

Time and Technology Wait for None

Sharad Bailur

In the Postal Department, Adaptation and not Monopoly is the Answer.

One of the first tasks that the Imperial Government of India set itself to do, when it took over from the East India Company after 1857, was to knit this vast and disparate land together. Electricity had not been heard of. The telegraph was still to be dreamt of and Marconi, or as some say, S. N. Bose, was yet to discover wireless transmission. So they hit upon the iron horse and the rails it would run on, and a revolutionary postal system that would deliver anything anywhere in the subcontinent.

The 'Mail' Trains

Rudyard Kipling had been the Assistant Editor of the *Pioneer*, then of Allahabad, for some time and his novel, "Kim", about the North West Frontier Province makes one of the earliest mentions of the Indian Railways. True to the legend, the Frontier Mail which today runs from Mumbai to Amritsar gets its name because it formerly ran up to Peshawar on the North West Frontier.

But notice the second half of its name: Mail. In later years a number of other trains acquired a similar nomenclature: Toofan Mail, Madras Mail, Kalka Mail, Gujarat Mail and so on. Many of them continue to rejoice in the glory of those names even today. This is because they literally carried mail. And they covered huge distances quickly. The carrying of mail by air began with JRD Tata's epic flight from Karachi to Bombay barely about 70 years ago.

The Department of Posts

The telegraph then added a new dimension to the transmission of messages and the Department of Posts quickly adapted itself to the change and became the sole provider of telegraphic messages.

All of this was done with one aim: To provide the country with the basic infrastructure of administration. The existence today of the Department of Posts (DOP) is based on this one simple premise. And it was this that kept it in the public sector.

Jawaharlal Nehru understood the value of the Indian Postal system, easily one of the best in the world, and after Independence, got the DOP to devise a hub and spoke arrangement of flying mail to Nagpur for redistribution

overnight in various directions. To this day it is possible to find a letter addressed by the vaguest of addresses: 'Behind this', 'In front of that', 'Below this', 'Above that', and still the letter gets safely to the addressee. This, in a land that has a history of illiteracy among the majority, through the ages, is nothing short of miraculous. The DOP has done this country proud.

Unfortunately time and technology wait neither for man nor beast nor for the Department of Posts. The telegraph was overtaken, first by the telex and later by the facsimile

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machine, better known today as fax. Now the fax is increasingly being overtaken by the e-mail and the internet. An SMS or e-mail sent from India is received – instantly – 12000 miles away in the US. In a few short decades from the human runner to the iron horse to the speed of light is an incredible journey, which today is seen as commonplace.

The Courier Industry

Among other developments that heralded the last decades of the last century was the courier industry. Much, if not most, of the courier services worldwide are in the private sector and abroad there is some self regulation and some government regulation to ensure that the courier industry does not interfere with the basic services provided by the postal services as an infrastructural necessity.

The Department of Posts has to adapt itself to such developments, as it did with the telegraph. Unfortunately a knee jerk reaction does not call for the mental effort that imaginative solutions to emerging situations does. And to an ossified bureaucracy that has come to represent the DOP a knee jerk is more tempting and less onerous than head scratching.

The Post Office Amendment Bill

What the Department of Posts has done is this: It plans to amend the Indian Post Office Act of 1898 by passing an amendment called the Indian Post Office Amendment Bill. This bill, in effect, proposes to:

1. Expand the monopoly provisions that are the privilege of the DOP.
2. Regulate Courier and Express Operators and
3. Levy an additional amount on courier and express operators to fund the Universal Service Obligation of the Department of Posts.

There are serious problems with this move. First and probably something no one has thought of: The move is tantamount to putting restrictions on the 'Freedom to practice any profession', guaranteed under the Fundamental Rights and can be challenged successfully on this count alone under the law.

Second, the draft of the amendment now on the website of the Department of Posts says that Posts will have the exclusive right to the handling of packages up to 300 grams. There is no logical reason for this specific figure. It is merely an attempt to assert a monopoly right. Besides it denies consumers a choice.

Third the courier services do not compete directly with the Posts. For one thing their rates are more than twice as high. Then they offer guaranteed express and

overnight services with tracking and acknowledgment facilities. Ordinary letters, most of which are in the 15 to 20 gram range, continue to be the exclusive preserve of the Department of Posts in any case. Besides, courier services are not permitted by the DOP to make use of the postal services for "last mile" deliveries. If private courier services are, by definition, to be discouraged why does the Government call Speedpost the Government's Own Courier Service?

Fourth, the Government says that it needs to service its Universal Service Obligation. It should therefore be allowed to charge the courier companies 10% of their revenue. Revenue, mind you, not profit. It cannot solve the problems of the Department of Posts. It will in fact make them worse by making the DOP more complacent than it already is. But it is enough to ruin the courier industry. Besides everybody benefits from the USO but it is only the express and courier services that are the target of this levy. The DOP wants to impose the limit of 300 grams below which the DOP will have the exclusive monopolistic right to service. Why then does it want the 10% of revenue levy in addition?

A Retrograde Bill

Then it wants the courier and express companies to register. Why this demand for registration does not apply to transporters and the airlines is not clear. They also carry parcels. Besides the registration is to be year on year. In effect what the government is planning is to impose a licensing regime on the courier service. This, at a time of de-licensing, deregulation and globalisation.

