

Shall we fail the nation again?

But come what may, these people -- who have plundered our state wealth and property at will, misusing their power and authority and becoming billionaires overnight -- must be tried and punished for the crimes they have committed as well as for the poverty, misery and indignity they have inflicted on the country and the people.

BRIG GEN SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

WE are passing through yet another critical juncture of our history, where we must rise as a nation as we did in 1971, but this time, to stamp out corruption from the body politic of this country. It is the corruption of our political and social elites, the high and the mighty in the different strata of our society, which has made our country one of the poorest of the poor in the world. If we cannot combat this level of corruption effectively, no grandiose plan for poverty alleviation, no infusion of massive external aid and no elected government will be able to lift us from this abyss of poverty and make us the proud nation that we all want our

Bangladesh to become.

We have made many ambitious poverty alleviation plans in the past. We have had billions of dollars of aid from rich foreign countries. We also had elected governments to our credit. But all the money has gone down the drain, simply because the corrupt political elites went about building their own personal fortunes for themselves and their coterie at the expense of the development of their country and the wellbeing of their people. Corruption spread fast, far and wide. Could it have been otherwise? No. There is a saying that a fish begins to rot from the head.

The declaration of a state of emergency and the bold, patriotic, pro-people policy of the interim

government, (and of course the support of the armed forces), it is for the first time in the history of this country that particular high-profile politicians -- former ministers, law-makers and businessmen -- have been arrested for corruption. It is a gigantic task arraigning these high-profile people considering the limited resources at the disposal of the government and the judiciary. But come what may, these people -- who have plundered our state wealth and property at will, misusing their power and authority and becoming billionaires overnight -- must be tried and punished for the crimes they have committed as well as for the poverty, misery and indignity they have inflicted on the country and the people.

These are the people who cried hoarse for democracy, people's welfare and development of the country before elections. But once elected, they conveniently forgot these very ideals. They remained focused on amassing fortune by grabbing money and property for themselves, for their family members and their cronies and henchmen. As their saga of corruption unfolds through the media, we as the people of this country are ashamed of having been ruled and governed by these people. But lo and behold! They have no shame or qualms whatsoever. They are shameless. They have no compunction.

Ask them about their corruption charges and horrendous wrongdoings. They and their countless lawyers will dismiss them as politically motivated. Ask them how come they have become so fabulously rich when they had none of it before they came to power. Thus comes the reply -- it is through our honest and legitimate income. Ask them how is it that

they have umpteen bank accounts in their own names, in the name of their family members and in some cases in the name of family trusts and foundations with tell-tale evidence of massive corruption. Ask them why they had awarded contracts to undeserving firms, though they entailed enormous losses to the state. They would simply say that they have done nothing wrong. They lie with such ease and finesse that it is difficult to say whether they do it congenitally or compulsively.

Put them in jail. They will either fall sick or feign sickness and manage a hospital cabin with the minimum of luxury they are used to enjoying. Release them on bail. Let them go abroad on parole for medical treatment because they are afflicted with ailments that cannot be treated in this country. They will go to the most expensive hospital in Singapore or Bangkok, accompanied by a full retinue of their family and friends for a duration of two months or more as if they are

on a long vacation. Where does such money in foreign exchange come from? Obviously from their honest and legitimate income! These are the people we have to deal with.

Those who do wrongs but when proven guilty admit their fault and apologize are those who deserve to be treated with compassion. But those who have no sense of repentance or guilt for the harm they have caused unto others are the most dangerous of human species -- and they must be punished for it.

It is appallingly disquieting to hear that of late most of these people have been granted bail and for some, their trial proceedings have been stayed by the higher judiciary for two months or so. We know very well that it is only under emergency rules that these people can be swiftly tried and punished. The higher judiciary has the prerogative to overrule the verdict of the lower judiciary. But let the trial proceedings of lower courts go ahead unhindered. With due



Government issued complaint boxes are placed around Dhaka to eradicate corruption in all layers.

respect to our judiciary and the legal fraternity, let me say in all humility -- we owe it to our conscience as educated and patriotic people of this country to see to it that those who have committed crime and sullied the name of this country by their wrongdoings are tried and punished no matter who they are and under what law they have been tried. Should we fail to do justice and allow the criminals

to go unpunished, it will only strengthen the hands of those who do rough justice on the streets and lynch a common thief because they believe that the thief will not be punished by the due process of the judicial system. Let us not fail the nation.

