



# *THE SASIA STORY*

**told by Madanjeet Singh**

UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador

# *THE SASIA STORY*

*Dedicated to  
the young people of South Asia*





Published in the UNESCO Profiles series.

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This publication received the support of the European Commission.  
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Published in 2005 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
7, place de Fontenoy F-75352 Paris 07 SP, France

ISBN 92-3-103992-X

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Proofreading: David McDonald, UNESCO Paris  
Layout: Paolo Regini and Piero Giussani, Amilcare Pizzi, Milan

Typeset, printed and bound in Italy on June 2005 by Amilcare Pizzi s.p.a.,  
Cinisello Balsamo (Milan)

**Madanjeet Singh**

# *THE SASIA STORY*

Foreword

**Koïchiro Matsuura**

Introduction

**Manmohan Singh**



UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

IN COOPERATION WITH THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
SOUTH ASIA FOUNDATION

## **OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR**

Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone

Etruscan Cave Painting

INDIA, Painting from Ajanta Caves

Indian Miniatures

Ajanta, Paintings of the Sacred and the Secular

Himalayan Art

The White Horse

This My People

The Sun in Myth and Art

The Timeless Energy of the Sun



## Director General

Regional cooperation is the theme of Madanjeet Singh's latest book, *The Sasia Story*. It is as closely interwoven with UNESCO's programmes, principles and ideals as a number of his previous publications with UNESCO.

*The Sasia Story*, published in cooperation with the European Commission, recounts Madanjeet Singh's lifelong search for common cultural and economic denominators to foster and strengthen cooperative initiatives. *Sasia* is the name he has coined for South Asia's common currency in the hope that, like the Euro, it will become the anchor of economic stability. He strongly believes that in today's fast-moving and ultra-competitive world, regional cooperation is indispensable and no country can safeguard its security and economic well-being unilaterally. His teenage experiences of poverty have led him to establish two foundations devoted to helping marginalized and disadvantaged communities in South Asia.

In recognition of his lifelong devotion to the cause of communal harmony and peace, the biennial 'UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence' was unanimously created by the 52-member UNESCO Executive Board at their meetings in Paris and Fez (16 May to 4 June 1995), marking the 125th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi. Among the Prize laureates have been dedicated groups of human right activists from Rwanda, India and Pakistan as well as distinguished individuals such as the Egyptian Coptic Patriarch, Chenouda III, Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar and Taslima Nasreen of Bangladesh.

Madanjeet Singh was designated as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador on 16 November 2000, the United Nations' International Day of Tolerance.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "K. Matsuura".

Koichiro Matsuura







प्रधान मंत्री  
Prime Minister

Since I had the pleasure of inaugurating the Sumitra Foundation, established by Madanjeet Singh in January 1995, I have retained an interest in the work of the two organizations established by Madanjeet – the Sumitra Foundation and the South Asia Foundation. I have watched as the South Asia Foundation has worked to enlarge the scope and dimension of its activities in search of common cultural, educational and economic denominators to strengthen cooperative initiatives throughout the South Asian region. *The Sasia Story* is a worthy part of these efforts.

This latest book of Madanjeet Singh recounts how, inspired by the secular and democratic ideals of Jawaharlal Nehru, and emotionally affected by his teenage experiences of people's grinding poverty, he has invested all he had to help marginalized rural communities not only in India but in all the South Asian countries.

The idea that is at the kernel of *The Sasia Story* is one that has remained with many people from my generation in South Asia. History takes its course, and it is not for me to speculate about possible alternative roads that South Asia could have taken nearly sixty years ago. However, it remains an alluring suggestion to consider what South Asia would look like if we realize the noble idea of amicable cooperation that is at the heart of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). I do believe that if the ambitious goal of integrating the economies of the South Asian nations is realized, our nations, which bear the ignominy of having among the largest number of deprived and underprivileged people, could well mirror the European Union in its singular effort to integrate the economies of many nations. While I remain confident of India's commitment to achieve this lofty goal, it is only realistic to admit that much more needs to be done to realize this vision.

Madanjeet Singh and other members of civil society who believe in this vision of a harmonious, prosperous South Asian community of nations, at peace with themselves, play an important role in chipping away at entrenched positions. Consequently, I am confident that the success of this book would substantially contribute to this noble endeavour. It is therefore a pleasure and privilege to wish this book every success.

New Delhi  
September 4, 2004

[Manmohan Singh]



Once upon a time, I went to school in a town called Trivandrum. It was the capital of the princely state of Travancore, where the natives spoke their own language, Malayalam, and used their own currency, the *chukram*.

Both of my parents originally hailed from another princely state, Jammu and Kashmir, far north at the other end of India. My maternal grandfather, Makhan Singh, a native of Jammu, started off as a contractor with the British cantonments in the rugged and dangerous region of the Northwest Frontier Province. Once he was waylaid by a warlord through whose territory his caravan of mules and camels was passing. The warlord threatened to kill him and take away all his goods and animals. 'You will do no such thing', my grandfather told him firmly, 'as that would be contrary to your tradition of protecting your guests', and he continued on his journey. A handsome, hearty Sikh with a flowing beard and a great sense of humour, he would tell hilarious stories of how he used to hoodwink the 'tommies' by showing them repeatedly the same camel's tail, as evidence that many animals had died on his journey, and then claiming compensation. But Makhan Singh did not become wealthy until he replaced his camels and mules with the newly arrived automobiles, and the authorities granted his

*My dad, Dogar Singh, would accompany the Maharaja to various splendid state functions, such as the spectacular Onam festivities when he would walk barefoot to the temple in a procession of religious chariots pulled by swaying tuskers.*



Imperial Motor Service a monopoly on transporting mail between Jammu and Srinagar.

The family of my father, Dogar Singh, lived in Uri in Kashmir. It was in a great hurry that he married Makhan Singh's only daughter, Sumitra Kaur, to take care of his 6-month old son, who had miraculously survived a tragic road accident. At the time, horse-drawn *tongas* were used to cover long distances, changing horses along the way. My father's first wife was carrying the baby from Uri to Srinagar. About halfway, on a narrow road that perilously grazed the vertical mountain rocks, the horse slipped trying to bypass a landslide blocking the road. The mother, to save the baby, flung him out as the *tonga* hurtled down the ravine, crashing 1,000 feet below and killing all on board. It was only when the next coach arrived four hours later that my half-brother, Gajendra, was found, dangling by his nappy from a tree branch sticking out over the edge of the cliff.

By this time, Makhan Singh and his extended family had opened up a number of canteens in cantonments all over Punjab and had moved to Lahore, where I was born on 16 April 1924. My grandfather proposed that his son-in-law take charge of one of the canteens, but my father preferred to continue higher studies. He joined the Forman Christian College in Lahore, won a scholarship to study industrial

*In Travancore, the natives spoke their own language, Malayalam, and used their own currency, the chukram (above).*

ceramics in England, and on his return was appointed a professor at the Hindu University in Benares.

I have some very pleasant memories of Benares; how my younger sister, Kaki, and I impatiently counted the days before we could sprinkle coloured water over the visitors who came to greet us on the Holi festival, and cover their faces with cinnabar; how we lighted candles and watched fireworks at Diwali; and how we went out singing and dancing with a procession of university students and professors, all dressed in yellow, when they came to our house early in the morning to celebrate the spring festival of Basant. The one unpleasant memory I recall was the resentment I felt at my father's decision not to send me to the Hindu School – where most of the other children on the university campus went – because Urdu was not taught there. He felt that, without knowing Urdu, a Punjabi's education was incomplete. So I went all alone to a Christian Missionary school, on an *ekka* (a peculiar two-wheeled horse carriage with a square wooden platform for the passengers to squat on), while all my friends were driven in a bus to another school. My isolation was all the more painful when an opposing cricket team in my neighbourhood took advantage of my absence from the Hindu School and lured away some players in our team, of which I was the captain.

In early 1935, the Maharaja of Travancore visited Benares and, impressed with my father's work, invited him to build a ceramics factory at Kundara, a village in his state where china clay deposits had recently been discovered. My father happily accepted the offer and took up his new job in mid-1936.

Travancore not only changed our lifestyle but also jolted the family with a series of cultural shocks. We no longer

lived in one of the tiny service apartments allotted to professors in Benares, but in a large villa fully equipped with refrigerator and telephone, gadgets we had not seen until then. The villa was located in a posh area surrounded by a spacious garden, and was close to Bhativilasam, the residence of the Dewan, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer. My father now had a large retinue of assistants and servants, and all the other amenities that high state officials were allowed. He would accompany the Maharaja to various splendid state functions. I particularly remember the spectacular Onam festivities, when he would walk barefoot under a gold-embroidered parasol, heralded by drums, bugles, trumpets and fifes. The entire route from the palace to the main temple was lined with fluttering standards, and decorated swaying tuskers passed through, the majestic elephants followed by lancers riding lovely horses. On weekends, our family would head off in our newly purchased, chauffeur-driven car for picnics at the beautiful white beaches of Kovalam. Naturally, this bewildering environment had an effect on me – I had a pair of breeches stitched in expectation of my father buying me a horse, and now I wanted to be driven to my nearby school by car. But my dad would have none of it, saying: 'When all the students go to school barefoot, you can jolly well walk with your shoes on.' At the time hardly anyone wore shoes in Travancore.

My dad once told my mother that in the Punjab you could tell a person's status and level of education by looking at their shoes, but this adage was totally invalid in Travancore. At the time, Bibiji, as everyone called my mother, was on the lookout for a maid-servant. One day, standing on the porch of the villa, she spotted two Malayali girls walking barefoot in the street, simply dressed in traditional loincloths

*On weekends, the family went for picnics and enjoyed the beautiful white sandy beaches of Kovalam, the magnificent resort known as the sun, surf and blue paradise of the Arabian Sea. PV solar lanterns are now often used for fishing at night.*





(mundu) and blouses. Attracted by my mother's Punjabi salwar-kamiz and dupatta-covered head, they approached her curiously. My mother did not speak much English; women of her generation in Punjab were discouraged from going to school, so my sister Kaki interpreted. The girls told her that they were indeed looking for a job, but not the kind of work Bibiji had in mind: they had recently returned from abroad, after having graduated from Harvard University in the United States. My mother felt so small and ashamed; later she complained to her husband: 'How could I tell, as these people do not believe in wearing shoes?'

My dad never called my mother by name. Instead, she was 'Toti's mother' – Toti being my nickname. For him it was scandalous that Malayali husbands and wives called each

other by name. Coming from a very macho world, he was uncomfortable to find that his boss was not the Maharaja but the Maharaja's mother, who ruled through the Dewan. Nor could he comprehend a strange social system in which the heir apparent was the son of the Maharaja's sister, and not his own son. I recall his bewilderment upon learning from our house-girl that her mother, the head of a matrilineal kin group called a *theravad*, had tied a man to a jackfruit tree for some misconduct and given him a good hiding. 'What kind of a country is this?' he asked, as if Travancore were not a part of India – an amusing comment when he himself had explained to his children that historically India covered the whole of South Asia. The name India had evolved over the centuries; the early inhabitants of the subcontinent named

*I had a pair of breeches stitched in expectation of my father buying me a horse, and I wanted to be driven to my nearby Model School (left) in our newly purchased chauffeur-driven car. But my father would have none of it: 'When all the students go to school barefoot, you can jolly well walk with your shoes on.'*



it after the mighty river Sindhu, which in Sanskrit means ‘like an ocean’. Later, the Greeks called it Indus, and thus the whole of South Asia came to be known by the generic name of India.

My mother had her own problems with exchanging rupees into fractions of chukrams when she went out shopping. She did not know that, as with all currencies, the chukram was born of a complicated history of power plays between large and small states, and rising and falling rulers of India. Ever since the first coins were minted in India over 2,600 years ago, currencies were not only used as financial tenders of trade and commerce, but also served as important political instruments to unify and stabilize great empires. The two empires of Kushan and, later, the Gupta

dynasties minted the finest gold coins of the ancient world. The Mughal dynasty, which ruled large parts of India from the early sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, introduced a new series of coins; the prototype and even the emperor’s name continued to be used by regional rulers well after the empire’s supremacy had faded. The Marathas rulers used many of these currencies to strengthen the power of the Peshwas, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh employed them in the Punjab, where he was the undisputed military power until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The hundred semi-independent states that subsequently took over used their own currencies, which the British in turn used to strengthen their administrative control. With the consolidation of imperial authority in 1858, only thirty-four

*The gold coins of the Mughal emperor, Jahangir (1569–1627). The Mughal dynasty that ruled large parts of India from the early sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century introduced a new series of coins. This prototype, and the emperor’s name, continued to be used by the regional rulers even after the empire’s supremacy had faded.*



states were conceded the right to mint their own coins; Travancore, with its chukram, was one of them.

Above all, my education became a most knotty problem, because Malayalam was the only, and compulsory, vernacular taught. In Benares, my father had found a school where Urdu was taught. But here in Trivandrum, the principal of the Model School, with whom my father met, was not even aware that Urdu was an Indian language: 'No! We do not teach foreign languages in this school' he told my dad, who almost fainted.

Provoked by such blatant ignorance, my father tried to explain to the principal that Urdu was very much an Indian language, originating in the region between the Ganges and Jamuna Rivers near Delhi. He told him how the earlier varieties of Urdu, variously known as Gujari, Hindawi and Dakhani, showed more affinity with eastern Punjabi and Haryani than with Khari Boli, the language commonly spoken in that area. It was as though he were giving the principal a lecture, telling him also about the Urdu literary tradition that resulted from the literary products of these dialects, which were all based on Sufi-Bhakti court cultures. Ignoring the fact that the principal was not even listening, my father went on to say that Urdu literature began to develop in the sixteenth century, in and around the courts of the kings of Golconda and Bijapur in the Deccan, in central India. He told him that Aurangabad became the centre of Urdu literary activities in the late-seventeenth century and, with the migration of scholars from Delhi in the eighteenth century, that Lucknow too had become an important centre of Urdu literature and poetry.

Frustrated, my dad took up the matter in vain with the Dewan himself. This resulted in Hindi (not Urdu) becoming

a part of the curricula in Travancore schools for the first time. My knowledge of Hindi was elementary, limited to what I had learned in the primary school in Benares. But Hindi created an even greater difficulty for the principal of Model School, as he could not find a suitable teacher. The person who was eventually appointed to teach me knew even less Hindi than I, so that I was the one who ended up teaching the teacher: I was the only student who appeared for the final exams, and scored a first class.

My father admired south Indians for their 'plain living and high thinking', using them as an example for his children to follow, rather than the extrovert Punjabis. But the current of life is determined by the terrain on which it flows, and although he hardly noticed it himself, the glamour of the princely court began to erode many of my father's previously held beliefs. He no longer aired nationalistic views as he had done in Benares, but now expressed opinions with which I disagreed. One day, when I told him that Sir CP, as the Dewan was called, had banned the Congress Party and arrested several Congress workers, he defended this action and referred to Congress policy of non-interference in princely states, saying that Mahatma Gandhi himself was not in favour of the Congress workers 'creating trouble' in Travancore; obviously he was afraid of a workers' strike in his factory. He reminded me that Sir CP had a liberal background and had once been the Joint Secretary of the Home Rule League and the General Secretary of the Indian National Congress. I disagreed whole-heartedly: Sir CP may have been a liberal in the past, but now, as Pandit Nehru said, he was nothing but 'a shining ornament of autocracy in an Indian state'. I supported the view that 'the Princes must go, as they had long survived their day,



propped up by an alien power’, and the strong words of condemnation I used were blunt and rude enough to provoke a heated and unpleasant argument.

Soon after I finished my schooling in Trivandrum, our family moved to a newly built bungalow at Kundara, beautifully situated on the edge of a hill and overlooking on three sides the waters of Ashtamudi, the eight-headed backwater. Although I wanted to go to Benares Hindu University (BHU), my mother was keen for me to go to a university in Madras, a city not so far away. My sister Ranjeeta (Kaki) had stayed behind in Trivandrum to study at a Women’s College (where special arrangements had been made to provide her with Punjabi food), and my mother was horrified at the thought of

being left alone in the ‘wilderness of Kundara’. She had already felt very homesick in Trivandrum; Lahore was too far away for her to travel every summer to visit her family as she used to do from Benares. ‘Why do you want to go and suffer in the sultry heat and dust in Punjab while you are so comfortably living in this paradise of perpetual greenery and clear blue skies?’ my dad would ask her. But she was not impressed, and one day confided in me, saying: ‘What kind of a paradise is this where even dust storms do not come?’ *Nheri* was the word she used, which literally means ‘darkness’, and I remember how the dust storms in Lahore when I was a child would turn the bright sunny day into pitch darkness, and how everyone would rush to shut the doors and

*The Maharaja of Travancore, accompanied by his heir-apparent (the son of his sister), came barefoot to open the china clay factory at Kundara in 1940. On my dad’s left is the Dewan, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer. The Maharaja had visited Benares in early 1935 and, impressed with Dogar Singh’s expertise, invited him to build the factory (left) in his state, where china clay deposits had recently been discovered.*

windows of their homes. Perhaps this is one example that culture had yet to be defined.

Finally, Bibiji reluctantly agreed that I could go to Benares, after my dad reminded her of how he had once come back hungry from a luncheon hosted by the Maharaja of Travancore to celebrate the opening of the china clay factory. He had expected the royal banquet to be like the lavish meal to which he had been invited in Srinagar along with his elder brother, a court-painter for the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. In Srinagar, the large rosewood dining table had been laid out with shining silverware, and behind each gilded chair stood a uniformed attendant, serving a variety of delicious Kashmiri

and Punjabi dishes. In contrast, there was no furniture in the dining room of the palace in Trivandrum, as the guests squatted on the floor, leaning against the four walls of the bare hall. A number of naked servants, wearing nothing but the *mundu* loincloth wrapped around their waist, then appeared one after the other, one placing in front of each guest a banana leaf sprinkled with water, the second serving lumps of rice with his hand, and the third pouring the watery *sambar* onto the rice from a metal container. The Maharaja, sitting next to my father, was greatly amused as he watched him looking desperately for a spoon while the *sambar* was freely flowing onto the floor. 'Professor Singh', he said politely,



*The Shudra community was prohibited from entering temples, or even worshipping idols of Hindu gods, although they profess the Hindu religion. In Mysore, they built the Swami Thoppu shrine to worship the sun, symbolized by a mirror. Every morning at sunrise the whole village gathers and performs the prakarma as they walk around the temple in a procession, carrying a large mirror decked in flowers (left).*

‘eating rice with hand without spilling *sambar* is a part of our culture, which I am sure you will soon learn.’ My dad had been starving when he returned home and asked Bibiji to cook some *daal* and *rotti*, commenting sarcastically, ‘Their culture did not fill my stomach.’

Before my departure for Benares, our family went on a sightseeing tour to the neighbouring princely state of Mysore, known for its beautiful temples and the magnificent palace of the Maharaja, about which we had heard so much. I did not know that people of lower castes were not permitted to worship in Hindu temples, even though they were Hindus. So I was taken aback when the high priest of a large temple barred us from entering, as he thought Sikhs were ‘untouchable’. He advised us to go and pray at the Swami Thoppu temple, a shrine that the Shudra community had built for themselves. Curious to know what this was all about, we went to the temple, in a village that was inhabited exclusively by people from the disadvantaged castes known collectively as the schedule castes. We found that even among these Hindus, the worship of Hindu gods or goddesses was strictly prohibited. Instead, they had installed a mirror in their shrine as a sun symbol, with the motto: ‘All are equal under the sun’. Every morning at sunrise the whole village would gather and perform the *prakarma*, walking around the temple in a procession, carrying a large mirror representing the sun. They venerated it as the fundamental source and embodiment of truth and justice, wisdom and enlightenment, physical and spiritual healing and, above all, growth and renewal of life.

A teenage revolt was brewing in me as I boarded the train for Benares in early 1939. I hated the discrimination that

was so pervasive in India, deeply rooted in the Indian psyche ever since the Aryans – the ‘pure ones’ – first established a social system that classified people by caste. This social structure manifested itself in the newspaper advertisements seeking fair-skinned brides and bridegrooms, in the prejudice against intercommunity marriages. It was a refined form of apartheid that specified who could cook your food, with whom you could eat, whom you could marry, how marriages should be performed in different castes, what kind of clothes and adornments a woman must wear, and even such ludicrous things as whether or not a man could wear a shirt or carry an umbrella. Caste divided the labour market: the Shudras, or the untouchables, were deemed fit only to be scavengers, and were forced to do dirty work at low wages.

Benares seemed a different place from what I had known as a child. My childhood impressions of it and my teenage experiences in Travancore clashed with each other as I tried to make sense of the subcontinent’s unity in diversity. The students at BHU came from all over South Asia, including present-day Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as from Nepal and Sri Lanka, and many came from as far away as Malaysia and East Africa. My roommate, Kanubhai Patel, was from Nairobi, and was dubbed ‘jungli’ by my north Indian friends, imagining that Africa was a vast jungle, somewhat like India south of Bombay, inhabited by ‘Madrasis’. Mostly we lived in groups, speaking our own language, wearing our own regional clothes and eating our own food in separate mess halls. The classroom and the sports fields were the only common areas where we met and interacted. Together we attended classes and went to play football, hockey, tennis and especially cricket, communicating in



*Benares seemed a different place from the one I had known as a child. My childhood memories of Benares clashed with my teenage experiences in Travancore, as I tried to make sense of the subcontinent's unity in diversity. The students at Benares Hindu University came from all over South Asia – present-day Bangladesh and Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and some from as far away as Malaysia and East Africa.*



English. Some of us got to know each other also when we gathered on Sunday mornings at the University Training Corps (UTC) field.

By year's end, acquaintances had turned into fast friendships and exchanging gifts became a common practice, a sort of barter trade, as the students returned with

souvenirs and clothes worn in their part of the world. BHU now seemed like a microcosm of South Asia – a huge banyan tree whose branches represented many ethnic cultures. Our Vice-Chancellor, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, helped us deepen our sense of unity in diversity; his weekly Geeta lectures expanded our cultural horizons enormously. He

*Mostly we lived in groups, spoke our own language, wore our own regional clothes and ate our own food in separate messes, but we were all united in the classroom, the playground and the University Training Corps (UTC). By year's end, acquaintances had turned into fast friendships and exchanging gifts became a common practice, a sort of barter trade, as the students returned with souvenirs and clothes worn in their part of the world.*

explained that the term 'culture' cannot be precisely defined because it cannot be cast into a rigid mould. It is an ever-changing, ever-growing and ever-evolving phenomenon produced by the interaction of different cultures within and without the region.

Dr. Radhakrishnan also made us aware of India's intangible cultural heritage, the development of which had accelerated with the arrival of the Aryans, who composed the sacred verses, the Rig Veda, on the banks of the River Sarasvati. This tradition continued with the development of the Hindu philosophy that was carried forward by the devotional fervour of the Bhakti movement. In south India, it was promoted by the Alvar and Nayanar hymnists from the seventh to the tenth century, but it was not until the Bhakti

notions interacted with the Islamic mysticism of Sufism in the Middle Ages that a South Asian 'renaissance' flourished, inspiring superb poetry and literature in regional languages rather than Sanskrit. Devoted to the classical ideals of divine love, the Bhakti poet-saints hailed from all sections of society, irrespective of gender, class or caste – ranging from mendicants like Namdev, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Surdas and Chandidas to the Rajput Princess of Jodhpur, Mira Bai, who wrote her lyrics both in Hindi and Gujarati. Dr. Radhakrishnan was a great Vedanta scholar. He told us that even though Hinduism was derived from the Vedas, it must not be confused with the Hindu religion which essentially began to develop with the Upanishads at the 'end of the Vedas', Vedanta. We also learned from him how the Sufi mystics found a resemblance



*I entered the cruel world of stark poverty as I saw people sleeping in the street (left). A defining moment of my life occurred when I saw a half-naked woman cooking for her children in a crumpled canister the same twigs, rags and old newspapers that she was using to ignite the fire below, in the chullah that she had improvised with two bricks.*

between the ontological monism of Ibn al-'Arabi and that of Vedanta, and how the Shattari order of the Indian Sufis practiced Yogic austerities and even physical exercises.

I became interested in photography in the early 1940s. Using my older brother Gajendra's box camera, I started taking snapshots – especially of the common and poverty-stricken people – during my long south-north travels, when I saw destitute and miserable people emerging from every nook and cranny of the towns and villages. But never before had poverty pained me as much as when, travelling to Benares after summer vacation, I happened to see a half-naked woman huddled in a corner of the platform at the Coimbatore railway station. As the train halted, I was shocked to find that she was cooking, in a crumpled canister, the same twigs, rags and old newspapers with which she was igniting the fire below them, in the *chullah* she had improvised with two bricks. Some teenage experiences are so charged with emotion that they nestle deep in the heart and forever eat away the soul. This event was a defining moment of my life, as I entered the cruel world of reality.

**O**n 17 August 1942, my life took a sharp turn. I was on my way to the weekly UTC drill when a friend came running and broke the news that Mahatma Gandhi had launched the 'Quit India' movement against colonial rule, and that he, along with most other Congress leaders, had been arrested. Everyone was stunned. Not knowing what to do, the cadets marched into town and paraded in the streets with their dummy rifles, and muffled volleys of gunfire could be heard in different parts of the city. The arrests had set off a popular uprising all across India. People rose in fury to demolish the instruments of colonial authority and power. The

University was shut down and the students were stranded, as train services had come to a standstill. So a group of my friends, mostly from the Engineering College, and I decided to escape on foot to the river Ganges, hire a boat, and sail upstream as far as we could go before catching a train. We intended to spread the 'Do or Die' message of Mahatma Gandhi among the village communities, and even thought of pulling down telephone and electric wires along the way to wreck the colonial administration.

It was a cloudy, drizzly day when the eight of us set out in the direction of the river. The monsoon rains had come and, as usual, large areas had been flooded. After several hours of plodding through mud and slush, we arrived at a small village on the riverbank. A group of villagers welcomed us warmly with the customary offering of *gur*, lumps of brown sugar and water. By then a crowd had gathered and we conveyed to them Mahatma Gandhi's message of 'Do or Die'. This was my first contact with village folk, and I was impressed by the sincerity clearly written on their faces. They listened to us with great attention and respect; but we were all taken aback when an elderly man hesitatingly got up and, with folded hands, said: 'Babuji, what you say is very true, but after you go away the police will harass us, beat us up and take away our animals. Then who will come to our rescue?'

I had always imagined that words and expressions had the same meaning for everyone. But not a word we said to these poor peasants conveyed our message. It was poverty that moulded their thinking and attitude as they patiently ploughed the hard furrows of life – things did not happen suddenly in their lives, for better or for worse. Even their poverty was not the kind that destroys suddenly: it was the





*Nothing we told the poor peasants about Mahatma Gandhi's 'Quit India' movement had much effect. An elderly man said: 'Babuji, what you say is very true, but after you go away the police will harass us, beat us up and take away our animals. Then who will come to our rescue?' Their approach was down-to-earth, expressed in terms of their land, their animals and their meagre necessities for survival.*





misery of ever-recurring misfortune that agonizingly trickles down drop by drop from birth to death. Their approach was down-to-earth, practical and concrete; they expressed it in terms of their land, their animals and their meager necessities

*The prisoners used a tasla, a copper bowl like the one carried by beggars, for everything – eating, bathing and going to the lavatory. One is seen here in front of the 'Tamra Patra' awarded to 'freedom fighters' by the Indian Government.*

for survival. Our attitude, on the other hand, was emotional, romantic and divorced from the hard realities of their life, as we did not know what it meant to live from hand-to-mouth. Our patronizing sermons and vague generalizations were completely out of place, because they wanted to be told simply and clearly what they could do without losing the little they possessed. We were embarrassed at not knowing what to say.

Watching the poor from a distance and hearing about their misery from others is not the same as actually living it, as we discovered in prison. Our journey was abruptly cut short by half a dozen armed policemen, who were lying in wait for us at one of the river ghats. Arrested at gunpoint and handcuffed, we were locked up in the local police station, and the next day they took us to Mirzapur jail. Not having eaten since our arrest, we were famished, but we were not given any food until a long list of prison formalities had been completed. Our names and other particulars had to be registered, and our clothes exchanged for prison garb. We were also issued with an all-purpose copper bowl called a *tasla*, which we were to use for everything – eating, bathing and going to the lavatory. Locked up like animals in a dormitory called a *kataghara*, literally a 'zoo cage', we waited some time before a *pucca*, or long-term convict, appeared, flinging four *rottis* at each of us and pouring watery *daal* into the *taslas* from a dirty bucket. I eagerly shoved a piece of bread into my mouth, but immediately spit it out in pain: the convicts had mixed the wheat flour with mud to replace the ration they had stolen from the kitchen. Later we learned to our astonishment that even this kind of rubbish was actually smuggled out of the prison by the *puccas* to feed their starving families outside.

Gradually we started eating even the mud-adulterated bread, without chewing it and by washing it down with the watery *daal*. Most of us survived mainly on the breakfast of raw *gram* pulse soaked in water; only Kashmir Singh could not adjust, and continued yearning for Punjabi food. He was a healthy boy who came from a humble peasant background; in jest he would display his arm muscles, which he said not even the jail food could destroy. Unfortunately it did, as lack of nutrition sapped his strength and he fell ill. The jail doctor knew of only two drugs, aspirin and quinine, which he prescribed indiscriminately to everyone. Patients were permitted a daily glass of milk, but Kashmir would not touch it, calling it 'white water', as indeed it was. He pined for fresh milk, *lassi* and *tandoori rotis* made of freshly harvested wheat. As his condition deteriorated he frequently became delirious, attempting to sing a well-known Punjabi folk song; 'The harvest is done, Aha! Aha!!' A week before Kashmir breathed his last, the authorities finally permitted him to be moved to the hospital in town. There it was discovered that his illness was not malaria but typhoid fever, contracted from infected food. It was an indescribable tragedy for his parents, who not only lost their extremely bright son but also their life savings, which they had invested in Kashmir Singh's specialized education at the expensive and prestigious Engineering College in Benares.