Most countries do not have mail development regulatory authorities. Where they do, it is to regulate monopolies. For example, the UK Postal Commission was set up to ensure that the Royal Mail did not exceed its monopoly. There is a similar provision in the US.

Another provision sought to be imposed is that foreign investors like Federal Express or DHL must dilute their holdings to a maximum not to exceed 51%. Or else they will be thrown out.

While the government may try to bring in this amendment to the Post Office Act it can only target the organised services in the private sector. It is unable to even begin to comprehend what needs to be done about the huge unorganised "angadia" service operating all over the country which probably make for about 50% of the postal traffic.

It is true that the government is losing business in the urban and metropolitan areas. But this is not primarily

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Point Counter Point

Ashok Karnik

Every issue has at least two sides. A wise man studies all sides before coming to a conclusion. This is an attempt to debate opposing viewpoints so that a considered opinion can be formed.

- Censorship of the electronic media is necessary because of its irresponsible conduct. Adult contents on cable, sensational but false scoops to gain TRPs, like breach of security at PM's house and a Minister's talk with a don etc., are everyday fare.
- Detention of 12 Indians in Amsterdam on biased suspicion and they were humiliated. Innocent people are being targeted due to their racial profile.
- South Africans withdrew from the cricket series in Sri Lanka due to a bomb blast in Colombo. Security concerns weighed heavily on the SA team and they felt they could not play in a disturbed mental state.
- Natwar Singh claims that he never received any oil scam money and that he had briefed Sonia Gandhi after his return from Iraq. Even the opposition parties claim that Natwar Singh is only a scapegoat.
- Pesticides found in Colas. Colas need to be banned, as Colas do not provide any health benefits whereas other pesticide-ridden foods consumed by us are needed by the body (like milk, fruits, etc.).
- Let the remedy not be worse than the disease. It is tempting to leave things to an all-powerful government. The Government is ever ready to control what you see, drink and enjoy. The Government has already decided that dance bars are bad for you, Adult movies are taboo on TV and Colas are bad for your health. All these may be genuine concerns but these decisions ought to be taken by the citizens for themselves and not by the Government. Parents have to look after their children's moral upbringing; it is not a task to be left to the Government. The Government has better things to do, like the security of the citizens. The best government is that which governs the least. The danger is, the government will next decide what you can read and write and even think. In the end, self-regulation is the best solution,
- More and more such incidents are likely to occur with the war on terror assuming global dimensions. Is there no remedy, as all Asians become suspect in the eyes of the Western world who tend to go by assumptions than facts? The West has to realize that security considerations can be appreciated but their authorities must be sensitized to the dangers of alienating their own supporters unless care is taken to handle the entire matter with circumspection. As long as there is only suspicion, without evidence, they must treat the "suspects" with courtesy and without affront to their dignity. Nothing can undo the damage but immediate compensation would go some way.
- The disturbances are indeed a cause for concern and the safety of players is of paramount importance but this problem goes beyond mere sports. In the days of global terror, no country is really safe from terrorist depredations. If Sri Lanka is not safe today, UK and US are not far behind in being targets. India is forever suffering from terror attacks. Can we stop the Commonwealth Games scheduled in Delhi? If the terrorists were led to believe that they could stop an international activity through their attacks, they would definitely target such events with greater vigour. It is time the world stood up to this challenge. Ultimately, it is the assessment of the host country that should matter.
- Natwar Singh is singing a different tune now. Earlier, he had never heard of the oil deals and the Volker report was a figment of imagination. He does not explain the letters written by him to the Iraqi Oil Minister. Even if the money has not come to him, he facilitated the deal for his son and relative, which he should have boldly admitted in the first place. What he briefed Sonia Gandhi about is still a secret. The opposition is suddenly soft on him because it smells an opportunity to hit at Sonia Gandhi. Where is their moral indignation over Natwar Singh's misadventure?
- Are Coke and Pepsi the targets because they are MNCs and easy to attack? Are the Indian soft drinks also to be banned? And what about tea and coffee? Are these also not redundant to the human body? The Government does not agree with the research done by the Center for Science and Environment (CSE) and has refused to condemn the Colas. The MNCs are being cagey, not admitting that their drinks contain pesticides but have resorted to a second line of defence arguing that the water that they are supplied itself contains pesticides. Is everybody not obfuscating the issue that the water we get needs to be attended to?

Readers are invited to send in their points of view on serious issues of the day to avkay@mtnl.net.in

The Prime Minister's Cruel Deception

Sharad Joshi

Fact-finding Exercises Don't Help if Facts are Deliberately Overlooked

Vidarbha's farmers had looked forward to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit with great eagerness in the belief that if their local politicians had failed them, surely the honest prime minister of India would bring some lasting relief. They were, alas, left deeply disappointed.

The Prime Minister went to Vidarbha with the declared intention of reviewing the situation first hand. This is not, let us remember, the first time that such fact-finding was taking place. The Maharashtra government, the M. S. Swaminathan committee, sundry media organisations, and sundry NGOs, have all already carried out studies on the Vidarbha situation. And their conclusions have run along similar lines: they all acknowledge the presence of contributory factors like family discord, poor health, and so on, but agree that the overwhelmingly predominant factor for rural distress in this region is massive indebtedness and the indebted farmers' inability to face the ignominy heaped on them by creditors, particularly cooperative banking institutions.