Brig Gen Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd) is a freedom fighter and former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

The Indian Muslim quandary

Look at the Indian movie industry; it is one Khan or the other who is ruling the roost. Indian classical music had long been a bastion of the Muslims. The best known Indian modern artist internationally is M.F.Hussain. Yet, why is that Muslims in general in India have fallen so far behind?

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

TERRORISTS have struck again in India. But this time it is in Gujarat, a state that had seen one of the worst communal carnages only a few years before. The Indian government

has taken timely measures to prevent any communal reprisal because, as in many similar cases before, the suspected perpetrators are some Muslim fringe groups. And every time such accusations take place, Muslims in general take cover since they could become the

targets of mob fury.

On wonders why, in a country that has the third largest Muslim population of the world, there should be Muslim fringe groups launching terror attacks against their own country. It cannot be that, like some armed political cadres (such as the Naxalites in Bihar or the Bodos in Assam), they are pursuing a dream to carve out a separate state in one corner of the country. The Muslims in India are far too many, and far too dispersed over the country, for anyone to even contemplate such an objective. Pakistan was tried, and we know what the outcome was. What else, then, could be behind the periodic terrorist outbursts that are attributed to these fringe groups?

A stock response would be a convoluted sense of injustice that has been consuming young Muslims in many Western countries where they are a small minority. But this would be a poor answer, considering that Muslims in India are not politically under-represented in the national forum. Could this be because, after centuries of co-existence, the Muslims find themselves straying away from the mainstream? Could this be happening because they have fallen way behind the great Indian march to advancement for lack of preparedness, and perhaps unwillingness, to modernise? Consider some statistics.

According to the Rajinder Sachar Committee (2006) report on Muslim Community of India, only about 5% are represented in government jobs, and 3% in the elite Civil Service. This should not surprise us as only a little over 3% of Indian Muslims complete graduation, whereas it's 16% for Hindus. In premier colleges only one out of 25 under-graduate students, and one out of 50 post-graduate students, is a Muslim. To this, I would hazard to add a few of my own observations.

A couple of years back, while visiting the Chennai offshore information technology support center of the organisation I worked for in the US, I was struck by the fact that out of a total of eight hundred staff there not even five were Muslims. The employees were largely from the Tamil Nadu region, who had graduated from the local IT institutions with skills that are in great demand both in India and overseas.

I tried to find an explanation for this observation of mine in the demographics of the region. I had thought that the low number of Muslim recruits in that center probably had something to do with the low Muslim population of Tamil Nadu, which was about 5% of the total. But this explanation also turned out to be inadequate when, on my return to headquarters, I went over the total number of offshore IT workers that we had engaged from all centers. As I went through the list of names, hardly more than four or five Muslim names appeared in the aggregate. Even in a center located in an Indian state that has one of the highest Muslim concentrations

(Kerala with nearly 25%), I could not locate more than two Muslim IT workers in that center. Where have the Muslims gone? Have they all migrated to the Middle East?

It is difficult to absorb these statistics for Indian Muslims in general in a country where Muslim names appear to dominate the entertainment industry, music, and arts. Look at the Indian movie industry; it is one Khan or the other who is ruling the roost. Indian classical music had long been a bastion of the Muslims. The best known Indian modern artist internationally is M.F.Hussain. Yet, why is that Muslims in general in India have fallen so far behind?

I have read various explanations for these humble conditions of the Muslims in India; and there are a whole slew of them. These range from economic deprivation of the Indian Muslim minority to their low literacy rate, from political apathy of the government towards the Muslims to downright religious discrimination. But do five to six percentage points of difference in income between the Muslims and Indian national average explain the low representation of the Muslims in the professions? How, also, can we accept political apathy to be a reason for this overall backwardness, since we know that many Indian Muslims rose to the top in Indian national politics?