The *kataghara*, in which we were locked from sunset to sunrise, had thirty raised mud platforms to sleep on, but because of the large number of people arrested during the Quit India movement it had to accommodate over eighty people. They were mainly common people who came from poorer sections of society, especially from rural areas. I



*On appeal, our sentences of two-and-a-half years each were quashed, but not before we had already spent over nine months in jail. I visited the prison again in 1960 after having joined the Indian Foreign Service.*

learned many things from them, as we had plenty of time to talk after lock-up. The *kataghara* became a kind of classroom. With us was a student leader of the Jharkhand movement, representing the tribal forest-dwellers. He was the one who first revealed to me some of the atrocities and humiliations these helpless people were subjected to by the police and local landlords belonging to higher castes. He also told me that preventing the untouchables from entering Hindu temples was not just a religious or social stigma, but was inextricably interwoven with the economic hegemony of the upper classes and the exploitation of the deprived sections of society. Until I went to prison, I was unaware of the cold-blooded murders, brutalities and discrimination to which the Harijans and Adivasi, the so-called primitive tribes, were subjected.

On appeal, our sentences of two-and-a-half years each were quashed, but not before we had already spent over nine months in jail. A day before we were about to be set free, our friends the *puccas* informed us that the police wanted to re-arrest and detain us for another six months under the Defence of India Rules. They came to our rescue by contacting a number of their comrades, the *goondas* – miscreants and social outcasts – in the neighbouring villages, who were waiting at the main gate of the prison as the seven of us came out. Before we realized what was happening, they virtually kidnapped us, whisked us into a corner house, dressed us up like villagers, divided us into two groups and drove us in different directions out of police jurisdiction on the waiting *ekkas*, traditional horse carriages like the one that took me to school in Benares.

The euphoria I felt on that unforgettable day of freedom is described in my book *The White Horse* (1976):

*With a fresh cool breeze gently rubbing against my face, right in front of me I saw the round red sun slowly setting below the horizon: its radiant light illuminated the clear and transparent sky with a lovely phosphorescent crimson colour producing a soothing effect on my nerves. I now began to look around, observing the golden sugar-cane plantations, bathed in a rosy light under the slanting rays of the sun, and seething with the intoxicating hue of life. With a surging sound, gusts of wind puffed at their stems and then rose upwards, lifting the young sprouting blades that seemed to be waving in ecstasy, welcoming the spring. The earth was steaming and carried with it the odour of newly-ploughed fields blended with the perfume of multi-coloured flowers and the sweet smelling sugar-cane aroma. In the limpid light that fell upon the slopes of the undulating hills I could see through the soft mist at a distance the beautiful silhouette of a herd of cows and buffaloes being driven home by a young peasant. In contrast with what I had gone through in prison this sensational panorama of liberty revealed to me that inward flowering of joy that comes from the grace of awakening to a new life and the virtue of suffering in its full glory. One is not aware of freedom unless liberty is denied.*

**H**aving escaped from the police, the authorities expelled us from the United Provinces. My mother, who had been permitted only once to visit me in jail, had stayed on with friends in Benares, hoping in vain to see me again. But at the time of my release from prison she had gone to Lahore; her mother had died and she was attending her funeral. She was astounded when I suddenly appeared at Sunder Niwas, her father's large *haveli* in Lahore cantonment, known as *peeli kothi* or 'yellow house'. Her great



*The famous Badshahi Mosque in Lahore and the Samadhi (mausoleum) of Ranjit Singh and, beyond it to the east, the Samadhi of guru Arjun Dev, the fifth guru of the Sikhs, who wrote the Adi Granth.*

astonishment and indescribable joy at seeing me back home is another story.

I very much wanted to go to Government College, but my grandfather, Makhan Singh, who had since been nominated 'Sardar Bahadur', was not optimistic, as parents put their children down for admission to this exclusive institution even before their birth. Moreover, schools and colleges had already opened three months earlier. However, my grandfather, with his considerable influence, managed to arrange an interview for me with the principal, G. D. Sondhi, who as expected rejected me outright. Disappointed, I was walking out of his office when he inquired casually if I played any games. 'Yes indeed, I am a tennis player. I played in several inter-collegiate tournaments for my university in Benares', I replied. He called me back and uttered just three memorable words: 'You are admitted!'

At the time, Lahore was truly the 'Paris of the Orient', a carefree and cosmopolitan town. Unlike Benares, male and female students went out together to restaurants and even danced in the Standard Café along Mall Road, which was the favourite student haunt. We spoke the same language, ate the same food, and together enjoyed Punjabi music and *bhangra* dances. Communal rioting was not uncommon in Benares, but in the Punjab there was hardly any antipathy between the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Festivals of different religious denominations were attended by all communities and Makhan Singh's extended family brought home-made sweets to celebrate Eid with a well-known family of Inayatullah who lived in the neighbourhood. As with Islam, the Sikh religion is based on social equality and shared values. The foundation stone of the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh shrines at Amritsar, was





*Government College in Lahore, established in 1864, is one of the oldest institutions of its kind in South Asia. Following my release from Mizapur Jail, I was interviewed by the principal, G. D. Sondhi, who at first rejected me, saying that parents applied for admission to this exclusive institution even before the birth of their children, but then changed his mind because I was a tennis player. Fifty years later I offered to build my alma mater a library and an institute of South Asian studies.*







laid by a Sufi ascetic, Mian Mir. Punjabi culture was greatly enriched by the interaction of Bhakti ideas with Sufi mystical elements from Islam, with influences originating from as far away as Egypt, Iran and Turkey – a way of life to which women made important contributions. Sufi mysticism is ascribed to an Iraqi woman from Basra, Rabiah al-Adawiyah, who died in AD 801.

Religious feasts are celebrated with great enthusiasm all over South Asia, but none equals the fervour and joy with which the Basant spring festival was celebrated in Lahore. It was a veritable spectacle to see the clear blue skies come alive with the gaiety of multi-coloured paper kites from mid-January to mid-February – the onset of spring. Originally, Basant and kite-flying were associated with *Vasant Panchami*, a Hindu festival, but as common Indian culture absorbed

different religions, it became a truly secular festival. The kites in the sky know no boundaries. Many a musical *raga* and *raagini* have been inspired by Magh (Spring). Poets have penned romantic verses, and artists, both past and contemporary, have painted the yellow of mustard flowers and the Amaltas trees – the reason why on the fifth day of the lunar month of Magh, men, women and children wear yellow clothes to go dancing in the streets and herald the coming of spring.

The finest manifestation of communal harmony I ever witnessed was in Lahore. It was the homecoming of three Indian National Army (INA) officers – a Muslim (Shah Nawaz Khan), a Hindu (Prem Sahgal) and a Sikh (Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon) – who had been set free by the British Government after a dramatic court trial at the Red Fort in Delhi

*At the onset of spring, Lahore celebrates the secular festival of Basant as nowhere else in South Asia. From mid-January to mid-February, clear blue skies come alive with the spectacular colours of paper kites, a phenomenon that the jihadis have not been able to stop as the kites in the sky know no boundaries. Originally, Basant and kite-flying were associated with Vasant Panchami, a Hindu festival, but as Indian culture absorbed the different religions coming from abroad, it became a truly secular festival.*

where they had been defended by, among other lawyers, Jawaharlal Nehru. Although the INA founder, Subhash Chandra Bose, had been reported dead in a plane crash about the time of the Japanese surrender, the INA continued to live in the hearts and minds of the Indian people as a symbol of national unity and as a challenge to the ugly communal and separatist forces in the subcontinent. At Lahore railway station I saw this extraordinary triumph of India's unity in diversity manifest itself in the rapturous welcome given to these ex-officers by a huge mass of people representing all communities.

After my imprisonment I appreciated nature and open spaces all the more. Besides playing tennis, I joined the College rowing club, which maintained a number of boats on the River Ravi. On weekends, my classmate Pran Talwar and I went rowing for exercise, enjoying the invisible birds singing their song of the rising sun in the early morning peace and tranquillity, wrapped in the river's wide embrace. Dawn on the Ravi also made me happy because it was on its bank, on New Year's day in 1930, that Jawaharlal Nehru had proclaimed for the first time India's complete independence from colonial rule – a vision shared by Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The two stalwarts of parliamentary democracy started their political careers as members of the Indian National Congress. While Nehru was known as the apostle of secularism, Jinnah was admiringly called 'the best Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity' by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the eminent Maratha Congress leader. Even though Jinnah ended his association with the Congress in 1920, he continued to be a firm believer in Hindu-Muslim unity and in constitutional methods for achieving political ends.

In this political climate I was very hopeful that the

Congress and Muslim League would ultimately find a compromise within the framework of the 1935 Government of India Act, which envisaged a federal constitution. This optimism was strengthened with the arrival of the British Cabinet Mission, as the new plan was still within the framework of a united India in which groups of provinces with Muslim majorities, and also the Princely States, were to form a loose confederation. Unfortunately, negotiations broke down, leading to an orgy of bloodshed in Calcutta. Within a few days some 5,000 men, women and children were killed in cold blood. The bloodthirsty communal monster then moved out of Bengal, destroying and setting afire the homes of thousands of innocent and peace-loving people in the towns and villages of Assam, Bihar and the United Provinces. Punjab had until then remained peaceful, but when it was announced that the British Government had irrevocably decided to transfer power to Indian hands by June 1948, communal violence was also unleashed in Lahore.

To make things worse, the authorities of both Calcutta and Lahore were actively fanning the fires of hatred and violence. The rioting in Lahore was deliberately plotted and incited by hired gangsters, who shouted for revenge as they carried skeletons in processions, claiming to have brought them from Calcutta. I was watching from my window in New Hostel when, on 4 March 1947, the police suddenly appeared and started shooting – killing and wounding a number of people who had gathered in the small square in front of Government College. This meeting had been called by the Student Federation as a part of its peace campaign. The attack ignited the spark of an already inflammable situation, and rioting immediately spread through the city like wildfire. Deaths accumulated, and soon the hospitals could

not take any more wounded. The next day the rioting worsened, as the police pickets had disappeared overnight and left the field wide open to hooligans.

How even the peaceful 'Paris of the Orient' could suddenly turn into a violent inferno of communal hell was unimaginable. Was this the same Lahore where, not so long ago, I had seen such an enthusiastic welcome accorded to the three ex-INA officers? Was it the same Lahore where Sheila Bhatia had become a hit as hundreds of fans belonging to all communities, and especially women, would gather in the Lawrence Gardens and join her, clapping and singing the songs of freedom and communal harmony she had composed based on traditional folklore? It was beyond my comprehension how a small band of *jihadi* fundamentalists could succeed in demolishing the formidable edifice of Punjabi traditions and culture and mislead the people into committing such atrocities.

It appeared as though Mughal history were repeating itself, reminiscent of the seventeenth century, when the Emperor Shah Jahan's son, Dara Shikoh, was paraded through the streets on a donkey by the *jihadis* and executed by his own brother, Aurangzeb. A disciple of the Qadiri Sufis, Dara Shikoh's supposed crime was that he had translated Hindu scriptures, such as the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Upanishads*, into Persian; in his translation of the *Upanishads* he closely followed Sankara's commentaries. In his treatise *Majma' al-bahrayn*, Dara Shikoh worked out correlations between Sufi and Upanishad cosmologies, beliefs and practices. As a result, in the seventeenth century the Muslim elite virtually identified Vedanta with Sufism. Later, Shah Wali Allah's son, Shah Abd-ul-Aziz, regarded the Hindu god Krishna among the *awliya* saints.

This marvellous syncretization of Indian culture was destroyed with one stroke of Aurangzeb's sword, just as now the *jihadis* in Lahore had demolished the edifice of Punjabi culture – a culture based on reason and ethical teachings common to all religions, which Akbar the Great had attempted to create when he promulgated a new religion, called Din-Ilahi, in 1581.

Now the streets of Lahore were deserted, schools and colleges shut. I was terribly shaken, and at this critical juncture when the very fabric of our society was being torn apart, I could think of no better place to visit than Preet Nagar, a kibbutz-like colony founded by Gurbaksh Singh, editor of *Preet Lari*. I admired him immensely for his forward-looking views on the burning topics of social life, communal harmony and socialism. Preet Nagar, halfway between Lahore and Amritsar, had become the meeting point of many progressive artists, writers and poets, and it was there that I met such eminent poets as Amrita Pritam, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sahir Ludhianavi, and writers such as Nanak Singh.

As direct bus service from Lahore to Preet Nagar had been suspended, I took a train to Amritsar in the hope of finding transportation from there. Arriving at Amritsar railway station I saw a train from Batala approaching on the other side of the platform. Even before it halted, I saw to my horror that blood was dripping from under the doors of several compartments. A mob at Sharifpura, a suburb of Amritsar, had stopped the train on the way and had attacked the passengers with knives, hatchets and stones. I was shocked out of my wits at the gruesome sight: heads almost severed, arms and legs chopped off, eyes plucked out and bellies gutted and ripped open. In the women's compartment, the

victims had been stripped naked; one woman lay dead with her breast torn off and her hands still gripping the door handle in an attempt to escape. I was so traumatized that my senses stopped functioning. A buzzing noise in my head drowned the wails and screams of the frightened men, women and children as they rushed out of the bloody com-

partments. It was with Herculean effort that I finally staggered out of the railway station to catch a bus for Preet Nagar, but no bus driver dared risk his life. During my enforced stop in Amritsar I saw fires raging in different parts of the town. Heaps of charred rubble lay everywhere, strewn with broken electric poles, entangled wires and twisted



water pipes, as if the town had been destroyed in an earthquake. I walked around the city at random, taking photographs of the havoc caused by communal violence.

On my return to Lahore, I decided to organize a Peace Campaign exhibition of my photographs and some paintings. I was still under the illusion that efforts such as these,

along with the public meetings to preserve peace organized by Ramesh Chandra and the two activist Khan brothers, Mazhar and Mehmood Ali of the Students' Federation, would help to stop this insanity. I had at my disposal a well-equipped darkroom in the Institute of Chemistry, but no funds to buy the large-size photographic paper needed to

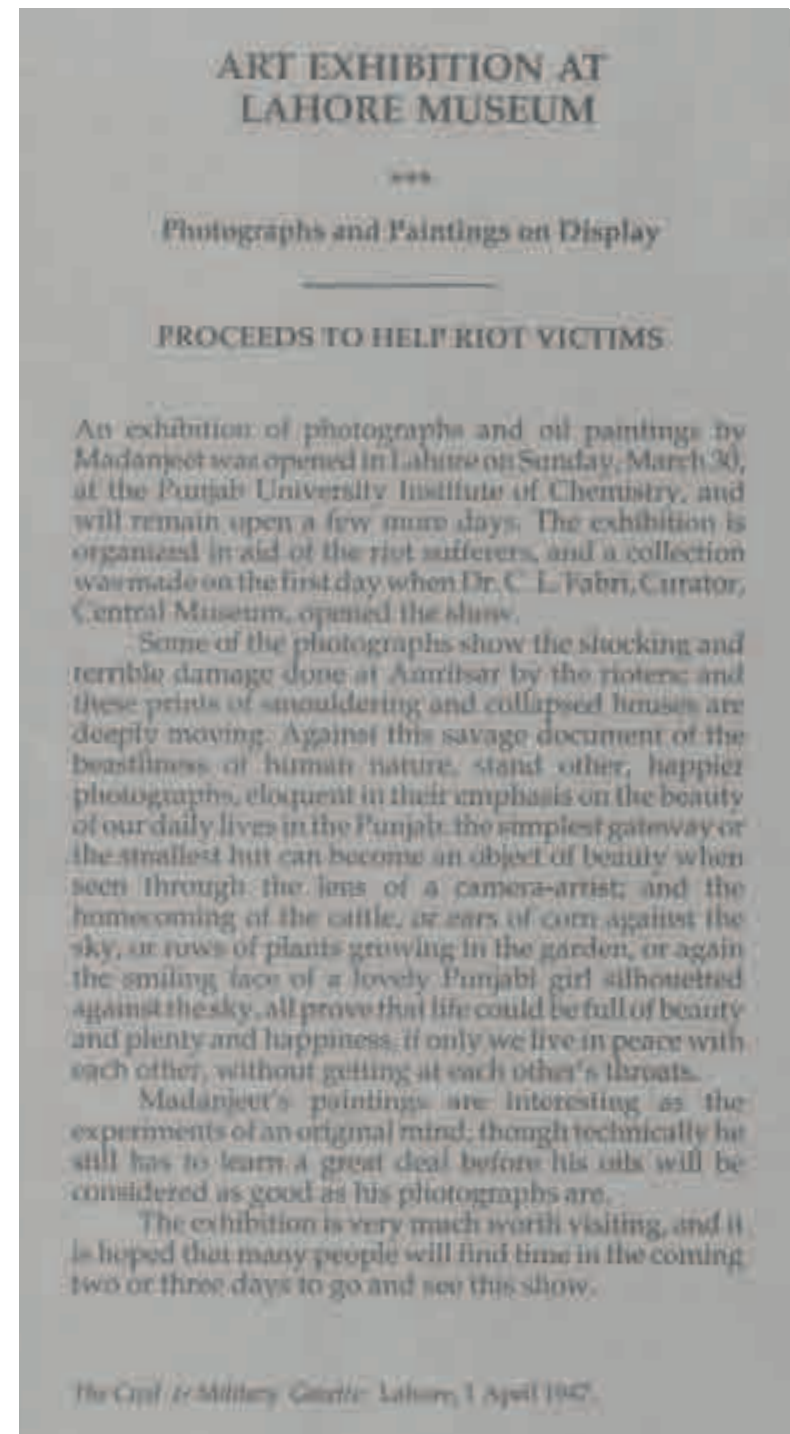


*An enraged mob at Sharifpura stopped the train on its way from Batala and attacked the passengers with knives, hatchets and stones. Amritsar became hell with heaps of charred rubble everywhere; the roads strewn with broken electric poles, twisted wires and water pipes, as if the town had been destroyed by an earthquake.*

mount such an exhibition. I therefore approached my sister Ranjeeta, to whom I had always been close, for help. She had married the son of an eminent doctor in Lahore a year earlier. But her husband was not interested in such 'useless activities' and she dared not ask him for money, so she secretly gave me four of the gold bangles she had received as a wedding gift, and I raised sufficient funds by selling the jewellery in a shop in nearby Anarkali Street.

Now I started working day and night to print the pictures. They included photographs I had taken in the Punjab villages during happier times: portraits of sturdy Punjabi peasants – Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs – living and working together in the fertile countryside; happy, contented faces, sincere souls and strong characters as they ploughed their fields, harvested their crops or sat in groups smoking water-pipes in their moments of relaxation. By contrasting their contentment and healthy lives with the criminal and wanton destruction that I had photographed in Amritsar and Lahore, I hoped to rouse people's indignation against fratricidal conflict. I believed such an exhibition of photographs would expose the perfidy and selfish ambitions of those communal leaders who, in the name of religion, were misleading innocent people and inciting them to violence for their own political ends.

Although I succeeded in holding the exhibition within a week of my return from Amritsar, in the atmosphere then prevailing in Lahore nobody was really interested in photographs, much less in the message I was trying to convey. Left with no other option, the show was inaugurated by a non-Indian, Dr C. L. Fabri, curator of the Central Museum in Lahore. Principal C. H. Rice of Forman Christian College, who had sent my father to England on a scholarship, was



*I was sorely disappointed by the poor attendance at the exhibition during the week, although it received excellent reviews in the local media, such as Lahore's Civil & Military Gazette.*



the only other prominent person present. Others who came for the opening were mostly my classmates and a delegation from the Students' Federation of the Soviet Union, who were coincidentally visiting Lahore at the time.

Having spent so much time and money, I was sorely disappointed over the poor attendance at the exhibition during the week, although it received excellent reviews in the local media. A correspondent for the *Civil & Military Gazette* wrote: 'The pictures of smouldering and collapsed houses are deeply moving. Against his savage document of the

beastliness of human nature, stand out other happier photographs, eloquent in their emphasis on the beauty of our daily lives in the Punjab: the smallest gateway or the smallest hut can become an object of beauty when seen through the lens of a camera artist; and the homecoming of the cattle, or ears of corn against the sky, or rows of plants growing in a garden, or again a smiling face of a lovely Punjabi girl silhouetted against the sky, all prove that life could be full of beauty and plenty of happiness, if only we live in peace with each other.' Although I was happy with this and other

*My sister Ranjeeta gave me four of the gold bangles she had received as a wedding gift, and I was able to buy the photographic paper needed to mount the Peace Campaign exhibition in Lahore. In the atmosphere then prevailing in Punjab, nobody was really interested in photographs, much less in the message I was trying to convey.*



reviews in papers such as the *Tribune*, in my heart I knew that I had failed to evoke the public response I had expected. It was a lone cry in the wilderness, a personal success but a public failure.

Within days the security situation deteriorated sharply, as Hindus and Sikhs were waylaid, stabbed, killed or wounded. With my beard and turban, I was a conspicuous target in the streets and could no longer use my bicycle. Ranjeeta, who had somehow persuaded her husband to stay on in Lahore until the opening of my exhibition, was obliged to leave with her in-laws for Mussoorie, while some members of my grandfather's family had already left for Dalhousie, where Makhan Singh owned a bungalow called Phoenix Lodge, and others had gone to New Delhi. The doors of Government College and New Hostel were shut, so when I was invited to stay with a family I knew in Model Town, a suburb of Lahore, I went gladly. But on learning a few days later that my host Tandon was also packing to leave, I decided to join Ranjeeta, who telephoned me from Mussoorie to say that Bibiji had also arrived from Trivandrum.

I departed in a hurry, with only a suitcase, leaving everything else behind. It was a very hot day, and as I walked along the main street I kept looking over my shoulder lest someone be following me; the hooligans usually attacked their victims from the back. Tired, and perspiring profusely from the heat as well as from the tension that was building up within me, I finally saw a *tonga* coming my way. As the panting horse halted, I hesitated for a moment because the driver, with his red henna-dyed beard, was obviously a Muslim. But there was no other option, as all the Hindu and Sikh *tonga* drivers had either fled or were hiding. So I got in and told him to take me to the railway station. He

nodded grimly, and as the *tonga* started moving, I wondered what the devil he was thinking. I tried talking to him but he was not interested. By then the *tonga* was passing through a narrow street in Anarkali, and my heart sank when I saw a Muslim mob with knives and hatchets throwing stones at a shop and blocking our way. This was the end, I thought, because there was no way out except to drive through this gang of hooligans. The coachman pulled back the reins and stopped, obviously wondering what to do. My first reaction was to jump out and run, but I could not have gone very far in this hostile neighbourhood. I was trapped and completely at the mercy of the *tonga-walla*. He looked back at me like a judge about to pronounce his verdict of life or death. No words were spoken as I held my breath. Then he whispered: 'Stoop low', and, shouting a mouthful of vulgar Punjabi abuse for which the Lahore *tonga* drivers are notorious, he whipped the horse hard. The *tonga* gathered speed as I ducked behind the wooden partition dividing the seats and closed my eyes; before anyone could see that I was a Sikh, the *tonga* had sped past the mob.

It was indeed a miraculous escape, and not before we reached the railway station did I recover my senses. How could I express my gratitude to this man for saving my life? The money I had was barely sufficient to buy a third-class railway ticket to Mussoorie. I offered him all I could spare, a 5-rupee note – 3 rupees more than the fare – asking him to keep the change. But to my astonishment he returned the note with thanks, saying: 'You will need it in the train.' I was overwhelmed. This single gesture washed away from my mind all the communal filth of the fundamentalist *jihadis* in Lahore and restored my faith in the intrinsic goodwill and generosity of my people.



The few days I spent in the hill station of Mussoorie with Ranjeeta and our mother relieved me somewhat of the pressure I had been feeling. The inferno burning in the towns and villages of the Punjab seemed so far away. Ranjeeta and I went out for long walks in the surrounding hills; we went to movies and restaurants together, and felt uncomfortable as people turned to stare at my beautiful sister. I wanted to stay with my family as long as I could, but as the newspapers started reporting on the mass exodus of helpless refugees crossing the border, I became restless to go and work in one of the refugee camps in Delhi. Both my sister and mother pleaded with me not to go, as they feared the worst. 'Don't make me suffer again', Bibiji cried. But my conscience would not allow me to hide in this safe hill resort while the refugees needed help so desperately.

After arriving in Delhi, I volunteered to work in a refugee camp called Dewan Hall, which had recently been set up opposite the historic Red Fort, along the main road that connected New Delhi with the old part of the city. My three maternal uncles and their families, who had arrived earlier from Lahore, had taken refuge in a two-room apartment in Faiz Bazar; they had not gone to Dalhousie because of a family quarrel. Born and bred in their father's luxurious *kothi* in Lahore, they found their exile extremely painful and tormenting, living as they did in a dilapidated, filthy apartment and working in a motor garage across the road to survive. On top of that, other relatives like me also moved in with them, as we too had nowhere else to go.

I rose with the sun every morning and bicycled to the camp, where a few tents had been pitched. The space was hardly sufficient for the innumerable refugees who had already arrived. Men, women and children were huddled

*Ranjeeta and I went out for long walks in the surrounding hills; we bathed in the crystal clear water of Kempty Falls, some 15 kilometres from Mussoorie, and went to movies and restaurants while people turned and stared at my beautiful sister.*



*My sojourn in Mussoorie relieved me somewhat of the pressure I had been feeling; the inferno burning in the towns and villages of the Punjab seemed so far away. I wanted to stay on with my family, but as the newspapers started reporting on the mass exodus of helpless refugees crossing the border, I became restless to go and work in one of the refugee camps in Delhi.*



together, cooking and sleeping in the open. There was little I could do to help them, and most of my time was spent listening to the unending tales of woe and consoling the grieving mothers and widows. Talking about their misfortunes seemed to lighten their hearts and give them some kind of solace.

The Radcliffe Award (named for Sir Cyril Radcliffe), which demarcated the new border, had been intentionally postponed until after the transfer of power to India and Pakistan on 15 August 1947. As innocent men, women and

children belonging to minority communities were mercilessly butchered, especially in remote villages, a paralysing fear gripped the Muslims in the eastern part of the Punjab and the Hindus and Sikhs in the west. Seven to eight million people migrated in long lines any way they could, mostly on foot, and some 200,000 men, women and children did not complete their nightmare journey at all.

Delhi had remained relatively calm until about the end of August, mainly because the news reports were censored. But as the first batches of refugees started arriving and

*I volunteered to work in Dewan Hall, a refugee camp that had been set up opposite the historic Red Fort in the old part of Delhi, where a few tents had been pitched.*

*The space was hardly sufficient for the innumerable refugees who had already arrived; men, women and children were huddled together, cooking and sleeping in the open.*



telling their gruesome stories, the terrible fire of revenge spread like bushfire. Rioting broke out in Delhi in the first week of September, followed by the large-scale looting and burning of Muslim shops, especially in New Delhi's main market, Connaught Place, and in old Delhi. One afternoon I saw a seemingly unending line of miserable people wearing rags being led along the main road in front of the Dewan Hall camp; they were being taken to another refugee camp which had been especially set up for Muslims. Then suddenly I saw a group of youngsters pounce on them and begin stabbing indiscriminately. There were hysterical screams, and before I realized what had happened, the attackers and most of their victims had fled, leaving a wounded child about 3 years old lying in the middle of the road. I ran, picked him up and tried to stop passing vehicles to get a lift to the hospital, but no one would stop as I stood holding the child, with blood gushing from the stab wound in his throat. Finally I grabbed a *tonga*, and rushed to the nearest hospital.

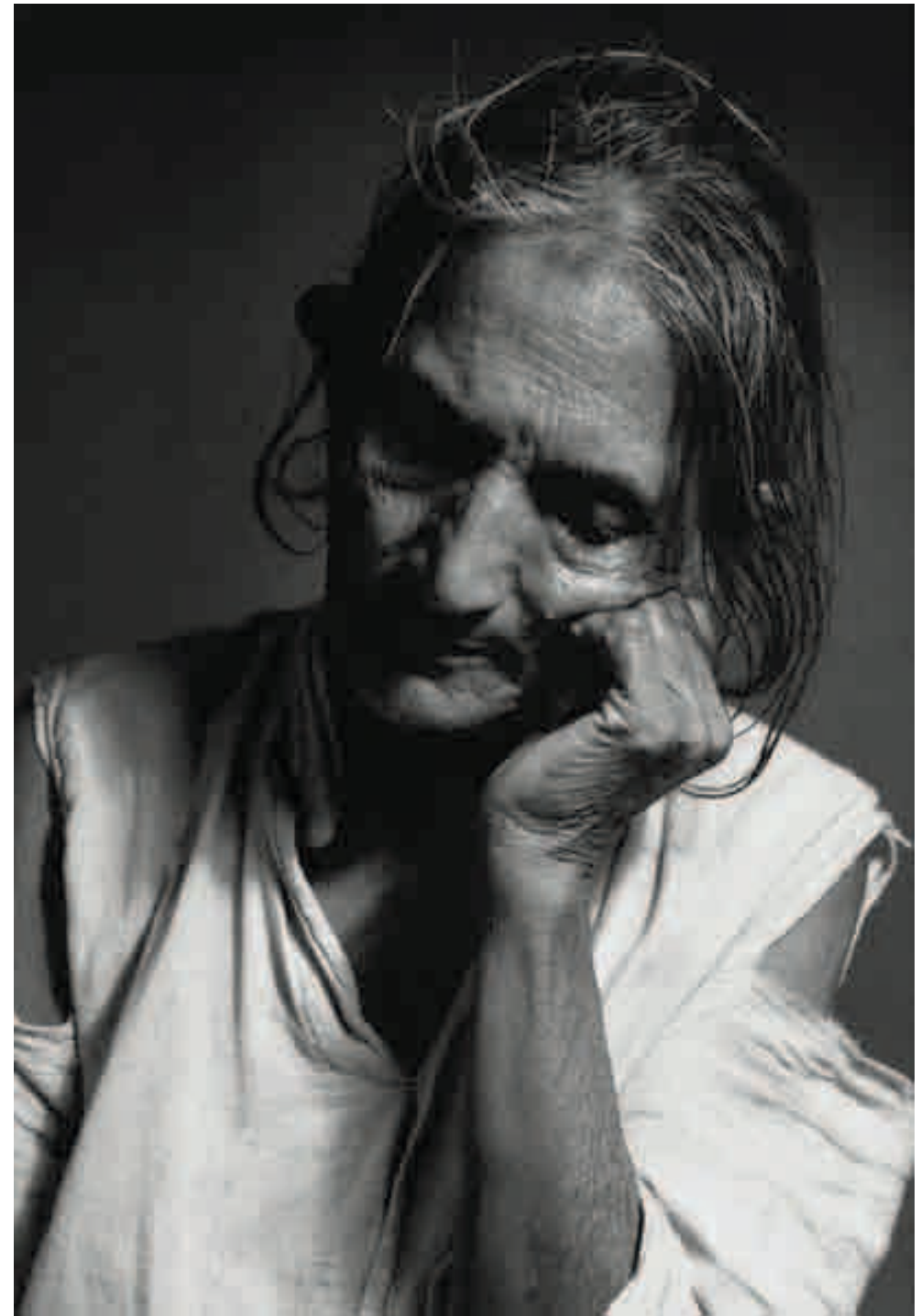
There was a long line of patients waiting in front of the emergency ward and I was also asked to wait my turn. But I jumped the queue, knowing that even a few minutes' delay would be fatal. I found a doctor leisurely scribbling something on a piece of paper. He looked at me casually and asked: 'Is it a Hindu or a Muslim?' A shiver of rage went down my spine and words stuck in my throat: by then the child was dead. Walking out of the hospital a sense of desolation descended on me: I saw everything – compassion, reason, logic – crumbling. Having witnessed so many barbaric acts of violence, I thought my sensibilities well protected. Now I realized how vulnerable my inner world of idealism was, spun by my own illusions.

