

FICTION

## An Asian Encounter with Romanian Communism

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

BORN into a conservative Muslim family, in a village in Pakistan, Rouf Malik joined the government service having completed his higher education, although he had never dreamt of one day doing this, as his forefathers were against the administration of the British in India. One of Rouf's relatives was in fact hanged by the British, having been declared an anti-state element for his participation in the Mutiny in 1857. However, his father and younger uncle also served in the British administration.

His younger brother, however, joined the Pakistan Army.

Rouf Malik was brought up in an unusual environment, in a village which was dominated by a Hindu population of different castes.

This had a direct impact on his upbringing. Rouf did not have any prejudice against other religions and his mind was secular in nature. His village house was surrounded by a vineyard with plenty of mango plants, which have a soothing effect on one's life.

He had never been to Europe before but this time he had been chosen to be posted there. Unfortunately, he landed in the eastern part of Europe, which was lagging far behind the western part of Europe in terms of per capita income and economic development.

He regarded it as a challenge to work in Eastern Europe as it was under the totalitarian monolithic communist system, and he accepted it in good faith.

His first experience in Eastern Europe was unique. It was July 1986. On his way to Romania, Rouf had to stop over in Athens Airport. It was a beautiful airport overlooking the Aegean

Sea. After doing some shopping in the airport, he had a meal in a greek restaurant. In the afternoon, Rouf boarded a flight with Tarom, which was the national aircraft carrier of Romania. Before boarding the aircraft, the Bucharest-bound passengers lined up in the queue to have their luggage checked. Thereafter, the passengers were advised to take their seats in the aeroplane.

Although no seat number was given on the boarding card, Rouf was given due courtesy and allowed to take a seat in the first class area of the small aircraft of the Fokker type, with fewer than 20 passengers on board. When the aircraft took off the passengers, mainly from the Asian continent, were praying to God for a safe journey to Bucharest. A good-looking hostess emerged from the cockpit ten minutes after the take-off and offered to serve tea and snacks. It was, however, hardly possible to sip the tea as the aircraft was flying unsteadily, even bumping occasionally. Despite his fears, Rouf recalled the Warsaw Convention which limits the liability of airlines for death or bodily injury. At one stage, the air hostess apologised to Rouf as his tea had spilled over from the cup and spoiled his suit. At this stage, Rouf was furious. Meanwhile a steward came forward to apologise again for the incident, which was however, beyond their control. The services of the Romanian Airlines was so bad it was beyond all imagination. Finally, the aircraft landed at Bucharest Airport at 21.00 hours. Rouf was astonished as he became aware of the dim light, and even areas where there was no electric light at all. He had not dreamt that such a situation would occur in Europe whether east or

west. At the immigration section, the officer concerned looked at him several times to verify his identification. After passing through different hurdles, particularly the immigration section, Rouf was met by a gentleman who had come to the airport to receive him.

He was driven to a hotel in the city center. While traveling by car from the Otopeni Airport, one can see attractive natural landscapes with meadows and oakgroves. After ten miles, the road takes a turn from Scientia Square, which has been renamed Piata Presei Libere after the fall of the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989. From here, a number of newspapers used to be published daily. As a matter of fact, it was known as the Fletet Street of Romania. The old Scantier House was the largest printing enterprise in Bucharest.

According to historians, Bucharest became the capital of Romania in 1862. Sprawling over 605 square miles, Bucharest stands in the Romanian Plain on the Dimbovitza River, 30 miles from the Bulgarian frontier. The river passes through Bucharest, but the city is not divided by its river as is Budapest (Buda and Pest), the capital of Hungary.

As part of his diplomatic assignment, Rouf established acquaintance with many people in Romania — political leaders, educationists, journalists and business people apart from ordinary citizens. One evening, he had an invitation from the Chinese Embassy in Bucharest.

It was a dark evening in Winter. The Chinese Embassy was hosting the National Day Event in October 1987. The Embassy compound in Bucharest was crowded with people from the different

strata of society in Bucharest. It seems that the Chinese Embassy in Bucharest had established good contacts with the Romanian people despite the fact that the entire society was under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu and his clan. It was monolithic culture. Ceausescu and his wife Elena Ceausescu had ruled the country for over 25 years with an iron hand. As a result, the people had been made timid and lifeless.