So what was there for the prime minister to discover anew? The right conclusions could have been drawn without moving out of South Block. Certain basic facts are very clear. First, Vidarbha's farmers are unlikely to be driven to suicide merely because a crop or two has failed. So the causes of suicides are not to be looked for in the immediate past.

Second, the adversity this region is experiencing is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until 60 years ago, Vidarbha was considered relatively prosperous. Marrying one's children into Vidarbha families was a matter of pride for the people of western Maharashtra. Similarly young men prided themselves if they succeeded in landing a Vidarbha father-in-law.

So when did Vidarbha's travails begin? The date can be pinpointed fairly accurately. Once a rich region of the Madhya Prant (the old province of Madhya Bharat), Vidarbha was made part of western Maharashtra simply because of the political compulsions of the Congress party. After the Samyukta Maharashtra agitation, there was no way the Congress could have had a political majority in Maharashtra. Senior party leaders therefore decided to push in the Congress majority region of Vidarbha in order to maintain control over the whole of Maharashtra, including Bombay. That was how a region rich in agricultural produce, like cotton and oranges, and endowed with abundant resources of iron, coal, manganese and electricity, came to be annexed to an industrially advanced state like Maharashtra.

The Rural Perspective



The inevitable started happening immediately. Soon after the formation of the state of Maharashtra, the Maharashtra State Cotton Monopoly Procurement Scheme (MSCMPS) was introduced. As it is, India's cotton producers as a whole were receiving a price that was 110 per cent lower than

that prevailing in the international free market, but Vidarbha's farmers – under the MSCMPS – got a price that was just about half the price received by cotton producers in states like Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. Vidarbha's cotton farmers, it is estimated, lost more than Rs.30,000 crores on account of the MSCMPS.

Vidarbha also has abundant water resources. However the Maharashtra government was extremely cagey about making funds available for canalising them. The money went largely towards the improvement of irrigation facilities in the sugar cane rich regions of Maharashtra. Since 1961, Vidarbha has been caught in a vice between the cotton and sugar cane.

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Need for a Healthy Debate

V. N. Torgal

The bane of the reservation controversy has been that it has raised a bitter controversy instead of a healthy debate.

When, in 1932, Gandhiji offered a blank cheque to Dr. Ambedkar to have as many reserved seats for scheduled castes as he desired, it was the finest example of an answer to the pernicious caste system with an ignominious history of three thousand years. Dr. Ambedkar looked at the problem more from a political point of view than a social one, while Gandhiji viewed it as a social problem. A golden opportunity of a sister and a nurse (Ambedkar called Gandhiji a nurse to the oppressed Dalits and himself a sister to the Dalits) merging into one personality of a mother was lost.

Thereafter, reservations have been a bitter struggle between those left behind in the advance and those who are straining at the leash to retain their advance. When Shri V. P. Singh Mandalized the political field, there was a hue and cry which died down only when the Supreme Court put its stamp of approval over the Mandalization of the political field. Now the same hue and cry is being raised against reservations in the higher educational sphere and in the non-government employment field.

Our president, Shri Kalam, has already found an answer to the problem of reservations in higher educational institutions with his suggestion that merit shall ever prevail and reservations will not come in the way of merit. The suggestion has almost been accepted by the Central Government and only the details are to be worked out. So the sting in the opposition to reservations has been blunted or ought to be blunted.

That OBCs do need reservations in the field of national life should be obvious to all, in the light of the very unsatisfactory progress made by these communities even after the golden jubilee of our independence. The obvious reason for this failure is that a practice of three thousand years cannot be done away within a matter of decades. How Dr. Ambedkar visualized this miracle to happen within a decade is a mystery. Perhaps he relied on the filtration theory that the advance of the creamy layer of the Dalits would filter down to the lower layers. But this theory has already proved to be false, as the education of the higher layers of Indian society failed to filter down to the lower levels. The miracle cannot happen

through law or constitutional provisions, but only through the magic of the Gandhian touch of bringing the advantaged and the non-advantaged together through the realization of the blundered social folly of thousands of years. The answer is in bringing about a social revolution and political reform. Let the slogan of protestors against reservationists be “youth for a social revolution” instead of “youth for equality.” One banner which I saw on television amused me: “Brahmin or Scheduled Caste, all stand for equality.” How sweet that dream would be when the banner turns into reality! But the harsh truth today is we need preferential treatment to different communities to make the dream of this banner a reality of national life.

Apart from this almost visionary thinking, where lies the solution to the present unhealthy rivalry between the advantaged and the non-advantaged and among the different OBCs for being getting the Dalit, or oppressed and Backward tag? Equality of opportunity is no answer. It simply means the continuation or the denial of opportunities for the OBCs. Preferential opportunities for the OBCs, with an assurance that merit shall not be punished, seems to be the only answer.

A word about statistics and the creamy layer and such other topics, which are very dear to the anti-reservationists. Statistics do say one thing and that is that the SC/STs and OBCs have not been able to play their role in national life with any significance commensurate with their numbers. Even today, they do not share in the nation's fortunes to any appreciable extent.