Again, I could not think of any other way to help the

*Early in the mornings, I rode my bicycle to the Photo Service Company in Connaught Place where Babuji, the proprietor, let me use his studio and even lent me some money.*

refugees than to raise funds by organizing a Peace Campaign exhibition in New Delhi. The proprietor of the Photo Service Company encouraged me to go ahead and very kindly allowed me to use the darkroom in his Connaught Place studio. Known as 'Babuji', he even advanced me some money to buy photographic materials, on the understanding that I would eventually pay him back from the sale of pictures. By then my collection of photographs had increased with the addition of new ones taken in the refugee camp. I enlarged about a hundred photographs, imitating the Lahore model of contrasting images of communal strife with scenes of people living and working together peacefully. I was delighted when, on a friend's recommendation, the secretary of the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) in New Delhi, Anil Roy Chaudhuri, agreed to let me mount the show free of charge in the main hall of the gallery.

Knowing Pandit Nehru's interest in the subject, I toyed with the thought of inviting the Prime Minister to inaugurate the exhibition. A few days earlier I had witnessed the incredible spectacle of the Prime Minister leaping out of his still-moving official car, waving his baton in the air and chasing a hooligan who was looting a Muslim shop in Connaught Place; the security men threw a cordon around him to ward off the crowds and persuaded him to return to the car. But even with no rioting, this was hardly the time to approach Pandit Nehru, who was extremely busy dealing with one crisis after another – the latest being the invasion of Jammu and Kashmir by the Pathan tribesmen from newly created Pakistan. These gangsters had entered Kashmir at Domel, ransacked Uri, my ancestral home some 60 miles from Srinagar, and had continued to advance towards Srinagar,



*A mother in the Dewan Hall refugee camp in Delhi laments the deaths of her three children and her husband as the family were fleeing from Lahore, leaving all their property behind.*

looting, pillaging and raping along the way. It was only when the invaders had reached Baramula that Maharaja Hari Singh, who until then had resisted accession to either India or Pakistan, was obliged to sign an Instrument of Accession to the Indian Union, on 26 October 1947.

Under these circumstances, the AIFACS gallery secretary, Chaudhuri, invited the Health Minister, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, to open the exhibition on 3 November 1947. I was also keen to invite her, as she was the first woman cabinet minister in the newly independent Government of India. The show turned out to be a success: unlike in Lahore, a lot of people came to see the exhibition during the week, surpassing my wildest expectations. The daily newspapers printed lengthy write-ups and a reporter of the *Times of India* complimented me, saying 'No more effective indictment of violence could have been presented'. He had also discovered that 'these photographs were made with economy of material and lack of proper equipment, some even with a borrowed camera.' The money I made from some of the pictures allowed me to clear Babuji's loan and still contribute a fair amount to Rajkumari's Refugee Relief Fund, on the understanding that the Dewan Hall refugee camp would be the main beneficiary.

But the happiest moment of all had yet to come. It happened a day before the exhibition was due to close when, all of a sudden, Chaudhuri came running and announced: 'Panditji has come! Panditji has come!' There was a great commotion as everyone in the hall rushed to the entrance and crowded around the Prime Minister. Nonplussed, I did not know what to do; I was not even dressed properly. I had been out all day and was wearing a rather soiled shirt with an open collar, and so tried to hide behind

the crowd. Chaudhuri spotted me, and holding me tightly by the arm, hustled me through the gathering to introduce me to the Prime Minister. I felt very awkward shaking hands with the great leader. I was used to seeing him only from a distance.

Without saying a word, Pandit Nehru then started walking from one end of the gallery to the other, carefully looking at each picture. He paused in front of a large blow-up of a Punjab village scene showing three friends, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh, walking home after work. The placard above the picture read: 'Our country is beautiful; let not the communal fascists destroy it.' Meanwhile, Chaudhuri had turned off the bright overhead lights to show how, in the semi-darkness, the photograph acquired a strange luminosity of its own; the long and slender shadows of the three peasants produced a marvellous three-dimensional effect against the slanting rays of the setting sun. Characteristically tilting his head to one side, Pandit Nehru stood there for some time looking at the picture. 'Congratulations!' he said, and moved on hurriedly to see the remaining pictures before he walked out of the hall as suddenly as he had come in.

My heart was singing with joy. At long last I had met the person whom I had idolized as the apostle of secularism and respected for upholding progressive and democratic values. I admired him for his socialist ideals and concern for the poor and the outcast, and for leading the Indian people into the modern age of scientific discovery and technological development. I had read passage after passage in his books wherein he described his concern for the people, their problems, their vicissitudes, their strivings, their dreams and ambitions. He had stated how vital and urgent it was to remove the curse of poverty and raise the standard



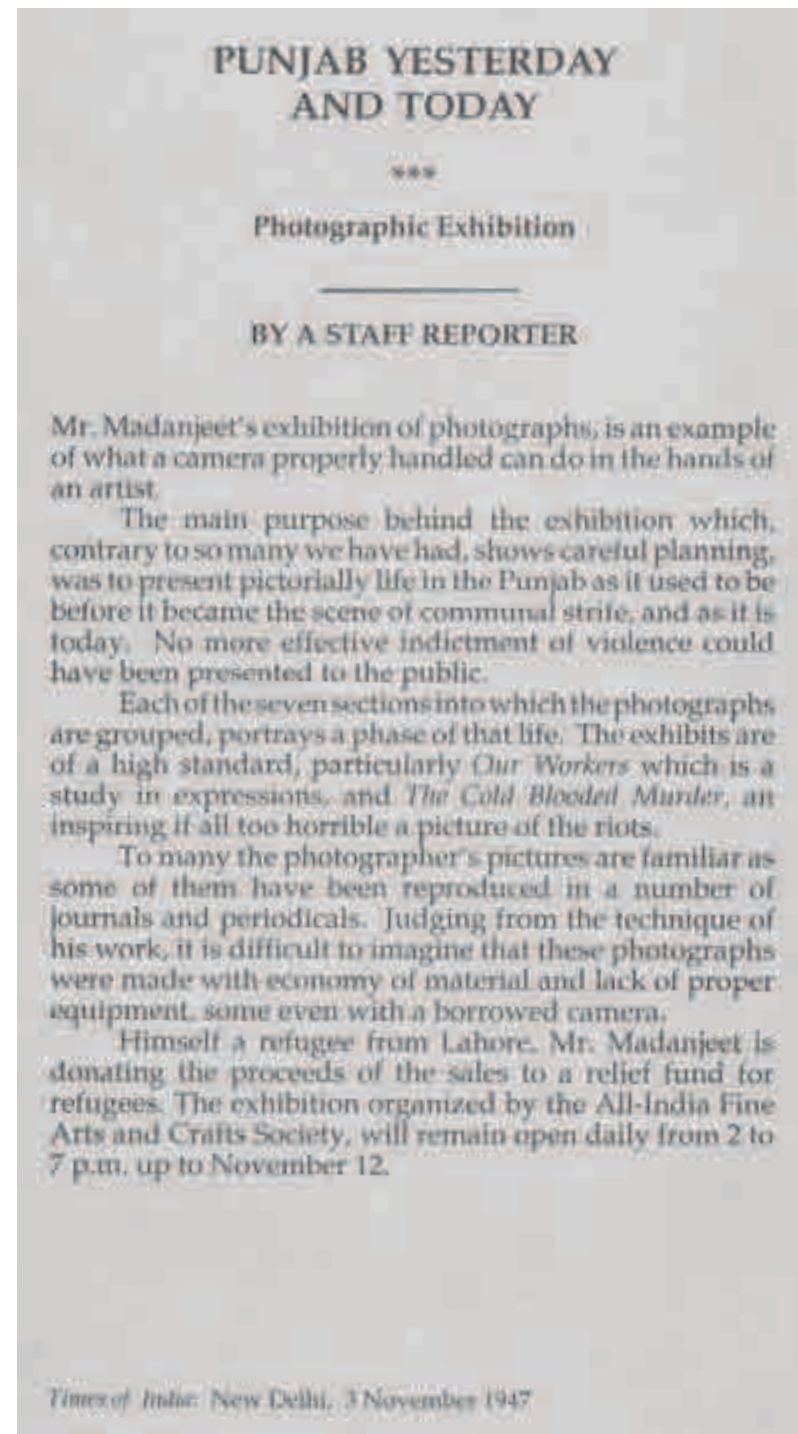
*At the AIFAC gallery, Pandit Nehru paused to admire a Punjab village scene showing three friends, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh. Above the photo, the placard read: 'Our country is beautiful; let not the communal fascists destroy it.'*



of living of the masses so that free India might develop into a cooperative South Asian power.

Next morning I was thrilled to see that the daily newspapers had printed a photograph of Pandit Nehru with me standing next to him. The headlines on the same page also reported the arrival of Sheikh Abdullah from Srinagar for talks with the Prime Minister. The publicity generated a great deal of interest, and a lot of people came to see the exhibition, which was extended for another week. Most surprising of all was that Sheikh Abdullah accepted the AIFACS secretary's invitation to visit the exhibition, notwithstanding that the tribal invaders had reached the outskirts of Srinagar. The 'Lion of Kashmir', as he was called, was extremely occupied, especially since Maharaja Hari Singh had invited the popular National Conference leader to form the government in Jammu and Kashmir. It was at Sheikh Abdullah's request that India started sending troops to Srinagar on 27 October to repel the invaders. He came to AIFACS accompanied by Indira Gandhi, and I wondered if Pandit Nehru had mentioned the exhibition to them. They seemed impressed with the show, and on learning that my ancestors hailed from Uri, Sheikh Saheb asked me to join the group of artists, writers and journalists he had invited to build the National Cultural Front in Srinagar to strengthen Kashmir's secular culture and help in resisting the invaders.

I could not possibly miss such a wonderful opportunity, even though my final exams were coming up at Delhi Polytechnic, where they had been moved to from Lahore following partition. Unfortunately though, I was stranded for weeks, as by then the military airlift of troops to Kashmir was in full swing. The army had requisitioned all available



*The exhibition turned out to be a success. The daily newspapers printed lengthy write-ups and a Times of India reporter commented: 'No more effective indictment of violence could have been presented'.*

Dakota aircraft. Waiting at the Palam airport I learned that during the first fortnight alone over 700 sorties had been flown; the skeleton staff had to work day and night to arrange for the dispatch of rations, clothing, ammunition and troops. Even invoking Sheikh Abdullah's name and personal invitation was futile. It was not until early December 1947 that I was finally able to reach Srinagar, by joining a group of foreign correspondents that included the French photographer, Cartier-Bresson, and his vivacious Indonesian wife.

By then, the Indian army had secured Srinagar airport and the tribesmen were in full retreat from Baramulla. Khawaja Ahmad Abbas, the well-known Indian journalist, happened to be at the airport when I arrived; he was covering the Kashmir events with a number of other colleagues, such as Sat Paul Sahni, a daring journalist who had accompanied the Indian Army unit that had captured Gurez in a dangerous operation. Abbas told me that had the invaders advanced directly to Srinagar, they would easily have captured the airfield. Instead they were more interested in looting, murdering and burning towns with unbelievable savagery. He accompanied me to the government guesthouse, where artists and writers were housed. Along the way we saw several groups of men and women – the newly created people's militia – parading in the streets, and a number of barricades that had been dug up and manned by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike; children were imitating them, wearing paper hats and carrying sticks on their shoulders.

Arriving at the riverside guesthouse, I was received with open arms by Navtej, son of *Preet Lari* editor Gurbaksh Singh, along with another distinguished short-story writer, Rajinder Singh Bedi. They introduced me to a number of Kashmiri writers and poets, such as Premnath Pardesi, Som-

enath Zutshi and Arif, the author of several poems and short stories. I was especially excited to meet the 'coolie poet', Aasi, a common labourer with a charismatic personality, who represented Kashmir's secular culture at the grassroots level. He had orally composed, in Kashmiri, some beautiful poems on communal harmony. Among the guests was also Shivdan Chauhan, the well-known Hindi scholar and critic, who had arrived about a month earlier with the Progressive Writers' delegation and had stayed on to help organize the National Cultural Front. He was working on an ambitious project to compile a cultural history of Kashmir; at one of the weekly meetings he described a primitive form of democracy that existed in certain areas of the valley, where voting was compulsory for community leaders and *panchayat* officials. Such stimulating talks and discussions highlighted Kashmir's Sufi culture in particular. Apart from Sheikh Abdullah, the other outstanding patrons of the National Cultural Front were D. P. Dhar and B. P. L. Bedi, two remarkable men with sharp minds who sometimes participated in the meetings, and provided intellectual input and direction to our group.

We visited a unique shrine in Srinagar dedicated to Kashmir's patron Sufi saint, Hazrat Nuruddin Nurani (or Nund Rishi), one floor of which was a mosque and the other a temple. There was a school of Kashmiri Sufis whose members called themselves *rishis*, after the legendary Hindu sages; they respected and repeated the verses from both Hindu and Muslim scriptures. As with Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Marathi, there is much poetic literature written by Muslims in Kashmiri, commencing with the Islamic invocation of Allah, which nevertheless betrays strong Hindu influences. Many Kashmiri poets were women, like Lalla, or Lal Ded (fourteenth century), who wrote poems



about the god Shiva. Hubb Khatun (sixteenth century) and Arani-mal (eighteenth century) were famous for their hauntingly beautiful love lyrics. Much mystical literature written by authors with Muslim names uses Hindu imagery and terminology. The origin of this literature is to be found in the accommodating character of Bhakti and early Sufism, which existed well before Kabir proclaimed that Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Hindus were all striving toward the same goal, and that the outward

observances that kept them apart were false. The Hindu, Muslim and Sikh rulers of Kashmir also encouraged syncretic tendencies to reconcile different religions.

Among the active members of the National Cultural Front was also Sheila Bhatia of Lahore fame. She had mobilized Kashmiri women from all communities and, as in Lahore, had composed a number of freedom songs and plays to promote communal harmony, which were staged in the modest theatre in Srinagar. There was also a very active

*Khawaja Ahmad Abbas, the well-known Indian journalist, happened to be at Srinagar airport when I arrived, and he accompanied me to the government guest house where artists and writers were staying; along the way, I saw newly created groups of people's militia, both men and women, parading in the streets where a number of barricades had been dug up and were manned by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike.*



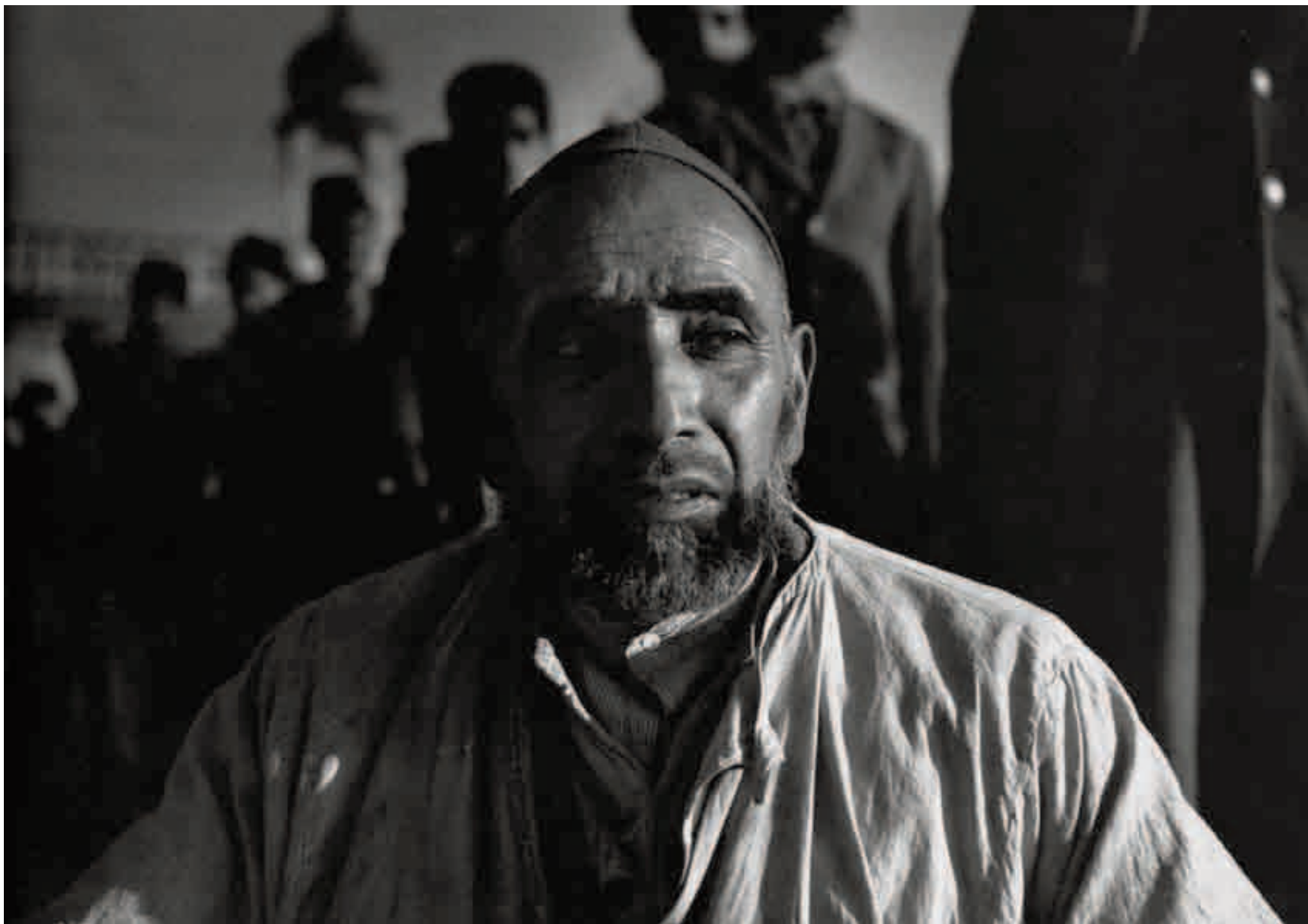
group of creative Kashmiri artists, such as Bhat, Kaul and Somnath, who joined hands with three outstanding Indian painters – Raza, a Muslim from Bombay; Anand, a Hindu from Amritsar; and Amar Singh, a Sikh, also from Amritsar. They had assembled a remarkable exhibition that was being shown in a number of places in Kashmir, and at the time it was exhibited in Srinagar. Mahatma Gandhi had visited Srinagar in early October and seen for himself this remarkable cultural synthesis and communal harmony, which later

prompted his comment: ‘In the darkness engulfing the sub-continent the only ray of light came from Kashmir.’

In the wake of recently won freedom, Srinagar’s captivating landscape seemed all the more wonderful and inspiring. Often I would wake up early in the morning and go for long walks along the banks of the River Jhelum, fringed with magnificent *chinar* trees, their branches hanging gracefully. I enjoyed listening to the melodious chirping of the birds as the sun gradually emerged through the soft, silvery veil of

*Children were also parading in the streets of Srinagar, wearing paper hats and carrying sticks on their shoulders as they played at being people’s militia.*

*The National Cultural Front comprised such Kashmiri writers as Premnath Pardesi and Somenath Zutshi, and a number of progressive Indian writers like Navtej, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and the well-known Hindi scholar, Shivdan Chauhan.*



*At the grassroots level, the secular culture of Kashmir was represented by 'coolie poet' Aasi, a common labourer with a charismatic personality who had orally composed some very beautiful poems on communal harmony.*

*Kashmiri women staged plays in the modest Srinagar theatre to promote communal harmony, and people from all communities joined in to sing freedom songs composed by Sheila Bhatia, of Lahore fame.*





mist above the water, and I loved watching the houseboats and colourful *shikaras*; I was fascinated by the brilliant kaleidoscopic effect produced in the water by the splash of the boatmen's oars. Of the many photographs I took, the ones I liked most were those of children; I enjoyed watching them row their small boats, going from one houseboat to another selling vegetables, flowers and handicrafts.

My paternal uncle had been the court painter of the Maharaja, and my dad used to tell me that I had inherited my artistic talents from him. So I was very keen to visit Uri, where he lived, but I could not do so for security reasons. When at last a visit was arranged with the help of the army area commander, I deeply regretted having gone there. Walking through the streets, I was horrified by the devastation

wrought by the invaders. I tried to locate our ancestral home, which my dad had told me was located in a corner of the main square. In any case, it was a futile effort as there was not a single building standing. In the debris of a corner house that I imagined might have been the home I was seeking lay a forlorn *kangri*, a tiny wicker basket – the symbol of Kashmiri hearths and homes.

Had it not been for my impending exams, I would have stayed on longer in Kashmir. Unfortunately, the Banihal pass, over which Dakota aircraft could not fly on cloudy days, was closed. For ten days in a row I had gone every morning to Srinagar airport in vain, and when the weather finally cleared I was still stranded, as there were so many VIPs waiting in the queue before me. Among them was Margaret

*As I walked through the streets of Uri, trying to locate our ancestral home, there was not a single building left standing. In the debris of a corner house, which I imagined might have been the home I was seeking, lay a forlorn tiny wicker basket – a kangri – containing an earthen pot in which burning coals are kept. Used by Kashmiris to keep themselves warm, the kangri is a symbol of their hearths and homes.*

Bourke-White, the famous American photographer. But upon hearing my plight, she very kindly offered me her own seat in the plane, saying ‘Your exams are more important than my interview with Prime Minister Nehru.’ Had it not been for her understanding, I would have missed my exams.

Soon after my return from Srinagar, I stayed temporarily with my classmate Pran, whose uncle, a banker from Lahore, had been allotted a house in old Delhi by his employer. The burning issue at the time was the transfer to

Pakistan of the assets that were to be proportionately shared between the two successor-states of British India. Mahatma Gandhi strongly advocated that India was honour-bound to make these payments to Pakistan, rejecting the Hindu right-wing parties’ objection to them. As he was a serious obstacle to their objective of reviving the glory of the ‘sacred Hindu land’ – called *Hindutva* by their guru, Sarvarkar – they started a vicious campaign, calling Mahatma Gandhi ‘Mohammad Gandhi’ and maligning him as Pakistan’s ‘fifth columnist’.



*Mahatma Gandhi with his two nieces, Manu and Abha, attends his last prayer meeting at Birla House on 30 January, just before he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic. ‘Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth’, commented Albert Einstein the next day when he heard the news.*



As the pressure mounted, Gandhi once again adopted his non-violent method of persuasion and, on 13 January 1948, began a fast. As his condition deteriorated, Pran and I went to Birla House where he was staying; we had never seen him at close quarters. A large crowd had gathered outside, and a number of prominent leaders representing different religious communities were inside persuading him to break the fast – especially as the Union Cabinet had that morning agreed to pay Pakistan its share of cash balances. Then someone came running out of the house with the good news that Gandhi had agreed to break his fast on written assurance by the leaders that the life, property and honour of Indian Muslims would be protected.

So it fell like a bombshell when the news broke on 30 January that Mahatma Gandhi had been shot dead by a Hindu fanatic. People all over the world were stunned; Albert Einstein at Princeton University summed up the emotion on 31 January: ‘Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.’ The horrendous assassination of the apostle of non-violence and tolerance is now a part of history. It set me worrying about Pandit Nehru’s safety, as he was a much more serious obstacle to the revival of the ‘sacred Hindu land’ than the traditionalist Gandhi. Rumour had it that a number of fascist-type communal organizations, supported by thousands of corrupt and unprincipled civil and military officers, were plotting to overthrow Nehru’s administration through unconstitutional means.

Having passed my exams (M.Sc.) at Delhi Polytechnic, I travelled south to see my parents. By then the Princely State of Travancore had disappeared and my dad had retired to live in a tea estate at Kotagiri in the Nilgiri

Hills. At the time I was toying with the idea of organizing an exhibition of my photographs of Indian sculptures in bronze and stone, inspired by a spectacular exhibition of South Asian sculptures that the Department of Archaeology had mounted in Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi. My idea was to show both an intimate relationship between Nature, the daily life of ordinary people and the surroundings in which they lived, and the interaction between the traditional culture of the people and the present-day reality of their lives.

At Kotagiri, when I mentioned my intention to dad, he blew his top and the classic father-son drama followed: he thought that it was crazy for me to go ‘chasing wild geese’ and not put my scientific training to use. He was very keen on my taking up a job at the cordite factory at Aruvankadu, where my elder brother Gajendra had been appointed to a high position, previously reserved only for British nationals. He refused to support me any longer, saying: ‘Now that you have graduated, my duty is finished’. As my sister Ranjeeta had done in Lahore, so now my mother came to my rescue. She secretly gave me 100 rupees from her household kitty, and I left Kotagiri in a huff, although I did not have enough money to buy even a train ticket to Delhi. However, I took it as a challenge to prove to my dad that I was quite capable of standing on my own feet.

I started off at the Ranganathan temple of Srirangam in Tiruchirappalli, situated on a small island between the tributaries of the rivers Kaveri and Coleroon. Surrounded by seven concentric walls, it enshrines a huge statue of Vishnu reclining on a serpent. Legend has it that as the sage Vibhisana was transporting this idol, known as Sri Ran-

ganathan, across India to Sri Lanka, he could not continue his journey when he reached Srirangam; the statue had magically stuck to the ground. So a small shrine was built to house it. Over the centuries it had grown into a massive temple complex with twenty-one towers, called *gopurams*, constructed between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The head priest was kind enough to let me stay with him in a partitioned section of the temple where he lived with his wife and a cow named Parvati. They all slept on the floor, and he indicated a corner where I could stay – next to a heap of garbage that had been accumulating for some time. A man from the north with a beard and turban was still a novelty in south India, and it was not easy to keep the curious onlookers away as I went around taking photographs of the 1,000 beautifully sculptured pillars in the grand hall. The stone carvings were gorgeous, but there was none better than the sculpture I discovered by chance one night when I went to bed. The piece was hidden under the garbage, showing only a part of the head. I spent next morning removing the muck, and found underneath a most beautiful sculpture of a nude temple dancer. I named her Nati, and her image has since been published worldwide, including in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

From Tiruchirappalli I went on to photograph dozens of historical monuments and archaeological sites, travelling by whatever transport was available: trains (mostly without tickets), buses or bullock-carts. I stayed without paying in *dharma-salas* reserved for pilgrims. I was overwhelmed by the hospitality and generosity of people in towns and villages as I photographed temples, mosques, churches, forts and ancient palaces. Living in the midst of ancient ruins,



*The stone carvings in the Ranganathan temple of Srirangam are gorgeous, but there was none better than the sculpture of a nude temple dancer I discovered by chance, hidden under garbage in a corner of the shrine.*



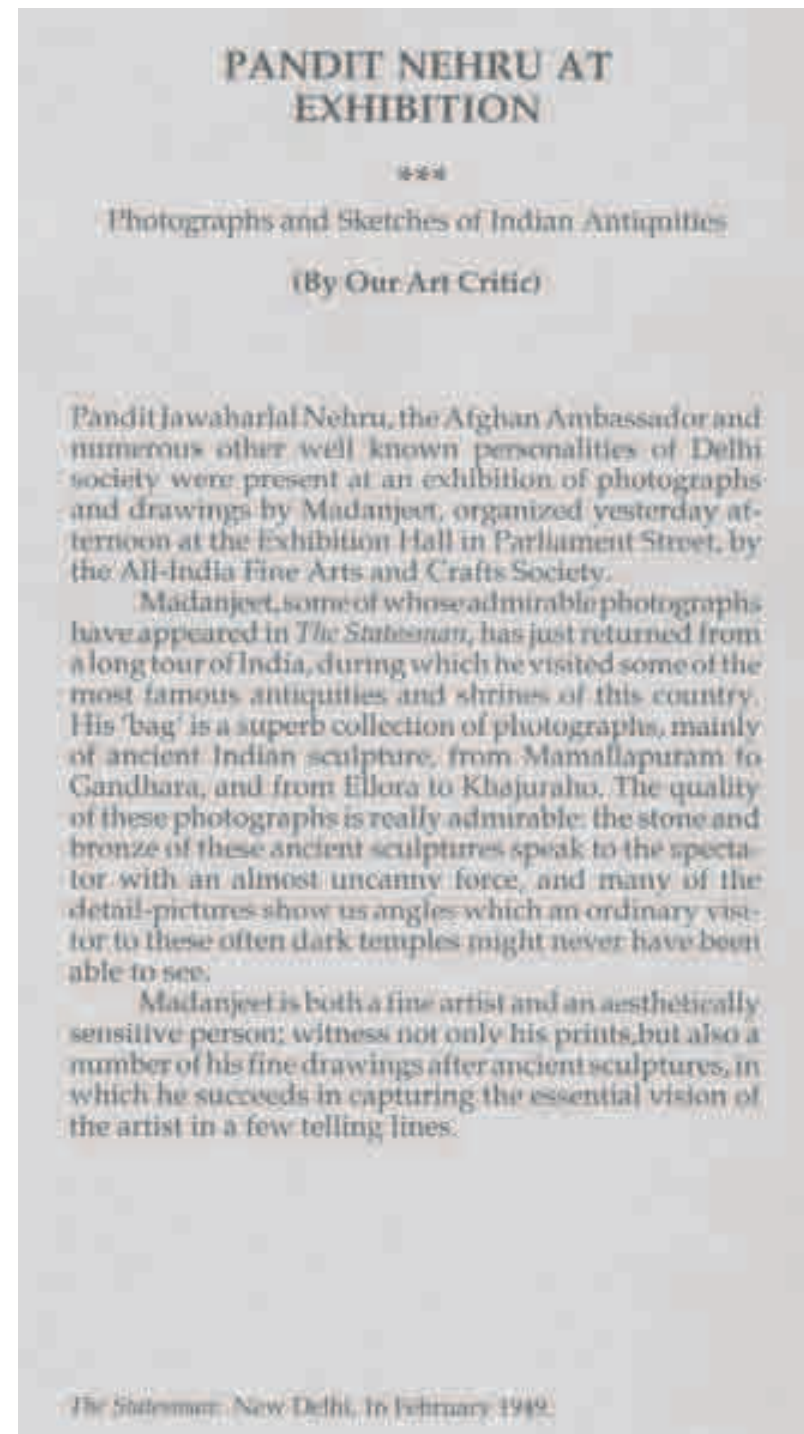




*Passing through numerous hamlets and villages, I visited temples, mosques, churches, forts and ancient palaces. I spent several days at the monuments that were not so well-known at the time, such as the Khajuraho complex of temples (right) and the Ajanta caves paintings (left). Preceding pages: There were no boundaries between the villages and the fields and forests, or partitions separating them from the rivers and lakes. The teeming flow of life was ever present even in the tranquillity of the wilderness.*



The 'Stones that Sing' exhibition at the All-India Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi, was also visited by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his biographer, Dorothy Norman, who bought a number of photographs including the 'Apsara' from Khajuraho.



