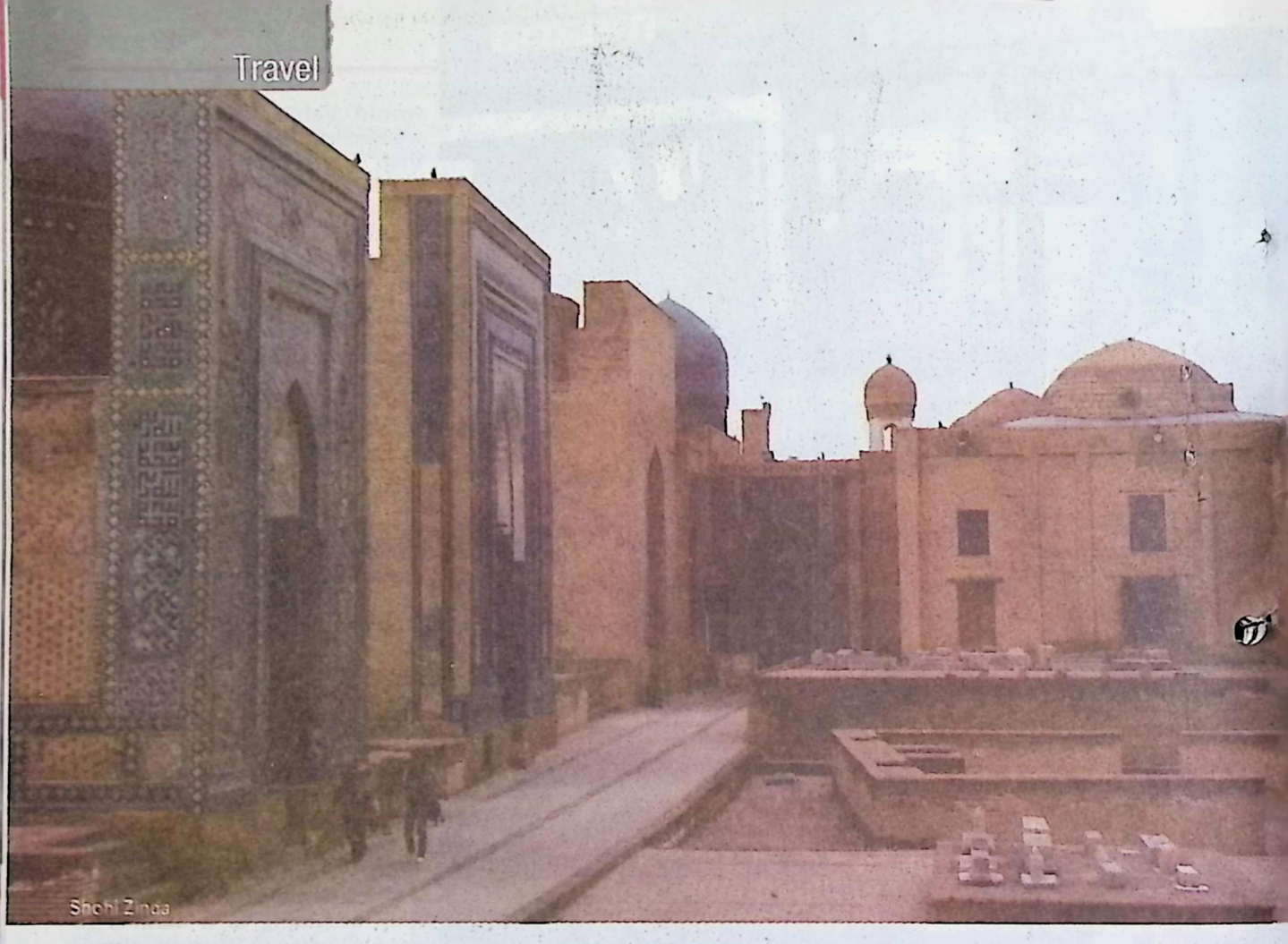


On the Silk Road

ADNAN R. AMIN

The apple-cheeked old woman, perched heavily atop an LG packing-box beside the Oloy Bozori, broke into a gap-toothed chuckle and held out four plump fingers. I reexamined the pack of cigarettes in my hand and felt further confused. Four or forty? Hundred or thousand? Prompted by the quickening tapping of her pumps - I gingerly drew out the fat wad of 500 cÿms and surrendered it all. She pulled out some notes and returned the rest, giving my cold hands a little squeeze, unleashing a flurry of softly-slurred words which could've come just as easily from my grandmother as from a tobacco-vendor. Her unnecessary but kind words on that freezing night left me warmer in this new city where no one knew me or where I came from. On my first day in Tashkent, fully-aware of the moral and statistical wrongness of trying to judge a people based on first-time chance encounters I was enchanted by its people.

I was in Uzbekistan: a middle-income country, three times the size of ours, with a 95 per cent literacy-rate, a legacy of modern infrastructure, extremely strategic location bang in the middle of Asia yet mostly relegated by us as one of those tottering spin-offs from the Soviet Disintegration. The Uzbek Government, supported by Unicef and The World Bank, was developing a brand for its integrated nutrition-interventions - the Nutrition Improvement Strategy (NIS). And I, their trusted brand and communications consultant, was hopelessly lost in translation.

Earlier, I had been caught off-guard by subzero temperatures near the end of March. The poorly heated air