

Ferish Booty Collection

WITH the intimation of Eid festival in the air, metropolitan cities of the country — especially Dhaka and Chittagong — are writhing in reckless extortionism and mugging perpetrated by swarms of professional and seasonal varieties of criminals. It is as if locusts of money-suckers have descended on the citizenry.

Because of the strave-and-whistle resistance organised by shopping enclave associations against the so-called subscription collectors the latter's wanton forays into the business complexes have ebbed considerably. Besides, with 20 more police platoons having been deployed in and around the market-places keeping the Eid buying spree in mind which brings out criminals on the prowl, the thugs are apparently shying away from the shopping centres. Quickly changing gears they are now concentrating on the streets to do a flying job of mugging the Eid buyers empty on their rickshaws or three wheelers caught in a vehicular standstill. They are taking full advantage of traffic jams to target their victims. This was amply illustrated on December 24 when a 15-minute traffic congestion along the short stretch between Mauchak Market and Century Arcade saw passengers of ten rickshaws being completely robbed of their belongings.

There are basically two kinds of demonstrative police vigilance: one at or near the shopping centres and the other is the mobile sort of patrol. In the Ramadan month somehow a certain stationary police activism shows an upward curve. Since the criminals have moved street-ward so too the policemen need to increase their patrolling activity, especially along the long queues of traffic jams where they are now conspicuous by their absence except on traffic duty.

What is of central importance in terms of effective law enforcement is the retention of the policemen's full moral authority to deal with the criminals by their own avoidance of Eid money collection in the first place. So, the house must be guarded by the top police bosses with a self-looking spangled surveillance mechanism put in place.

Typical of DCC

AFTER spending crores of taka on them since the early 1990s, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has suddenly realised that the portable garbage containers "are causing nuisance and the system is too expensive". So, out goes 410 containers and 152 carrier trucks; and comes in prospect the familiar concrete bins of yester years. The DCC's garbage management, therefore, has only resulted in the erosion of public exchequer instead of any sustainable handling of some 3,500 tonnes of trash that the city produces everyday. For a change though the DCC has been courteous to admit that the portable containers for garbage management "was wrong". Mere admission surely doesn't create ground for exoneration of the mistake committed. However, in our context, that's the best the citizenry can expect. In all certainty, the DCC has closed the chapter on the portable container project, no questions asked or no audit done. The cruel reality is: a few crore taka of the tax-payers' money have gone down the drain.

The DCC slip-up is, unfortunately, symptomatic of planning and execution driven by whims rather than wisdom. One of the reasons the corporation has cited for opting out of the project is huge expenditure on fuel for the carrier trucks. But, couldn't such an eventuality be foreseen? The number of trips the carriers would make, the placement of the containers, collection of containers, etc. are details that should have been thought of and addressed beforehand. Unfortunately, there does not appear to have been a feasibility study in this case.

The disquieting message that the DCC bloomer sends across is: it takes tax-payers' money for granted, to be used for any and every development project the Mayor deems essential. The city-dwellers have all the right to know how their money is being spent. Having said that, we cannot help express apprehension over the Mayor's fickle-mindedness at a future date.

Cancerous Cheats

CANCER itself is deadly. It does not need any external help — free or otherwise to kill a patient and destroy his family in terms of treatment expenses. It has an all-pervading destructive capability which can hardly be matched by any other ailment.

But here at the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital (NICRH) a local breed of dangerous cancer thrives on the simplicity and helplessness of the patients cashed in on by the machinations of a particular group of doctors. The business of cheating innocent patients to the jaws of death is a 'booming' one, said an investigative report in The Daily Star issue of Tuesday. In the absence of adequate facilities in the only cancer hospital of the country, patients are being enticed away by a group of unscrupulous nurses, employees and even doctors to private clinics with false hopes for better and cheaper treatment through 'package deals'. But the cheats taking the desperate patients to private clinics deliver a hoax in the name of radio therapy and fleecing them. There are so many examples of such inhuman treatment meted out to the terminally ill patients by these groups of blood suckers. All these are being done in lieu of commissions offered by the private clinics whose owners are mostly doctors themselves.

Does the health minister know that camoetherapy treatment in the NICRH has remained suspended for the last two years due to stoppage of drug supply? Does he know that the costly Cobalt-60 radiation machine has been out of order for about a month now. We have heard tall talks and grandiose ideas about the national health policy involving millions of dollars but what are these worth when the ministry cannot even take care of small but important life-saving machines?