Publicity in such newspapers as the Statesman and the Hindustan Times generated a lot of interest, and the exhibition was extended for another week.

the people were in intimate contact with nature and animals, and I saw hardly any separation or barrier between them and their natural surroundings. There were no boundaries between the villages and the fields and forests, or partitions to separate them from the sacred life-giving rivers and lakes. Even in the tranquility of the wilderness there was a teeming flow of life, the fascinating atmosphere that I tried to capture in my photographs. I spent several days at the monuments, which were not so well known at the time – such as the Khajuraho complex of temples and the Ajanta caves.

‘Stones that Sing’, I thought, was a suitable title for the photographic collection of Indian sculptures that I mounted at the All-India Arts and Crafts Society. It turned out to be another feather in my cap. Pandit Nehru also visited this exhibition, and for this occasion he was accompanied by his American biographer, Dorothy Norman, his houseguest at the time. She selected a number of photos she wanted to buy and asked for the price. But as I hesitated, she took out \$600, all that she had in her purse, and handed it over to me when Pandit Nehru was not watching. Six hundred dollars was a lot of money in those days and I was once again solvent.

I used part of this money to print a set of photographs I’d taken in the preceding three years and compiled an album, *This My People*, which I wanted to publish. A preface by Pandit Nehru, I thought, would impress the publishers. One morning, in the first week of January 1949, I picked up my bicycle, tied the album on its rack, and took off for Teen Murti House, the official residence of the Prime Minister of India. To make a long story short (described in my book, *This My People*), Pandit Nehru very kindly agreed to my request.

A week later, when I went to collect it, I was amazed to see that he had written it in his own hand. Indira Gandhi told me later that her father had written the preface just before midnight, after he had finished dictating the monthly letter that he circulated to the Chief Ministers of Indian States, informing them of the latest national and international developments. How incredible, I thought, that at this critical juncture of Indian history, in the aftermath of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, and when the Prime Minister was extremely busy writing India’s constitution, he should have found time to oblige a mere student whom he hardly knew.

**T**he set of pictures to which Pandit Nehru wrote the preface included many photographs already exhibited in the two Peace Campaign exhibitions I had organized in Lahore and New Delhi. I had intentionally excluded the photographs depicting the gruesome scenes of death, destruction and arson in Lahore, Amritsar and Uri, as I could no longer bear to see such images. Instead, I wanted my pictures to focus on peaceful aspects of life. Poverty was of course omnipresent in the lives of the people I depicted, but my objective was not to show poverty as such, but to create a sense of urgency to remedy the underlying causes that create poverty. Through my photographs, I wanted to make people aware of their collective responsibility, now that India had achieved its freedom. I found it immoral and scandalous that the people of South Asia should go on living in conditions of misery and privation, while the gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow. My ideas were perfectly in tune with those of Pandit Nehru, and I felt greatly honoured and excited that the Prime Minister should have handwritten the preface. It read:

*India is frequently represented by pictures of its noble buildings and its famous monuments of antiquity. Sometimes we see more modern structures, which may be impressive in their own way, but are seldom noted for their grace and beauty.*

*We have also pictures of her mountains and lakes and forests, and vast plains, and great rivers and raging torrents and bubbling brooks. All that is India, or a part of India. It is impossible to compress the infinite variety of India in a book or in a collection of pictures.*

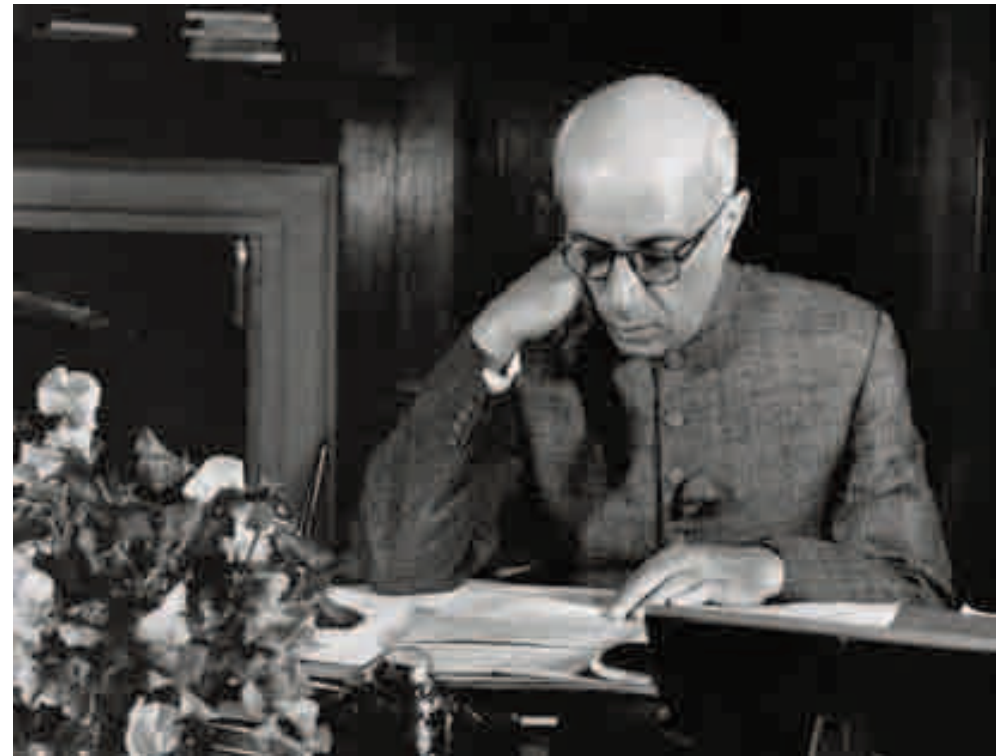
*Latterly, the politicians of India appear almost daily in some pose or other in the newspapers. They compete, in this respect, with the film stars of other countries. It is not a happy development. But that too is India.*

*Then we have pictures of parties and receptions, especially in New Delhi, with the same people, or more or less the same people, going from one reception to another. They represent the official world as well as the non-official of note and substance, with their wives and daughters. That too is India.*

*But here in this volume there is a different aspect of India – the common folk, the masses, the people. Again, they represent some odd types chosen from Kashmir in the North to Kanyakumari in the far South. It might have been possible to choose an entirely different set of types and they would have been equally representative of this rather wonderful country of ours. But this set of pictures does give an idea of our people in the humbler ranks of society. The pictures are good and I hope that many will derive pleasure from them and some understanding, as I have done.*

*Jawaharlal Nehru*

*New Delhi – January 9, 1949*



In the preface, Pandit Nehru had projected a comprehensive picture of India and not just focused on the poverty that my photographs depicted. I wondered if it was now my turn to be in the grip of revolutionary ethos and burning idealism, of which Pandit Nehru had said: ‘Looking at the people and their misery and overwhelming gratitude, I was filled with shame and sorrow, shame at our easygoing and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city dwellers who ignore this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India, sorrow at their degradation and overwhelming poverty. A new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable. And their faith in us, casual visitors from the distant city, embarrassed me and filled me with a new responsibility that frightened me.’

*The collection of photographs to which Pandit Nehru wrote the preface included many pictures already shown in the two Peace Campaign exhibitions I had mounted in Lahore and New Delhi.*



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Jawaharlal Nehru

New Delhi - January 9, 1949

A few months later, I received a message from Indira Gandhi's secretary that Pandit Nehru wanted me to accompany him to Ladakh. This area had recently been cleared of the Pakistani army and the Prime Minister wanted to visit the region himself. I had heard about this vast, high altitude stony desert, but it was not until we landed on the narrow strip of improvised iron-grill runway on the sandy bank of the River Indus that I fully realized the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape. Nestled within the isolated mountain peaks, covered with perennial snows and dry boulders left by melting glaciers, are many monasteries and temples containing extraordinarily beautiful wall paintings and sculptures. The stream of water flowing through the narrow valleys seemed so disproportionate to the great River Indus, representing the culture and all the myth and legend of South Asia. As the Prime Minister was expected to arrive the next day, I took this opportunity to visit the Leh Monastery and another smaller shrine nearby, and was greatly impressed by the grandeur of the works of art therein. This unforgettable experience attracted me back to Ladakh many years later to collect the material for my book *Himalayan Art*, published by UNESCO in 1968.

The Prime Minister and his entourage landed at Leh in a large Russian Antonov aircraft on 4 July 1949. A large crowd of Ladakhis wearing their colourful traditional costumes was waiting to welcome them. After a brief rest and a ritualistic ceremony performed by the *lamas* to ward off evil spirits, Pandit Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah led the expedition to Hemis monastery, riding on ponies. The group comprised some twenty VIPs, including Indira Gandhi and her husband Feroze. Nearly halfway, we stopped at the Monastery of Thikse, at a height of about 12,000 feet, and after lunch



Pandit Nehru was told to rest a while. With his characteristic impatience he ignored the advice and started walking towards the river along the neatly groomed strip of greenery. This was an excellent opportunity for me to take some exclusive photographs, but the security men prevented me from approaching him. Pandit Nehru noticed and ordered them to let me come up. Walking with him, I could see that he was feeling the altitude and, after some time, he sat down on a ridge, and then lay down, exhausted. I became concerned and enquired if he was feeling unwell. 'I do not know if it is the height', he said in a feeble voice, and changed the subject by asking me: 'What would you like to do in the future?' The question was so unexpected that I

*It was incredible that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru sat up until midnight to handwrite the preface to my collection of photographs This My People, after he had finished dictating his monthly newsletter to the Chief Ministers of Indian States.*

*Prime Minister Nehru and Indira Gandhi were welcomed in Leh by a large crowd. They visited Leh Monastery, where the lamas performed a ceremony to protect them from evil spirits, before continuing on to Hemis Monastery.*







took some time to figure out what he meant. Being all alone with the Prime Minister was making me very nervous. All I could think of was to thank him for having so kindly handwritten the preface to *This My People*, and express my wish to go abroad where I could publish a high-quality book.

The matter seemed to have been forgotten – but a month later I was summoned, along with two other candidates, Jamila Berkat Ullah and Keshev Malik, for an interview concerning an Indo-Italian student exchange programme. The Italian Ambassador and Prem Kirpal, the secretary in the Ministry of Education, informed us that the

open-ended scholarships would allow us to study whichever subject we wanted for the next two years. They also told us that we would be getting 42,000 lire per month, an amount we imagined was enormous for a scholarship. The interview seemed a mere formality, at the end of which Prem Kirpal congratulated us, and also told us never to forget that we were going to Italy as ‘Ambassadors of a secular India’ – explaining why a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh had been chosen for the scholarships. We were delighted, and within a few months sailed from Bombay to Naples on an Italian ship, the SS *Toscana*.

Preceding pages: *The narrow stream of the legendary River Indus flowing through the valleys of Ladakh seemed so disproportionate to the great ancient culture of South Asia that it represents.*

*The Prime Minister lay down, exhausted, on the banks of the River Indus at Thikse. I became concerned and asked if he was feeling unwell. He ignored my question and enquired instead, ‘What would you like to do in the future?’*

Arriving in Italy, it was shocking to find how little Europeans knew about India at the time. Our first task was to learn Italian in Florence, where we were going to stay at a small family hotel. When we arrived, the landlady looked curiously at Jamila's sari and my turban and demanded that we open our suitcases. She wanted an assurance that we were not carrying snakes in our baggage. India's image was either that of its wrenching poverty or the fabulous wealth of the Maharajas, with nothing in between. Very few really knew or cared about India's freedom struggle, her socio-economic problems, and even her art and culture, which was seen as nothing but an appendage of Greek and Roman civilizations. We reacted strongly against this ignorance and, on my return to Rome, decided not to publish *This My People*, which would only have highlighted the image of India's poverty. It now became clear to me why in his handwritten preface Pandit Nehru had projected an all-embracing picture of India and not just focused on the poverty that my photographs depicted.

Instead of going ahead with the publication of *This My People*, I tried persuading Giuseppe Tucci, director of the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (ISMEO), to publish a selection of the photographs from my 'Stones that Sing' exhibition in Delhi. It was as though I were trying to cover up India's abject poverty with the beauty of Indian art in much the same way I had uncovered the hidden sculpture of Nati from under the garbage in the Ranganathan temple. Tucci was very sympathetic to my request and asked me to identify a suitable printer and enquire how much it would cost. So I went browsing in several bookshops in Rome until I came across a book on the famous Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo that had been printed beautifully by a firm in Milan. I noted the address, travelled by train to Milan,



and found Via Panizza, an obscure street where I met with the printer Amilcare Pizzi, who was working in a small three-room workshop.

Looking at my turban, Amilcare knew at once that I was an Indian, and before I could say a word, he started talking

*Arriving in Rome, I reminded Keshev Malik and Jamila Berkat Ullah (later married George Verghese, a Christian) of our promise never to forget that we were the 'Ambassadors of a secular India'.*



about India and Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. He told me about the untimely death of his only daughter Silvana, and was overwhelmed with emotion, saying that he felt as grieved by Mahatma Gandhi's death as when Silvana had passed away. 'Since then my nephew Rodolfo has been helping me,' he went on to say, and introduced me to a young man who was busy making colour reproductions by block-printing on an out-dated machine. Amilcare gladly agreed to print my book and parried the question of what the cost would be: 'Pay me what you can, even gratis if you cannot afford'. His generous offer enabled ISMEO to publish my first book, *Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone*, in 1950. Later, it was on my recommendation that Pizzi printed some twenty-five volumes of the UNESCO World Art Series, starting with my book *INDIA, Paintings from Ajanta Caves*, in 1954. Since then, Pizzi has printed all ten of my books. After Rodolfo's death, his son Massimo took over the largest printing house in Italy. I have known Massimo since he was a child, and as I was

working with him on the layout of *The Sasia Story*, I told him how I had felt at home at Pizzi ever since I first came to meet with his grand-uncle over half a century ago.

Initially, my ambition was to become a painter, and so I had started working in the studio of a friend, Eva Fischer, in Via Margutta, a well-known haunt of international artists in Rome. I was still suffering from the partition syndrome that the gruesome carnage I had lived through in both parts of the divided Punjab had provoked – this was the primary theme of my paintings in the early 1950s. European artists at the time were similarly emotionally affected by the horrors of the Second World War. Soon after my arrival in Rome, the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, had proposed integrating the coal and steel industries of Western Europe. As a result, in 1951, six countries established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC): Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany. The power to take decisions about the coal and

*I found Amilcare Pizzi working in a small three-room workshop in Milan. The recent colour photograph shows his grand-nephew Massimo Pizzi standing with me in front of a painting of his granduncle Amilcare Pizzi and his father Rodolfo Pizzi – the three generations who have printed all ten of my books since 1950.*

steel industry in these countries was placed in the hands of an independent, supranational body called the High Authority, with Jean Monnet as its first President. Hence there was great interest among both artists and intellectuals in the efforts being made by the European leaders to secure a lasting peace between their countries by uniting them economically and politically. They felt that these efforts would be futile unless European culture were assigned an important role to play, a popular topic of discussion among the artists who frequently met at the Margutta artists' club.

With the monthly scholarship of 42,000 lire, which we had imagined in India to be a large amount, I could hardly buy even two meals a day. Giuseppe Tucci had very kindly given me a part-time job editing the quarterly magazine *East and West*, published by ISMEO, and had also asked me to take charge of news broadcasts in Hindi, a programme that the Italian Radio (RAI) had recently started. My job was to translate a daily news bulletin from Italian into Hindi, and then go and broadcast it to India every afternoon at the RAI transmitting station. For Pakistan, there was a separate news bulletin in Urdu, which was handled by an Italian Catholic priest who had lived for over two decades in a remote village in Punjab, trying in vain to convert the natives to Christianity; instead, the Punjabi culture had made him extroverted, blunt and abrasive. The 'Father', as he was called, had learnt to read and write elementary Urdu, and he was dead set against my view that there was no need to broadcast a Hindi and an Urdu news bulletin separately, as 'Hindustani' was generally understood both in India and in the newly created Pakistan. Obviously, he did not want to lose his broadcasting job, and I was trying to avoid having to spend so much of my time correcting his faulty Urdu

manuscripts – while he was busy giving 'fatherly' advice to a young nun who frequently came and talked to him tête-à-tête in whispers as they sat in the large room in which we both worked at Palazzo Brancaccio, the seat of ISMEO.

Gargano, a very gentle, soft-spoken and jovial Italian was in charge of the India-Pakistan news section at ISMEO. He had picked up some words of Hindi in India while he was incarcerated in the prisoner of war camp in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh, from where he had escaped ingeniously. It was great fun, he would say, as he had casually walked out of the camp, wearing a *dhoti* given to him by one of the prison guards. Pretending to be an Indian peasant, he had then travelled long distances, trekking, hitch-hiking and riding in trains without tickets, until he reached the Bombay harbour. There he spotted an Italian trawler on which he managed to stow away for the passage back to Italy. A great admirer of Benito Mussolini, he invariably wanted to insert some patently fascist notions into the commentaries that followed the news bulletins, propaganda that I detested. Knowing Gargano's inadequate knowledge of Hindi, I used to turn the text upside down, condemning fascism in all its manifestations.

But there was nothing I could do in regard to the fascist propaganda that the Father incorporated into his Urdu manuscripts, except to hope that no one in Pakistan would be able to follow the incomprehensible, highly Italianized accent in which he spoke Urdu. Then one day as I came back unexpectedly to Palazzo Brancaccio to pick up some papers I had forgotten to take with me to RAI, I was taken aback to find the holy Father crushing the frail nun with his elephantine weight as she lay on the large Renaissance-style wooden table. It was like a live scene from the *Decameron*, an Italian classic of earthly tales of love and





passion between priests and nuns, written in 1348–1353 by Giovanni Boccaccio. The bonus I reaped from the Father's romantic adventure was a kind of silent, unspoken understanding that I would keep mum about his love affair, and he would delete all pro-fascist propaganda from the Urdu news bulletins without letting Gargano know, and show me the text before its transmission.

I succeeded also in improving the content and quality of the quarterly magazine *East and West*, inviting a number of scholars to write for the journal. I myself wrote a series of articles on cultural and economic interaction between India and Italy. One piece, which in particular drew the Indian

*The president of ISMEO, Giuseppe Tucci, and Ambassador B. R. Sen, listening to me speak on East-West trade, and on the significance of the discovery of many Roman coins along the Western coast of India, such as at Arikamedu.*

Ambassador B. R. Sen's attention, was on the importance of the discovery of Roman coins in several port towns on India's West coast, such as Arikamedu. It showed how widespread trade and commerce between East and West had been, a subject on which I had also spoken at a conference held at ISMEO. Impressed with my book, *Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone*, and my articles in the magazine *East and West*, and having heard me speak at functions at Palazzo Brancaccio, the Indian Ambassador asked me to join his Embassy in Rome as a cultural attaché.

The first major project I undertook in my capacity as

*The Indian pavillion at the Venice Biennale was inaugurated by Sir Ronald Adam in the presence of Luther Evans, then Director-General of UNESCO. As many as forty Indian paintings were sold at this very competitive international art forum.*

cultural attaché was to assemble an exhibition of well-known past and present painters from all parts of India to show at the Venice Biennale. It was not easy to persuade its organizers to allot space for a pavilion at this, the oldest international exhibition of art, as Indian artists were virtually unknown in Europe. However, I managed to solve this problem with the help of my friends, the Via Margutta group of artists, and especially with the support of Fortunato Bellonzi, an Italian art critic and secretary-general of the National Art Quadrennial in Rome. I then took off to India, travelling extensively and visiting the three main art centres of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. I personally selected some fifty paintings by young contemporary artists, some of whom were Pakistani refugees. The only resistance I encountered in India was from the National Art Gallery, whose director declined to lend works by such well-known artists as Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy, arguing that they would be damaged in transit. His objection was overruled by Pandit Nehru's intervention on my appeal. The Indian pavilion at the Biennale was inaugurated by Sir Ronald Adam, a well-known art critic, in the presence of Luther Evans, then the Director-General of UNESCO. Its success was evident, for as many as forty paintings were sold at this very competitive international art market.

**F**ortunato Bellonzi was among the young intellectuals who were greatly excited by the idea of a united Europe. His view was that only by integrating the European economy with what he called 'a common fulcrum of culture' would post-war Europe recover and stabilize. He cited the example of Pablo Picasso, who was born in Spain but was essentially a European painter. His masterpiece *Guernica* spoke

out not only against Franco's war in Spain but against the universal horror of all conflicts. Bellonzi wanted to bring European artists onto a common platform, like the ECSC.

I was in Venice organizing the exhibition of Indian art at the Biennale when Bellonzi introduced me to Egidio Constantini. Egidio was then in his forties, and had fought as a partisan against fascism in Italy during the war. Educated as a botanist, and a banker by profession, the versatile Constantini was also a poet. But his talents really flourished in 1953, when Jean Cocteau re-baptized the Murano glass studio he had founded in 1948 'Fucina degli Angeli' (it was originally the Centro Studio Pittori Arte del Vetro), and Arp designed its star-shaped logo. Egidio Constantini had already contacted a number of well-known artists to draw sketches, which were then to be interpreted in glass by the famous Venetian glass-blowers in Murano. He wanted to promote original ideas to infuse new life into Venice's glass-blowing industry, which had fallen into a sort of rut and was dying, as the artisans continued to produce the same stereotypical wares.

Unlike Bellonzi, who wanted to confine the Murano exhibition of glass art to European participants, Constantini wanted to give it a wider international dimension by inviting some non-European artists as well. So he asked me to contribute a design and, with his son, Attilio, accompanied me to the island of Murano, about an hour's boat trip from Venice. At the Fucina degli Angeli workshop in Murano I drew two sketches of women from Ajanta. It was very exciting to watch Maestro Checco blowing the two-dimensional sketches into three-dimensional forms in sparkling green and pink coloured glass. I was inclined to call them 'Ajanta Women', but Constantini preferred the name 'Archaic Figures', as he rightly felt that Ajanta was unknown in Italy at the time. It was



*Half a century later we went to Venice to see an International Exhibition of Salvador Dali, organized on the centenary of his birth. The high tide of the full moon had inundated most parts of the city, and San Marco Square was filled knee-deep with water as hordes of tourists jostled each other on the narrow wooden pontoons hurriedly erected in the narrow lanes.*



*The two sketches I drew at the Fucina degli Angeli workshop in Murano were modelled after the women of Ajanta. It was very exciting to watch Maestro Checco transforming them into sparkling green and pink coloured glass.*

*Egidio Constantini with Pablo Picasso at the 1954 International Exhibition of Glass Art of Murano, held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, at which my exhibit, Archaic Figures (left), was among the first to be sold.*



indeed a matter of pride for me to be a part of an eminent group that included such great masters of art as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Alexander Calder, Georges Braque, Oscar Kokoschka, Henry Moore, Guttuso and Le Corbusier. And my ego was boosted all the more when my two 'Archaic Figures' were among the first exhibits to be sold – for a price comparable with Picasso's creations – at the International Exhibition of Glass Art of Murano, held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome from 22 May to 13 June in 1954.

Half a century later, my companion, France Marquet, and I went to Venice to see an International Exhibition of

works by Salvador Dali, organized on the occasion of the centenary of his birth by the Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation at Palazzo Grassi. Although some Italian cities have become monstrous over the years, Venice is a happy exception, despite the havoc caused by tourism and nature, and the fact that the city is sinking. We stayed at the Hotel Gritti and found its lobby covered with a sheet of water; we had to walk on raised wooden planks laid out in the hall. The high tide of the full moon had inundated most parts of the city, and San Marco Square was filled knee-deep with water. Hordes of tourists jostled with each other on the thin wooden pontoons

*I was pleasantly surprised that now so many shops had mushroomed in almost every nook and corner of the town, selling exquisite glass artifacts designed by famous artists. It reminded me of the first ever International Exhibition of Glass Art of Murano, held in Rome way back in 1954.*



hurriedly erected in the narrow lanes. Numerous buildings and monuments were covered with scaffolding in efforts to salvage this unique city, which is included on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List, and several streets were blocked. So we had to walk a zigzag route all the way to Palazzo Grassi and then climb up and down the stairs of its three floors to see the exhibits. I was exhausted by the end of it and sat down in a security guard's chair, reassuring France that I was feeling fine, and added that even seeing one masterpiece made the visit to Venice worthwhile, as I consider Dali to be the greatest of all artists who ever lived.

Next morning we went around visiting the landmarks in Venice, which revived dormant memories of my arrival in Italy in the early 1950s as a student, followed by my seven years as the cultural attaché at the Indian Embassy – organizing the Biennale art exhibition of Indian art, as well as fashion shows of Indian fabrics, and participating in the annual film festivals, in one of which my documentary film on Ajanta, which I had made together with the cinematographer Claude Renoir, was awarded a prize. Later, as a director in UNESCO's Culture Sector, I had the wonderful opportunity of participating in the fabulous extravaganza of medieval

*Looking for the 1954 Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Glass Art in Rome, we took a boat ride to the island of Murano and made inquiries at a number of glass shops and workshops. Even the director of the glass museum (right) had no clue and he suggested that perhaps the Museum of Venetian Art and History at San Marco might be able to help.*

pageantry at San Marco Square, from where the UNESCO Silk Road expedition had taken off in a procession of decorated gondolas to the ship that sailed from Venice to Osaka in Japan. This time I was pleasantly surprised that so many shops had mushroomed in almost every nook and corner of the town, selling exquisite glass artefacts designed by famous artists. It reminded me of the first International Exhibition of Glass Art of Murano, held in Rome way back in 1954. I had since misplaced the catalogue of that exhibition and wondered if I could find a copy in Venice.

It was a marvellous sunny morning as we took a boat ride next day to the island of Murano and made inquiries at a number of shops and workshops, but in vain. Even the director of the Murano glass museum had no clue, and he suggested that perhaps the Museum of Venetian Art and History at San Marco might be able to help. So the day after, once again we had to navigate through the inundated streets and bypass the pool of water in San Marco Square to reach the museum and meet with its director, Attilia Dorigato. She was extremely kind and directed a number of her colleagues to go through the museum's library records, but again with no results. As a last resort, she gave us a telephone number to contact Attilio Constantini at the Murano design studio *Fucina degli Angeli* – names which fifty long years had effaced from my memory.

Not getting any response on the telephone, and prevented by flooded streets from reaching *Fucina degli Angeli*, we marked time lunching in a nearby restaurant and then telephoned again. As advised by the person who picked up the receiver, I called again from the hotel at five in the afternoon, and at last spoke to Attilio Constantini. He was leaving town in an hour's time and so we rushed to meet with him,

as the water of the high tide had by then receded. The streets in Venice are like a puzzle, and although we had found the street, we could not locate the house as the numbering was not in sequence. We were about to give up when a man waved at us from the street corner and led us to the house of Egidio Constantini in the next parallel street. 'Are you the artist who designed the two "Archaic Figures"?' asked Attilio Constantini. He had to depart in a hurry, but told Antonio, Egidio's grand-nephew, to show us the archives. Antonio took us to a room with built-in racks piled up with all kinds of books, catalogues, pamphlets, posters and other publicity material. He was doubtful if the catalogue I was looking for was available, as Venice had been inundated with about 2 metres of water in 1966, destroying most of the archives. He pulled out a stack of documents and placed them on a small table, saying that they were the earliest in their collection.

'There it is!' I exclaimed with sheer joy as I spotted the edge of the olive-green catalogue among the documents and eagerly pulled it out from under the heap. I was absolutely delighted, as it was a chance in a million that I would find it. Hurriedly shuffling its pages, I found the picture of the two 'Archaic Figures', and holding the catalogue tightly in both my hands, I asked Antonio if I could keep it. 'It is for my grand-uncle to decide', he said, and added that Egidio Constantini did not receive guests after sunset as he was now over 93 years old.

Nevertheless, Antonio went upstairs to ask his grand-uncle while I waited with my fingers crossed. He came back beaming and led us to the room where good old Egidio was seated facing the door; he saw us climbing the steps and started clapping vigorously with hands pointing towards me.