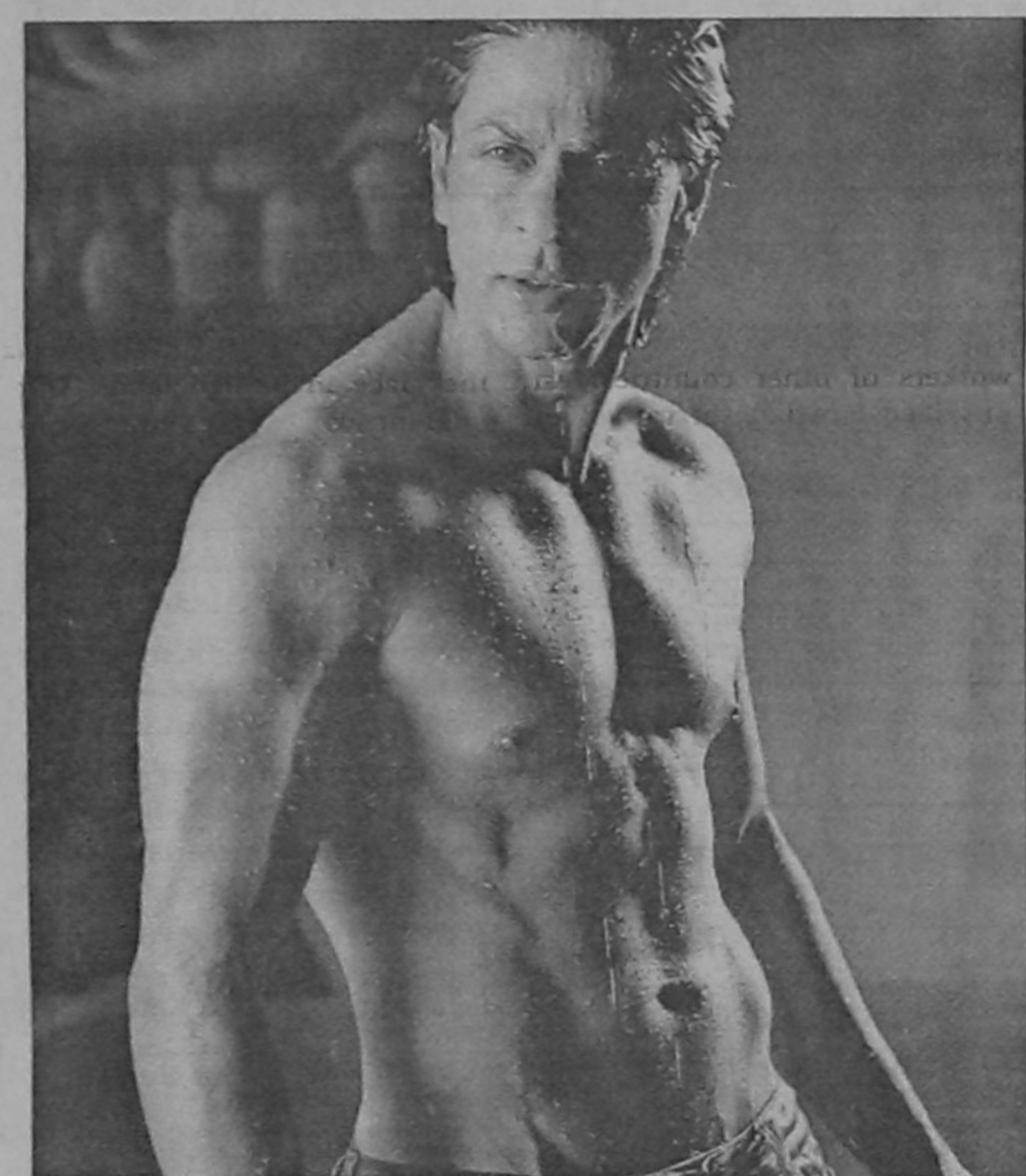
The real issue lies elsewhere. It is education, education, and education. To be more precise, it is modern higher education that equips a person with a marketable language, and skill. Muslims in general lack both, and hence are poorly equipped to enter the great race to advancement.

