

## The big questions for 2008

These are the questions that fill television, newspapers, seminars, meetings, and so forth in this year 2008. I claim that we are fascinated with the particular and the dramatic and we are missing the great currents that will shape our future. I set out here five events in 2008 that are far more important than the politics, economics, and wars that so fascinate us.

FORREST COOKSON

THE air is full of chatter about politics and economics. We have elections in the near future for Bangladesh and the United States. The emerging line up of the political parties in Bangladesh is obscure. We do not know who will be the Democratic party's candidate for president of the United States.

The world economy is slowing down, but how fast? The oil price is rising, but how far? There is a world-wide inflation of food prices, but how long will this continue? Armed conflicts continue in five or six locations with other spots ripe for outbursts of violence.

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Indian Premier League: The IPL has started and promises to revolutionise cricket. The move to

Twenty20 format for matches allows the cricket fan to see a complete game in a few hours rather than one or more days in the usual formats. Mass paying audiences are hardly possible in the old formats, the number of matches is limited by the physical strength and endurance of the players.

India has moved to restructure the game to raise the money earned; increase the number of players that can participate; increase the number of matches played, and make the game more exciting. Things will be further enlivened by the move of some of the teams to have cheerleaders to work up spectator enthusiasm for their team. American coaches are already at work. Money is pouring into this league.

While there is a loud outcry against change favouring traditions that do not provide a reasonable financial base, the modernisation and change of cricket has a good chance of being successful. It is a different cricket world coming -- riskier batting and running, more chances for the fielders, it will become a far faster sport. For South Asia the success or failure of this

effort to change the face of cricket is the most important thing going on. Kashmir will not change, but cricket will. Politics pales in comparison.

The Higgs particle: Located astride the Swiss-French border is CERN, the European centre for nuclear research which is completing the construction of the most complex machine every built by humanity. This great particle collider, the LHC -- large hadron collider -- will go into operation during 2008, culminating years of work and billions of dollars spent by all of the participating nations. The design of this machine was built on one key objective -- to find the Higgs particle.

Between 1925 and 1985 scientists had constructed the most elaborate and beautiful theory of nature that has ever existed. It is remarkably accurate in what it can calculate, but when it reaches its limit no one knows how to go further. Key to this so-called Standard Model is the existence of the Higgs particle. This particle is essential to make sense of the Standard Model but it has never been observed as our existing colliders or accelerators are not large enough to reach

the energies where it can be formed. The LHC is large enough to produce the Higgs at the mass where theorists believe it should be found. The discovery or non-discovery of the Higgs will be the greatest and most important achievement of 2008. Watch for it!

Drugs and the Olympics: In four months the Olympics will take place in Beijing and thousands of athletes from all over the world will compete in a bewildering number of sports. Watch for how many records get broken and how many cases of drug abuse are detected.

The more drugs are used, the more records will be broken, and the more people will be caught. Why is this important? Making of drugs to change human beings is looming before us. I am not talking about medicines to cure disease, but rather drugs that will increase our memory; make us do mathematics better; raise our intelligence level; enable us to run faster, throw further, hit a ball harder, etc.

