucrats? Such exercises provide the much-needed breathing time. Time is not only a great leveller, but also a decent cover to provide some privacy from the public glare. This harmless and inoffensive tool has been traditionally exploited by administrations in all countries for centuries. The basic concept is simple: the alleged definition of a committee is that it is a group of experts who meet to conclude solemnly how it is not possible to do something.

If we go by precedence, we remain where we are. But that is not the definition of stability or development. Develop what? What else to do?

Nutrition for all

Under the World Bank-funded Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project, the government and NGOs collaborate in ensuring that the poor and undernourished have easy access to nutrition. **PROBE NEWS AGENCY** visits a village under the project in Bogra

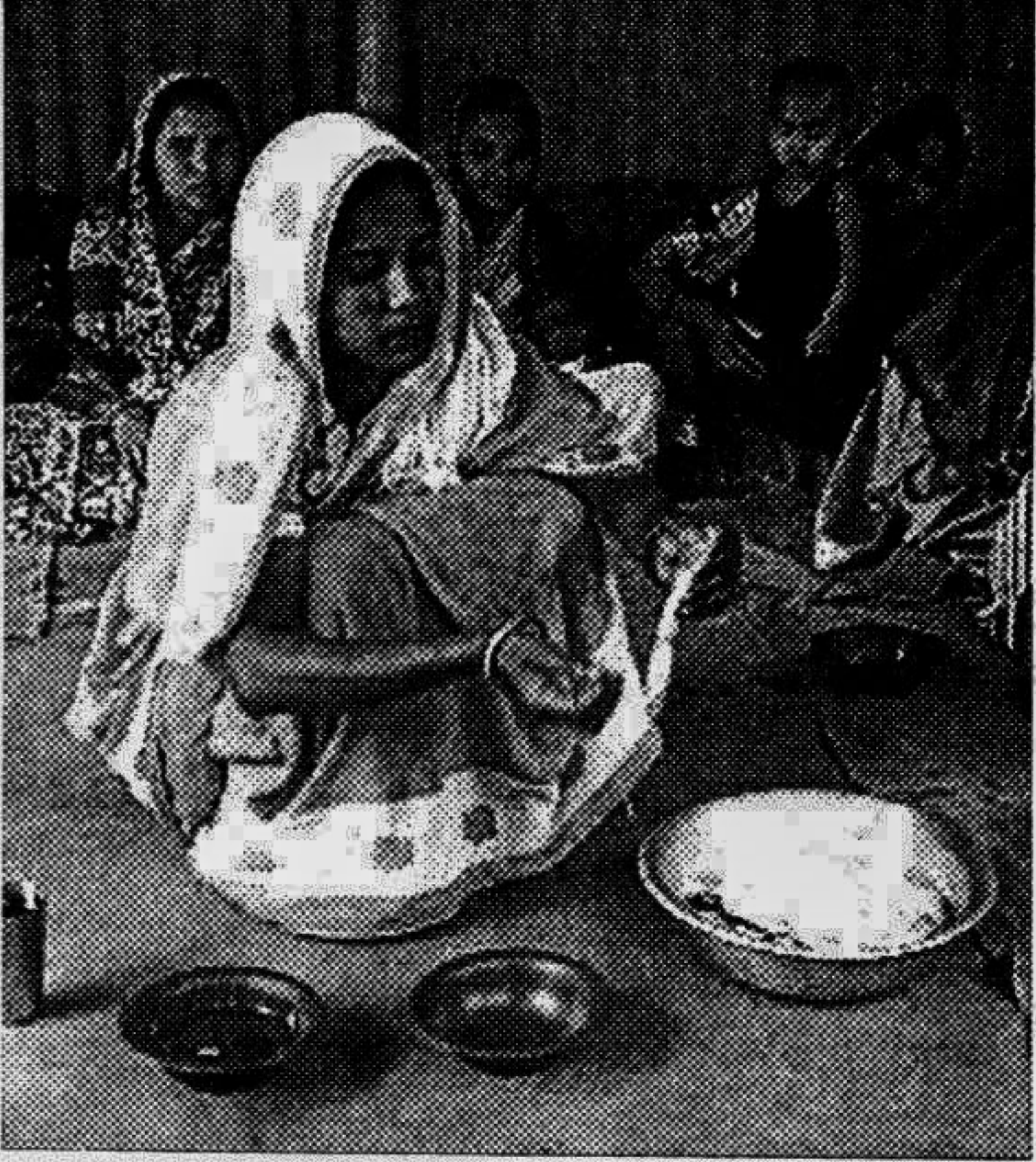
FATIMA was giving her six-month-old baby girl Kamala an oil massage. "You know, last month Kamala was quite ill. She had high fever and lost a lot of weight," she told Nasrin, her sister-in-law. "She looks well and happy now," said Nasrin. "Yes," agreed Fatima. "Thanks to the *pushti* programme."