It was amazing for Rouf to find Romanian people in the National Day Reception in the Chinese Embassy to be informal and receptive to talks with foreigners. Rouf had been given to understand that Romanians were forbidden to talk to foreigners, and if found in such a situation by the police, he or she would be asked to give the nature of the talks. But its information was not disclosed voluntarily to the police.

That was the state of affairs in Romania. A person who was arrested on the charge of meeting a foreigner would be retained in jail for a period of time unless he was given clearance by the Securitate (Secret police force of President Nicolae Ceausescu). This special security force was built up meticulously for the security of Ceausescu and his clan. They were mostly recruited from orphans and illegitimate children. As a result, they were naturally obliged to Ceausescu and his family at the first instance. Rouf incidentally met a number of people, including women, in the reception. Rouf was greeted by a woman in sub-continental style as soon as he introduced himself. The style of greeting attracted him and he took the opportunity to have talks with the woman. He asked her name and was told that she was

Carmen Mihaela Mihai and handed over her visiting card to him. Smilingly, Carmen extended her hand to Rouf. While shaking hands, he felt shy as this was the first time he had shaken hands with a woman. In the traditional Muslim society from which Rouf hailed, a man is not permitted to shake hands with a woman.

Carmen was a charming woman, slightly shorter than Rouf, slender and with blonde hair. While shaking hands, she had asked Rouf, "How are you?" in Hindi. He was taken aback on hearing Hindi in a place like Bucharest. In his reply, Rouf said, "I am fine. But how are you?" She did not reply, as she had no more Hindi words on stock. Still smiling, Carmen asked, "When did you arrive in Bucharest? Do you like the country?" Rouf replied, "I am here only for six months. It is a beautiful country and the women are beautiful too. I like Bucharest. Rouf considered Carmen to be in her early thirties.

After a while, Rouf took leave of Carmen, but the impression she created remained with him. On return to his residence, Rouf thought of her and decided to talk to her over the telephone as soon as possible. A few days later, Rouf tried to telephone her, but received the reply that Carmen was not at home. In his frustration, he decided not to pursue the matter, and Carmen did in fact phone up to respond to Rouf's calls. He was still looking forward to talking to her and his impression was that she had been known to him for ages.

In this gathering, Rouf got to know another woman by the name, Olga Jora, who was Editor of Editora Universe, a Romanian journal. Olga Jora was of the same age group as Carmen.

Olga distinguished herself as activist in promoting the cause of women in Romania.

On an invitation, Rouf had been to the residence of Olga Jora to see for himself the life-style of a Romanian family. In fact, that was Rouf's first ever visit to a family in Bucharest. As he knocked at the door, Olga came out to welcome him. He was entertained with Romanian delicacies and coffee. To the query of Rouf, Olga spoke a great deal about their family life. Her husband was a diploma engineer, but whatever amount he earned, he spent it on hard drink and gambling. The husband usually came home at midnight and beat his wife although he had married her for love. This was the routine of events in her family. A boy, who was born out of wedlock was sent away to school.

After completing her story, Olga began sobbing. Rouf patted her and gave her solace. He was informed that Olga was in the process of seeking a divorce and wanted to live alone with her son. She adored her son, Micky, and wanted to groom him like a perfect gentleman. Olga said that the life of many of the married women in Romania was pathetic. Prior to the marriage a boyfriend had made promises to make life as comfortable as possible and built imaginary castles in the air. After the marriage, the boyfriend turned husband became ruthless and heartless in his behaviour. Apart from spending the money he earned himself in an extravagant way.

Very often he concealed his marital status from unknown women in order to have extra-marital relations. In fact this was the state of affairs for womenfolk in Romania during the communist period. *To be continued*

BOOK REVIEW

by Robert Anderson

*India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* by George Perkovich: Oxford University Press Delhi, 2000; Rs.645.

CURIOSITY of scholarship that synthesises modern Indian history, including the good books, is that most technical, scientific or industrial works of history since 1947 are underplayed and undervalued. Even the military receives insufficient attention in these broad works interpreting the past 50 years. This is probably so because there are few published case studies of major programmes (such as the nuclear programmes), of major institutions (such as the Department of Atomic Energy or the Planning Commission), or of major figures (such as Homi Bhabha or Vikram Sarabhai). It is ironic that this kind of work has not been encouraged (or even discouraged), because these are the stories of the Indian elites, and these individuals and institutions have had great influence on the country and abroad. Integrative work about the broad sweep of politics, economics, and society do not contemplate these dimensions like the nuclear programme, and so we misunderstand, to this extent, the larger picture of modern India.