Bankrupt Power Policy: Cogentrix = Bully Tricks

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The BJP-led regime today has the most right-wing economic agenda of all our governments. This has little to do with liberalisation, or dismantling excessive regulation. It involves the wholesale transfer of public assets into private hands through shady, non-competitive, deals.

IMAGINE you are an American company without much experience in power generation. You are offered a contract to build a 90,000 MW in India's own unglamorous public sector. You launch a "fast-track" project in Karnataka with patronage.

You get Karnataka to buy your electricity at double its own state electricity board's (SEB's) cost. You spend millions of dollars on public relations: you even learn Tulu and Konkani. You are promised counter-guarantees which you wouldn't dream of in the U.S. Everything is going perfectly well, smoothly.

And then the environmentalists start getting restive about pollution. People start questioning you about costs. Activists collect damaging evidence on your political skulduggery. The High Court stays the project and asks the CBI to investigate charges of bribery for which there is credible evidence. The government gets cold feet about counter-guarantees.

You appeal to the Supreme Court—your last chance to push through the \$1.3 billion project. And then? You suddenly announce that you have abandoned the project—out of righteous anger at your "harassment" by NGOs and their public-interest litigation. The timing of the announce-

ment is dramatic. It sends shock waves through the corridors of power. Sections of the media express orchestrated outrage. They say: "Fast track projects need fast justice". In other words, your blackmail must prevail.

Union ministers are stunned, as is the Karnataka chief minister. They come begging you not to withdraw. The Karnataka government files a joint appeal against the High Court verdict with the project promoters.

Now, You call the shots. You dictate the terms for not quitting India. Everyone is mortally scared that your pullout will send "wrong signals" to foreign investors. That is the ultimate fear of the Indian policy-making elite. The Supreme Court, keen not to be seen impeding "development", passes a strange order, lifting the High Court stay, even quashing the investigation into bribery. You become a hero.

The scenario is not hypothetical. It is precisely what Cogentrix succeeded in bringing

about. The government is now giving in to its diktat: don't open up the PPA; give counter-guarantees within 15 days, accept our word on the environment. Or else...

Cogentrix is getting away—despite the fact that the HK\$122 million bribery charge against it was based on the balance-sheets of its own promoters.

The government's genuflection before Cogentrix has encouraged other private power producers. They call it a "litmus-test", a "real indication" of the government's resolve to push ahead with "real", "fast-track" development.

Indeed, the U.S. ambassador read out a sermon to our leaders: the "damage" could only be reversed if the key actors "pick up the phone and call the chairman of these companies and say 'Look, we know you are frustrated. So are we. Here's how we propose to move this forward...'". That alone will give "a positive message about the ability to do business in India".

Not one commentator

among all those who tremble with anger over "challenges" to India's "sovereign right" to mass-destruction weapons, wrote a critical remark on this outrageously arrogant remark.

Cogentrix's triumph has prompted others, like the Hindujas in Vizag, and Ambanis in Patialgala, to demand even bigger concessions. They know they can quietly get away with what Enron—the pioneer in this game—did after raking up controversy, spending \$20 million in "education" (read, bribery), and bludgeoning its critics.

As discussed earlier at length in this column, and as documented in a superb book by Abhay Mehta (Power Play, Orient Longman, Rs. 195), the Enron deal remains the most odious contract any Indian has ever signed. It will sell power to Maharashtra at Rs. 4.40-plus a unit—in comparison to the Rs. 1.20 it costs MSEB to generate electricity.

This is the surest recipe for bankrupting MSEB, victimising ordinary consumers, and making Indian industry non-

competitive. And yet, the BJP-Sena, which had promised to dump "the Enron project in the Arabian Sea", tripled its size!

Thereby hangs a larger truth. The BJP-led regime today has the most right-wing economic agenda of all our governments. This has little to do with liberalisation, or dismantling excessive regulation. It involves the wholesale transfer of public assets into private hands through shady, non-competitive, deals. This is being done in highways, telecom, railways, roads, flyovers, shipping, petroleum, mining, hotels...

The burden of our ministers' song is that the government's role is only to facilitate profiteering by the private sector. Last year, the Vajpayee government handed over infrastructure policy-making to six committees, each one headed by an industrialist with a direct stake in privatization of the sector. Now it has set up eight Working Groups within the Trade and Industry Council (which is a collusive government-business group).