"*Pushti* programme?" queried Nasrin. As Fatima described the nutrition programme which had become so popular in the village, Nasrin realised that nutrition was no longer a privilege for the rich. A little knowledge of proper diet and health care was all one needed. It all began when *pushti* *apa* came to the village. Nazma Nahar, the *pushti* *apa*, worked for the nutrition project of a local NGO. The project was part of the government's integrated project to ensure proper nutrition nationwide. *Pushti* *apa* first organised a group of responsible women of the village to form a women's group. This group would mobilise young mothers into ensuring better nutrition for their children. She introduced them to the *pushti* packet which spelt health and nutrition for mother and child alike. Every morning young mothers took their infants to the nutrition centre set up in Karim Master's house. These were mothers who had infants needing extra nutrition. Some pregnant and lactating mothers needed nutrition themselves. Each mother was given a *pushti* packet to feed the child.

"It's so cheap and simple," Fatima tells Nasrin. "The packet contains a little rice powder, powdered dal or lentils, and a small lump of gur or brown sugar. This is mixed with a few drops of oil and some water and you have a nutritious and tasty cereal."

The simple meal in the packet is a scientifically balanced diet containing carbohydrates, sugar, protein and vitamins needed for a healthy human body. This meal is easy to make. Commonplace ingredients can be found in any household. Once the women have this lesson in nutrition, they can ensure a balanced nutritious diet for their children and don't need to visit the nutrition centre any more. A few days after Fatima's discourse on nutrition, Khadija, a member of the women's group, brings *pushti* *apa* to Nasrin's house. "Fatima bhabhi is not at home," Nasrin says. "We've come to see you," says *pushti* *apa*.

Nasrin offers her guests a seat, but hurriedly explains, "I don't have any child, you know." "But you plan to have children one day, don't you?" asks *pushti* *apa*. "Yes," Nasrin replies. "But I'm not pregnant now." "That doesn't matter," replies *pushti* *apa*. She tells Nasrin how she should take care of herself so she may be a healthy woman and a healthy mother. "Bring your husband to the weekly meeting of newly weds this Sunday. You will find it interesting."



Women all over Bangladesh are learning the importance of nutrition. This nutrition scheme is a part of the government effort, with collaboration of NGOs to ensure nutrition for all.

Nasrin persuades her husband to join the meeting. He listens with interest to *pushti* *apa*'s talk on nutrition. "Apa," he interrupts. "I want Nasrin to be a healthy woman, but I can't afford meat and fish all the time." *Pushti* *apa* explains that nutrition is not costly if one understands the value of food and cooking processes. One doesn't need meat and chicken for nutrition. All one needs is a balanced diet. "The dal which we eat, these lentils are an excellent source of protein," explains *pushti* *apa*. "shank or spinach is excellent too, just make sure you wash it well and add a little oil in cooking. That brings out the nutrient value and makes it tastier." Nasrin is happy. "It's over a year since she's been married. She's just learnt that she is

pregnant. With her awareness about nutrition, she feels confident about herself and the child to come. Like Nasrin, women all over Bangladesh are learning the importance of nutrition. This nutrition scheme is a part of the government effort, with collaboration of NGOs to ensure nutrition for all. The Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project, under the Ministry for Health and Family Welfare, is funded by the World Bank. It aims at reducing poverty by improving education and productivity through better nutrition. The World Bank is providing US\$ 59.8 million for this six-year project to initiate the development of a national nutrition programme whose long-term goal is to improve nutritional status so that malnutrition would eventually cease to be a public health problem.