Abraham's *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb*, India's Nuclear Bomb by Perkovich enables us to compare the circumstances of the first Pokhran test in 1974 and the second tests in 1998. No two nuclear bombs or tests are the same. Perkovich shows clearly what happened in the volatile 1974-1978 period. Here we see the complex international reaction of nuclear powers to their long-held expectation that India 'would go nuclear', along with their earlier sense that India 'couldn't do it'. This paradox affected all the original players with an interest in nuclear India in 1974, except Britain. Their expectation about India's 'going nuclear' was coupled to another idea that it might never happen. Moreover, some thought, India might acquire the ingredients, yet not actually make or not test atomic bombs. Even the fascinating disagreement over what the 1974 test's yield and the size of the first bomb was, and how the uncertainty surrounding it was actually used by interested parties, is part of Perkovich's analysis. Here we see the relations of politics and science at their most complex.

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Within four crucial years of India's first nuclear bomb test in May 1974, changes occurred both to delay and accelerate India's nuclear programme, thus creating an image of India as a 'nuclear enigma' until the more famous nuclear tests 20 years later, in 1998. 'Why did India not weaponise its nuclear capabilities?' outsiders asked curiously, echoing or questioning calls in India to do so. Those more interested in India's history asked 'how did it build its nuclear capabilities?' And those interested in a global system of effective control on nuclear proliferation, asked 'what is India's impact on proliferation elsewhere?'

PERKOVICH'S monumental book leads us to the answers to these and many other questions, and thus enables us to re-read and re-think India's modern history. But before considering the book, think about what inspired him to study this subject. In a recent conversation, Perkovich told this writer that though he had studied the politics and economics of 'nuclear weapons establishments' of the United States and the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) since 1982, he did not find room in conventional international relations theory for the historical and anthropological dimensions that would help explain the behaviour of those establishments. Ten years later, in 1992, he came for the first time to India, and found it "fascinating and rather enlightening. I had no prior interest in India or knowledge of it." He met the top scientists and military specialists, and found "they thought about nuclear weapons differently than the U.S. or Soviet experts did, and differently from what the literature allowed". Perkovich said: "They avoided the hyperactive, abstract military calculus of deterrence that we created, and instead saw nukes as largely political-

symbolic instruments. This is what they are elsewhere, too. I believe, though our governments try to pretend otherwise. The Indian approach seemed more reasonable, if not also strange in places." Inside this large book is a concealed doctoral dissertation, and it shows all the attention to detail which is expected of such projects. As he told me, "the PhD was written with the book in mind".

The first Pokhran test and its consequences foreshadowed what was to come, and suddenly revealed the strange combination of public disapproval and private acceptance by nuclear powers, as seen more recently in 1998. Part of the sequence, relying on

Perkovich and some of my own findings, was as follows:

May 1974: India exploded one small nuclear bomb under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's orders, the explosive yield of which remained uncertain and unexplained for many years. Doubting the official announcement about the costs, Perkovich concludes that at the probable cost was Rs.1.76 billion over the preceding five years, or \$220 million in 1974 values. (For which Perkovich cites a study by N. Seshagiri, page 181) Canada suspended cooperation on a reactor and heavy-water plant; France sent a congratulatory telegram (and then withdrew it). Protests from the U.S. and the USSR were muted and more neutral.

June 1974: The Aid India Consortium voted an increased aid budget at the World Bank-managed Paris Club meetings; the U.S. sent its routine delivery of enriched uranium fuel for an (ill-functioning) American reactor near Bombay.

August 1974: Canada eventually began quiet negotiations to restore nuclear cooperation with India, to work

on an (ill-functioning) Canadian reactor in Rajasthan; U.S. Congress directed U.S. representatives to the World Bank to vote against loans to 'any country which develops any nuclear explosive device' unless that country adheres to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

September 1974: Following severe problems with the supply of heavy water for reactors, India again approached the USSR as a source for new supplies.