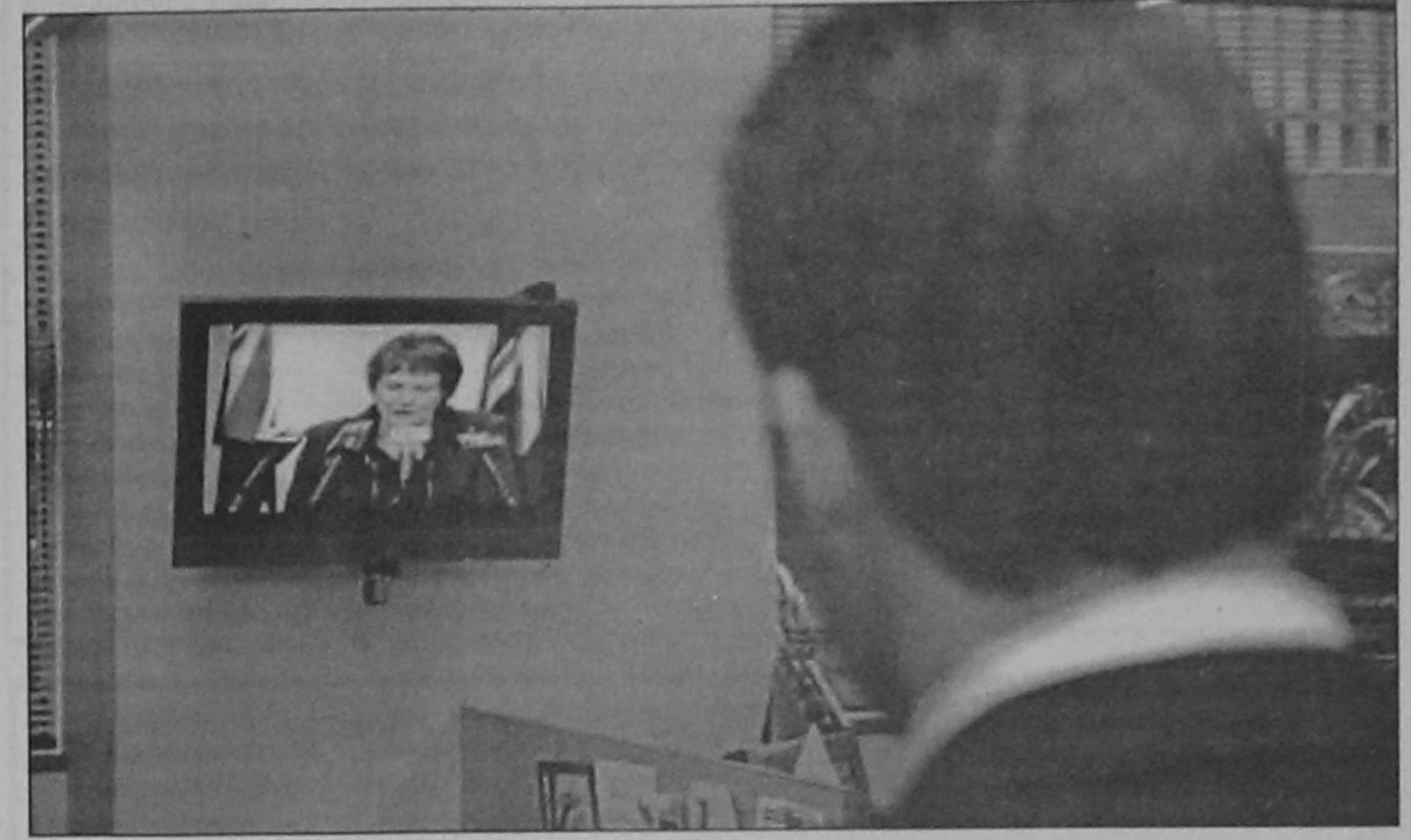
It is at the Olympics that we will be able to see how much progress is being made to develop these drugs. These life-changing drugs are here to stay and will shape the nature of human beings. We may not breed a new level of humanity, but we can drug ourselves into it. Keep an eye on the results in Beijing and assess how rapidly this new world is coming.

Shift in the key currency: The fourth question for 2008 is whether the key currency of the world is going to shift from the dollar to the

euro? The 19th century key currency was the pound sterling, replaced by the dollar during the first third of the 20th century. The financial world is changing rapidly and the dollar is weakening quite sharply. The euro is worth almost twice as much with respect to the dollar as it was several years ago. The time when everyone wanted to hold dollars is fast coming to an end and the demand for euros will grow rapidly.

During this year we should see signs that this is really going to happen. What to look for? We should see: a continued depreciation of the dollar with respect to the five important currencies -- the euro, the pound sterling, the Indian rupee, the Chinese yuan, and the Japanese yen. If the dollar depreciates against the euro by 20%, i.e. one euro is two dollars then the sign will be clear what direction the currency world is shifting. If the depreciation of the dollar is less than there is still uncertainty as to whether the shift in the key currency is going to take place.