These too are headed by representatives of Big Business, scarcely known for their competence. For instance, the Group on investment in education and health comprises Mr. Mukesh Ambani and Mr. A.C. Muthiah. The FICCI president will head the Group on disinvestment (how very cosy), and the power sector will be reorganised under a private power promoter.

This policy is mindless. The 2,050 MW Parvati hydel project near Mr. Vajpayee's adopted Kulu home was granted an environmental clearance overnight. At this rate, services relevant to the public will be priced out of its reach. Assets built over half a century will be donated free to private business, without regard to safety.

All this has emboldened the Confederation of Indian Industry to recommend the closure of three big nationalised banks. This has rightly caused a scandal. Some members of the CII "task force" have defaulted on public bank loans worth Rs. 103 crores. The total dues to banks from CII members add up to Rs. 25,000 crores.

The CII has temporarily withdrawn its self-serving, obnoxious, proposal. But industry pressure on the government will remain powerful. The public must resist it.

Chandrika's New Term in Sri Lanka

Can She Resolve the Northeastern Crisis?

With the victory, Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumartunga is entrusted with a tougher duty to bring peace in the war-ravaged country but it remains to be seen how she proceeds with this daunting task.

THE president of the Indian-Ocean island-state of Sri Lanka has won a second term in the office in a tough electoral battle. Chandrika Kumartunga has just scraped through by winning little more than 51 per cent of the votes in the December 21 presidential elections while more than 50 per cent votes is a must for a victory. Her main challenger Ranil Wickremesinghe polled about 44 per cent of votes.

But what is noteworthy here is that the incumbent president rather miraculously survived an assassination attempt just three days before the balloting. And this seems to have turned the swing in her favour. A suicide bomber's bid to kill her met with the deaths of many people, including the police chief of Colombo. But the president who escaped with injuries, mainly in the eye, was the immediate beneficiary of sympathy. It is now quite evident that she could not have secured more than 50 per cent of the votes and might have been defeated but for this unexpected last-minute sympathy votes. The main challenger was known to be enjoying an edge during the last days of the campaign but all changed largely after the bomb attack.

The opposition leader was relatively soft to Tamils separatists, who were behind the assassination attempt on the president. He was preferred by the militants to Kumaratunga, who was seen as going tough with them in their war. Not surprisingly, the dominant Sinhalese community whose support was almost evenly divided between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, swung to the target of Tamils attack and this late favour helped her win the polls.

Sri Lanka is mostly in news in the context of the lingering civil war. The ethnic conflict

shows no sign of a decisive development since successes in the battles fluctuates. If it was a phase of colossal losses some time ago for the rebels known as the "Tamil Tigers" or the LTTE, the recent spate of victories certainly reversed the situation. Then again, the militant had to give in some of the areas they gained. In the midst of this endless internecine war, the issue that drew the global attention in the South Asian country was the recent presidential elections. Sri Lanka has presidential form of democracy and here the chief of executive is the president with nominal role of the prime minister. Hence the importance of the December 21 elections were easily understandable. The political history of the country is stormy as violence characterises the political milieu despite the fact that democracy has flourished. Top political leaders have been murdered in the country either by political rivals or by Tamil militants. The rebels have killed the last president Ranasinghe Premadasa. They also killed the president when their suicide squads killed former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu in 1991. President Premadasa was assassinated in capital Colombo itself during a rally for his unrelenting fight against the separatist struggle, while Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in bomb blasts because of his support to the Sri Lankan government in suppressing the fighting of the Tamils. He had sent Indian troops to the island state at the request of the then Lankan President Junius Jayawardene. Consequently, more than 1000 Indians soldiers died there, fighting the Tigers, before New Delhi called

off its troops.

When Kumaratunga was chosen as president in 1994 with about 62 per cent of votes, she vowed to make every effort to end the civil war. But the wheel has come a full cycle. When she called the presidential elections, almost a year before the expiry of her six-year term, not many eyebrows were raised since the president wanted a fresh mandate, particularly when the government troops suffered some setbacks. Security was tight during the voting since the Tamils are expected to target the president and also

but showed little interest in political leadership. She married a dashing movie star Vijaya, who later became a popular politician and formed left-leaning Sri Lankan People's Party. In 1989, he was assassinated just four days before their 10th marriage anniversary. Chandrika blamed political foes for the murder.