As a reaction to the screaming cry of the reservationists today, the demand is getting louder that there should be separate electorates for the SCs and STs. One shudders to think of this country's future if the anti-reservationists force God himself – terrorized by this anti-reservationism – to forsake us.

So the answer to this mind boggling riddle seems to be turning the political controversy into an earnest sociological debate with a mandate to come to a consensus.

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Cornucopia

Firoze Hirjikaka

Are Terrorists Stupid?

I happened to be on the very same Northwest Airline flight 0042 a month ago and, while we encountered nothing more alarming than a frowning flight attendant shooing people in the toilet line back to their seats during a period of turbulence, it was apparent that the American crew was not entirely at ease with the planeload of Indians. This was before the London terror alert, of course, and probably they were just uncomfortable due to the “unsophisticated” behaviour displayed by some of the passengers. My point is that it is not surprising that this incident took place on an American airline; they do tend to be a little too “trigger-happy”. The sight of a bunch of guys who looked “different” and were ‘horsing around’ – to use a Yankee expression – was probably too much for them.

Are terrorists really that stupid? This certainly seems to be the opinion of the security agencies. Nor is this an isolated incident. Sport a beard; wear non-Western clothes and talk “funny” and you are guaranteed special attention from the authorities. So would a terrorist intent

The proposals formulated by the Home Ministry Committee, headed by Soli Sorabjee, to make the police more professional and insulate them from political influence could, if implemented, become one of the more important milestones in the history of independent India.

The reason why India has never realized its full potential is that, despite having the economic clout, technical expertise and natural resources of many First World countries, the quasi-colonial mindset of its politicians keeps it firmly mired in the Third World. One of the biggest drawbacks of our successive governments has been their almost psychotic need to control everything. This is particularly evident in the case of the nation’s police force, where the right to interfere in, even dictate, transfers and promotions of our men in khaki, is jealously guarded. The reputation of the police in many states is far from admirable. Instances of even educated senior officers indulging in unethical, even illegal, practices are too numerous to recount. Naturally, a major reason for such brazen behaviour is absence of fear from retribution; since they are protected, sometimes even encouraged and abetted, by their political masters. Ironically, it is the small percentage of upright and efficient policemen who pay for their honesty by being sidelined and languish in inconsequential postings.

The proposal to appoint a statutory board to examine complaints from police officers about being

on mayhem go out of his way to draw attention on himself? Not unless he was incredibly dumb – which Al Qaeda or its affiliates definitely are not. If one of their operatives was smart enough to deceive multiple levels of airport security and get aboard an airplane, he would be smart enough to be unobtrusive. The genuine “bad guy” would probably be smartly dressed – sporting a smart goatee, at most – and speak impeccable English.

There is another sad fallout of this whole affair. Though very few would openly admit it, the knee jerk reaction of many of us, on learning the Muslim-sounding names of the detained Indians, would have been to assume that perhaps they *were* up to no good. And I’m not talking about Narendra Modi and his rabble rousers, but ordinary law abiding Hindus, Christians and Parsees. This is what this “secular” country, once celebrated for its tolerance towards all religions and peoples, has been reduced to. In that sense, the terrorists have already scored a significant victory.

Curbing Politicians’ Powers

subjected to “illegal orders” is admirable; but it can be circumvented. For one thing, the “tainted” officers who have achieved their undeserved rank and posting thanks to the patronage of their political bosses are hardly likely to complain about them. Secondly, the statutory board is to include the states’ home minister, chief secretary and Director General of Police; some of the very persons who often have a hand in unmerited promotions and transfers. Still, it is an important first step and just a few individuals with courage and integrity could make a significant change.

The Catch-22 situation, of course, is that our Constitution and system of governance requires any law to amend or replace the Police Act 1861 to be passed by parliament. And parliament is peopled by the very individuals who for decades have meticulously held on to their “influence” and privileges. Hence, the possibility of the Act being passed in the form suggested by the Sorabjee Committee is remote. The ruling party will make a show of “giving serious consideration” to the proposal. Secure in the knowledge that, for once, they will have the full, if surreptitious, backing of all opposition parties, amendments will be introduced which will retain cosmetic suggestions, but remove the teeth from any clause that dilutes their powers. This, after all, is the way it has always been in this great land of ours.

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A Land of Children Dancing in the Rain

Azim H. Premji

If India has to develop economically, socially, intellectually, and culturally, we must empower those most vulnerable to social diktat: our children.

One often hears of the high prevalence of child labour in our country. Of the many reports I have read, perhaps the most disturbing was a report on the condition of children employed by zari factories in Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of India. It grieves me to imagine children exposed to such inhumanity in an evolved society like ours.

Robbing children of their childhood is a criminal act, and our society must weed this malaise out from the root. But where does the root lie? Before you attempt an answer, let me give you an anecdote from the other end of the social spectrum.

A colleague in Wipro has a child studying in standard nine of a reputed school in Bangalore. This child wakes up 5 a.m. and studies for an hour before going to school. She returns from school at 4 p.m. and rushes for her IIT entrance exam coaching class. At 6 p.m., she has tuitions for two hours. Post dinner, she spends an hour or more on homework. I asked her when she gets time to play. She replied that she does not play. She gets half-hour of free time each day, which she spends watching her favourite serial on television. She also added that board exams and entrance exams are very important, and that you only get one chance.