Communication explosion: Almost everyone in Bangladesh has participated in the first phase of the dramatic changes in communications now going on. The data collected in the LHC is so vast as to exceed every few minutes all the written records of mankind! Part of this information is being dispersed to a number of universities and laboratories for analysis. The sheer volume of this information



There is more happening behind the screen.

staggeres the mind. The ability of our technology to handle and transfer such a volume of data is a clear signal of what the future holds. If the CERN plans for handling all of this data work in 2008, we can be confident that we are not far from the ability to educate at a distance, provide medical care including operations from afar, provide enormous computer power to everyone, and keep track of economic change at a scale we cannot imagine at this time.

Satellites that can count the area planted to rice, that can tell from

the spectral signatures of the rice the yields, not only in total, but in every location.

Maintaining records of all telephone calls and the location all the time of every mobile telephone.

Providing virtually instant access to all of the written materials in the world.

Enabling everyone with a mobile telephone to pay bills, transfer money, access virtually any movie, any television program, any musical performance or any written material.

This is already beginning to hap-

pen; it is probably going to take place on an even more rapid scale. As the price of communication continues to fall even faster, the traditional controls that governments try to enforce will be blown away. Watch for the success of CERN's data management program.

These are the big things in 2008 -- keep your eyes open for them. The result of the Bangladesh and American elections will be insignificant in 100 years, but we will still be celebrating finding the Higgs particle.

Forrest Cookson is an Economist.

## The roar of the radicals

There are two parts to tackling any looming threat of religious extremism. One is treating it as another law and order concern; and the other is treating it as a potential threat to our goal of establishing a pluralistic and democratic society. A law and order concern is addressed when the law-breakers are contained and order restored. But a potential threat by religious radicals cannot be stopped simply by police actions.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THE disturbing happenings of April 11 in Baitul Mukarram Masjid square are a stark reminder to all of us that the specter of religious extremism continues to hang over our head like the proverbial sword of Damocles. It is a serious threat to our social fabric unless we deal with it firmly now. Thanks to wide media coverage, a worldwide audience watched with awe video footages of hirsute young men in white robes and armed with sticks chasing police and hurling bricks and stones that were presumably stored near the mosque.

Few people who watched this encounter from abroad had any knowledge of what led these peo-

ple to such violence; but they saw who they were, and that they were challenging armed law enforcers to a show of strength.

This may sound a bit overdramatic, but to underscore a point I must say that to some of us the incident at Baitul Mukarram brought back uncomfortable flashes of the Lal Masjid incident in Pakistan last year.

True, the Lal Masjid had ultimately turned into a war zone with disastrous and murderous consequences. But we must remember that the forces that had challenged the law enforcing agencies of Pakistan from that center originally started their crusade against the authorities with sticks and stones, and ended up with machine guns. And we must also remember that,

like the Baitul Mukarram mosque, the Lal Masjid is also a government owned religious institution.

To explain away the April 11 incident as another instance of bigotry by a small group of fanatics is a cop-out. This was not an impulsive act by a group of people misled by propaganda that hurt their religious feelings.

This was not a spur of the moment protest against any political rhetoric. This was a planned incident orchestrated by people who want to impose their interpretation of religion on others, and along with it their political ideology.

I say this because there has been a pattern of behaviour of a section in our country in the last few weeks over a legislation concerning women's property rights. This

started with claim by this section that it was beyond the government's legal power (*ultra vires*) to have a policy that allows equal rights to women since it would go against religion.

The claim was followed by public utterances and protests by some people following that line of thought, that such actions would violate religious dictates on the subject. No one cared to explain how a policy espousing equality of human rights, of men and women, would militate against our religion.

These utterances went unchallenged since we, the educated majority, have delegated the responsibility of interpreting religion to the clerics. The culmination of this silence was the April 11 incident.

Our worries and concerns would have been minimal, had the efforts of this school of thought been limited to interpretation of religion only for religious purposes.

Unfortunately, these clerics, products of largely unchecked religious institutions, not only act as guardians of the religion, but

they now also want to ensure that our legislative agenda also carry their seal of approval.

To me, the implications of this incident are far wider than the protest over an issue of legislation that may have "religious" connotation to a group of people. Although in the minority, this school of thought is rarely challenged, as most of us tend to shy away from topics that touch religion.