Fearing insecurity, she fled to Europe with two children. Four years later, she returned to the country in 1982 and took up the task of injecting new life into her mother and present prime minister Srimavo Ban-

ethnic Tamils undoubtedly poses a problem of severe magnitude and to find a settlement of this imbroglio is a Herculean task for any Lankan leader. Peace efforts floundered and only alternative appears a decisive military solution. But neither side is in a position to accomplish it as both are losing hundreds of men every week.

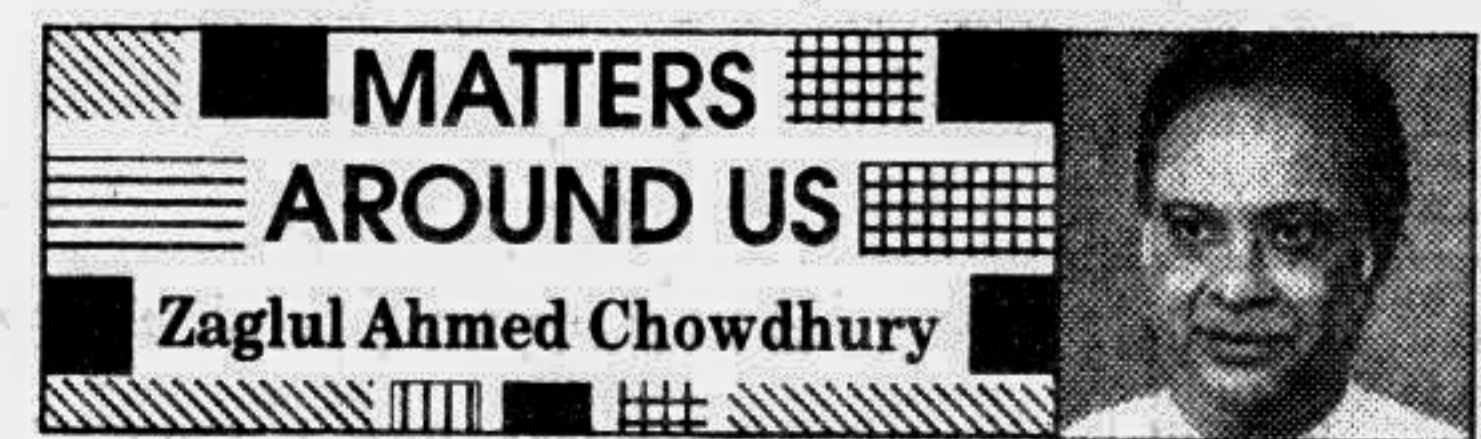
The latest spate of success by the rebels puts the government on an uphill task of restoring the confidence of the army as well as the people. The Tigers overran several military garrisons in one of their major victories in the protracted war for independence. However, this in no way takes them to a position of ascendancy and their goal remains a long way and governments side recovered some of the lost grounds.

The pattern of the voting shows that the majority Sinhalese favors an end to the war while protecting their interests. Possibly, they would have preferred the opposition leader but for the assassination bid on the president. Wickremesinghe won more votes in the Colombo district and the Tamil-dominated northern areas, where, however, voting was low. Chandrika won in the native region handsomely and some other areas. The outcome has left her with a chance of softening stance against the Tamils, who had initially hoped for a better deal from her but found Chandrika belligerent in the last two years of rule. The Tigers and their leader V. Prabhakaran have clear said that Chandrika had done "immense harm" to their interests when she became president five years ago. The Tamil militants had even unilaterally declared one-week cease-fire at that time for talks. But it is also expected that the

president would seek to protect the sovereignty of the nation. Her escape of the assassination attempt was lucky, because never before this method of "human bomb" initiated by the Tamil Tigers failed.

Chandrika is likely to demonstrate tougher attitude since she would not like to be seen as cowed down Tigers' aversion for her. Before leaving for London for treatment for the injuries she sustained in the recent attack, she gave hints for stiffening her stance against the Tamils. Certainly, she keeps in mind the coming parliamentary election expected early next year. Her party has a slender majority in the house and commanding majority helps enact laws. She has to weigh the pros and cons carefully whether a mild or tough line will help her in the coming polls. Possibly, immediately after the presidential polls, it is a bit early to chart out a new policy in this regard. There should be a definite indication when she returns home after medical treatment. But given the complexity of the Tamil problem, it appears that the Sri Lanka is unlikely to get a relief from this war in the near future since the outcome of the elections has not opened up any prospects in that direction.