According to statistics, a whopping 30-50% of Muslim students attend Urdu medium schools in some states, whose performance at the Secondary Education exam level falls short of national standards, bringing into question the suitability of such schools to provide mainstream education that is apt for the modern changing world. This is the crux of the problem. True, there are also a good number of Muslims that attend only religious schools. But instead of obfuscating the issue by focusing on the 4% enrollment in madrasas, one needs to take an objective look at the overall inadequacy of education of Muslim students and suggest an appropriate solution: mainstream education for one and all.

Today, it is imperative that the Indian Muslim community fight the ogre of illiteracy (in modern education, that is) by adopting the prescription of English education and modernity given by Sir Syed Ahmed one and a half centuries ago. They also need to ensure that that they successfully challenge and oppose the opportunistic Muslim leadership offered by these so-called fringe groups.

The Indian Muslim leadership has also a role in this. It needs to foster among the Muslims a sense of greater self-reliance through the community's own private initiative in education, charity, co-operatives and social reform, and offer an alternative to the route of community improvement through politics.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



Sadly not representative of Indian Muslims.

India's one-legged legacy

Singh has probably only two or three sessions of parliament left to get the second leg of the Indian economy running again. His legacy to the next government is likely to be a fiscal deficit that is reaching pre-reform levels, a dire choice between growth and inflation, and a shelf full of broken economic programs that need to be extensively repaired or tossed in the dustbin.

PRAMIT PAI CHAUDHURI

MANMOHAN Singh's four-year term in office has been resurrected in the last few months of its existence. When his government this week defeated a no-confidence motion in parliament instigated by his former coalition partners, the communists, Indian television stations used a popular Bollywood song, "Singh Is King," as a backdrop.

The choice of the song had a subtext: so far Prime Minister Singh has been more courtier than monarch. There was a palpable sense of relief among many urban Indians: a prime minister they desperately wanted to admire had at last shown strength of character. Now his government could move forward on the policy front.

His government has already announced its intention to pass a number of reforms, especially in the financial sector. Singh's own tabled statement in parliament outlines legislative priorities like a right-to-education bill and a social safety net for workers in the informal sector. The likely end of India's nuclear pariah status may hog the headlines, but it is such welfare programs that have been the main focus of the Singh government.

The change in Singh's fortunes

will come too late for the prime minister to reverse so many years of what a UBS analysis called always taking the "easier option." Despite this week's parliamentary vote, India must go for general elections by March of next year.

Singh took office promising "to combine the economics of growth with the economics of equity." We have no option, he said, but "to walk on two legs." However, pouring money into welfare is easy -- opposition is confined to op-ed writers.

Second-generation economic reforms that cut off wasteful subsidies or money-losing state firms affect large groups of voters and require immense political skills. Singh's tenure was notable for the frenetic activity that was carried out on the welfare side and the lack of forward movement on the growth side. Economic policy walked on one leg.

The outlay on education tripled, loans were waived for an estimated 35 million farmers and a rural welfare scheme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), designed to provide income for "the poorest of the poor," was launched. Expenditure on poverty alleviation schemes is budgeted to touch 1

trillion rupees.

Singh's underlying assumption was that government outlays would lead to social outcomes. And his policies assumed an Indian state that was more honest, efficient and less creaky than it is.

As one of his former advisers noted: "Singh has never lost his faith in bureaucracy and bureaucrats." His new flagship agency, NREGS, is the fifth most corrupt of 11 public services in terms of bribes that poor people had to pay to get benefits, according to a survey by the Transparency International Centre for Media Studies. Education is a similar tale of money spent, with little impact on the quality of teaching.

Singh can rightly claim to have helped fund an agricultural revival that has meant this laggard sector is expected to grow 3.5 to 4 percent this year. However, the reality of rural India is that it is impossible for so many people to survive by tilling the land.

If their incomes are to rise, they need to be moved to cities and factories -- a fact Singh has been the first to admit. This shift will be possible only if India's hopelessly restrictive labour laws are changed. After flirting with the idea, Singh not only abandoned labour reform,

he blocked state governments who tried to strike out on their own.