Our political leaders in the past either avoided these issues, or embraced the proponents of this line of thought as political partners for short-term gains. Our reluctance to deal with topics of religious sensitivity through public debates, and often coddling of some leaders of this radical line of thinking, have made this section of people take the lead on these issues and insinuate themselves in formulation of public policies in the name of religion.

The Lal Masjid happenings of Pakistan taught us that religious militancy can grow at one's doorstep when state power nurtures radical elements, either through

negligence or for short-term political gains.

It has shown how radicals can proliferate at state expense when young minds are tutored and trained to implement radical ideologies with a wrong interpretation of religion.

There are two parts to tackling any looming threat of religious extremism. One is treating it as another law and order concern; and the other is treating it as a potential threat to our goal of establishing a pluralistic and democratic society.

A law and order concern is addressed when the law-breakers are contained and order restored. But a potential threat by religious radicals cannot be stopped simply by police actions. This needs, first, a full awareness of the potential threat, an acknowledgment by all that it exists, and engagement of all righteous sections of our society in opposing such ideas and ideology.

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## Tremor on the roof of the world

The Chinese revolution failed to overthrow the former serf-owning ruling class precisely because it was embedded in the Buddhist religious institutions of the Tibetan theocracy. The locus of the independence movement inside Tibet is in the monasteries, the sole remaining political institutions of feudal power. The movement is kept alive by decades of simmering resentment in the monasteries against secular state institutions that have increasingly challenged their power and influence, and redistributed monastery land to the peasants.

BILLY I. AHMED

A wave of protest and riots has rocked Tibet since March 10 -- the 49th anniversary of a failed rebellion led by the Dalai Lama in 1959, and has drawn global condemnation of China's alleged human rights record in Tibet. The impression given is that China is using its police and army to violently enforce a brutal occupation on peaceful Tibetans.

No doubt there will be some human rights abuses whenever riot police and troops are brought out in force. However, it is important to look behind the media headlines to understand what is happening.

The US government has been funding and encouraging Tibetan exiles in India through the US Agency for International Development, National Endowment for Democracy, and through covert operations by the Central Intelligence Agency. This is a continuation of the long history of CIA support for Tibetan uprisings after China formally asserted sovereignty over Tibet in 1951.

With China's rapid rise as a global power economically and politically, there is increasing reason for the US government to find ways to destabilise a potential competitor on the world stage.

Human rights have always been a convenient pretext for selectively mobilising world opinion against, and pressuring, potential opponents.

But, in recent days, the US National Security Council has had its eyes warily focused on yet another reason to destabilise Tibet; to seek a foothold in that remote part of the world.

In an ABC Television interview on "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," April 13, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley unintentionally revealed a new hidden White House agenda behind its covert backing for the pro-independence movement in Tibet. In response to repeated questions from Stephanopoulos on whether President George Bush would attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic games in Beijing over concerns about China's policy on Tibet, Hadley mentioned "Nepal" in repeated slips of the tongue.

Hadley's concern arises out of the surprising electoral victory by the Maoists in Nepal's elections for a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution. Not only does this popular mandate quicken the end of the monarchy, but it also decisively marginalises even the centrist Nepali Congress, which the

Koirala family has dominated until now.

The Maoist victory in Nepal is a boost to Maoists in India who, through armed struggle, have taken over large zones under their control in the central and northern regions of the country. The situation has been of serious concern to the government of India as well as in the White House.

The violence in Tibet did not start as a government crackdown on Buddhists and Tibetan dissidents seeking independence or greater autonomy from Beijing. It started with Tibetan rioters attacking Hans and Huis in Tibet, and their shops and properties. This is substantiated by the Dalai Lama's repeated appeals to his followers to stop the violence.

Tibetans do have legitimate frustrations because of economic distortions and social alienation resulting from rapid capitalist development throughout China. This must be viewed in contrast to the historical context of Tibet's violent serfdom past presided over by the Buddhist theocracy before 1959.

It is argued by proponents of Tibetan independence that China's presence in Tibet is an occupation. Yet, China today includes 55 officially recognised minority nationalities, composing

8.5 per cent of the country's population. Should each of these nationalities seek independence? What would happen if each of these minority nationalities were to become independent and form their own countries?