From his sparkling eyes and the clamorous applause of welcome we could see that he was genuinely happy to see me. He warmly held my hand and asked me to sit down beside him, apologizing for not being able to get up as he had fallen recently and broken his hip. But his memory was crystal-clear as he recounted several incidents that I had forgotten. I told him how amazed I was to see the bonanza that the artists and glass-blowers of Murano were now reaping from the hybrid seedling of glass art that he had grafted half a century ago. 'Indeed, you unleashed a veritable revolution', I complimented him. Egidio was visibly overwhelmed with emotion; he

clasped my right hand in his and, placing it tightly on his heart, said: 'You, too, were a part of that memorable initiative.' He then gladly presented me with the catalogue I wanted. He gave me also a number of other books on glass art published by the Murano design studio, Fucina degli Angeli, describing the origins of the art of glass blowing in Murano, which go back to before the first millennium and attribute something magical and supernatural to this transparent material. During my Silk Road expeditions, I had learned that besides silk, spices, textiles and perfumes, glass-blowing techniques had benefited greatly from the trading contacts that the Venetians

*'There it is!' I exclaimed with sheer joy as I spotted the edge of the olive green catalogue (left) among the documents and eagerly pulled it out from under the heap. I complimented Constantini for having unleashed a veritable revolution, the bonanza of which both the artists and glass-blowers of Murano were now reaping. He clasped my right hand in his and placing it tightly on his heart said: 'You, too, were a part of that memorable initiative.'*





had with the Orient, and above all with people who had an ancient tradition in glass-blowing, such as the Phoenicians, the Syrians and the Egyptians.

When I was the cultural attaché, the Indian Embassy in Italy was concurrently accredited to Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece. I was eager to visit Yugoslavia, especially since my friend, the writer Alberto Moravia, had told me that it was a good model for the European Union. My wish was soon realized as I was asked to accompany the Vice-President of India, S. Radhakrishnan and Ambassador Sen, who went to the beautiful island of Brioni in Yugoslavia to meet with Marshal Tito on the eve of the annual meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement. Later, we visited almost all the provinces of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In his speeches and talks with officials, Dr. Radhakrishnan applauded Tito for having so successfully unified Yugoslavia in an extremely difficult historical environment. The country was an excellent example of unity in diversity – one state with two languages, three religions, four nationalities, five ethnic groups and six republics. He told us that in this respect Yugoslavia was a miniature version of India. The tragic destruction of this beautiful country by Yugoslavia's 'modern-day Neros' who looked the other way when mass graves of Muslims were being dug in Kosovo is a warning not only to the people of Mahatma Gandhi's Gujarat but to the people of South Asia as a whole.

On our return to Rome, I wrote a number of reports about the progressive policies of Marshal Tito, promoting economic justice and social equality in the management of the economy and in the areas of finance and industry, adult education and workers' rights. I also started producing a

*The Italian writer Alberto Moravia was an admirer of the progressive policies of Marshal Tito, and believed that Yugoslavia was a good model for the European Union.*



*I accompanied S. Radhakrishnan and Ambassador Sen when they called on Marshal Tito in Brioni. The Vice President of India praised Tito for having so successfully unified Yugoslavia, a country which was, like India, an perfect example of unity in diversity – one state with two languages, three religions, four nationalities, five ethnic groups and six republics.*



Serbo-Croat edition of the Italian quarterly magazine, *INDIA, a Cultural Review*, which I had conceived and started publishing soon after I joined the Embassy in Rome. Later, at the request of the Indian Embassies in France, Germany and the Soviet Union, French, German and Russian-language editions of the magazine were also published in Rome.

*During Pandit Nehru's official visit to Rome, I interpreted for him in Italian at various functions. The Prime Minister insisted on my presence when he called on President Giovanni Gronchi, ignoring the protocol's request to use their own Italian interpreter.*

By then I had learned sufficient Italian to interpret for Pandit Nehru when he came to Rome on an official visit. I interpreted for him first at the old Ciampino airport when he was received by the Italian Prime Minister Segni, and then again when he delivered a speech at a banquet given by the Italian government. Next day, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs saw no need for me to accompany the Prime Minister when he went to call on President Gronchi, as the Palace had its own interpreter. 'Does the Palace interpreter know Hindi?' asked Pandit Nehru, obviously wanting me to accompany him to the Quirinale Palace. As expected, the Prime Minister talked with President Gronchi in English, and I had nothing to do but sit patiently and listen.

One Congress leader whom I greatly admired was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, although I did not have the honour of meeting him until he visited Italy. Ambassador Sen asked me to accompany the Education Minister and show him around some of the Italian monuments and historical sites, and we also drove to see the Vesuvius volcano near Naples. A great scholar in Persian and Arabic languages, it was indeed a real treat listening to his flowery phrases in classical Urdu. Walking through the ruins of Pompeii, he pointed at Vesuvius and said: 'Communal passion is like the burning lava of a volcano which destroys everything that comes in its way, including our most precious possession, culture.' Then, thoughtfully, he added: 'Partitions do not solve any problems; they create more divisions. Those who believe that religious affinity can unite areas that are geographically apart and linguistically different are sadly mistaken and swimming against the cultural current of history.' I recalled those prophetic words many years later when Bangladesh separated from Pakistan. Maulana Azad



seemed impressed with my knowledge of Italian culture, and soon after his return to India I received an unexpected grant from the Ministry of Education that enabled me to travel for three months, visiting many museums, institutions and art centres in half a dozen countries in Europe.

**O**n my way back from that marvellous European trip, I stopped in Paris to meet with Prem Kirpal, who had in the meantime joined UNESCO as a director in its Culture Sector – a post I also filled many years later. I told him about my having visited the Ajanta caves and showed him some colour slides. The wall paintings were fast deteriorating, and so I suggested that UNESCO do something for their restoration and preservation before they were completely obliterated. As Prem Kirpal was already thinking on those lines and had planned to publish a number of volumes in the UNESCO World Art Series, he agreed that I should compile the first volume on Ajanta paintings. Impressed with the high quality of the reproductions in my book *Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone*, he also accepted my recommendation that the contract for printing the series be given to Amilcare Pizzi in Milan.

Meanwhile, Anton Schutz, publisher of the New York Graphic Society, had been asked by UNESCO to participate in its World Art series and to accompany me to the Ajanta caves in India. We flew to Bombay and then to Aurangabad from where we were driven to Ajanta. It was a very hot April day as we arrived and, entering the caves, the paintings created a very different impression from the one I had carried since my last visit. Having become used to seeing the large-sized frescoes in the imposing churches of Italy and other parts of Europe, the Ajanta paintings seemed like faded

*In Pompeii, the Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad pointed to Vesuvius and said: 'Communal passion is like the burning lava of a volcano which destroys everything that comes in its way, including our most precious possession, culture.'*



miniatures, lost amidst glaring patches of chipped-off surfaces. They no longer impressed me as they had in the past. I was worried lest Anton Schutz think likewise, and I started telling him the history of the paintings and their importance. I tried 'selling' Ajanta to him, as the Americans say, and told him how, way back in 1819, a party of British army officers on a tiger hunt in the forest of western Deccan had suddenly come across the caves way high up on the horseshoe-shaped cliff overlooking the Waghora River. Thus they discovered a series of thirty carved caves, including some unfinished ones, hewn out of a vertical rock-face with beautiful sculptures in bas-relief. Entering the caves, they were amazed to find that the walls were all painted with masterpieces of Buddhist religious art – later dated from the second

and first centuries BC to the Gupta period (fifth and sixth centuries AD). The sculptures and paintings in the Ajanta caves detail Buddha's life as well as the allegorical Jataka tales, depicting the lives of Buddha's reincarnation. I quoted Pandit Nehru: 'Looking at the Ajanta paintings was as though the people outside the caves were part of the long, never-ending procession of Jataka stories painted on the walls of caves. They depict a vast panorama of landlords and peasants, hunters and fishermen, saints and priests, merchants and shopkeepers, thieves and mendicants, gamblers and dancing girls, animals and a variety of birds.'

Perspiring profusely, the publisher remained mum and displayed no reaction whatsoever. That, I thought, was the end of my Ajanta book. It was not until we had gone through

*Tired and perspiring profusely, Anton Schutz remained silent and displayed no reaction whatsoever as we visited the Ajanta caves. Worried that he might not publish the book, I tried 'selling' Ajanta to him, as the Americans say, telling him how the caves were accidentally discovered in 1819 by a party of British Army officers on a tiger hunt. At last, when we had visited all thirty caves, he commented: 'If I could only carry these caves to the United States, I would make millions of dollars.'*



*The sculptures and paintings in the Ajanta caves detail the Buddha's life, as well as the allegorical Jataka tales, depicting his life in different incarnations.*

all thirty caves that I finally ventured to ask his opinion. Schutz turned to me slowly, and without the slightest emotion said in his heavy German accent: 'If I could only carry these caves to the United States, I would make millions of dollars.' Relieved, I burst out laughing, delighted that I had succeeded in 'selling' Ajanta to him. Anton Schutz described our memorable journey together in a book of his own memoirs, *My Share of Wine*.

The UNESCO volume on the Ajanta caves was almost ready by the end of the year. At Prem Kirpal's suggestion, I sent a proof copy to Pandit Nehru requesting him kindly to write a few words of preface for it. There was no response for nearly a month, and I had given up hope when I learned that the preface had been received through diplomatic pouch at the Indian Embassy. It read:

*I should like to congratulate UNESCO on their volume on Ajanta, the first to be devoted to Asian Art in the UNESCO World Art Series. Ever since the Ajanta frescoes were rediscovered and became generally known, they have exercised an increasing influence on our thought and on Indian art generally. They bring out not only the artistic traditions of fifteen hundred years ago or so, but make vivid the life of those distant periods. The women of Ajanta are famous. History becomes human and living and not merely a record of some distant age which we can hardly understand. Thus the appeal of Ajanta is not merely to the artist or the expert, but to every sensitive human being. Anyone who would understand the past of India must look at these frescoes which have exercised such a powerful influence not only in India but in distant countries also. If I were asked to name three or four places of paramount interest in India, which*

*gave some glimpse into India's mind in successive ages, I would mention Ajanta as one of them.*

*I, therefore, welcome this production and congratulate not only UNESCO but my young colleague, Madanjeet Singh, who has brought his ability and labour to the performance of this task.*

*Jawaharlal Nehru.*

I was thrilled both because Pandit Nehru had now written prefaces to two of my publications and because UNESCO had paid me as much as US\$3,000 – enough to buy a Mercedes sports car, which I very much wanted. With much pride, I wrote a long letter to my parents conveying the good news. My mother's reaction was astonishing; she wrote back urging me to observe the customary practice of giving away part of one's first earnings to *dharm arth* (charity). By then I had already purchased the new-model Mercedes 190 SL, and I soon became known in Rome as the 'Maharaja': an Indian driving a sports car could not be anything else. But I hated to promote either the poverty or the Maharaja image of India, so it was not long before I got rid of the car, for the same reasons that prevented me from publishing my book, *This My People*.

Charlie Chaplin was among the first people to whom I had the pleasure of presenting a copy of my book, *INDIA, Paintings from Ajanta Caves* (1954), published as part of the UNESCO World Art Series. I admired his progressive views, for which McCarthyism had hounded him out of the United States. He and his wife Oona O'Neil had recently settled at Vevey in Switzerland, and I met them at a reception hosted by Prince Massimo to celebrate his wedding

with the actress Dawn Adams, a friend of the Chaplins. They had met with Pandit Nehru in Switzerland and, impressed on learning that the Prime Minister of India had written a preface to my UNESCO book, Charlie Chaplin gladly accepted my invitation for a drink in my Parioli apartment, and asked if he might bring along a friend.

The friend was none other than Salvador Dali, who had created a scandal in the very Catholic city of Rome by arriving at the exhibition of his paintings on a *palanquin* carried by four girls in bikinis. As Dali entered my apartment, I drew his attention to a large canvas hung at the entrance, which I had painted in Via Mergutta: the subject was the same as the two Murano Archaic Figures in glass, except that these two almond-eyed Ajanta women in green and pink were portraits. Without turning his head, Dali glanced at the painting for a second from the corner of his eyes and casually commented in Spanish, 'Interesting.' That was the only word he uttered throughout the evening, which was otherwise entirely monopolized by Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin was in fine form and started off telling us about the recent lunch he had hosted for Pandit Nehru in Switzerland. As the Prime Minister had very little time to spare, Chaplin described how Pandit Nehru went on talking calmly as they were being driven full-speed along the narrow winding lakeside roads, while he jumped at every sharp turn as the brakes of the car screeched. Asked about his new film 'The King in New York', he stood up as if he were on stage, and alternately played the role of the child, bending low, and then standing tall as he represented the King.

Ambassador Sen and a distinguished scholar, Dr. Zakariah of the historical division in the Ministry of External Affairs, were also invited and they were waiting for a chance to ask Chaplin why he had left the United States. At first he



*Talking about the European Union, Charlie Chaplin commented prophetically: 'Only a United States of Europe can possibly defend its cherished value systems against McCarthyism in the United States of America.'*



parried the question by saying that he did not want his children to watch television. But later, when Zakariah pointedly asked his opinion about McCarthyism, he became very serious and was no longer the jovial actor we saw a few minutes earlier. He hesitated for a moment and said: 'America was born of European parentage from whom the Americans learned the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, symbolized by the Statue of Liberty in New York, a gift of France to America. McCarthy and his followers consider 'liberal' a dirty word, displaying their ignorance that liberty and freedom originated from the Latin *liber*. Then talking about the European Union he stated: 'Only a United States of Europe can possibly defend its cherished value systems against McCarthyism in the United States of America'.

'What Chaplin said was only the tip of the iceberg of what he did not say', Zakariah later explained. The roots of liberalism as a political movement and value system, he argued, lie in the Enlightenment and the defence of the rights and dignity of the individual against despotic governments. As with Pandit Nehru, Chaplin had been influenced by Fabian ideas. Founded in 1884 in London, the Fabian Society published a series of political essays on socialism from 1889 until 1931, edited by George Bernard Shaw. Its outstanding leaders included Sidney Webb, Edward Pease and Graham Wallas Shaw, as well as Beatrice Potter, who married Webb in 1892. Annie Besant infused many of these ideas into India's freedom movement by establishing the Indian Home Rule League (1916), which laid the foundation of the Indian National Congress. During its early period, the Fabian Society devoted its attention to general arguments against capitalism and in favour of socialism. It also stressed the importance of local government as a means of

promoting collective ownership. The horizons gradually widened, and the Fabians became as much interested in social services as in the nationalization of industry. The Colonial Bureau of the Fabian Society was established in 1940, and produced a continuous stream of discussion and writing on colonial questions.

**E**ver since, Charlie Chaplin's European vision of social, political and economic development has been unfolding into reality. The success of the ECSC prompted its six original members to integrate other sectors of their economies. In 1957 they signed the Treaty of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). Ten years later, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament were added. Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined in 1973, followed by Austria, Finland, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. The 1992 Treaty of Maastricht introduced new forms of cooperation between member states in the areas of defence, justice and home affairs, and created the European Union (EU). Among the important agreements was the Schengen Convention, which came into effect in 1995, introducing freedom of movement for individuals and commodities among thirteen member states. Two more countries have since joined the Schengen Convention, and the EU family has grown to twenty-five members. A constitution for the European Union was agreed in Brussels on 18 June 2004. It brings together for the first time the many treaties and agreements on which the EU is based and it defines the powers of the EU, stating where it can act and where the member states retain their right of veto. It also defines the

role of the EU institutions. Above all, Europe's common currency, the Euro, has become an anchor of economic stability and regional cooperation.

The more the Europeans succeeded, the more my dream of a South Asian Union turned sour, as the Indian and Pakistani leaders continued to suffer from the megalomania of the post-partition conflict and vested interests. They could not look past petty local politics, or understand that without regional cooperation, peace and stability, their countries could not survive the growing trend towards globalization or realize their economic potentials. I could not comprehend why they were bent on destroying their economies with ever-increasing military expenditures, to the detriment of their poverty-stricken people. Why did they not join hands and use the subcontinent's immense potential and resources to make South Asia a major economic power in the world?

I was therefore elated when, soon after I was appointed a director in the Culture Sector of UNESCO in 1982, the charter of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on 8 December 1985. It reflected several EU ideas, and I imagined that a similar South Asian Union would solve many of our problems. I assumed that, as regional cooperation had brought France and Germany together after centuries of devastating wars, so too would SAARC encourage India and Pakistan to transcend their quarrel over Kashmir. I cherished the hope that SAARC would rapidly forge ahead like the European Union, dealing with such important subjects as education; culture; trade and commerce; citizens' rights; ensuring freedom, security and justice; job creation; protection of the environment; and other areas of regional development. I hoped, too, that with its common official language – English – the

proposed South Asian Union would achieve even faster economic and political integration, for the European Union does not have a common language. Surely, like ECSC, SAARC would soon identify common economic denominators in South Asian countries, and start off by setting up an independent, supranational body like the one created under the presidency of Jean Monnet. I expected that a South Asian Economic Union would soon be formed; it would have a single common currency – which I named the Sasia, thus anticipating the Euro by over fifteen years.

**O**n 18 March 1987, my mother, Sumitra Kaur – friend, guide and philosopher – passed away at Kotagiri in the Nilgiri Hills in India. The wealth of wisdom and ideals I inherited from Bibiji were wrapped up in a simple saffron coloured piece of cloth, together with the holy book of the Sikhs, *Granth Saheb*, and a copybook dated 15 September 1976, on the cover of which she had written, in *gurmukhi* (Punjabi) script, *Memories of Dreams*. It briefly described the significant happy and painful events of her life and listed guidelines to follow 'for good human relationships'. Inside, there was an image of Guru Nanak, together with photos of Swamy Vivekananda, the 'Mother' of Aurobindo Ashram, and a miniature painting of a Sufi sage, Mian Mir – the Muslim fakir who had laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The four images significantly summed up her whole life and beliefs, founded in the writings of poet-saints such as Kabir and his disciple Guru Nanak, who conceived the Sikh religion by incorporating the best of Hinduism and Islam and rejecting such anti-social practices as caste discrimination. Both Kabir and Nanak were devotees of a God whom they were unwilling and unable to delimit by sectarian



description. Bibiji was genuinely interested in people and practiced what she believed. Soon after India's partition, when there was so much resentment against Muslims among her friends and relatives, she wholeheartedly blessed my marrying a Muslim girl, a daughter of the Indonesian Ambassador in Stockholm where I was posted at the time.

My mother donated to charity whatever she could spare. The last time I saw her in Kotagiri she asked me to buy and give fifty blankets to orphans of a nearby convent; she had seen children sleeping without coverings on bare wooden platforms in the bitter cold of this hill station. She was convinced that the curse of poverty could not be alleviated without effective family planning, even though population control was not looked upon with favour by the Catholic Church. She took pride in telling her friends and relatives how she had overruled her husband by refusing to bear more than two children and never changed her mind, even after a series of tragedies in which both her only daughter, Ranjeeta, and her granddaughter, Reeta – Ranjeeta's only child – were killed. Nineteen-year old Reeta, a talented poet, lost her life in an air crash near Paris as she was returning home after spending summer vacation with her mother in Brazil, where her stepfather was the Indian Ambassador. Less than a year later, Ranjeeta herself was shot dead in a cruel mugging in New Delhi. Bibiji's iron will and unfaltering religious faith helped her to bear these terrible tragedies with formidable fortitude. A large number of people attended her funeral, many with tears in their eyes. On her death I regretted that I had ignored her wish to give away to charity part of the royalties I had received from my UNESCO book, *INDIA, Paintings from Ajanta Caves*. She was deeply hurt that I had not respected the traditional custom.

*My mother Sumitra Kaur, friend, guide and philosopher, passed away in Kotagiri on 18 March 1987. Deeply religious and compassionate, she believed that the curse of poverty could not be banished without effective family planning.*





I wanted to set up a foundation in Bibiji's name to promote her ideals, but as a civil servant I had hardly any funds. The royalties I earned from my several books were barely sufficient to pay for my son Jeet's education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, USA. I thought of selling my Vasant Vihar house in New Delhi, which was rented out to a foreign embassy, but the ambassador refused to vacate the premises, ignoring even the philanthropic reason for which I wanted the house back. Invoking his diplomatic immunity, he flouted all rules and regulations, from the lease deed to the intervention of the Ministry of External Affairs. In 1994 – seven long and frustrating years later – my house was returned to me when His Excellency the Ambassador departed surreptitiously on the completion of his mission in India, without informing me and without having paid the rent for three years.

At last, Sumitra Foundation (SF), was inaugurated on 8 January 1995, by the Finance Minister Manmohan Singh (now Prime Minister of India), who accepted to become its chairman. The function was attended by many of my old friends and benefactors who had supported me since I was a student. In a moving speech, Prem Kirpal, who had helped me to publish my UNESCO book, *INDIA, Paintings from Ajanta Caves*, revealed that it was on Pandit Nehru's recommendation that he had arranged for my scholarship to Italy. Manmohan Singh spoke about the importance of family planning and the protection of the environment, pointing out that the ecological disaster that resulted from overpopulation was as much a consequence of poverty as it was its cause. In my speech I elaborated on the damage caused by the population explosion such as denuding the forests, polluting the seas, producing the greenhouse effect, and creating holes in

*The foundation stone of the Golden Temple, Amritsar (previous page) was laid in 1589 by a Sufi ascetic, Mian Mir. It represents the synthesis of Bhakti and Sufi cultures, taking into its loving embrace Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike.*



the ozone layer. Moreover, dire wretchedness and desperation caused by poverty creates intolerance and religious fundamentalism, thus posing an ever-greater danger to the social and political structures of secular democracies.

Meanwhile, my book *This My People* had been published on 14 November 1989, to mark the 100th anniversary of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's birth. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi wrote the Foreword. It reads:

*I am glad Madanjeet Singh has snatched back this fragment of history from the drawers of his writing desk, where the manuscript has languished for close on four decades. It is an intensely personal account of an epochal event in the life*

*of the nation, the tumultuous joy of independence, the agony of partition, the thrill of nation building.*

*This is also a memoir that etches one of the greatest personalities of our time, Jawaharlal Nehru, from the perspective of a sensitive young artist who finds his growing into manhood coinciding with his country growing out of bondage, into freedom and liberty.*

*The theme of the book, of both the photographs and the text, is the great running theme of our ancient civilization; unity in diversity, the celebration of that multifaceted heterogeneity that distinguishes our civilization from most others, the recognition that there is so much that is wondrous, wise and beautiful on this earth that our windows should be kept open to the best that blows in from wherever*

*The first jury chairman of the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Non-Violence and Tolerance, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, handing over to then Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, the names of the 1996 Prize laureates, awarded to a collective of thirty-two women's associations in Rwanda, Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe (right). The Prize was unanimously established in 1995 by the Executive Board of UNESCO on the United Nations Day of Tolerance.*



Hand-written preface: **JAWAHARLAL NEHRU**

# *THIS MY PEOPLE*

Text and photographs: **MADANJEET SINGH**



*it comes. Out of this recognition comes tolerance and compassion showing the path to truth and nonviolence, one humanity and one world.*

I had reckoned that *This My People* would be of limited interest – primarily to the people of South Asia – as the black and white photographs were taken during the crucial period of India’s partition between 1946 and 1949. Hence I was pleasantly surprised by the extraordinary attention the book received worldwide. ‘An astonishing book of photographs ... his is a mental journey through the India he loves deeply’, wrote Souren Melikian, the well-known art critic of the *International Herald Tribune* (7/8 October 1989); while in a full-page article written by Ismail Merchant in the *New York Times* (15 July 1990), the eminent film producer lauded ‘the aesthetic merits and historical value of the book’. Even the French succumbed to the charms of *This My People*, running a three-page article in the prestigious magazine *L’Express* (5 January 1990).

**O**n the eve of my departure for Harare, Zimbabwe, to attend the Solar Summit of Heads of States and Governments, from 14–18 September 1996 (part of the World Solar Programme of 1996–2005), the South African Embassy in Paris invited me to visit South Africa. At my request, the ambassador had fixed an appointment for me to meet with President Mandela. I had followed Nelson Mandela’s struggle for freedom since the 1960s, when he was arrested and imprisoned, and respected him no less than Mahatma Gandhi. I carried with me a copy of my book, *This My People*, which I knew he would appreciate. As I arrived for the appointment at his Johannesburg office, I was surprised to

see a large crowd of media people, photographers and TV cameramen waiting at the office door of the President. ‘My God! Have I become so important?’ crossed my mind as I made my way through the crowd to announce my arrival to Mandela’s secretary. ‘You will have to wait’, she said courteously. ‘President Mandela is about to make a very important announcement’. I waited for over an hour, when Nelson Mandela arrived and announced that he had decided to divorce his wife and fellow freedom fighter, Winnie Mandela.

I was given the red-carpet treatment in South Africa, as I had already had the honour of meeting with Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his capacity as the first jury chairperson of the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Non-Violence and Tolerance, established in 1995. The 1996 prize was awarded to an association of thirty-two women’s organizations, *Profemmes Twese Hamwe*, in Rwanda, for their work to promote the role of women in building peace and combating social injustice. Shortly after the April 1994 massacres in Rwanda, these women’s groups – *Twese Hamwe* means ‘all together’ – had launched the Action Campaign for Peace to fight for social justice and women’s rights. The association supported rural development programmes, operations to aid widows and orphans, health programmes and other training activities fostering a climate of peace based on tolerance and non-violence. Having concurrently served as ambassador in Rwanda and Burundi when I was the High Commissioner of India in Uganda in the 1970s, I was happy that the prize, which at that time amounted to US\$40,000, would benefit the widows and orphans who had survived the horrendous genocide committed by extremists in Rwanda’s Hutu majority who had launched a campaign of extermination

*This My People was finally published on 14 November 1989, to mark 100th anniversary of Pandit Nehru’s birth. Published in several languages, it was well received and reviewed throughout the world.*



against the country's Tutsi minority. In barely 100 days, as many as 800,000 men, women and children had been brutally massacred. Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe had done outstanding work to rehabilitate families and communities.

In Johannesburg, the South African National Commission for UNESCO had arranged my programme in cooperation with the Independent Development Trust (ITD). A representative of this South African agency very kindly drove me to Krueger Park, some 200 kilometres from Johannesburg, to show me a medical clinic run on solar energy. The main roads in South Africa are as good as in Europe, so it took us no more than three hours of picturesque driving to reach the village. I was very impressed with the solar equipment supplied by ITD and funded by the government. At my request, the ITD resident director agreed to provide any help should Sumitra Foundation wish to build similar solar medical clinics in India.

Pleased with the success of *The Sun in Myth and Art*, Federico Mayor had suggested at the Solar Summit in Harare that it would be worthwhile to bring out a supplementary volume, on solar energy to launch the World Solar Programme (1996–2005). I gladly agreed, though it was a daunting task. Much of the material and illustrations for *The Sun in Myth and Art* could be obtained from museums and institutions, but the renewable energy of the sun was a new subject for which I had to travel worldwide to collect material. Nevertheless, I took up the gauntlet and started attending a number of pre-summit meetings of experts organized by UNESCO in different parts of the world.

I travelled widely, not only to attend meetings of solar experts, but also to visit several major solar energy projects in the remote and poorer regions of Africa, Australia, the

Americas and Asia. In particular, a visit to China turned out to be very fruitful, as after the meeting in Beijing I was invited to visit Inner Mongolia. Driving mile after mile along the road in this vast, treeless landmass, I was amazed to see hundreds of small hybrid solar-energy systems – comprising a small wind turbine and a photovoltaic panel – installed on the roofs of houses and even on the tops of yurts, and being moved seasonally by the shepherds with their animals. I mentioned this to the local governor and enquired if I could buy one of these portable solar-energy systems and take it to India. 'You don't have to buy, we shall give you a gift', he responded generously; and by the time I reached India, the solar equipment had already arrived in New Delhi. It was installed by the Sumitra Foundation in a pilot medical clinic on a one-acre plot of land at Gurgaon, about 40 kilometres south of New Delhi.

**B**efore arriving in Harare for the Solar Summit in September 1996, the material on solar energy that I had gathered enabled me to publish a ninety-page booklet, *Renewable Energy of the Sun*. The elements I provided to Federico Mayor for his preface to this publication were not just on energy itself, but also about the 'human face' of solar energy, integrated with the environment and culture of the people, a topic that I had written about in my book *The Sun in Myth and Art*. In it I emphasized that solar energy technology is perceived by many as being in harmony with their cultural traditions. Camels are often used in India to carry photovoltaic panels to remote and depressed areas in the desert, such as Megh-wallon-ki-dhani, a village inhabited by people belonging to the schedule castes.

The preface stated that developing a new and sustainable energy economy is one of the major challenges facing



*The Chinese National Commission for UNESCO invited me to visit vast, treeless Inner Mongolia where hundreds of small hybrid solar systems had been installed on the roofs of houses, and even on the tops of yurts, moved seasonally by the shepherds with their animals.*



*In the Rajasthan desert of India, camels are often used to carry photovoltaic panels to remote desert areas, such as Megh-wallon-ki-dhani, a village inhabited by poor people belonging to schedule castes.*

humanity – population growth, rapid urbanization, ecosystem destruction, to name but a few. *Renewable Energy of the Sun* pointed out that damage to the earth's environment, largely due to affluent lifestyles in industrialized countries, is compounded by abject poverty in many parts of the world. Therefore, international action to promote renewable energies is all the more urgent, as more than 2 billion people, one in every three people worldwide, do not have access to electric power. Many of these men, women and children live in remote regions or island habitats where solar energy is their only recourse. Photovoltaic and other on-the-spot solar energy installations can change the lifestyle of people in isolated locations who cannot be reached through electricity distribution grids. Many rural communities are at last beginning to enjoy the benefits of electricity, which is bringing them into contact with the outside world through telecommunication systems, radio and television. Solar lights installed in schools and clinics have improved the quality of healthcare and educational services for children. Other

sources of renewable energy, such as wind and biomass-generated electricity, are similarly benefiting both urban and rural communities.

The spin-off benefits of renewable energies are also of the greatest importance. Small and dispersed solar-energy projects in rural areas, including individual photovoltaic plants, biomass and small hydro facilities, have a cardinal role to play in halting the increasing rush to the cities by peasants living in the poorest regions. Such projects, by virtue of their local and participatory nature, are also more democratic, tending to create new cooperative structures that resist the concentration of power in a few authoritarian hands. By promoting sustainable development based on partnership with nature, they protect the environment and favour the emergence of a culture of peace, which is inseparable from democracy and development. Sustainable energy, with its peaceful, participatory and environmentally friendly associations, seems poised to repair the long-standing divorce between science and culture through the



*An Indian woman in Tamil Nadu spreads out her colourful saris to dry after washing them with water drawn by a solar water-pump (right). These PV systems, which are now being used worldwide, are very reliable, and unskilled personnel can easily be trained locally to handle their installation, operation and maintenance.*



traditional and scientific use of solar technology, a crucial energy of the future.