However, the president after winning the second term has also spoken about efforts to resolve the war, which once again looks both difficult and remote. Wickremesinghe while charging of malpractice and ballot stuffing in the voting, assured opposition support to efforts for a solution of the civil war. International observers called the malpractice insignificant to change the verdict of the people. With the victory, Kumaratunga is entrusted with an even tougher duty to bring peace in the war-ravaged country and it remains to be seen how she proceeds with the daunting task.



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

her Foreign Minister Laxman Kadirgamar, who is seen as a hardliner. Kumaratunga was the candidate of ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and her main challenger Ranil Wickremesinghe from the main opposition United National Party (UNP) although there were many others in the fray.

The polls were crucially important for Kumaratunga for a variety of reasons. In face of an increasingly vociferous opposition and reverses suffered in recent days in the battles against the Tigers, she has to demonstrate greater control over the situation and give new confidence to her people and the armed forces. When Chandrika took over in 1994, she did not receive it on a platter. After a stint in the Paris University, she returned home with western education and dynamic outlook

dernaik's political party - Sri Lankan Freedom Party - which was in dire straits. She was elected chief minister of the western provincial council in 1993 and won the general elections the following year. After briefly serving as the prime minister, Chandrika was elected as the president of Sri Lanka. This ended 17 years of uninterrupted rule by the United National Party. Now, will her victory for the second term help resolve the Tamil problem and attain greater political understanding in Sri Lanka? Her first term has been challenging. She had to live up to expectations for the party that she is leading since people's hopes from it were enormous because of the long rule by the UNP. The intensity of the Tamil Elam for a separate homeland for an estimated 2.5 million

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"The PM must..."

Sir, After quite a while, I feel relieved and hopeful on December 26 morning, having read your commentary in the DS. Ever since the Tangail by-election, I felt dejected and distressed. I am a well-wisher of Awami League and wish its success for no other reason than it is the only party in the country which can stand up for secularism, rule of law, democratic ideals and moral values, not because that I believe this party is committed to these but because the other parties are clearly opposed to them.

For the last two years, I have been losing hope and trust seeing the continued deterioration in law and order, then the Tangail by-election outraged me. The latest terror against Kader Siddique's convention turned me fearful of the party for which I wished success. I write only when "I am sufficiently provoked". This time I am angry. I was planning to express my anger in the DS, but I see no reason for that after reading your commentary on December 26, specially its clarity. I could not express myself so clearly and forcefully, nor my voice could carry weight anywhere near yours, I see hopes. If men of your courage and conviction coupled with the standing you have in the society continue to not only stand up but also hit the evil, the good will surely prevail. I don't want to lose trust in my society at this near end of my existence.

R. H. Khandker
Dhaka

Do you believe?

Sir, According to the newspaper reports, the Awami League-backed armed goons had foiled the convention of the dissident AL leader Bangabir Kader Siddique, BU. It is a

shocking piece of news for the peace-loving citizens. We condemn this act of vandalism. The incident, however, raised a few questions among us. Do the AL leaders or its activists really believe in democracy? Do they actually tolerate the opposition's opinion that a party needs to possess in a democratic system?

It is difficult to believe that the leaders of a party provoked their cadres to foil peaceful convention when their leader is recently awarded with the UNESCO award for peace!

A Citizen
Dhaka

The Moon on December 22

Sir, This letter is in response to M. R. Rousseau's article that appeared on December 26, '99. Lately there has been a confusion about the news item that the Moon will come closer to Earth in 133 years or so and consequently there'll be so immense moonlight that one will not require a headlight to drive. All these were wild speculations that resulted from a wrong almanac report. Rousseau and others were aptly disappointed by the performance of the "stargazers". It should be understood that without thorough theoretical understanding of physical phenomena it's very dangerous to speculate on physical phenomena. But unfortunately, this has been a fashion on the part of our amateur astronomers to jump to conclusions on little or very conspicuous facts (recall the wild prediction of a meteor storm last year). I enclose a report, circulated by Sky & Telescope magazine on December 17th, that will remove all confusion there of. "Suddenly a lot of people are asking this question: Will the

full Moon of December 22nd be the brightest full Moon in 133 years? They're asking, apparently, because of an article in the Old Farmer's Almanac that is being widely circulated by e-mail. According to Roger W. Sinnott, associate editor of Sky & Telescope magazine, the answer is unequivocal. It is true that there is a most unusual coincidence of events this year. As S&T points out in its December '99 issue, 'The Moon reaches its very closest point all year on the morning of December 22nd. That's only a few hours after the December solstice and a few hours before full Moon. Ocean tides will be exceptionally high and low that day.'