Some could be economically viable in their land; most probably would not. But all would become open to CIA schemes to subvert China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, North Korea, and Nepal. History leaves no doubt that the fragmentation of nation states would be destabilising without any added prospect of advancing democracy, human rights, or social justice.

The state in China has brought

about dramatic socio-economic changes -- including land redistribution from the monasteries to the peasants, secular education, healthcare, and gender equality. It has also pumped billions of dollars in subsidies to develop the minority regions.

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in the monasteries against secular state institutions that have increasingly challenged their power and influence, and redistributed monastery land to the peasants.

Paradoxically, it is also the opening of Tibet to international tourism that has revived many Buddhist temples and monasteries as tourist attractions, providing an opening for the clerics to spread their influence.

Nevertheless, Tibetan society is deeply divided over the protests. Many Tibetans, except those in exile, seemingly do not regard China's presence as an occupation. They oppose independence. Even while they revere the Dalai Lama as a religious figure, Tibetan peasants oppose the protests, fearing the monasteries will revive the serfdom of the past.

The Dalai Lama himself has been angered by the Western insistence on Tibetan "independence." In a press conference on March 20, in Dharamsala, India, the Dalai Lama expressed his frustration: "The whole world knows the Dalai Lama is not seeking independence, one hundred times, thousand times I have repeated this. It is my mantra -- we are not seeking independence."

So why are "human rights activists" in the West demanding what the Dalai Lama himself is not? This fact alone is consistent with an exogenous Tibetan separatist movement, not a true human rights movement that supports the hopes of Tibetan people. The exogenous separatism is driven by the external influences of the US and other Western governments.

Billy I. Ahmed is a tea planter, columnist and researcher.



## How to get married, Asian style

WARNING: never attend an Asian wedding. You may have an unexpected attack of marriage.

Some people turn up for free booze but end up wedded until death do them part.

Has this never happened to you? Count yourself lucky. There are numerous tales in Asia of weddings at which one or other of the co-stars fail to turn up, and someone leaps (or is pushed) from the crowd to fill the gap.

I remember reporting on the wedding of one Jayalakshmi, a 21-year-old from Chennai, India. Halfway through the wedding, her groom Murugesan announced that he was disappointed that he had not received a motor scooter

released and sent back to the victim with a smile. This is reminiscent of the Western concept of the "shot-gun wedding," in which a stern father would point a firearm at a man and say: "You are an evil, immoral brute of the worst order. Marry my daughter this instant."

A reader sent me a cutting about a Western jilted bride acting in an Asian way. Alison Innes, 20, of Scotland, was ditched by her cad-dish boyfriend shortly before her wedding. But the whole thing went ahead, with a friend marrying her in place of the original groom. On the surface, this seems like an Asian wedding tale. But close examination reveals a key difference. Ms. Innes was eight months pregnant. In Asia, her ballooning condition



among his dowry presents. He departed to find a woman with a deeper appreciation of a man's deepest automotive needs.

Bride Jayalakshmi was not fazed. She promptly decided that her love for the idea of having a big Indian wedding was greater than her love for Murugesan or any particular individual, so she grabbed one of the male guests and hustled him into position. No doubt he found something suitably romantic to say, such as "Help, help."

This doesn't just happen in South Asia. In China, people regularly marry ghosts. If a woman dies unmarried, the relatives pay someone to wed her spirit. It's not a bad deal. She's a cheap date and there are never any fights over the remote control.

I cut out a report from a newspaper in the subcontinent about a man named Karan Singh who was caught red-handed raping the daughter of his neighbour. He was jailed for three and half years. He offered to marry his victim, and was

would probably have prevented alternative husbands springing from the audience to romantically proclaim: "I suppose I'll have her if no one else wants her."

Westerners are more relaxed about such things. Indeed, Ms. Innes told reporters that she was not sure whether the father of her child was her original fiancé or the friend she was actually marrying. She added (this is not a joke): "Or it might be his brother."

But the West can't beat Asia for wild wedding stories. When a reader wrote to me about a man in Europe who married his sister, I just yawned. My file of Asian weddings includes one in which a nine-year-old girl married a dog, an adult woman married a statue, and people regularly marry ghosts and paintings. So the European wedding was comparatively normal.

I mean, at least the bride was human.

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