Let me ask you: is the condition of this child different from that of the child in the zari factory?

When I look at children, I wonder whether they have time to play with friends, to meet interesting people, to explore the world, and to follow their curiosity. When the first monsoon showers begin, I would think that the streets would be full of children rushing headlong into the rain, dancing and playing. However, I think today, the rains fall on empty streets.

This, my friends, is the new Indian reality in our villages, in our slums, and in our metropolitan high-rises. Whatever the reasons – poverty, societal aspirations, apathetic individuals and organisations, or just the burden of circumstances – the reality is that our children are straitjacketed, thus stifling their natural growth.

The final indicator of a country's independence is

the way its children live. Are children free from the malaise of poverty and hunger? Are they free from the burden of parental aspiration? Are they free from norms of social conditioning? Are we ensuring the curiosity of our children continues to burn and is not stamped out? Are they free to explore the world, to realise their unique potential, and thereby, help discover the true potential of the society itself?

Gandhiji said that the greatest lessons in life are learnt from children, not from learned men. A child will fearlessly try before giving up. As adults, fearing failure, we give up even before we try. A child is inherently curious about the world, about relationships, about wanting to understand how things work. As adults, our blinkered and conditioned self prevents us from truly exploring without prejudice. For a child, what she does is meaningful in its own right. As an adult, we usually link every action to an external reward of money or recognition.

I did not learn how to be a father from manuals. Whatever little I learnt about being a parent, I learnt by observing my children and letting them teach me. Similarly, I think our teachers could grow enormously by learning from their students how to be a good teacher. We will then refrain from pushing our knowledge down their young minds, and begin the democratic process of being joint learners as we discover and understand our world. I believe a powerful force for empowerment is to have motivated teachers who are learners first, teachers second. Only then will we stop trying to mould children into our 'adult' likeness. Only then will we let them blossom, developing on the already mature qualities of their childhood.

If India has to develop economically, socially, intellectually, and culturally, we must empower those most vulnerable to social diktat: our children. Let us resolve to give our children the freedom of childhood; let us change our schools from being textbook prisons to laboratories of exploration; let us change homes from being tuition centres to playgrounds of art and sport.

India will be radiant when our children are free to dance in the rain.

Kind Courtesy: MR. AZIM H. PREMJI, Chairman and Managing Director, Wipro Ltd.

What The Tibetan Issue Is All About

C. A. Kallianpur

To understand what the Tibetan issue is there is no better way than to understand Chinese history by comparing it to our own history during the British rule.

Like the British who were waiting in the wings while Mughal rule was collapsing, the Manchus who were from Manchuria were also biding their time when the ruling Ming Chinese dynasty was on its last legs, outside the Great Wall, a wall built by the Chinese to keep out both the Manchus and the Mongols.

The British having consolidated themselves on the throne of Delhi moved into adjacent lands making some, like Burma into a province and some, like Nepal and Bhutan into protectorates and proclaimed their possession as the Indian Empire. The Manchus did likewise. They established themselves on the throne of Beijing as the Ching dynasty and after having consolidated themselves, conquered the adjacent territories of the Mongols and the Turkic people making their lands part of Manchu China and places like Tibet - a Manchu protectorate.

Here, I need to tell a little about the Manchus as many people are under the impression that the Manchus are Chinese or of Chinese stock. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word Manchu as a "Member of the Tartar people forming the last Chinese imperial dynasty (1644-1912)", their language is now spoken in parts of North East China and the word Tartar as: "Native of Central Asia East of Caspian Sea, member of a group of people including Turks, Mongols etc." The Chinese call themselves as Han and China proper which traditionally consists of 18 provinces is confined to the South of the Great Wall of China.

The only difference between Manchu China and British India was that unlike British India, there was a revolution in Manchu China in 1911-1912 and the Manchus were overthrown, one of the slogans of the revolution being "Down with the Aliens", and whatever was Manchu China came into the hands of the majority Hans, hence modern China's claims to whatever the Manchus built, which is the basis for their claim to Tibet and Taiwan currently and may be Korea in future.

Here we need to pause and ask ourselves whether on that basis can modern India claim Burma. The answer is No. Because Burma's relation was with British India and not modern India. It was the British who had made Burma a part of India not the Indians. Same is the case with Tibet. It is the Manchus who had made Tibet a protectorate of

Manchu China. Tibet's relations were with Manchu China not with modern China and the Hans who succeeded them. On what basis is modern China claiming Tibet? Take the case of Nepal and Bhutan which were also British protectorates. Today both are independent countries, even members of the United Nations. But why is Tibet which was a Manchu protectorate not an independent country?

We need to examine what happened in Tibet after the Manchus were overthrown. The then 13th Dalai Lama who was in exile in India returned to Tibet and proclaimed Tibet's independence, but was able to expel all Manchus only from Outer Tibet. Inner Tibet came into the possession of warlords. The British tried to formalise this situation and the McMahon Line was agreed to as the India-China boundary at the tripartite Simla Conference of 1913-19 between British India, China and Tibet. The Chinese did not sign the 1914 Simla Convention prompting the British to sign bilaterally with the Tibetans.