But to have these three events — lunar perigee, solstice, and full Moon — occur on nearly the same day is not especially rare. The situation was rather similar in December 1991 and December 1980, as the following dates and Universal Times show: Event Dec. 1999 Dec. 1991 Dec. 1980 Full Moon 22, 18h 21,

10h 21, 18h Perigee 22, 11h 22, 9h 19, 5h Solstice 22, 8h 22, 9h 21, 17h What is really rare is that in 1999 the three events take place in such quick succession. On only two other occasions in modern history have the full Moon, lunar perigee, and December solstice coincided within a 24-hour interval, come just 23 hours apart in 1991 (as indicated in the preceding table) and 20 hours apart back in 1866. The 10-hour spread on December 22, 1999, is unmatched at any time in the last century and a half. So is it true, as numerous faxes and e-mails have claimed, that the Moon was brighter on December 22nd than at any time in the last 133 years? We have researched the actual perigee distances of the Moon throughout the years 1800-2100, and here are some perigees of "record closeness" that also occurred at the time of full Moon: Date Distance (km) 1866 Dec. 21 357,289 1893 Dec. 23 356,396 1912 Jan. 4 356,375 1930 Jan. 15 356,397 1999 Dec. 22 356,654 2052 Dec. 6 356,421

Capitalising on Y2K

Sir, New millennium, year 2000, is just in four days' time and the main talk of the world is the Y2K problem. It's a vital problem, but sometimes I feel it is being exaggerated, especially in the perspective of our country.

Y2K is not a problem for the general people. It's only a problem for the computers who work on date-based programs such as banks, who does their calculations on the basis of date, aviation, who are entirely dependent on the dates, for the ticket bookings.

Bangladesh has its general people with a very little knowledge about computers. A few who have got a good knowledge are capitalising the general people by taking the advantage of the general people's ignorance about computers. Some of those over-earnings are making a good amount of money too.

The general people are getting scared. They think anything might happen due to this problem: the computer may burst-out, medical equipment may give wrong information, etc. I have seen some computer monitors having stickers of "Y2K complaint" as if they are the only one, although they have no relation with this problem. These are the ways by which the problem is being capitalised for business purpose.

Unlike those, as far as I understand, it's not a problem at all. Suppose you have a camera, which is not Y2K compliant, i.e. the year shows as 99 instead of 1999. So what's wrong? The date may come wrong but the picture will be as such.

Same example is applicable for any other equipment, especially medical ones. For the general users like us, the Y2K will not create any problem other than showing a confusing date which can be easily corrected by converting the two digit year format into four.

Senjuti Saha
Class-VIII
GCE, Bangladesh International Tutorial

It turns out, then, that the Moon comes closer to Earth in the years 1893, 1912, 1930, and 2052 than it does in either 1866 or 1999. The difference in brightness will be exceedingly slight. But if you want to get technical about it, the full Moon has been 100 times brighter in 1893, 1912, and 1930 than in either 1866 or 1999 (based on the calculated distances). The 1912 event is undoubtedly the real winner, because it happened on the very day the Earth was closest to the Sun that year. However, according to a calculation by Belgian astronomer Jean Meeus, the full Moon on January 4, 1912, was only 0.24 magnitude (about 25 per cent) brighter than an "average" full Moon. In any case, these are issues only for the astronomical record books. This month's full Moon won't look dramatically brighter than normal. Most people won't notice a thing, despite the e-mail chain letter that implies we'll see something amazing. Actually, if the interested people had looked into DS's December 22 issue they would have found the true story in the 5th page in an article by Dipen Bhattacharya. M. R. Rousseau has pointed out that the coastal people had to refrain from their fishing business for "extra care about the possible tidal surge". I wonder from where did he get this information that the coastal people really refrained from fishing and thereby incurred losses, since it is very difficult to convince them about a real danger arising even from a real cyclone. Besides did any weather forecasting issued any distant/local cautionary signal that day? So why should they refrain from fishing anyway? It's rather hasty to call the astronomers "loony" and leave the judgment on 'time'. Because it is 'time' that has proved that Space is going to be our Next Frontier. Better recall Dipen's sayings in his above-mentioned article. 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