At the inauguration of the Harare Solar Summit on 14 September 1996, I had placed copies of *Renewable Energy of the Sun* on the desks of each of the heads of state and government. President Leghari of Pakistan, who was seated at the main rostrum, saw me sitting at the United Nations desk. He walked over to me from across the hall and asked if he could have another copy. During my recent visit to Islamabad to attend the solar experts' committee meeting, he had personally intervened to allow me to visit the sensitive military area of Bunair Valley, where 288 solar panels had been installed at the Konkoi Solar Station.

*A Pakistani farmer in Bunnair Valley teaches his son to sow seeds using water drawn with pumps run on solar energy, against a backdrop of the 288 solar panels of the Konkoi Solar Station.*

Federico Mayor noticed President Leghari talking to me and later complimented me, saying: 'Amity between India and Pakistan is another benefit of solar energy'. It was a comment made in jest but it set me thinking that perhaps cooperative solar energy projects in SAARC countries would help in promoting regional cooperation in South Asia.

Australia is among the avant-garde countries promoting solar technology. I was keen to go there since Gordon Thompson, the Managing Director of one of the larger companies in Perth called CASE, had invited me while I was in Harare. Accordingly, within a month I flew all the way to Perth, and spent a memorable month in a country I had

*A number of schools run on solar energy were set up for Aboriginal children by the Australian government; they include facilities for teachers to live and work in these isolated areas.*



never been to. There I realized why the use of solar energy is indispensable in the vast isolated desert-like regions of central Australia that grid electricity cannot possibly reach. CASE had hired a four-seater aircraft, and for a week I was flown around several tiny oasis habitations in the Central Australian desert, located on farms as large as 1–2 million hectares. A number of schools run on solar energy had been set up by the Australian government for the Aboriginal children, with adequate facilities for teachers to live and work in these isolated places. In one village, I was frightened out of my wits as we landed in a blinding dust storm on a bumpy dirt clearing. The client to whom CASE had supplied solar equipment was absent, and in his place there was lit-

erally a horse to receive us. It was no joke. Like a chief of protocol, the beast turned round and led us to the village about a mile away and stopped in front of a house that apparently was his master's. There was not a soul in this hamlet of no more than five or six houses, so we waited, surrounded by chattering chickens. It was getting dark and the pilot of the plane was anxious to take off in order to reach the next village before nightfall. Then we were relieved to see a jeep approaching with a young couple we thought must be the clients we were expecting. The driver leaned out of the window and asked: 'Sir, which is the way to Darwin?' To which I responded amidst peals of laughter: 'Why don't you get this information straight from the horse's mouth?'

*Flying in a four-seater aircraft over a million-hectare farm in Australia, I was frightened out of my wits as we landed in a blinding dust storm on a bumpy dirt clearing. Our host was absent and in his place there was literally a horse to receive us. It was no joke. Like a chief of protocol the beast turned round and led us to the village about a mile away and stopped in front of a house that apparently was his master's.*



Another all-knowing horse I met was in Indonesia, where I stopped on my way back to Paris. I was keen on visiting Bulak Baru in the Jepara region of Indonesia, where a number of wind turbines had been installed, as in the Muppandal and Perungudi Valleys of Tamil Nadu in India. The night before, I stayed in a small hotel in Jogjakarta, and to fill time I enquired if there was a show I could see. 'Of course,' the girl at the counter said, 'you can see either the *wayang* puppet show enacting Mahabharata or, even better, the Ramayana, which is being played by a famous Indonesian Muslim group from Bali.' A number of the omnipresent rickshaws were waiting in front of the hotel but I picked up a horse carriage, called

*andong* in Javanese. I asked the coachman to take me to the Ramayana show. As the horse started moving the coachman sat with folded arms without holding the reins, which were tied to a side lamp. 'Won't you guide the horse?' I asked. 'No sir, Krishna knows the way as he goes every evening to see Ramayana.' Krishna, the Indonesian horse, had more sense than those communal fanatics in India who demolished the Babri Masjid to redeem their god Rama – no less a 'crime against culture' as the Director-General of UNESCO described the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

Unfortunately the population of Indonesian fundamentalists, who, in the name of religion, destroy monuments

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just as the Taliban regime had done in Afghanistan, is proliferating. The magnificent UNESCO World Heritage Site of Borobodur on the island of Java was damaged soon after its restoration was completed by the Indonesian government in cooperation with UNESCO, after over fifteen years of hard work that had begun in 1968. It was an affront to the professionals from twenty-seven countries who had joined their Indonesian counterparts to carry out the project, which involved the complete dismantling and reconstruction of the lower terraces of the monument, stone by stone, and which cost US\$20 million. Since then, several attempts have been made by Muslim fanatics to

deface the beautiful statues and panels, and the site has to be guarded day and night.

The radical Muslims are busy destroying Indonesia's syncretic culture. Indonesian women have never covered their heads, and most Indonesian Muslims still use Hindu names; Dhyanawati is the name of my son Jeet's Indonesian mother, and her Muslim sister is called Sita (wife of Rama). As I was being driven to the village of Sukatami in West Java, where a number of homes have been installed with solar-energy systems, I saw many women covered from head to foot in traditional Arab dress. The driver and my guide stopped at stipulated times to pray at the

*The Taliban followers in Indonesia who, in the name of religion, destroy non-Islamic monuments are on the increase. The magnificent World Heritage Site of Borobodur on the island of Java has to be guarded day and night since the monument was damaged soon after its restoration by the Indonesian government in cooperation with UNESCO, at a cost of US\$20 million and over fifteen years of hard work that started in 1968.*



numerous newly built Wahabi mosques along the road. At one such stop, I walked in to see the *madrassa* attached to the mosque, and was shocked by the manner in which Indonesia's own beautiful language, Bahasa, is being ousted by Arabic. The curriculum was strictly limited to the rote learning of Islamic scriptures.

For centuries, *madrassas* in South Asia, where the Indonesian *madrassas* originated from, were centres of primary education, open to all regardless of religion. I went to a *madrassa* during the summer vacations we spent in Lahore while my father was a professor in Benares; I was then 4 or 5 years old. Traditionally, the *madrassas* were under the charge of local communities, maintained by the children's parents. I recall how once the *maulvi* (teacher) had asked me to bring some wheat flour and mustard oil to class, and I made a mess by carrying both those commodities in my pocket; I was trying to hide them from my grandfather, who thought the *maulvi* was too greedy. What a shame that these democratic grassroots institutions have since been taken over by unscrupulous fundamentalists funded by mysterious charities.

The material I had gathered from Australia, Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Hawaii, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Malta, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Spain, the United States and India enabled me to bring out a more comprehensive book, *The Timeless Energy of the Sun* (1998), which was published in eleven language editions by UNESCO, in cooperation with the European Commission. While presenting the book to Federico Mayor, I reminded him of a letter, dated 5 January 1998, that I had written to the director of UNESCO's solar programme, proposing a SAARC Regional Project of medical

clinics run on solar energy. Anticipating that the funds raised from the sale of my house would not be sufficient to cover the cost of such a large multinational project, I wanted UNESCO to help in identifying international funding agencies that the Sumitra Foundation could approach for financial assistance in the framework of the World Solar Programme. I brought the Director's attention to the fact that the *raison d'être* of the Sumitra Foundation was to promote family planning and protection of the environment within the framework of the resolutions recently adopted at a number of United Nations conferences.

I reminded him of the report of the United Nations Fund for Population, which stated that the world's population, then estimated at 5.4 billion, would reach 6.25 billion by the end of the century, with more than 90 per cent of the increase concentrated in developing countries. Continuing fast population growth would lead to greater numbers of poor and hungry people – 1.2 billion of whom already live in abject poverty. It is evident that an exponentially growing population has an extremely damaging effect on the environment and on the global climate, which is affected by gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. Human beings increase the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere primarily by burning fossil fuels – coal, oil and natural gas – and through a number of other industrial processes. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen 30 per cent since the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century – a very dangerous trend that could accelerate exponentially as China, India and the other developing countries industrialize using cheap but dirty energy sources. There is no way to break this vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation except through family planning and the use of clean, renewable solar energy sources.

*Bastar is primarily a rice-growing region, and rice husk can be used to generate biomass electrical power by PV solar energy systems with machinery already being manufactured locally, near Raipur.*

I proposed that, with these dangerous trends in view, the Sumitra Foundation would like to build a number of medical clinics run on solar energy not only in remote and mostly poorer areas in India, but in all of the South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. An ambitious international project such as this, I reiterated, could not be implemented without substantial financial assistance from national and international funding agencies such as the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank and the Solar Development Corporation, a joint effort between the World Bank and a number of private charitable organizations.

To demonstrate that such solar energy systems are as feasible and beneficial as I had described in my book *The Timeless Energy of the Sun*, I wanted to build a pilot project. So, on Manmohan Singh's recommendation, I gladly accepted the invitation of Digvijay Singh, who was then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, to install solar-energy systems in the health and education centres that his government was setting up in the tribal district of Bastar. Accordingly, France Marquet and I flew to Raipur and from there were driven to the isolated tribal village of Binta, located deep in the forest of Lohandiguda in the district of Bastar. This was just the kind of location we were looking for to





install the hybrid wind-PV (photovoltaic) solar-energy system that the Government of Inner Mongolia had donated to the Sumitra Foundation. We decided to shift the equipment from Gurgaon to Binta as the first step in beginning the project. To make a long story short, I describe below our second visit to Binta, six months later, in October 1999.

Recalling my previous whole-day, bone-shaking car drive from Raipur to Jagdalpur, I had purchased a support belt in Paris to protect my spine. To reach Binta from the district headquarters of Jagdalpur we had to travel some 60 kilometres on a *kutchha* (unpaved) road through mud and slush, drive across two knee-deep streams and walk part of the way, so a jeep was our only option. Bastar and its approximately 4,000 villages, separated by broad timber forest belts of teak, are mostly inhabited by the Gonds and

Halbis tribes. The area is drained by the Indravati and Mahanadi Rivers, and rice and millet are the major crops, although grown in less than 10 per cent of the district. With a literacy rate as low as 19 per cent, around 1,000 villages are not connected to grid electricity, and there is no possibility of electric power reaching any of these villages in the near future.

Upon arriving in Binta we were received by an engineer from Urja Vikas Nigam (UVN) and a very active *sarpanch* (head of the village *panchayat*) named Tirumani, who was also the elected chairperson of the Women and Children Welfare Centre. During our first visit to Binta, France had promised her that we would soon return, and so she was delighted that we had kept our promise. Her enthusiasm had not in any way diminished even though she was completing her term as *sarpanch*. She was stepping down

*The electricity in the Sumitra Medical Clinic in Binta (left) was generated by a hybrid solar system, modified to cope with the additional power load required by such electrical appliances as a refrigerator for storing medicines, a washing machine and four lights. Right: A doctor and a nurse treating a young patient.*



because she did not belong to the tribal community and the majority of people wanted to elect one of their own. She told us that, coincidentally, the election of the new head of the village *panchayat* was to take place that afternoon.

The UVN engineer informed us that the pilot medical clinic installed in Gurgaon, some 40 kilometres south of New Delhi, had already been shifted to Binta, and that the solar-energy systems were working perfectly. The electricity was provided by a hybrid system comprised of a wind turbine and a portable photovoltaic panel installed on the roof of the clinic. The equipment had been suitably modified to cope with the additional power load required by electrical appliances in the clinic, such as a washing machine, a refrigerator for storing medicines, and four lights. A number of houses in the neighbourhood were also provided with

electricity. He showed us the three-room clinic, one room of which was used as the doctor's quarters. He introduced us to the young doctor and the nurse who were busy examining a child carried by his mother.

In front of the Sumitra Clinic, chairs had been laid out for the customary welcome ceremony. Without waiting for such formalities, we walked straight over to see the primary and secondary schools, which had been established next door so that the schoolchildren could also benefit from the clinic's medical facilities. Trimuni then accompanied us to visit the Women and Children Welfare Centre, where we met a number of tribal women in their colourful saris who looked picturesque against the backdrop of the blue hills. Talking to them, I enquired if, as in other parts of South Asia, they worshipped the sun god Surya and

Left: *The primary and secondary schools had been established next door to the Sumitra Clinic so that the school children could also benefit from its medical facilities.*  
Right: *The sarpanch introduced us to tribal women who were members of the Welfare Centre, some of whom had come with their children for treatment at the clinic.*



believed in other nature deities: Vayu, the wind; Agni, the fire; Varuna, the deity of seas and rivers; and the wind god, Indra. Indeed they did, was the response, although they called them by different names. Later we saw a performance of a customary tribal dance in which the Bastar tribesmen had replaced the fire, representing the sun god Surya, with a solar lamp – a curious intermixing of the traditional with the modern.

By then a crowd had appeared as if from nowhere. They seemed to be hiding behind trees and bushes and came forward when they saw that we meant business. They were especially interested in watching the water gushing from the solar water pump that had been installed in front of the clinic. The UVN engineer told us that surveys of over

1,000 households in thirty-eight Bastar villages had shown that water was becoming increasingly scarce in the countryside. Villagers, especially women and children, had to spend considerable time and effort to fetch water from wells and ponds that were few and far away. They asked the Sumitra Foundation to provide each development block with at least one PV solar water pump – not only for the medical clinics, but for irrigation and drinking water as well. These systems, which are now being used worldwide, are very reliable, and unskilled personnel can easily be trained locally to handle their installation, operation and maintenance.

In the afternoon, the deputy collector of Jagdalpur, Pravir Krishn, came to chair the meeting to elect the new *panchayat*. During the colonial days of the Raj, the highest

*At a dance performance, the Bastar tribesmen had replaced fire, representing the sun god Surya, by a solar lamp – a curious intermixing of the traditional with the modern – in the ritual during our Binta visit.*

*Life-giving water and the sun are traditionally worshipped in many parts of South Asia. Here, a father and his son are seen saluting the rising sun in a surya-namaskar prayer.*



*Water festivals are commonly celebrated in South Asia, especially by women. Here they are seen filling their pitchers with water at a pond, before going to pray to the water god in a temple.*



government official in rural areas used to be the *dipti saheb*, whom no common soul could ever approach. A colleague of mine in the foreign service once told me how, when he proudly announced to his grandmother that he had been promoted to deputy secretary (higher in seniority than a dis-

trict deputy collector), she consoled her grandson by telling him not to worry, as one day he would surely become a *dipti saheb*. What a contrast, I thought; the young and energetic Krishn mixed freely with the villagers as if he were one of their own.

*At a meeting organized by the district deputy collector, a large crowd had assembled under a banyan tree to elect the sarpanch of their panchayat, as excerpts from the preamble to India's secular constitution and voting procedures were read out to them. The crowd became animated, went into huddles among themselves, whispering to each other and raising hands to ask for clarifications.*

The *panchayat* is among the oldest institutions in South Asia, and it originated as the caste jurisprudence. It was the anchor of social stability that helped the rural communities survive centuries of foreign invasions and changes of government. Even the passing of the Evidence Act by the British in 1872, with its strict rules of admissible evidence, did not entirely undermine the *panchayat's* authority, although some individuals did take their cases directly to the state courts. The Congress Party attempted to strengthen the *panchayat* as a local instrument of government. Rajasthan was the first state to try the experiment of the *panchayat raj* rule by village committees. In Gujarat, a multi-layer system of *panchayat raj* was introduced in 1963, differentiating between a single village, a group of villages, and towns and districts. The state government allotted the *panchayat* an annual grant, to be spent locally and entirely at the discretion of the *sarpanch*. In West Bengal, *panchayats* have been established since 1956, with the object of developing self-government through an elected local authority. Along with other responsibilities, the *panchayats* are entrusted with sanitary and conservation services, and the development of cottage industries under the supervision of the *sarpanch*. Efficient management by the *panchayats* is one reason for the stability of the state, which has enabled one political party to rule West Bengal for many years since India's independence.

Never having attended a *panchayat* meeting, we were very curious. Soon a large crowd of men and women, with their children, began to assemble under a huge banyan tree to elect the new *sarpanch* to replace Tirumani. The first item on the agenda was to evaluate the progress on the decision taken at the last meeting to get rid of the middlemen trading

in tamarind. These merchants had been exploiting the tribespeople by buying the tamarind beans they collected in the forest from them cheaply, and then selling them in the market at four times the price. The removal of the middlemen, Pravir Krishn told them, had resulted, after barely one year, in 50,000 Rupees being deposited into the *panchayat's* coffers. He then proposed that the *panchayat* now start packaging tamarind for sale not only in local markets, but all over India. The decision was loudly applauded.

One of his assistants then read out excerpts from the secular and democratic preamble to India's constitution, and explained the ballot procedure: how to propose and second a candidate and then vote by raising hands. It was a delightful spectacle to see the excitement among the voters. The crowd became animated, whispering to each other and raising hands to ask for clarifications. Some asked if another woman could be nominated to follow Tirumani. Small groups of three or four went into huddles among themselves and then with each other. Finally, they reached a consensus to nominate and elect a male farmer from a nearby tribal village to be their next *sarpanch*.

We were glad to learn that the Madhya Pradesh government was taking adequate measures to preserve the rain forest in Bastar, and that the environment was also being protected through new, strict rules on cutting and excessive use of burning wood by both urban and rural communities. We were shown a 'box' type solar cooker, which was being increasingly used, as in Rajasthan, and were told that over 200,000 solar cookers had recently been sold in Madhya Pradesh. Customers were standing in queues to buy them, and manufacturers could not cope with the demand. I gave a copy of my latest book on solar energy to the deputy





*As in Rajasthan, a 'box' type solar cooker was increasingly being used in Madhya Pradesh. We were told that over 200,000 solar cookers had already been sold and manufacturers could not cope with demand.*

commissioner to show that thermal appliances such as water heaters and cookers are now being used increasingly all over the world. Israel is an outstanding example; solar collectors are effectively used on virtually every rooftop, and 65 per cent of homes in Israel are currently equipped with solar hot-water heaters. I told him also about the St. Xavier School in Gujarat we had visited recently, where cooking and heating water is done with the help of solar collectors constructed by the students themselves.

Encouraged by the success of the Binta pilot project, we thought of building more such centres run on solar energy, in cooperation with the development blocks that were being built by the government at Madhya Pradesh. We were told that suitable biomass gasifier plants (100 kW) were already being manufactured locally near Raipur, the power generated by PV solar energy systems could be augmented with rice husk-generated biomass electricity as Bastar was primarily a rice-growing region. Thus entire village communities living in Bastar development blocks would be able to enjoy the benefits from solar electricity.

**I**t was quite late in the evening and getting dark by the time we departed from Binta for Jagdalpur. Passing through one of the villages on the way, we were stopped in a narrow street by a torchlight procession coming from the opposite direction. They were holding placards and it appeared like an election gathering or a religious pilgrimage. As they came closer, we were surprised to see that they were students, both boys and girls, led by a schoolteacher. Holding burning torches, they were shouting: '*Barhna hai to parhna sikho – haq ke liye larna sikho*' (learn if you want to progress – learn to fight for your rights). How amazing, I thought; it reminded

me of my street-fighting days for freedom against colonial rule, and of the saga of the student leader of the Jharkhand movement, representing the tribal forest-dwellers, whom I had met in Mirzapur jail four decades ago. I wished my friends in Delhi – who thought that I was mad for having spent so much time and money on the welfare of 'some god-forsaken tribes' – could see this tremendous down-to-earth revolution fermenting in the marginalized region of Bastar. I wished with all my heart that other regions of South Asia would follow this magnificent example.

Sumitra Foundation succeeded in installing forty Binta-type solar-energy systems in health centres in the district of Bastar. It was a source of great satisfaction to us that this huge project covering an area larger than Switzerland had been completed in a record period of just over a year. On the other hand, the cost of these expensive solar-energy systems had practically drained all the funds that Sumitra Foundation had at its disposal. Consequently, SF could not go ahead and build similar projects in other SAARC countries as I had envisaged. I wrote to UNESCO, reminding them of my letter of 5 January 1998, and again approached funding agencies such as the UNDP, the World Bank and the Solar Development Corporation for funds. I filled out numerous application forms, provided voluminous information documents, and solicited recommendations from several influential VIPs, some of whom I had met personally in Geneva and Washington. I even invited them to visit Binta at my expense and see for themselves the remarkable grassroots 'revolution' unfolding in the rural areas of Bastar. But my overtures were politely declined, as the bureaucrats had no time to spare.

I was depressed also because following the transfer of Bastar district from the administration of Madhya Pradesh to



Chhatisgarh, the computers installed in the Sumitra Clinics had been removed for use in government offices. I now began to wonder if my friends in Delhi had not been right after all. In those discouraging circumstances, my son Jeet said: ‘Dad, why not go back to writing books rather than wasting your valuable time on this wild-goose chase?’

**B**y then, Miki, as I call Jeet, had graduated from MIT and wanted to become a musician – an endeavour no more ridiculous than my plan to become an artist after having qualified in technical chemistry, which my father had scoffed. My reaction, therefore, was more restrained, but the classic

teenage son-father drama was repeated nonetheless. Finally, a compromise was reached, in which Jeet agreed to work until the age of 35, earn sufficient money to sustain himself, and then go back to his first love, music.

Jeet created a software company, the Art Technology Group (ATG), with a friend, Joe Chung, a Korean American studying at the MIT Media Lab. They employed a programmer and a secretary. This nucleus of four soon expanded into about 100, when Jeet asked me to help him with some money to hire a larger office space. I paid half the amount they needed and advised him to collect the other half from Joe’s father, a well-known brain surgeon, to keep the partnership equal. In

*Driving back from Binta to Jagdalpur, the district headquarters, we encountered a procession of both boys and girls, led by a schoolteacher, holding burning torches. They were raising slogans: ‘Barhna hai to parhna sikho – haq ke liye larna sikho’ (learn if you want to progress – learn to fight for your rights).*

lieu of cash repayments, ATG allotted equities of 10 per cent to each of us. The company grew rapidly and had reached 1,000 employees when it went public.

One fine morning, I received an e-mail from Jeet conveying the ‘good news’ that he had just bought a rosewood Steinway piano, adding: ‘that means ATG was worth it’. Curious to know what he was worth, I looked up the Nasdaq site on my computer and rubbed my eyes in disbelief; on that day my genius son had half a billion dollars in stocks. That he should have ignored this fabulous amount of money and instead told me only about the rosewood piano was out of this world.

I was stunned – 10 per cent of this enormous sum was mine. Before the IT bubble burst, I quickly sold my equities and earned a fortune I never could have imagined in my wildest dreams. As a career civil servant who had to count pennies all his life, I thanked God that now I would not have to go begging for funds for Sumitra Foundation. Now, with so much money suddenly falling into my lap, I was happy and yet sad, wishing that I had had all this wealth a few years earlier when I could have accomplished so much more of what I had dreamed of; it would have saved me all the time I wasted chasing the funding agencies. At my advanced age I was living on borrowed time, and started working day and night in a frantic hurry to enlarge the scope and activities of the Sumitra Foundation by setting up another organization to work in South Asian countries to benefit disadvantaged and marginalized communities. I felt deeply that no country could progress without taking its entire people along – especially the poorer farmers living on less than \$1 a day who comprise the bulk of rural South Asia. At the same time, in today’s fast-moving and competitive world, regional cooperation was indispensable; no country could safeguard its security and

economic well-being unilaterally. Thus the South Asia Foundation (SAF) was born – a non-profit, non-political and secular youth movement to promote regional cooperation in South Asia, comprising all the SAARC countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Together with Jeet, we registered a small five-member group of trustees, comprising my dedicated companion, France Marquet, my godson, Pratap Talwar and Narasimhan Ram, Editor-in-Chief of the *Hindu* group of newspapers.

I had respected Ram for his political integrity and foresight ever since I had met him accidentally in Khajuraho, where France and I had gone to attend the temples’ millennium celebrations on 7 March 1999. On the way to the inaugural ceremony by President Narayanan, I had introduced myself to the person walking beside me. ‘Oh! You are the man who wrote that piece in the *Times of India*?’ said Narasimhan Ram, introducing himself as the editor of the *Hindu*. I had indeed written the article, but had not seen it published. On our return to the hotel, I found a copy under the door, but as Ram had heavily underlined the article, I refrained from showing it to the President when we called on him and his wife Usha the following day – I did not wish to give the idea that I was trying to impress them. The message I was trying to convey was that, now that both India and Pakistan had openly become nuclear powers, neither country could further its own interests in Kashmir by force of arms. Therefore, only meaningful negotiations that essentially benefit the people of Kashmir on both sides of the Line of Control (LOC) – which might well be called the ‘Line of Cooperation’ – could settle this fratricidal quarrel. A composite dialogue to create peaceful conditions and promote



confidence-building measures has a better chance of succeeding in the framework of regional cooperation, a lesson South Asia should learn from the European Union.

**T**he small peaceful village of Khajuraho that I had visited half a century earlier had been inhabited by a few Hindu and Muslim peasant families, who lived among clusters of temples in various stages of preservation. The temples were difficult to access, located as they were amid dense groves of *khajur*, the tree from which Khajuraho derives its name. ‘Is this Khajuraho?’ I had asked in utter disbelief in 1948, as the brakes of the steaming bus in which I had travelled from Jhansi screeched to a stop, and the driver dumped me by the

roadside under a tree. I found myself in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the frightening dense forest, wondering where to go; there were no houses, no temples. The sun had set and in the pitch darkness I walked in the direction of a glimmer of light at a distance. I reached a mud house, knocked on the door, and was welcomed by a young man who happened to be the *Pujari* of the only temple in Khajuraho still in use. He was kind enough to let me stay with him for two or three days, during which I took a number of photographs of the temples with a borrowed camera; pictures that were later exhibited at the ‘Stones that Sing’ exhibition in New Delhi. Some of them also appeared in my book *Indian Sculpture in Bronze and Stone*, published in Rome in 1950.

*The millennium ceremony of the Khajuraho temples was inaugurated by the President of India, K. R. Narayanan. A spectacular float designed by Sunjoy Roy, with dancers and musicians crossed the lake to the stadium where the guests were seated.*



The Khajuraho group of temples were constructed between AD 950 and 1050, during the Chandela Empire. Originally there were eighty-five temples, of which only twenty-two still exist. The so-called erotic panels carved on them are not as profane as generally believed. They represent an important landmark in the development of the Bhakti movement which, while emphasizing the devotee's intense emotional attachment to and love of a personal god, also encouraged religious syncretism in a country that has given birth to so many faiths and absorbed other religions from abroad. It is reflected in the devotional fervour of the thirteenth-century poet Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda*, invoking the love of Krishna and Radha; in the fifteenth- to sixteenth-

century Bengali mystic Chaitanya's eulogizing the yearning of a woman for her beloved; and in his contemporary Val-abha's delights in the exploits of Krishna as the divine lover.

Another equally important strand of the Bhakti movement resulted from its synthesis with Sufi (which means mystical) elements from Islam, elements that are also found in Buddhist literature, such as the *Kalachakra*, which speaks of Mecca and introduces Islamic formulas into mantras, and certain Ismaili texts such as *Umm al-kitab*. This trend of religious syncretization appears to have continued as late as the nineteenth century, when Raja Pratap Singh Judeo of Chhatarpur tried translating the Bhakti-Sufi spirit into temple architecture. In one temple, the three traditional *shikharas*

*Raja Pratap Singh Judeo of Chhatarpur built a unique shrine at Khajuraho in the nineteenth century, invoking the Bhakti-Sufi ideal. Its three cupolas represent a Hindu temple, a Buddhist stupa and the dome of a mosque. He wanted this shrine to be open for worship to everyone irrespective of religion, caste, class or sex.*



*The erotic panels carved on Khajuraho temples were not all that profane. They represent an important landmark in the development of the Bhakti movement, emphasizing the intense love of a devotee for a personal god.*

on the top of a shrine represent the Hindu temple, the Buddhist stupa and the dome of a mosque. The Raja wanted the shrine to be open for worship to everyone, irrespective of sex, class, caste or religion, much like the Sufi shrine in Kashmir, where one floor was used as a temple and the other as a mosque.

Today, this magnificent UNESCO World Heritage Site is beautifully laid-out with flowerbeds in a green landscape. Another pleasant surprise was to find on inquiry that the good old *Pujari* whom I had met fifty years ago was still around, regularly performing his *puja* at daybreak in his old temple. So France and I woke up early the next morning and found him in the temple sanctum, singing *bhajans* at the top of his voice. Shimandhar Gautam was surrounded by a number of foreign tourists, and it was some time before we could approach and talk to him. He seemed to remember me vaguely, and apologized that at his age, 89 years, his memory was no longer as good as it had been. Alluding to the European visitors to whom he was giving *prasad*, I asked him if non-Hindus were also allowed to enter his temple. He smiled and said: 'Everyone is most welcome!', reminiscent of Raja Pratap Singh Judeo's shrine in which there was no discrimination against worshippers.

**B**efore France Marquet and I started on our long journey to visit the seven SAARC countries, I had already conceived the South Asia Foundation as a youth movement, nurtured through cultural diversity and common traditional values rooted in centuries-old interaction among the people of South Asia. That was the only way, I felt, to overcome the political hurdles that stood in the way of regional cooperation, peace and progress. I wanted SAF to become an

action-oriented mass movement, to create an environment favourable to friendship and constructive regionalism, forming at the same time a strong public lobby that no politician could possibly ignore. My concept of unity in diversity was essentially based on what I had experienced as a student at the Hindu University in Benares. I wanted SAF to stand on two legs: that of the classroom (education) and the playground (creative friendship). Initially I called it a 'rainbow partnership', implying that, while diversity is represented by each colour of the rainbow, the seven colours together symbolize regional cooperation. Moreover, the rainbow is an omen of peace and prosperity in all South Asian cultures.