Do the Tibetans have anything in common with the Chinese:

- 1) Language: The Tibetan language being phonetic has alphabets, its source being Brahmi/Sanskrit and is written horizontally i.e. left to right. Some inscriptions at Kanheri Caves near Bombay which are in Brahmi, can be read by the Tibetans. The Chinese language not being phonetic has no alphabets but an ideographic script or pictograms and is written vertically i.e. from top to bottom. Therefore these two languages are like chalk and cheese.
- 2) Religion: The Tibetans follow Buddhism, the Chinese follow Confucianism which is more a social code of behaviour and ancestor-worship and Taoism.
- 3) Race: The Tibetans belong to the Mongoloid stock. The Tibetans and the Mongols have close affinities. The IV Dalai Lama of Tibet Yonten Gyatso was a Mongol. In the institution of Dalai Lama, there has been a Dalai Lama born in Mongolia, there has been a Dalai Lama born in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh which is in India, but there was never a Dalai Lama from proper China. The Chinese belong to the yellow race same as the Japanese and the Koreans.

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“Suffering is the Badge of Our Tribe”

R. Srinivasan

The last few weeks witnessed the passing away of some eminent stalwarts of literature and they need to be remembered.

Naguib Mahfouz passed away at the age of 95 in Cairo (30th August 2006). One of the most pre-eminent of Egyptians, he was the only Arab to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1998). A prolific novelist and short story writer, he lived all his life in Cairo and wrote his novels and stories on life in the city and the teeming inhabitants of his neighbourhood.

His novels were justly famous and one of them, ‘Children of Our Alley’ was to be controversial – “an allegory for the series of prophets that Islam believed in including Jesus and Moses ... and culminating in the Prophet ...” It was to be banned in the country (by the religious authorities) and had to be reprinted from Lebanon. An enraged Muslim Imam ruled that the author deserved to be killed. In 1994 he was stabbed by a religious zealot right in front of his home but he fortunately survived.

He was witness to the rule of King Farouk under British domination, of the traumatic events of the revolution which convulsed the country economically, politically and socially. He was to see the triumph of Nasser as well as his humiliation. Mahafouz claimed that he was the inheritor of several traditions, the ancient pre-Islamic pharonic, the Islamic and later the Western rationalist traditions of its literature and culture. To him, happenings in his beloved country were indeed depressing.

A prolific author of over fifty books, he was active to the very end, dictating his paragraphs. A year before his passing away, he published a collection of short stories.

If Mahafouz claimed inheritance of three civilisations, the other literary titan who passed away on April 30, 2006 - Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Jakarta was of a different vintage. Deeply involved in politics, he entered early into nationalist liberation and was to be imprisoned several times, first by the Dutch for his nationalist activities (1947-9), later by the independent government. Like many other literary figures of eminence, he wrote his first novel in prison. This was smuggled out and published in 1950, the first of several novels to be similarly brought out.

Once Indonesia became independent, he headed the Lekra, the People’s Cultural Institute, which was aligned to the PKI, the Communist Party of Indonesia. During his tenure as chief of the Lekra, he was responsible for suppressing or destroying the works of those opposed to his views and became a Literary Commisar of the Soviet variety. Later when he was awarded the Magsaysay Award, more than a score of literary figures opposed the award and one of the awardees and a once imprisoned writer

Mochtar Lubis was among them.

After the stepping down of Sukarno and his consequent house arrest, anti-communists turned their ire against Pramoedya laid waste his house, destroyed his library, burnt his writings and encyclopaedia on which he was working. He was taken to a waiting truck, chained like a dangerous criminal and there was every possibility of his being eliminated. Not for one or two but for fourteen long years he was imprisoned and packed off to the penal island colony of Maluku for a ten year term of incarceration. The brutal treatment meted out to the prisoners including Pramoedya was compounded by “the harsh forces of nature, starvation, loneliness and death”.

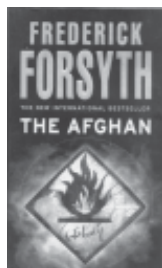
For one whom writing ran in his very blood, this ban on writing was indeed an unbearable agony. However, he and his fellow prisoners found a way out. When they returned in the evening back to the prison from their hard labour, they gathered together and Pramoedya would narrate to them his chapter in the novel that he had composed for the day. It was thus his masterpiece ‘The Buru Quartet’ running to more than a thousand pages came to be composed. When the authorities relented and allowed him to write, he had no paper to write on and his fellow prisoners saved up all the scraps of paper that they could lay their hands on. In spite of being imprisoned, his fame had reached distant shores and Jean Paul Sartre sent a typewriter for his use. A well disposed captain of a boat that plied carrying food to the prison island and to neighbouring islands made it possible to secrete these chapters to safe keeping in a monastery.

Released in 1979, but under house arrest, he published the first two volumes of his monumental quartet. It became a best seller and they were promptly banned by the government. The corpus of his writings in the face of the unsurmountable obstacles is enormous – 40 books in all. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize several times; his books have been translated into 37 languages.

It is the fate of writers in the third world to serve prison sentences or face severe public opprobrium. It is unique that a writer like Pramoedya who had suffered untold suffering should, in turn, become a Calvinist literary dictator driven by ideology. This is perhaps without a parallel in the non-communist third world and is the brand of Cain that his life will ever carry. What unites Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Burma and other countries is the way the State treats their writers. What Shylock said in a different context is true of them – “for suffering is the badge of our tribe”.