His supporters, incorrectly, say these sorts of reforms were impossible so long as the government depended on communist support. Others argue his authority was diluted by the over-the-shoulder presence of the Congress Party president, Sonia Gandhi.

However, Singh compounded this by taking his self-description as the "accidental prime minister" too seriously. Senior officials often complained about the difficulty in extracting a decision from the prime minister. One representative of a multilateral aid agency remembered how Singh's unwillingness to overrule even trivial objections by junior bureaucrats would kill projects.

As this reputation for passivity spread, Singh lost control of his own ministers. Arjun Singh, a venal member of the Congress old guard, stalled changes in education. Telecom, which has driven service growth in India even more than software, has collapsed into policy whimsy.

Ram Vilas Paswan, who held the steel portfolio, did nothing to promote the growth of the industry -- paving the way for steel price inflation. Indiscipline touched even foreign policy, with an army chief blocking peace moves with Pakistan and the Department of Atomic Energy dictating the pace of the nuclear talks.

The one-legged economy kept its balance because 9 percent growth and higher taxes meant more government revenue. Eventually, the economy overheated when global

commodity prices, notably oil, rose dramatically.

Global price hikes and government overspending combined to generate double-digit inflation. Y. V. Reddy, governor of Reserve Bank of India, publicly warned that such spending made inflation control impossible.

Singh has probably only two or three sessions of parliament left to get the second leg of the Indian

economy running again. His legacy to the next government is likely to be a fiscal deficit that is reaching pre-reform levels, a dire choice between growth and inflation, and a shelf full of broken economic programs that need to be extensively repaired or tossed in the dustbin.

Chaudhuri is senior editor of the Hindustan Times.

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Indian PM Manmohan Singh.