April 1975: India launched its first satellite on a Soviet rocket from a Soviet launch site;

June 1975: Indira Gandhi declares a state of emergency owing to her apprehension of an insurrection, and suspends normal political activity; eventually thousands of political and labour activists, intellectuals, students, etc., were imprisoned under 'Maintenance of Internal Security Act' (MISA);

Spring 1976: The Canadian Cabinet rejected an agreement, drafted and approved by senior Indian and Canadian officials, to reopen nuclear cooperation; evidence appears of the rapid advancement of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, a programme which had actually begun in earnest in 1972. Indira Gandhi said that she did not wish to hear about any more Indian nuclear tests, when atomic energy scientists raise this question hopefully with her;

July 1976: The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission opened hearings on the shipment of enriched uranium, and opponents caused a wide review of U.S. nuclear reactor export programme; the Nuclear Commissioners became divided over the decision to ship fuel for Tarapur;

March 1977: Indira Gandhi held national elections and was soundly defeated; 21-month emergency period

was over.

July 1977: Prime Minister Morarji Desai, against some 'internal' opposition, publicly rejects any further bomb development programme, and is somewhat disregarded by scientists who continue to work on the bomb programme. Construction begins on 'Dhr uva', a new research reactor, to replace the Canada-India reactor as the source of plutonium for the weapons programme; Desai yields to the Soviet demand that further shipments of heavy water, and the ('Canadian') reactor for which it was destined, be placed under safeguards.

March-July 1978: U.S. Congress passed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act. Morarji Desai and President Jimmy Carter met in Washington, and discussed weapons. Congress approved President Carter's decision to allow the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to ship enriched uranium for the U.S. reactor near Bombay; the U.S. finalises negotiations with France to become a replacement-source for enriched uranium reactor fuel for India.

AND there, in 1978, the enigma rested for 20 years. Everyone knew something was happening, yet 'nothing' happened. In Perkovich's words, "The Pokhran blast had put India in a mirror-lined box: the reflection revealed the frailty of India's nuclear capacity, and the primacy of other issues" (page 204). During this period officials and scientists knew which Minister was pro-bomb or anti-bomb. Scientists worked on their bomb objective, surviving occasional budget cuts and administrative changes. They went to extraordinary lengths, and at times devious lengths, to keep their programme going (as with clandestine contracts for heavy water in the 1980s). And some people gradually changed positions, as dramatically so in the case of socialist

leader George Fernandes (the Minister of Defence and deeply involved in the 1998 nuclear tests);

after the 1974 tests he wrote (from prison) "And should any government discuss such a proposition (the bomb) seriously without first taking steps to provide all citizens of the country with food, clothes, shelter, pure drinking water, education, and a chance to live a life befitting human beings, such a government can be called nothing but criminal." In 1998, as Minister

of Defence and deeply involved, he applauded the second tests.

During this ensuing period, atomic energy's contribution to the national electrical grid increased only slightly, as reactors came on stream; but this occurred at a great cost, given the delays and shutdowns. The Department of Atomic Energy remained the biggest financier of big science, and a lot of good science done in India, far outside its 'mandate'. Meanwhile the voice of the Jan Sangh and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), plus voices such as K. Subrahmanyam's waited for their turn, and, as we know, approved a bomb test after their election success in 1996. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee then cancelled that test just before Parliament's vote of no-confidence. But finally Vajpayee scheduled a nuclear bomb test immediately after their first electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led front in 1998. This electoral victory in March 1998, however, was not attributable to espousal of a pro-bomb policy, but more to issues such as the price of onions. The BJP-led front's re-election in 1999 also might not have occurred but for a conventional 'war' with Pakistan on the high-altitude border of Kashmir - it is unlikely the 1998 nuclear tests would have had much effect at the electoral level. But the tests did add to an image of a 'strong India' in the border clashes using conventional weapons. Is India still in a 'mirror-lined box'?

As important as the consequences of the 1974 test are, the other question of how the nuclear capabilities were built from the late 1940s by Nehru, Bhabha, and others is more important for the broad picture of India's history. Perkovich skillfully shows how the Atomic Energy Commission gradually built research reactors, plutonium separation plants, uranium fuel rod manufacturing and reprocessing facilities and so on, combining international assistance and domestic strengths. *To be continued*