DR. R. SRINIVASAN, retired professor of Political Science, Mumbai University, and Associate Editor, *Freedom First*.

Book Review



THE AFGHAN

Published by
Frederick Forsyth, Transworld Publishers

Reviewed by
Firoze Hirjikaka, a freelance journalist.

The true measure of a master story teller is that once you start reading one of his novels, it takes all your will power – or sheer exhaustion – to put it down midway. Frederick Forsyth certainly falls in this category. But what sets him apart from many of his contemporary adventure novelists is a clever mix of fact and fantasy. He peppers his narrative with real people and actual events; and weaves his tale around them so skillfully that the reader tends to forget that this is a work of fiction and imagines himself vicariously reliving history or, in the case of *The Afghan*, the future.

Forsyth's latest novel revolves around a subject that is extremely topical and relevant today: terrorism. He skillfully intersperses true events like the July 2005 attacks on London's Underground and hints at a connection – however tenuous – between his chief protagonist and feared names like Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, so that – overriding one's sense of reason – one almost believes that he is perusing a true story.

The plot line of *The Afghan* is deceptively simple. A chance tip-off leads the authorities in Pakistan to a top Al Qaeda (AQ) operative. The AQ man thwarts their attempt to capture him alive by jumping off a roof, but he leaves behind a laptop containing enough information to get the intelligence services of Britain and America seriously worried. Apparently, AQ is planning a spectacular terrorist attack on the USA that would make September 11 seem pale in comparison. The laptop yields the name of the operation, but no details about its nature or scale – or how and when it is to take place. Since AQ operates through extremely secretive modules, who know only as much as they need to, the only way to find out about the entire plot is to infiltrate the top leadership of AQ, all the way up to Bin Laden himself.

The “Afghan” in the book is a former senior commander of the Taliban. He was captured during the American invasion of Afghanistan, after 9/11, and interred in the infamous Guantanamo Bay penitentiary. What makes him especially valuable to the Western spymasters is that,

before the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, he had a chance encounter with Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri and apparently impressed them with his courage. The main protagonist in Forsyth's novel is Mike Martin, a retired British soldier who grew up in Egypt, speaks fluent Arabic and, more importantly, has spent time in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation ferrying arms to the warlord Muhammad Shah Masood. The plan is to engineer a fake escape for the Afghan from Guantanamo Bay, spirit him away to a secret location and substitute Mike Martin in his place; hoping he could find his way into the AQ top tier. The bulk of the narrative revolves around how – in true spymaster style – this is accomplished. It would be a disservice to the author and his readers to reveal the final outcome here.

The Afghan has all the ingredients one expects of a Frederick Forsyth novel; twists and turns in the plot and edge-of-the-seat suspense. What sets it apart, however, is the insight it offers into the tortuous relationship between a terrorist and Islam. Two passages from the novel are worth quoting verbatim.

“Even *jihad* is the wrong word. Of course, *jihad* exists, but it has rules. Either it is a personal struggle within oneself to become a better Muslim, but in that case it is completely non-aggressive. Or it means true holy war; armed struggle in the defence of Islam. That's what the terrorists claim they are about. But they choose to airbrush the rules out of the text. True *jihad* can only be declared by a legitimate Koranic authority of proven and accepted repute. Bin Laden and his acolytes are notorious for their lack of scholarship.”

“(In Islam) it is forbidden to attack and kill those who have offered no offence and done nothing to hurt you. It is forbidden to kill women and children. It is forbidden to take hostages and it is forbidden to mistreat, torture or kill prisoners. The AQ terrorists and their followers do all four on a daily basis.”

This Forsyth novel has come after a fairly longish interval. It was worth the wait.

Time and Technology Wait For None *(Cont'd. from page 2)*

due to the courier services. It is due to SMS, the internet, fax and phone services. What then should the DOP do?

There is no doubt that the Department of Posts is facing a crisis and needs to pull up its socks and perhaps even its trousers. But the way forward is not by this kind of amendment to the Indian Postal Act. It is by adapting itself to new developments as they occur. It did an admirable job when it started the telegraph service. Now the time has come for it to do something similar.

The telephone services were transformed by the Pitroda initiative. This transformation in fact resulted in falling revenues for the Department of Posts in a largely illiterate subcontinent which preferred to talk rather than write. The Department of Posts must do something similar.

Where the Telephones set up STD/ISD booths at

every street corner, a task that involved wiring up all those millions of street corners and providing the infrastructure, the Department of Posts already has the infrastructure of 1,55,000 post offices. It can set up cyber cafes in all of them and re-train postmen specifically to key in messages for illiterate villagers and read them their replies. The post office can also have booths at which people operate the internet themselves if they wish. Over time the entire task of sending letters will then be replaced by e-mail, even encrypted e-mail. Money will be transferred electronically as a matter of course. So there will be no need to send cheques or drafts by post. It could eventually result in the business of the Department of Posts being limited to handling parcels. There they can compete with the courier services in the open market to the benefit of the consumer. The courier services will surely welcome such competition.

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The Rural Perspective *(cont'd. from p.4)*

We (the Shetkari Sanghatana) have long proposed a rescue plan for the besieged cotton farmers along these lines:

One, a 24-hour helpline should be established that can be accessed by desperate farmers and the administration should try to resolve the problems of the threatened family by studying its needs and possibilities without loss of time.