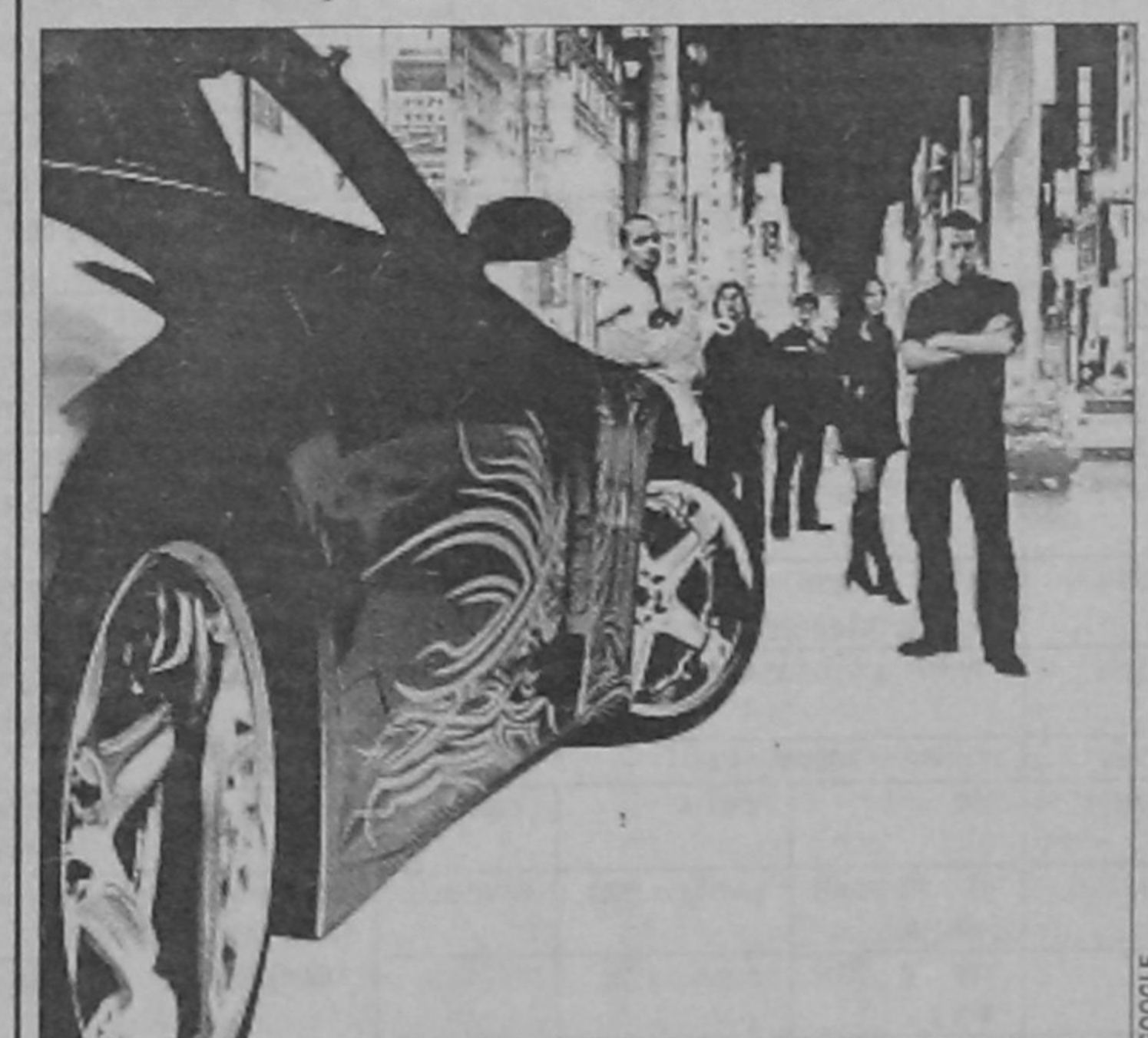
In Asia, life is like a movie

I have a friend who has a bracelet on his wrist. It says "WWJD" and reminds him that he should never make a decision without asking himself: "What Would Jesus Do?"

I like this idea. It would certainly help another friend of mine, whose life is a string of disasters and seems to make decisions based on the principle: "What Would Homer Simpson Do?"

year-old motorist in New Zealand who was charged with driving while disqualified. He decided, unwisely, to get to the district court by driving himself there. On the way, he crashed into another car -- and the other driver turned out to be the judge assigned to hear his case. How many times have you seen that plot in movies?

Or consider Ranvir Singh of Uttar Pradesh, India, who tried to kill a



Real life or movie? You decide.

In comparison, I would say that my second friend's life has more drama, but is likely to be considerably shorter than my first friend's.

The other day an American interviewer asked me why I lived in Asia. His sole source of information about Asia was Fox Network News, so he thinks of it as a place of endless natural disasters governed by atrocious leaders. This is actually rather accurate.

But I like to live here, anyway. I tried to explain Asia's magic to him: "In mature western societies, life tends to be predictable and safe, so you have to go to movies if you want to experience life with its full intensity, drama and unpredictability. But in Asia, normal life is like that: life is like the movies."

Clearly intrigued, he asked me for examples.

So I told him about a case I once reported on in Japan. Motorist Masafumi Sato, aged 20, saw an attractive young woman and fell instantly, madly, deeply in love. So he chased her, driving his car up a 20-metre-long flight of stairs, through a railway station, down a flight of stairs, and then demolished a load of railings. Sato was charged with "willful destruction of property". The correct charge, of course, should have been "willfully behaving as if life is a chick-flick."

Sometimes, life in Asia is a comedy. I once wrote about a 25-

mouse by various means, including setting fire to its tail. In the end, his attempts to destroy the rodent caused the destruction of his entire house. This is the exact plot of the 1997 Hollywood movie Mouse Hunt.

Also from India came the story of a Ghaziabad scientist who experimented with an untested serum and turned himself into a giant, super-strong ape-man. Yes, it's the plot of the Hollywood movie Altered States. Or hang on: am I thinking of Arnold Schwarzenegger's life story?

"Gosh," said my American interviewer. "Life in Asia really is like the movies."

"It is," I agreed. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to ring off because it's time to go to work."

I told him that I commuted by leaping from rooftop to rooftop before jumping into a passing truck carrying mattresses, and then commandeering a sports car which I would drive through a market place, knocking over a fruit stall, before crashing through a restaurant window, interrupting a wedding.

I decided that that sounded more exciting than telling him that most Asians go to work on public buses. Even though our buses are a way more dangerous way to travel.

More stories like this can be found at our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com.