The omens were good. Arriving at the India International Centre in New Delhi, a club of which I am a life member, we found that a seminar, sponsored by the European Commission was being held on 'National Identity and Regional Cooperation: Experiences of European Integration and South Asian Perceptions'. Among the participants was my former benefactor, Ambassador K. B. Lal, and at his invitation we attended a number of meetings with high-level European and Indian personalities – diplomats, civil servants, university professors, scholars and media representatives. Lal was among those who delivered the inaugural and valedictory addresses, along with Pranab Mukherjee, now the Minister of Defence, and Salman Khurshid, former Minister of State for External Affairs of the Government of India. Several other speakers provided us with a wealth of thought-provoking ideas about the similarities and differences between the European and South Asian concepts of regional cooperation.

The first person we called upon in Delhi for advice was Inder Kumar Gujral. During his tenure as Prime Minister of India he had taken a number of very effective steps to bring



about a rapprochement between India, Pakistan and other South Asian countries – a policy known as the Gujral Doctrine. With his vast experience, he gave us some very sound tips on how to proceed, and how to avoid the pitfalls of such an enormous undertaking. The aims, objectives and activities of SAF should be in full conformity with the spirit, purpose and principles of the SAARC charter, he told us, and must respect the understandable sensitivity of the smaller South Asian countries in dealing with the ‘big brother’: India. He suggested that SAF should build a fully decentralized structure. Accordingly, seven autonomous country chapters were created, to be headed by a chairperson who was to choose the members of his or her advisory board from different walks of life. Inder Kumar Gujral very kindly accepted to become the chairperson of the SAF India chapter.

Our next stop was Kathmandu. I was looking forward to visiting Nepal because that was where, in the early 1960s, I had started collecting material for my UNESCO book *Himalayan Art* – the term I coined and which has since entered the international vocabulary. The book contains photographs of wall paintings and sculptures in the temples and monasteries I visited along the Himalayan range, from Kashmir to Bhutan, including Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim and the Shiwaliks. At that time I was on home posting at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. Most of the shrines are situated along the India-China border, so it was not easy to get permission to visit them, especially as military clashes had recently occurred. Luckily, General Choudhuri, the Army Chief of Staff and brother-in-law of Ambassador Sen in Rome, had permitted me to travel in prohibited military areas with army escorts, and had provided me with all kinds

of transport – jeeps, helicopters and mules – but most of the treks had to be covered on foot.

Flying from Delhi to Kathmandu reminded me of an amusing story. It had been a long and tedious journey driving in a military vehicle along the Chinese border through a barren region of the Spiti Valley until the jeep slipped while turning a sharp corner and fell several metres down a ravine. Luckily we all escaped unhurt. Our resourceful local guide knew the region like his fingertips, climbed up to a nearby monastery on the top of a hill and brought back a number of Buddhist *lamas* to haul the vehicle up to the road. As we were waiting, I complimented the guide on his knowledge of the area, as otherwise we would have been stranded in this wilderness. This encouraged him to brag to my military escort, a captain, about how well he knew the camps where the Indian military were stationed. The army captain was horrified and warned him not to talk loosely about such military secrets, as the Chinese might learn about them. ‘Oh! The Chinese know all about them’, he snapped back. ‘How do you know?’ asked the captain. ‘Because I told them’, he replied with a straight face.

Talking about the Chinese attack against India in 1962, I also told France about the letter I had written to Pandit Nehru on his birthday, enclosing a cheque for US\$2,100 to help the Indian army. At this critical time, with the Prime Minister under tremendous pressure, I did not expect a reply, except perhaps a routine acknowledgement from his office. His enemies in India were jumping with joy as his China policy was in tatters. The people who wanted to undermine him politically were the same fanatics who, in the aftermath of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, had joined a number of fascist-type communal organizations, supported by corrupt

*During my travels to collect material for my book Himalayan Art, the military vehicle in which we were travelling in Spiti Valley slipped and fell several metres down a ravine. Our resourceful local guide knew the region well, climbed up to a nearby monastery and brought a number of Buddhist lamas who hauled up the jeep to the road.*





*Driving along the India-China border through the Spiti Valley, our local guide bragged how well he knew the camps where the Indian military were stationed. My military escort, a captain, was horrified and warned him not to talk loosely about such military secrets as the Chinese might learn about them. 'Oh! The Chinese know all about them', he snapped back and added, with a straight face, that he was the one who had informed them.*



*Flying along the spectacular snow-covered Himalayan ranges, I recalled my mother telling me of Swamy Vivekananda's comment that Indian religions were not born in the hot plains of the subcontinent but in the Himalaya, meaning the 'house of snow', where all the mountains are sacred and the temples, shrines and monasteries are located on hilltops.*

No. 2005-PNH/62

प्रधान मंत्री भवन  
PRIME MINISTER'S HOUSE  
NEW DELHI

November 19, 1962

My dear Madanjeet,

Thank you for your letter of the 14th November and your good wishes. Also for your cheque for 2,100 dollars which I appreciate very much. More particularly, I am grateful to Dhyaniwati for the amount she realized from the sale of her jewellery. I am sure she will never regret this.

We are living through difficult times but I am confident that we will triumph in the end.

Yours sincerely,

*Jawaharlal Nehru*

Shri Madanjeet Singh,  
Embassy of India,  
Stockholm.

and unprincipled civil and military officers wanting to overthrow the Nehru administration. Hence it was as astonishing as his handwritten preface to *This My People* that Pandit Nehru lost no time in replying personally to my letter, dated 14 November 1962. His letter read:

*My dear Madanjeet,*

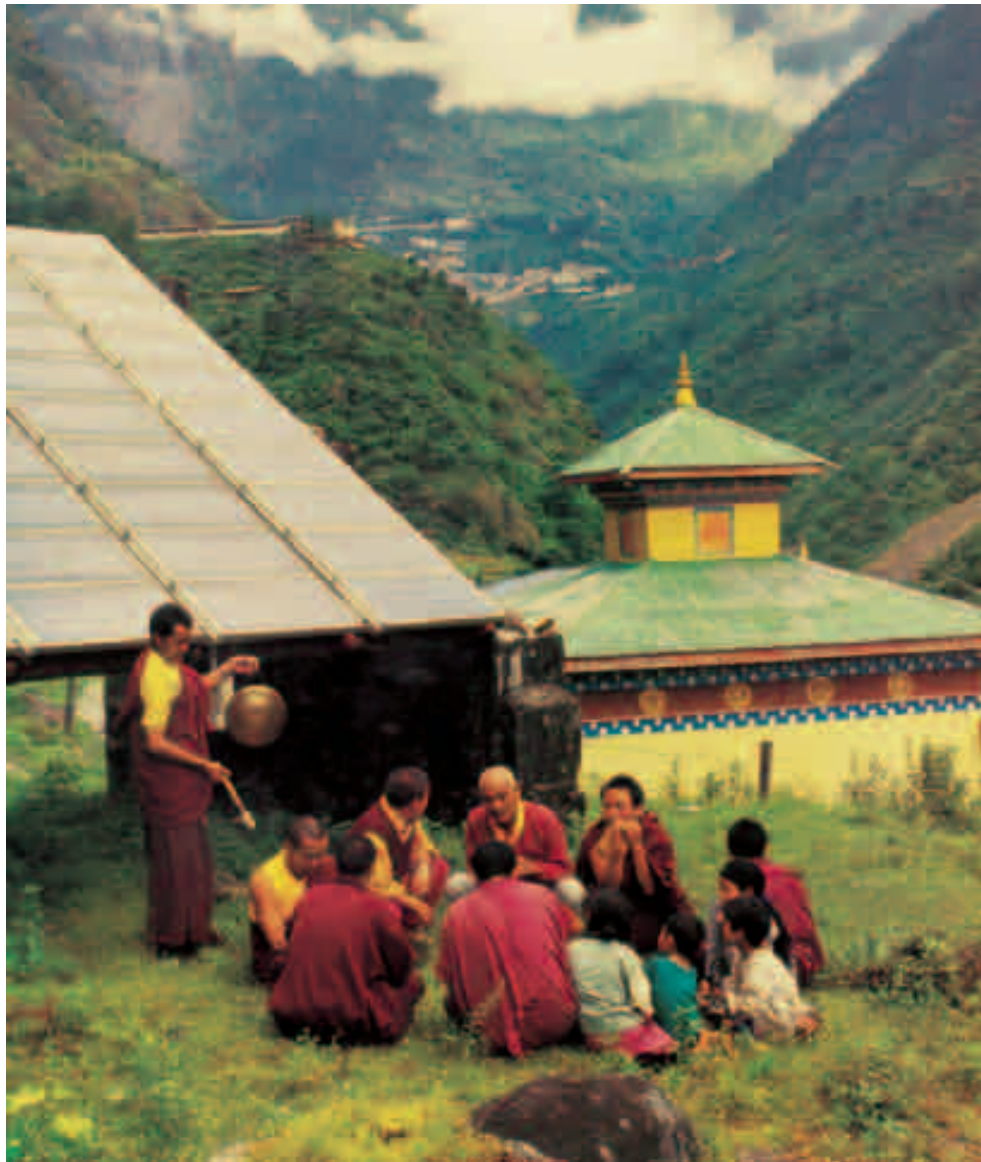
*Thank you for your letter of the 14th November and your good wishes. Also for your cheque for 2,100 dollars which I appreciate very much. More particularly, I am grateful to Dhyaniwati for the amount she realized from the sale of her jewellery. I am sure she will never regret this.*

*We are living through difficult times but I am confident that we will triumph in the end.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Jawaharlal Nehru*

The last time I had visited Nepal was in 1995 in connection with my book, *The Timeless Energy of the Sun* (1998). At that time I had also travelled to the Tatopani Buddhist monastery, which is equipped with a solar energy system. It is located near the 'friendship bridge' across the river Bagmati, marking the border between Nepal and Tibet (China). I had recently undergone triple bypass surgery, and reaching the bridge, my heart sank to see that the monastery was situated 1,000 feet up a steep cliff, overlooking the Tibetan village of Khasa. Having driven over five hours from Kathmandu on a very bad gravel road, during which we had to alight from the car several times as the way was blocked by landslides, I could not possibly return without visiting the monastery. So I took the risk of climbing the hill, resting frequently all the way. Reaching the top, I was

*It was astonishing that, at a time when Pandit Prime Minister Nehru was under tremendous pressure fending off the Chinese attack, he found time to personally reply to my letter wishing him a happy birthday on 14 November 1962.*



well rewarded for the effort. The Buddhist *lamas* had placed a stone sculpture of the sun god, Bodhisattva Vajrasattva, to protect the photovoltaic panels of the Kodari/Tatopani solar power project, and they were also teaching their children about the benefits of solar energy.

*To protect the photovoltaic panels of the Tatopani solar power project, generating electricity for their monastery, the lamas had erected a stone sculpture of the sun god, Bodhisattva Vajrasattva, and taught their children the benefits of solar energy.*

We landed at Kathmandu airport in the last week of September 2000 amid strict security; a group of terrorists had recently hijacked an Indian Airlines aircraft from Kathmandu to Kabul and the authorities were taking no chances. It seemed like a bad omen and a warning of the difficult mission ahead. We were driven to the Hotel Yak and Yeti. The first person we met in the lobby was Ibrahim Hussein Zaki, the Minister of Planning for the Government of Maldives. He was attending a periodical meeting of some retired bureaucrats, army officers and others who had been invited by the Coalition for Action on South Asian Cooperation (CASAC), which was funded by a German organization, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

A former Secretary-General of SAARC, Ibrahim Zaki was then the Chairperson of the twelve-member Group of Eminent Persons (GEP), established during the Ninth SAARC Summit held in Malé in 1997. He briefed us on the report 'SAARC Beyond the Year 2000', which the GEP had since submitted, but its recommendations to vitalize and enhance the effectiveness of the stagnant organization had again been bogged down. The *raison d'être* of the GEP was primarily to develop a long-range vision, formulate a plan of action including a SAARC agenda for 2000 and beyond, and spell out the targets that could and must be achieved by the year 2020. Aside from making far-reaching recommendations in the social arena, the GEP stressed the urgent need for regional economic integration, and suggested a time-bound plan that included negotiation of a treaty for a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 1999. It also proposed a South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA); a SAARC Customs Union; and the establishment of the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU), to become operational by the year 2020.

The GEP report stated that while South Asian countries remained mired in unacceptable levels of poverty, human deprivation, exponential population growth and environmental degradation, SAARC had been dragging its feet, unable to keep up with the fast-moving political, economic, scientific and technological global developments. It argued that the schemes of people-to-people contact had degenerated into mere tokenism, and that the development of the economy, energy, manufacturing and finance was still kept outside the pale of SAARC cooperation. On some pretext or another, visas were denied and obstacles placed in the way of people travelling from one South Asian country to another. This self-defeating attitude of non-cooperation was holding back South Asia's cultural, social and economic development at enormous costs. The report pointed out that SAARC had remained at a standstill, while its sister inter-governmental organizations – ASEAN, NAFTA, APEC – and the Indian Ocean Rim countries had moved further towards regional cooperation.

The GEP evaluation was valid, but I thought that SAARC's timetable for the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) to become operational by the year 2020 was far too slow in a very fast-changing and ultra-competitive world. It was more in tune with the 'timeless eternity of Oriental mentality', as Jeet commented when he told me about the breakneck speed at which the corporate world and his own company ATG was moving – they were updating their IT software every quarter, instead of annually, as had been done previously.

As we know, the seed of European economic cooperation was originally sown by Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet when they proposed integrating the coal and steel



industries of Western Europe. As a result, in 1951, six countries established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Likewise, the recent proposal to construct a 'peace pipeline' that would carry natural gas from Iran and Turkmenistan across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian

*Bhatgaon in Nepal acquired a large share of the Indian/Tibetan trade between AD 1696 and 1772, during the time of Bhupatindra Malla, leading to increased cultural and economic intercourse in the region.*

subcontinent, I thought, would mutually benefit not only India and Pakistan but all the countries in the region. The ball was in the court for India and Pakistan, and hopefully they would soon realize the damage they were causing to themselves and others in South Asia by their confrontational policies, instead of reaping the economic and cultural fruits of cooperation. Regional economic integration is very much in the interest of the traders and industrialists of South Asia.

I felt that the SAARC process could be accelerated by giving a push to the considerable business-to-business contacts that already existed between a number of chambers of commerce and other trade and industry groups in the region. Such trans-national trade, in which currencies played a cardinal role, was not alien to the region. The Nepalese coin *tanka*, colloquially known as 'Mahendramalli', accelerated trade between India and China through Tibet. During the sixteenth century, trade had brought the silver *tankas* minted by Ala-ud-din Mahmud Shah Khilji (AD 1295–1315) of Delhi and Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud Shah (AD 1515–1539) of Bengal to Nepal and were used as prototypes by the Malla Dynasty of the Newar Kings – especially during the reigns of Bhupatindra Malla (AD 1696–1722) and his successor, Ranajit Malla (AD 1722–1769). As the Silk Road extended through Bhutan, the cultural and economic relations in the region further intensified.

We also know why, during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities had failed to block trading between the mainland, Taiwan and the countries in South-East Asia, as the restrictions they imposed were contrary to the interests of Chinese business. South Asian traders and industrialists are no less shrewd and would gladly join hands to build economic bridges of trade and commerce. No government

would be able to ignore such a strong lobby, and thus the SAARC process would speed up as well. Perhaps this was the way out of this logjam, I thought, but decided to proceed step by step, starting with the education of young people, for it is their future that is at stake.

I did not know Nihal Rodrigo, the newly appointed SAARC Secretary General. His predecessor had not even cared to acknowledge the letter I had written to him over two years ago, proposing to set up a number of medical clinics run on solar energy in SAARC countries. As we entered Rodrigo's office, I noticed a copy of my book *Himalayan Art* on his table: I needed no introduction, as he already knew all about me. He received us with open arms and introduced us to all seven SAARC directors. Among other things, I told them that against the background of my bitter experiences with international funding agencies and the manner in which they operate, I was averse to following the beaten track of funding meetings and conferences attended by retired civil servants and military officers who wanted to advise SAARC on how to achieve its objectives. I wanted to take an entirely new route, and promote regional cooperation through education and other practical activities by mobilizing youth at the grassroots level. That evening, Nihal Rodrigo hosted a dinner and introduced us to a number of VIPs. He was a painter himself and after dinner showed us his latest works.

Notwithstanding yet another Maoist attack and the political crisis it created in Nepal, Prime Minister G. P. Koirala found time to receive us. He had already been briefed on SAF's activities by the Nepalese Ambassador in India, Bhek Bahadur Thapa, who had very kindly agreed to become the Chairperson of the SAF chapter in Nepal (since taken over by his wife, the eminent Dr Rita Thapa). The

Following pages: *Flying over Bhutan, I tried identifying the landmarks; the Punakha monastery and other shrines, such as Simtokha and Tak-Sang, situated on a 1,000-foot high cliff; I saw the River Wangchu flow past Thimphu, the capital, and meet its tributary in the Paro Valley, where the airport is located.*









Prime Minister cited several examples of his having promoted SAARC programmes and promised full support to SAF. He nominated an official in his Ministry to liaise with the newly appointed SAF coordinator, Nishchal Pandey, to facilitate the required formalities for registering the SAF chapter and opening a bank account in Kathmandu.

**B**efore we left Kathmandu, Nihal Rodrigo strongly advised us that SAF would do well to start its activities in a smaller country with centralized authority, such as Bhutan. He showed us a letter he had just received from the Bhutanese Minister of Education, Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup, seeking assistance for training Bhutanese teachers in computer and communication technology. He described the Minister as an extremely energetic, efficient and dedicated civil servant who was greatly interested in promoting regional cooperation. I gladly agreed, as the proposal was perfectly in tune with SAF's intention of establishing a series of vocational training workshops across the SAARC region.

I was dying to see Bhutan after almost forty years. France and I flew to Paro in the last week of October 2000 by Druk Air, Bhutan's tiny airline. Flying precariously between the magnificent snow-covered mountain ranges, I tried to identify the landmarks. I saw the River Wangchu flow past Thimphu, the capital, and meet its tributary in the Paro Valley, where the airport is located. On my last visit there were hardly any roads here, and I had mostly followed the footpaths along the Raidok, Sankosh and Tongsa Rivers. I recalled the tedious journeys I had undertaken along the valleys on mules and, more often, on foot to collect material for my book *Himalayan Art*. It had been quite an ordeal visiting the famous monasteries – Bajo, Wangdue Phodrang,



Simtokha, Punakha and Thimphu Dzong. I thought of how I had sweated and panted when climbing the 1,000-foot-high vertical cliff on which Tak-Sang monastery is situated.

Landing at the newly built Paro airport, it was evident how much the country had changed since my last visit, when a personal invitation from His Majesty the King was required to enter Bhutan. That time I had driven a whole day on a dilapidated road from India to reach the capital. Now, the Chief of Protocol in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received us formally and conducted us to the VIP lounge in a building that was modern and imposing, yet built and decorated in traditional Bhutanese style. We drove along the sparkling Wangchu River and, on arriving in Thimphu, it was indeed a pleasant surprise to find that the streets were clean and orderly. I was happy to see that the town, nestled in green hills against the backdrop of the spectacular

*The Education Minister, Sangay Ngedup, invited us to a very colourful gala dinner with traditional dancers and musicians. Himself a keen musician, he led the customary Bhutanese dances in which France and I gladly participated.*



snow-covered Himalayas, had lost none of its traditional glamour; no new building was permitted unless built in conformity with traditional Bhutanese architectural design.

The Minister of Education, Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup (now Minister of Agriculture), received us with overwhelming cordiality and courtesy. I presented him with a copy of my book *Himalayan Art*, and told him of the flattering reviews the book had received – *Time* magazine (14 February 1969) had devoted an unprecedented three pages to review the book when it was first published – and how a smaller-format edition that appeared later was sold out despite the large number of copies. My suggestion that I revise and update the text of the book for this second edition had been resisted by the British publishers in London, Thames & Hudson, categorizing it as a ‘classic’ that must not be altered.

The Minister was happy to learn of my impressions regarding Bhutan after all these years. He said that even though his country was small, its government was fully committed to promoting regional peace and cooperation. However, the people needed to be adequately educated and equipped with the resources and know-how of modern communications technology, and his government wanted to develop IT at the grassroots level, especially in community schools. He explained that these schools, each with about 100–200 students, were built and maintained by the communities themselves, and that the development of IT in these localities would benefit the communities as a whole. The priority at present, said the Minister, was teacher training, and to start with he suggested that SAF fund IT projects to enhance learning and teaching at the primary level.

*Bhutan became the first SAF chapter to start a programme for training in vocational skills (left), and a workshop was established to train teachers from Bhutan's National Institutes of Education in computers.*

Promoting computer literacy among teachers and students would facilitate access to greater knowledge and connectivity for people in all regions of Bhutan.

Having been briefed by Nihal Rodrigo in Kathmandu, I readily accepted the proposal and suggested that the Minister himself might wish to direct the project in his capacity as chairperson of the SAF Bhutan chapter. Sangay Ngedup gladly agreed, and by the time France and I arrived for dinner at his residence, he had already nominated some very distinguished members to the SAF advisory board, including its very charming secretary, Dechen Zam, a sister of the Prime Minister. A keen musician himself, the Minister had arranged a colourful gala dinner, with traditional dancers and musicians. He himself led the customary Bhutanese dances in which France and I gladly participated. His son had graduated from the Woodstock school in Mussoorie, and when he learned that Jeet had studied there too, and was interested in music, he promptly extended an invitation for him to visit Bhutan and meet with a number of his Woodstock schoolmates. 'We will welcome him with a big music festival', he promised.

Thus Bhutan became the first country in which SAF set up a teacher-training programme. Two computer experts were promptly sent from India and a workshop was established to train teachers from Bhutan's two National Institutes of Education. Within a few months, fifty-eight local teachers had been trained in networking, software installation and management and monitoring of information on salaries and student credits. The newly trained teachers have since trained 350 more of their colleagues through the Bhutan government's programme of information and communications technology. Encouraged by the success of this pilot project, SAF has since been requested by the government

to extend the project to thirty community schools, and to fund the required resources and IT infrastructure for Bhutan's development.

As we were about to leave after our four-day visit, the Chief Commissioner of Bhutan Scouts invited us to a scout jamboree in Thimphu. It was a very impressive show, a perfect example of interaction between youngsters hailing from so many countries. It prompted me to ask the Chief Commissioner if similar jointly sponsored SAF scout camps could be organized to promote people-to-people interaction between other South Asian countries. The Commissioner liked the idea and proposed that, subject to the approval of his Minister of Education and the regional commissioner of the scouts in Manila, a yearly SAF Scouts Friendship Camp be organized in each of the seven South Asian countries in rotation. These annual events would give young people an opportunity to meet with each other and thus foster mutual understanding, forge creative friendships and promote regional cooperation.

**F**rom Bhutan we wanted to fly straight to the Maldives, but we were obliged to postpone our visit because of the Eid celebrations there and in the Muslim countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan. So we returned to France and resumed our travels to Malé in Maldives on 1 January 2001, at the end of Eid. Our itinerary included Colombo in Sri Lanka, Dhaka in Bangladesh, and Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar and Lahore in Pakistan.

The Maldives Archipelago comprises over 1,000 small, low-lying coral islands in the Indian Ocean. Malé airport is located on one of the 200 inhabited islands of the Maldives, of which 87 are tourist resorts. Ibrahim Zaki, the Chairperson of the SAF Maldives chapter, received us and as we

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came out of the airport, we stood spellbound looking at the picturesque surroundings. The protective coral reef around each island is like a transparent underwater garden, home to hundreds of species of multi-coloured tropical fish and countless shapes and sizes of coral and shells. There are no hills, mountains or rivers. The Maldives was long a sultanate, first under Dutch and then under British protection. It became a republic in 1968, three years after gaining independence.

Soon after our arrival, we were accompanied by Zaki to call on President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. He had recently hosted the ninth SAARC summit, in Malé, and was very supportive of SAF activities. Like the Bhutanese Education Minister, he was especially keen on computers and communications technology to help connect people living in the

*President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom had recently hosted the Ninth SAARC Summit in the Maldives. He was very supportive of SAF activities when France and I called on him in Malé.*

numerous isolated and remote islands of the Maldives. Zaki followed up on the President's request for SAF's help in establishing a computer laboratory for the island constituency of Adh Atoll to promote computer literacy among teachers, students and local communities. Accordingly, as in Bhutan, SAF decided to fund a primary-level programme at the Education Centre on Adh Atoll. The project was in keeping with SAF's objective of imparting education to young people to enhance their efficiency and productivity, while at the same time creating a sense of regional cooperation and solidarity in South Asia.

At the President's suggestion, we later met with the chairperson of the National Council for Linguistic and Historical Research. He told us that Maldivians are a racially homogeneous people, predominantly of Aryan and Dravidian

*This beautiful replica of a typical Maldivian fishing boat made of shell, presented to us by President Gayoom, is a work of art. The boat-building and handicrafts industry developed through interaction with India and Sri Lanka.*





*As in India, elephants are not only used in Sri Lanka as decoration in religious and state functions, but contribute substantially to economic development, as they are employed for logging and transporting wood in industry.*

origin. They speak a unique 'digital' language called *Dhivehi* (Maldivian), the official language of the Maldives. It is closely related to the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, but has its own script, based on numbers rather than letters. As Maldivian islands were at the crossroads of Arab and South Asian traders, *Dhivehi* was invented by Maldivian port workers to keep their secrets from the foreigners. It is spoken by over 200,000 people in the Maldives and by about 10,000 in India.

Tourism is naturally the largest industry; over 90 per cent of government tax revenue comes from import duties and tourism-related taxes. Fishing is the second leading sector. Agriculture and manufacturing continue to play a lesser role in the economy, constrained by the limited availability of cultivable land and the shortage of water and domestic labour. Most staple foods must be imported. Besides tourism, industry consists mainly of garment production, boat-building and handicrafts developed as a result of interaction with India and Sri Lanka. Maldivian authorities worry about the impact of erosion and possible global warming on their low-lying country: 80 per cent of the area is 1 metre or less above sea level and would disappear should the sea level rise.

**F**rom the Maldives we flew to Colombo in Sri Lanka, a country about which I had learned a great deal since I was at school in Trivandrum. I knew that Buddhism was introduced in Sri Lanka from India in the middle of the third century BC, and that a great civilization developed at Anuradhapura between 200 BC and AD 1000 and at Polonnaruwa from about AD 1070 to 1200. Occupied by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was united

under British rule by 1815. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted in violence in the mid-1980s. Tens of thousands have died in an ethnic war that continues to fester. I felt that, apart from other reasons, regional cooperation was in Sri Lanka's national interest. Under the overall South Asian umbrella, the ethnic conflict might simmer down in much the same way as the Basque and Catalan independence movements did in the framework of the European Union.

We had the advantage of knowing a number of people from Sri Lanka whom we had met in Kathmandu attending the meeting sponsored by CASAC. The convener of its Sri Lanka chapter very kindly arranged a meeting at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI), an organization that promotes capacity building for peace and democracy, respect of human rights, and social development. The meeting was well attended by representatives from different organizations and prominent personalities, including Sunethra Bandaranaike, the younger sister of the President of Sri Lanka. But although we appreciated the welcome and cordiality extended to us, the meeting did not produce the kind of concrete results that we were expecting.

A well-known social worker, Ariyaratne, whom we met at this meeting, invited us to visit his *ashram* the next morning, and informed us of the dedicated work he and his family were doing to promote a number of projects at the grass-roots level. He had founded the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (SSM) and set up the Ma-Savena project to house and assist abandoned teenage mothers, victims of rape and other kinds of sexual abuse. Several volunteers in the neighbourhood helped out by teaching the girls



vocational skills such as cooking, basket-making and vegetable gardening. Begun in March 2001, by assisting five teenage mothers, this project has since been enlarged in cooperation with the Sri Lankan Department of Probation and Child Care. On Ariyaratne's request, I agreed to consider partly funding the project, subject to the approval of the chairperson of SAF Sri Lanka, who had yet to be nominated.

Our main purpose in visiting Colombo was to identify a suitable chairperson for the SAF Sri Lanka chapter. It was a Sunday morning and there was nothing more we could possibly do before flying that evening to Bangladesh. Then, out of the blue, I received a telephone call from the residence of the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, inviting us for a drink. Within an hour an assistant of the Minister picked us up at the hotel and we were received by Lakshman Kadirgamar,

as though he knew me already; later we learned that his good friend, former Prime Minister of India, I. K. Gurjal, had informed him of our visit. He fully concurred with my grassroots approach to promoting regional cooperation through education, and showed us the text of the speech he had delivered at the last SAARC Summit, which was perfectly in tune with SAF's objectives.

In particular, Lakshman Kadirgamar told us about Sri Lanka's proposal to build a SAARC Cultural Centre at Kandy. He explained that the project had first been proposed during the SAARC Heads of State Summit Meeting in July 1998, and was consequently discussed at the Council of Ministers' meeting held at Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka. His government had offered to donate a suitable plot of land in Kandy, and to allocate 50 million Sri Lankan rupees to initiate

*Like the Ajanta caves in India, Sigiriya in Sri Lanka served as the rock-shelter monastery of Buddhist monks from about the third century BC. The palace and the garden city around it were built by Kasyapa (AD 477–495), and the monastery complex remained in use until about the fourteenth century. Thousands of tourists visit the caves annually, generating income for their maintenance.*



the project. The Kandy Cultural Centre, he said, would provide a meeting place where South Asian artists and writers would be able to share and broaden their experience, thereby fostering mutual understanding and regional cooperation between South Asian intellectual communities.

From my own experience in Rome when I wanted to become a painter in the early 1950s, I knew how, by working together as we did in Via Margutta, artists from different parts of the world could become fast friends. At the time I had joined the fraternity called the 'Margutta artists'. It brought to my mind the conviction of my friend Fortunato Bellonzi that it was essential for the recovery and stability of the European economy that artists and writers cooperate with each other to create what he called 'a common fulcrum of culture'. Visualizing a similar fraternity of 'Kandy artists',

*The partly SAF-funded Ma-Savena project assists abandoned teenage mothers, often victims of rape and sexual abuse.*

I gladly agreed to Kadirgamar's request and, subject to the approval of all the other chairpersons of SAF chapters, promised to match the government of Sri Lanka's contribution of 50 million Sri Lankan rupees.