Two, it should be solemnly announced that the villainous Maharashtra State Cotton Monopoly Scheme is scrapped forever and that its presence be limited only to ensuring a minimum support price for cotton. Private trade should operate freely and purchases made without any restrictions.

Three, all coercive recoveries of loans should cease forthwith and in no case should the farmer's land, agricultural implements and household necessities be seized.

Four, farmers who find themselves unable to pursue agriculture as a vocation should be given the option of selling their land at current market prices.

Five, the constitution of a separate state of Vidarbha should be put on the fast track.

The Prime Minister's package is needlessly couched in financial terms. The farmers' demands do not involve any additional expenditure but demand some very hard decisions, which could be severely embarrassing to the

Congress party, like the scrapping of the MSCMPS and the formation of the separate state of Vidarbha.

That an eminent economist like the Prime Minister should consider it necessary to seek the advice of a committee to understand the problems of rural indebtedness is tragic. Given the fact that agriculture in India is a losing proposition, adjusting interest and restructuring repayments can at best be palliatives. Dr Manmohan Singh, in his earlier incarnation as Narasimha Rao's finance minister, had kept agriculture out of the reach of his economic reforms and the present distress of farmers all over India is a consequence of that aberration.

Incidentally, the package announced by the Maharashtra chief minister on December 10, 2005, had the effect of actually accelerating the tempo of suicides. One would have to wait and watch the farmers' reaction to the prime minister's package. But one thing is clear already. It seems to have been thrown together in a tearing hurry. Even the totals don't tally. The sum of Rs.3,500 crore for the relief of the farmers is barely 10 per cent of the value of this year's loans held by them in cooperative banks.

The PM, I suspect, was made to run through a minefield by his party bosses. But Vidarbha's farmers are unlikely to have benefited from the exercise.

MR. SHARAD JOSHI, founder of Shetkari Sanghatana, is a member of the Rajya Sabha. He can be contacted at sharad.mah@nic.in

Between Ourselves ...

The feedback on the 12-page August monthly is a mixed bag of cautious welcome and an emphatic no no from those who feel that it looks more like a leaflet than a journal and does not do justice to the quality of its contents. They have a point. The problem for us is the age-old *cliché*: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak! However what is encouraging is the instant feedback! We have taken note of the suggestion made by more than one reader that what the monthly lacks is a cover to give it respectability! We agree. We'll do our best to give the monthly a cover asap.

In the last two months we have been having a distressingly useless debate over *Vande Mataram*. Even while we are grappling with the Reservation conundrum the Union HRD minister throws another missile, this time aimed at school children – they must sing *Vande Mataram* the national song on its centenary on September 7. Heads of Muslim schools refused to compel their children to do so on religious grounds. So did some Sikh Gurudwaras. *Freedom First* finds nothing intrinsically wrong with *Vande Mataram*. It is a beautiful ode to Mother India. But

everything is wrong if the unwilling are forced to sing it. Those who refused to sing it are as patriotic as those who sing it with gusto. But then our politicians, of all hues and directions, have to keep tensions alive particularly if such tensions are divisive in nature, for this is the recipe for survival in politics – keep the pot boiling. Moreover it is the easiest thing to do in India already riven by a million divisions of caste, religion, regionalism, language – the list is endless. If this nation is to survive and preserve its integrity, policies that divide people into various compartments have to be discarded. This requires courage of an extraordinary kind. We must seek it among our people not among those who claim to govern us. This is the line of thought that *Freedom First* will seek to explore in its pages and invites you to participate in this patriotic exploration.

Stop Press: As we to press we understand that the HRD Ministry goofed on its date – 7th September was not the correct date of the anniversary we are now told!

- Editor

Many Voices

...every single person is ultimately alone, from the moment that umbilical cord is cut.

Film actress Rekha in an interview in *Brunch*, a *Hindustan Times* Sunday magazine, July 30

Business tycoons are entering Parliament while many from political families are becoming tycoons.

Former Union minister Arun Nehru, *The Asian Age*, August 4

I have always believed that memoirs, no matter how well they are crafted, are really meant for grandchildren to read, as the author is never wrong.

Former Union minister Arun Nehru, *The Asian Age*, August 4

Please give us the pill you are administering to Shiv Sena leaders. After joining the (Congress) party, they adopt the secular ideology overnight.

Maharashtra's home minister and NCP leader R. R. Patil, *Mumbai Mirror*, January 19.

So buyable are our politicians and bureaucrats that there have been moles at the highest levels in Delhi from the time of Morarji Desai and Jagjivan Ram.

T.J.S.George, *The New Sunday Express*, August 6

Dealing with devils seems to have reminded him of God.

An aide to prime minister Manmohan Singh (who was thanking senior GOI officials for their assistance in getting the India-US nuclear deal through parliament), *The Indian Express*, August 21.

If Saddam (Hussein) is given to me, I would eat him.

Iraqi Kurd Khawar Mahmoud who lost six children and his pregnant wife who were killed by Saddam's army using chemical weapons, *The Indian Express*, August 22

I think on the reservations issue, everybody wants a very, very quick fix.

S. Ramadorai, CEO, Tata Consultancy Services, *The Indian Express*, August 21

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