Still lingers mad cow fear

While British beef can now again be sold to meat-eaters across the world, the scare over "mad cow disease" has left consumers and industry critics with a nasty taste. **Colleen Silverthorn of GEMINI NEWS SERVICE** reports on the fears that linger even after the 'all-clear' has been sounded

THE European Commission's recent decision to lift a global ban on beef exports from Britain may have British farmers heaving a sigh of relief, but tremors from the affair continue and scientists refuse to lower their guard. Topping the list of lingering concerns about the scare over 'mad cow disease' (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, BSE) are worries that the fatal human equivalent of the disease (a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or nvCJD) may be transmittable by means other than eating infected beef.

"What we are looking at is the evolution of these diseases," observes Dr James Ironside of the government's CJD Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh. "The risk is that there is an unknown number of humans incubating this disease and they are capable of transmitting it to other humans — possibly mother to child." CJD is a particularly cruel disease. The first symptoms often include depression and behavioural changes. Eventually, patients lose their co-ordination, experience difficulty walking and develop memory loss, often slipping into a catatonic state. There is no cure and it is always fatal.

Ironside says the exact incubation period for nvCJD is unknown, but some estimates put it as high as 30 years. "The longer the incubation period, on average, the more cases we are going to see," he notes. There is a theoretical risk that people in whom nvCJD is incubating, but who are not yet displaying clinical symptoms, could transmit the disease through several means, including blood donations. Ironside emphasises that much more research needs to be

done, but points to experiments in mice "suggesting it might be possible to transmit nvCJD by blood." Such worries have prompted the United States Food and Drug Administration and the Canadian health department to consider banning blood donations from people who have spent more than a month working or holidaying in Britain. Ian Mumford, communications vice-president with the Canadian Blood Services, the group responsible for the country's blood collection system, says a decision about banning blood donations from travellers to Britain will probably be made this September.

"This is a precautionary measure. It's not proven one way or another, if it is transmitted through blood. But at one point the transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C was theoretical too," Mumford says. "We would rather be accused of being overly cautious." To decrease risk of transmission through donated blood, British blood agencies started importing all plasma in 1998. As a further safety precaution, all blood from British donors goes through a process known as leucodepletion — the removal of white blood cells — because "experts believe if

(nvCJD) can be passed through blood, white cells would be how it's transmitted," explains Sue Cunningham, spokeswoman for the National Blood Authority. Leucodepletion of blood started in 1998 and will probably be complete by November. But Liane Rayfield, whose husband Peter, a butcher, died two years ago from CJD, believes the problems with CJD extend far beyond new forms of transmission. "I know there are more unreported cases (of CJD) slipping through; I think the number of cases are higher than they say," claims Rayfield, who lives in Kent, south-east England. She watched her husband's health deteriorate over an eight-month period in 1997 before his death at 49.

"I have never in my life seen an illness like it," Rayfield recalls. "It's so distressing to watch. It's like a living death. If it was an animal you would have them put down." Because nvCJD is not a notifiable disease, such as tuberculosis, which requires doctors to report all confirmed and suspected cases, Rayfield believes many cases go unreported. And two conflicting diagnoses over which type of CJD caused her husband's death — one associated with "mad cow

disease", the other not — leads her to doubt official figures on the numbers of Britons dying from nvCJD. Deaths in Britain attributed to nvCJD reached 16 in 1998. In the first five months of 1999 another three deaths were probably due to nvCJD, according to the CJD surveillance Unit. Ironside says the tracking system for CJD is adequate even if the disease is not notifiable. "The development of a blood-based test would be the best way forward because you could screen the population for the disease," he says.

Apart from the medical issue, some commentators argue that the real lingering problem stems from the farming practices that led to the BSE outbreak in the first place. "BSE is a symptom of malaise in the whole farming system," suggests Vicki Hird, policy director with Sustain, an alliance for better food and farming. Hird believes large-scale farming and consequent demands for cheap cattlefeed provided perfect conditions for the emergence of BSE in cattle. Although British farmers are now banned from using mammalian meat or bone in animal feed — thought to be the way the disease was spread — Hird remains worried about health risks that are unique to mass-scale or "industrial" farming. "There is a big concern that the over-use of antibiotics in livestock farming is causing resistance in humans eating the meat — superbugs. This is another issue that is going to slap us in the face for wanting too much food too cheap."

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