Lakshman Kadirgamar did not know if his status as Foreign Minister would allow him to accept the position of chairperson of the SAF Sri Lanka chapter, but when I cited the two precedents from Bhutan and the Maldives, he gladly agreed to my request and later nominated some very eminent people to his advisory board, chosen from all walks of life, thus imparting an entirely new dimension to the South Asia Foundation.

Our next stop was Dhaka, a place that had largely faded in my memory, as I had last travelled in united Bengal way back in the 1940s on the eve of India's partition, after attending a meeting of the Students Federation in Calcutta. However, I had been in touch on and off with Kamal Hossain, whom I had known since his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the newly independent government of Bangladesh, which came into existence in 1971 when Bengali East Pakistan seceded from its union with West Pakistan. The last time I had met with Kamal Hossain was at the Orientalists' Conference in Mexico City in 1973, when I was the Ambassador of India in Colombia. I had spoken to him by telephone before coming to Dhaka and he had gladly agreed to be the chairperson of the Bangladesh chapter of SAF. By the time we reached Dhaka, he had already nominated some very eminent people on his advisory board, whom he introduced to us at a dinner he and his charming wife, Hameeda, hosted. They included Muhammad Yunus, the well-known creator of Grameen Bank; Jamilur Reza Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of BRAC University; and



Rehman Sobhan, Chairperson of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Khushi Kabir was another member of the board with whom I was particularly delighted to meet. She is the grand-niece of Humayun Kabir who, as the secretary of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, had conveyed to me the good news about my travel grant for Europe, which the first Education Minister of independent India had sanctioned on his return from Rome in the early 1950s. Khushi Kabir has become well known as the first woman to work among the poorer communities in remote areas of Bangladesh. As a volunteer of the Nijera Kori development organization, she has helped some 200,000 landless men and women improve their living

conditions. Many people are landless and forced to live on and cultivate flood-prone land, while water-borne diseases and pollution resulting from the use of commercial pesticides are prevalent in surface water, especially in fishing areas. Ground water is contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic, and there are intermittent water shortages because of falling water tables in the northern and central parts of the country, which are linked to soil degradation, erosion, deforestation and severe overpopulation. About a third of this extremely poor country floods annually during the monsoon rainy season, causing great human suffering and hampering economic development.

*Many peasants in Bangladesh are landless and obliged to live and work on flood-prone land. The surface water in these areas is often polluted and may cause water-borne diseases, including diarrhoea, dysentery, typhoid and cholera, which take a heavy toll on both human health and economic development.*



*Fishing is the main source of livelihood for Bangladeshis. About one-third of this extremely poor country floods annually during the monsoon season, hindering economic development.*



An activist against communalism and fundamentalism, Khushi Kabir was working alongside Hameeda, and on their advice we visited some of the city slums. Tears welled in my eyes upon seeing the miserable conditions in which these poor people live, their huts and shacks right next door to the posh residences of the rich. The moral outrage I felt was

*Bengali Muslims were authors of many padyavalis – poems singing the love of Krishna and Radha – which are very popular among Bangladesh folk dancers.*

similar to what I had experienced watching the woman at Coimbatore railway station, a defining moment of my life that had woken me up to the cruel world of poverty; even sensitive people living in an environment of such misery tend to overlook the stark reality.

On the eve of our departure from Dhaka, another

*Bengalis are a very artistic people, having produced some outstanding writers, poets and painters. Their artistry is evident here by the lovely flower pattern in which the fishermen have tied their boats.*







distinguished SAF Advisory Board member, Farooq Sobhan, the former Foreign Secretary and High Commissioner to India, accompanied us to call on the President of Bangladesh, Justice Shahabudin Ahmed. I presented the President with a copy of my UNESCO book *The Sun in Myth and Art*, and drew his attention to an illustration of a black, stone Surya sculpture from Bangladesh. I told him how this very beautiful twelfth-century masterpiece of Pala art embodied the syncretism of both the Sufi and Bhakti movements and truly represented the rich Bengali cultural heritage.

**F**rom Dhaka there is a convenient night flight to Karachi, an exception to the time-consuming roundabout connections between South Asian countries. Lack of communication and travel facilities is a major obstacle in the way of people-to-people contact between SAARC countries. Passengers flying from Bangladesh and Bhutan to India have often to take the long route through Singapore or Bangkok. This is like yoking the cart before the horse, a problem that SAARC should resolve for the sake of regional cooperation. A South Asian Airline, jointly operated by the SAARC countries, would not only be economically viable in itself, but promote cultural, business and trade interaction in South Asia.

The immigration official at the Karachi airport grabbed my United Nations *laissez-passer*, shuffled its pages and, not finding my nationality, asked: 'Are you Indian?' I smiled and stated: 'I am South Asian!'

I was not kidding. I am a South Asian both in spirit and deed. It reminded me of the ordeal I had suffered in Uganda when, as India's High Commissioner in Kampala, I had staked my life to rescue from Idi Amin's bloody clutches not

*President Shahabudin Ahmed was interested to know that Surya, a twelfth-century masterpiece of Pala art, embodies the syncretism of the Sufi and Bhakti Bengali cultural heritage, as published in my book, The Sun in Myth and Art.*



only Indians, but also Pakistani and Sri Lankan nationals. Like most South Asian communities, they had been peacefully living and working together in different parts of the country, when the Ugandan exiles in Tanzania suddenly attacked the country from the south, overpowering Idi Amin's army of Kakwa gangsters as they fled towards Sudan in the north. By the time the invaders reached Kampala, almost all

the foreign missions, including the Pakistani and Sri Lankan envoys, had been evacuated to Nairobi, leaving many of their nationals stranded in isolated locations. My government advised me also to shift either to Rwanda or Burundi, the two countries to which I was concurrently accredited, but I declined to leave until all the Indian nationals had been safely evacuated to Kenya.

*Karachi had faded in my memory since I came to visit my sister Ranjeeta and her husband, who was posted here as a civil servant during pre-partition India. The new skyline shows the development of modern highways and office buildings that had mushroomed in the meantime.*

I had already sent almost all my Embassy staff and their families to Nairobi and stayed behind with only a skeleton staff and my faithful dog Puchi, even though my colleague, the East German Ambassador had been massacred while trying to escape the day before the Tanzanian armies entered Kampala. I would have lost my life, too, had not a Tanzanian rocket blown up the roof of my personal assistant's house, obliging him to move into my residence. So as luck would have it, we did not take the road on which the Ambassador and his wife along with a young couple, his first secretary and his wife, were blown up by a Tanzanian bazooka. I found their bodies lying beside their car, not far from my residence. My resolve to stay put was not shaken even when, a week later, the UNDP regional representative was also killed by Amin's gangsters, who were ruthlessly killing drivers and stealing vehicles to escape. My chauffeur, too, had disappeared and I wondered if he had been killed.

Ignoring Idi Amin's drunken soldiers, I drove the official car myself back and forth to the border town of Kisumu, halfway between Kampala and Nairobi, evacuating a number of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan nationals who were teaching at the Makerere University in Kampala. Then by chance I learned from an Indian working in the Kinyara sugar factory, about a four-hour drive north of Kampala, that a number of terrified Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan families were helplessly trapped in the factory and dare not step out. He himself had escaped on foot and walked for two days, hiding among sugar plantations, as the countryside was infested with Amin's Kakwa soldiers fleeing north towards Sudan. He strongly advised me not to attempt rescuing them as 'you will surely be killed', for he had seen many corpses of drivers who had been shot and their

vehicles stolen. I must have been in some kind of hypnotic trance, as I ignored his warning and decided to go ahead with my dog Puchi, taking the enormous risk of driving all alone through the dangerous countryside.

It was sheer luck that I managed to reach Kinyara in the afternoon but did not see anyone as I entered the factory compound. The Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan families were in hiding, having locked themselves in the factory cellar where they were cooking, eating all together, and sleeping on the floor. A dog outside began barking at Pucchi and the haggard group of about thirty men, women and children came out nervously. The expressions on their faces suddenly changed to sheer joy as they saw the Indian flag in front of car. With tears in her eyes, a young Pakistani mother with a child in her arms came up to me and said in Punjabi: 'You have come to us in the image of Allah.' I was as relieved as she was, as though I had paid back the debt I owed to the Lahore *tonga* driver who had saved my life in the aftermath of India's partition.

It was getting dark and there was no time for the families to collect their belongings as they were quickly herded together in a sugarcane truck which an Indian worker had hidden with sufficient gasoline in the factory garage. He followed my car and under the cover of darkness we finally reached the border town of Kisumu between Uganda and Kenya.

In Karachi we were in transit and stayed at the Sheraton Hotel. The next day being Friday, the Muslim day of rest, we did not expect to meet anybody, but then, as had happened in Colombo, we received an unexpected telephone call from someone, who introduced himself as a retired General Ghulam Umar. He said that he was calling on



behalf of Niaz Naik, the former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, whom I had met at a dinner in Kathmandu. Niaz Naik had been sitting at the next table and had come up to me with an unexpected question: 'Were you a Government College student?' 'Yes, indeed! How did you know?' I replied. 'You can tell a Government College student from a distance', he laughed, and said that he was my contemporary

at the College. We had, in fact, come to Pakistan on his invitation. Within an hour Umar came to see us at the hotel, accompanied by a retired Pakistani diplomat. I briefly told them of SAF's objectives, and explained that our priority at present was teacher-training for IT projects.

Next morning, Ghulam Umar very kindly arranged a meeting with all concerned at the Sir Syed University of

*My collection of contemporary South Asian art was enriched by Mariam Saeedullah Khan's painting on silk. She herself came to France and installed the large panels showing Villa Surya (top-left) in place of the Taj Mahal that had been in her original painting, which I had first seen in the Sheraton Hotel, Karachi.*

Engineering and Technology, and he came personally to take us to the University campus. We were happy to find that there were over twenty professors, lecturers and IT experts awaiting us, headed by the Chancellor of the University, Z. A. Nizami. The chancellor welcomed us warmly and, after his colleagues had introduced themselves, I took the floor. They all burst out laughing when I said that I was the only genuine Pakistani among them, as I was born in Lahore, and they had all emigrated from India after partition. In his introductory remarks Nizami showed much pride in the level of excellence the Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology (SSUET) had achieved. It was connected to the internet, and e-mail facilities were available to all students. He suggested that SSUET and SAF might well cooperate in the field of IT. After some clarification, Nizami chose a young Pakistani IT engineer, whom I invited to attend the training courses that SAF was arranging at an Indian software company, Plexus Technology, in Mumbai.

In the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel hung a beautiful painting on raw silk, covering an entire wall. It showed the Moghul Emperor Shah Jahan and his entourage in a procession of horses, elephants and palanquins, with attendants carrying colourful flags and buntings. It revived my childhood memories of the Onam processions in Trivandrum. On learning that the artist, Mariam Saeedullah Khan, was in Karachi, I met with her and requested that she paint a similar panel for me. Six months later, as promised, Mariam arrived in Cote d'Azur with five large sections of the painting, all rolled up under her arms. The only variation from the Sheraton Hotel panel was that the Taj Mahal had been replaced by the image of Villa Surya, copied from a photograph we had sent her. She personally installed her

masterpiece on a large wall of the Villa. It was amazing that even at the age of over 70 she could paint such minute details of traditional Indian miniatures.

From Karachi we flew directly to Islamabad, on 15 January 2000. Niaz Naik lost no time in taking us to a meeting on Security and Defence, organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute. It was being held in the hotel where we were staying and was attended by a number of senior Indian and Pakistani army officers and diplomats. We were ushered in and seated in the front row beside a former Indian Foreign Secretary and his Pakistani counterpart. Both sides were trying to justify the policies of their own governments, arguing whether or not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against the other; the discussion could not have been more bizarre. Soon we got bored and slipped out of the hall. The next morning, newspapers splashed front-page photographs of the two senior Indian and Pakistani bureaucrats peacefully snoozing with their heads resting against each other. There could have been no better commentary on the love-hate relationship between the two neighbours and the futility of such elitist conferences sponsored by foreign funding agencies primarily to further their own agendas.

In stark contrast, we happened to see a more useful grassroots activity in Rawalpindi where we were invited by a very enterprising Pakistani housewife, Zehra Syed. She had set up an open-air school in the courtyard of her home to educate children of the domestic servants working in the locality and the socially and economically disadvantaged street children. We were very impressed with the dedicated social work she was doing and I suggested that Zehra might consider training them in computers as well. I recalled how



nostalgically my mother used to talk about ‘our Pindi’, where she had spent her childhood before the family moved to Lahore. I was toying with the idea of starting a project in her memory in Rawalpindi and had wondered if Zehra’s initiative could be further developed.

On my previous visit to Pindi three years earlier I had tried in vain to locate the street where my mother’s family had

lived, just as I had failed to find my father’s home in Uri. I had gone there at the invitation of a Pakistani artist, Masood Akhter, to see his paintings. He understood my feelings, for after all the years since he and his family had migrated from India, they were still longing for the home they had left behind in Lucknow. I had met him in Islamabad at a reception, to which I was taken by Salima Hashimi, my host in Lahore.

*An enterprising Pakistani housewife, Zehra Syed, had set up an open-air school in the courtyard of her home in Rawalpindi, giving free education to children of domestic servants and to socially and economically disadvantaged street children.*



Masood was talking to a military officer who asked him if he was originally from India, as he spoke like a *tiliar*. Masood was infuriated, and later he explained to me that *tiliar* means a chattering migrating bird, a disparaging name which the 'authentic' homegrown Punjabis have given to people who emigrated from India. They are envious of people who speak good Urdu, as they themselves speak 'Purdu', a strange mix-

ture of Punjabi and Urdu. He said that Urdu remains the 'bazaar language' in Pakistan, as it was used by the Persian soldiers of the Mughals to communicate with the local people.

I wanted to visit Peshawar primarily to see for myself the Afghan refugee camps I had heard so much about, and to establish contacts with the University of Peshawar. But,

*Most of the refugees from Afghanistan had been living in camps for years. These camps in Peshawar had become permanent settlements and grown into small townships. They were well-organized and provided reasonable facilities, such as health clinics and schools for both boys and girls.*

following a security alert, we could not proceed, and waited until the last moment, when Niaz Naik managed to get two seats in a plane on 19 January 2001, informing all concerned in Peshawar of our arrival. At the airport we were greeted by a protocol officer with a bouquet of flowers, who handed us the day's programme. He also introduced us to a young man who was deputized to accompany us throughout our stay in Peshawar.

From the airport we were driven straight to call on Mohammad Naeem Khan, Commissioner for Afghan Refugees. On one wall of his office hung a large map showing the refugee camps that were in his charge. He briefed us on the history of the camps, the number of refugees in each of them, and the inadequate financial support he was getting to shelter and feed them. We were then taken to see the two camps in Peshawar. Contrary to what I had expected, they were well organized, with systematic registration of the incoming refugees, and were provided with reasonable facilities such as schools and health clinics. Most of the refugees had been living there for years, explained our guide, so that the refugee camps had become permanent settlements and grown into small townships.

On our visit to the University of Peshawar, a number of professors welcomed us and hosted a lunch before showing us a comprehensive library housing some very old books and manuscripts. Their studies and research seemed centred entirely on Central Asia and they showed scant interest in South Asia or my proposal for SAF to interact with the Area Study Centre of the University of Peshawar. I was disappointed, as I was toying with the idea of establishing a centralized website on the SAF portal in cooperation with all the other South Asian institutions; a matter I had also dis-

cussed during my visits to SSUET in Karachi and to the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh.

Lahore was our next destination. My previous visit, in 1993, had essentially been a pilgrimage, and I had stayed with Salima Hashmi, the daughter of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, my senior colleague at Government College. At that time, I had very much wanted to visit my grandfather's *Peeli Kothi* in Lahore cantonment, a large *haveli* called Sunder Niwas, named after my great-grandfather. Salima's husband, Shoaib, discouraged me, as most buildings in the locality had since been demolished or parcelled into smaller habitations by the squatter refugees from India, he explained. But I insisted, wanting to see at least the spot on which the house once stood.

I requested Shoaib to drive along the same road I vaguely remembered, on which my grandfather's buggy used to take the family for evening drives in the Lawrence Garden. On the way I identified the canal we crossed and then asked him to drive towards the *tonga* stand that was located close to the house. 'What *tonga* stand?' Shoaib was amused, 'there are no more *tongas* in Lahore!' Then I suggested we go towards the cantonment central police station. Shoaib was getting impatient as he had an appointment in town, when I cried out, 'Stop! Stop!' On the left side of the road I saw a hay-cutter using the same antiquated machine with a large iron wheel with which hay used to be cut for my grandfather's horse over half a century ago. I stepped out of the car in a hurry, crossed the road – stopping the traffic – and asked the man if he knew of a house named Sunder Niwas. He shook his head and then brightened: 'Oh! The *Peeli Kothi*, Sardar Makhan Singh's house! My grandfather used to supply hay for his horse.'





On learning from Shoaib that I was Makhan Singh's grandson, the man jumped up from his wooden seat and insisted on showing us the house that no longer existed. Here was the gateway of the house through which the buggy entered; here was the stable; here was the lawn where the children in the neighbourhood used to come and see puppet shows; here was the water pool in which children used to bathe; and above all he remembered the car, which was among the first seen in Lahore, given in dowry to my uncle by his bride's parents, the owners of Pioneer Sports in Sialkot. The elderly hay-cutter turned into a child, telling us about the car's lighted direction indicators that popped out like hands from both sides. 'It was an Austin

coloured blue' clarified his companion, Muhammad Ali, and he recalled how my uncle had given free rides to all the children in the neighbourhood. He then took us to the Makhan Singh *Maidan*, the large courtyard where the grain market was held on Sundays, and told us about one Natha Singh who had stayed put, ignoring partition, changed his name and became known as *Baba Gadee* or 'the old man with the cart' as he started plying a cart for a living. By then a crowd had gathered around us, pulling out the *manjis* (coir-cots), and asking us to sit down and have tea. Shoaib had no time, but they would not let us go.

An old couple, Rashid and his wife, stood at a distance. She kept staring at me, perhaps she knew me as a child?

*The gateway of my grandfather Makhhan Singh's property Peeli Kothi had become a narrow street and his large house was demolished or parcelled into smaller habitations where refugees from India were living. The large courtyard Makhan Singh Maidan was still used as a grain market on Sundays (right).*

Only when we were leaving did she come over, touch me on the shoulder, and then walk away without uttering a word. This was the same poignant touch on the shoulder as that of the Pakistani woman I had rescued, with her family, from the bloody clutches of Idi Amin in Uganda. ‘No words or eulogies could have possibly expressed her deep feelings more forcefully than her silence’, Shoaib explained.

Government College had since been elevated to a University, but the administration had rightly chosen to retain its old name; like antiquities, old institutions become emotionally a part of life, and I myself would have been disappointed had my alma mater changed its name. The principal Khalid Aftab, now the vice-chancellor, showed us around the premises, and I was happy to learn that the college now had 4,500 students and a teaching faculty of 250 members. He very kindly hosted a dinner, followed by a concert organized by the students. Listening to some of Faiz’s poems, I was overwhelmed, recalling that the poet had himself recited some of them for the first time at Preet Nagar, a *kibbutz*-like cooperative colony established by Gurbabaksh Singh. I remained in touch with Faiz and he recited his last compositions in my apartment in Paris on his way back to Lahore, where he died soon after on 20 November 1984.

My good old Nahar Singh’s milk bar, where I had enjoyed eating hot patties, had disappeared, replaced by a large white mosque that clashed aesthetically with the beautiful gothic architecture of the college building. Nearby stood a crumbling old Anglican church, built about the same time as the College in 1864. Khalid Aftab lamented that all his efforts to have it restored had failed. He wondered if UNESCO would help to include it into its World Heritage

list. He was disappointed as I explained to him that only the government of Pakistan could take up this matter with UNESCO, an intergovernmental organization.

It was apparent that under the surface an intense tug-of-war was going on, and the zealous *jihadis* were pitted against increasingly intimidated progressive elements of Pakistani society. This became even more evident when I was taken to the New Hostel, where I used to live: the warden reluctantly showed me my old room with its broken-down door without a lock, and no bed inside. The dining room was occupied by a gang of *jihadis* with Kalashnikov rifles, who were grabbing and eating the food cooked and paid for by the students; the helpless warden told me that he was planning to build a ‘great wall of China’ around the hostel to keep the *jihadis* out. It was shocking. This was a far cry from the elitist college and the glamorous boarding house I had once lived in.

Other friends tried reassuring us that the situation was not as bleak as it appeared. Young boys and girls go out together to eat along Gawalmandi, the famous food street, and the secular festival of Basant is still celebrated in Pakistan with the same gusto as ever by men, women and especially children. The *jihadis* have not been able to stop Basant festivities, although it was originally associated with *Vasant Panchami*, a Hindu festival. The kites in the sky know no boundaries. They asked us to stay on for a few days more until the start of the season and see for ourselves the joy and enthusiasm with which the spring festival is celebrated in Lahore.

It was heart-warming also to see the outstanding work being done against all odds by the leading human rights activists, Asma Jahangir and I. A. Rehman, along with the



Joint Action Committee for People's Rights (JAC), an informal coalition of some thirty non-governmental organizations. On 21 January 2001, JAC organized a meeting, largely attended by the representatives of a number of women's and labour organizations. I took this opportunity to congratulate them heartily for their tireless efforts to promote women's rights, fight religious intolerance, and to encourage mutual understanding and friendship between India and Pakistan. I described to them my efforts to create a SAF youth movement to promote regional cooperation through education at the grassroots level of society. I also told them that the damaging consequences of the India-Pakistan conflict were very much on my mind when, on the 125th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth and the United Nations Year of Tolerance, I gladly accepted the proposal that I fund a UNESCO-

*The winners of the 1998 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize, Shah Taj Qizilbash and Narayan Desai, with jury members Boutros Boutros Ghali and I. K. Gujral. The jury was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.*

Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Non-Violence and Tolerance – a resolution that was unanimously adopted in 1995 by the Executive Board of UNESCO.

Since then, the Prize has acquired a high international status, as evident from its present jury, which is chaired by Nobel Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu and comprises former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros Ghali; former Prime Minister of India, Inder Kumar Gujral; and other eminent personalities. The 1998 Prize was awarded jointly to JAC, represented by Shah Taj Qizilbash, and the activist Narayan Desai, organizer of the Shanti Sena (Peace Bridge) corps of Indian volunteers dedicated to non-violence. He is promoting the spread of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of *Gram Swaraj* (village self-government) – a decentralized political and economic

*The Egyptian Coptic Patriarch, Chenouda III, was awarded the 2000 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence for his work encouraging inter-faith dialogue.*

system. Desai has also contributed to the creation of a number of peace centres and youth training camps in India. Presenting the award, the Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, paid a tribute to the admirable courage and constancy of both the Indian and Pakistani organizations for their tireless efforts to promote religious and ethnic harmony and tolerance, and to their activism against the nuclearization of the subcontinent – ‘a mad race which may lead humanity to its destruction’.

I also mentioned at the JAC meeting in Lahore that human rights cannot be promoted in isolation, and that a united international effort was essential for this to succeed. Hence I was glad that a four-member international jury, chaired by the well-known writer and professor of philosophy at the University of Ivory Coast, Tanella Boni, had awarded the 2000 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence to Chenouda III, the Coptic Patriarch of Egypt, who is devoted to the promotion of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue. He is playing a very active role in reducing inter-religious tensions, and to honour this commitment his Coptic church has established amicable relationships with the Muslim communities in Egypt and abroad through sermons, books and magazines.

On the eve of our departure from Lahore, I promised Prof. Khalid Aftab that, subject to the approval of all seven newly nominated chairpersons of SAF, I would do my best to help my alma mater upgrade its Department of Computer Science into a ‘Centre of Excellence’, as he wanted. I was glad that both male and female students were admitted for higher education courses. Today, it is conducting postgraduate research in IT/computer science, a computer literacy programme, and organizing short professional IT courses.

He wanted SAF to fund a visiting faculty of computer sciences, starting with employing an Associate Professor and a Lecturer for the next two years to teach computer architecture, computer communication and networks.

At that time I was greatly enthused with the possibility of online education, now that computers had become a part of the life and culture of young people. Jeet had told me how the Harvard Business School was using his company’s ‘Dynamo’ software to teach online. There was also a great deal of excitement because Columbia University in New York was planning to build an online learning portal that would offer courses and other learning opportunities through the internet (fathom.com), in conjunction with thirteen other institutions, ranging from the University of Michigan and the London School of Economics and Political Science to the American Film Institute.

SAF had already started setting up a powerful portal based on the ATG Dynamo Application Server that Jeet had very kindly donated. At the same time efforts were intensified to train a group of IT coordinators nominated by SAF chairpersons. ATG had identified a training course at Plexus Technology, located near Mumbai, India, in which IT coordinators from all seven SAF countries participated. The Indian software company was structured on a very elaborate and all-embracing consulting protocol which included modules for education, scholarships, teacher training, health, art and culture, regional profiles, NGOs and charities, content management, membership and user registration, administration, newsletters and so forth. In March 2002 these IT coordinators were sent to the ATG Training Centre in Reading (UK) for the final course, which involved the use of the updated



Dynamo portal suite. At this workshop, training was also given by the representatives of WorldSpace Corporation, and each participant was provided with the equipment for wireless transmissions through the AsiaStar satellite.

France and I had met with Noah Samara, the President of the WorldSpace Corporation (WSC), in Washington DC. Its subsidiary, WorldSpace Foundation, was using satellite technology to relay information and education to remote areas in Africa. As this appeared to be the solution to imparting education more widely by reaching isolated villages like those in Bastar, we did not have to do much canvassing. Noah and his colleagues were greatly impressed by a short DVD about the Sumitra health clinic that ran on solar energy in the tribal village of Binta. A month later, Noah Samara, accompanied by the President of WorldSpace Foundation,

*SAF IT coordinators were sent to the ATG Training Centre in Reading, United Kingdom, for the final training course involving use of the updated Dynamo portal suite.*

Gracia Hillman, travelled to New Delhi at my invitation and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 31 August 2001, which allowed SAF a cost-free link with the AsiaStar satellite for a period of one year.

On that occasion, representatives from the WorldSpace Corporation and the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore were able to demonstrate how, through the satellite centre in Toulouse, France, they could transmit my pre-recorded message to New Delhi with the AsiaStar satellite. They showed how simple messages could also be received through a hand-held computer, called a Simputer. An IT expert attending the demonstration was not convinced, as such a small gadget could not be used in a rural environment, especially since the cost of locally manufactured computers with larger screens was falling

*The President of WorldSpace Foundation, Gracia Hillman, travelled to New Delhi and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 31 August 2001, giving SAF a cost-free link to the AsiaStar satellite for a period of one year.*

sharply. But as I wanted to help the inventors of this cutting-edge technology, I went ahead, giving the manufacturers a large sum of money in advance on condition that they would set up a project in Bastar and prove within six months that the Simputer-AsiaStar satellite system could indeed be used for distance learning. It turned out to be a huge disappointment; after over two years, the demonstration they arranged in a village school in Chhatisgarh amply proved that, notwithstanding the Simputer's other merits, it could not be used for education.

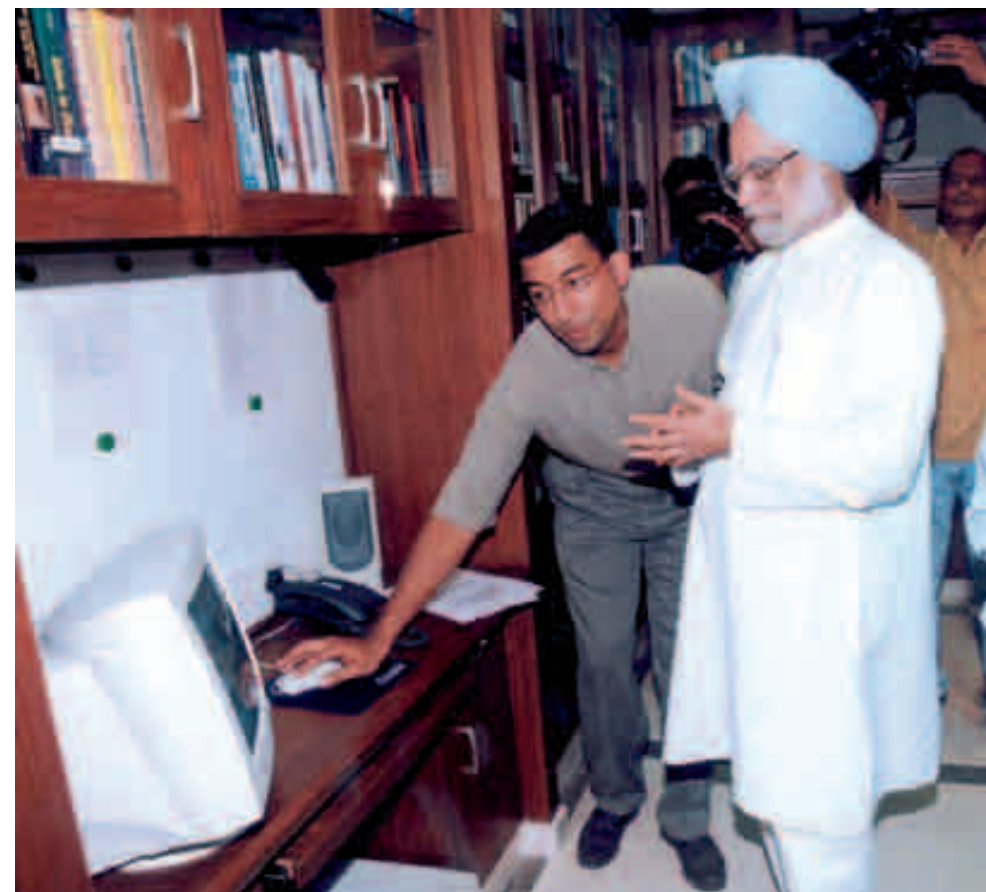
Meanwhile, I had taken possession of my home in Vasant Vihar. It has since been remodelled to house the offices of the two foundations. I also decided to set up the SAF Documentation and Information Centre (SAFDIC) in one part of this rather large building. The brainchild of Mahendra Lama, a professor at the School of International Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University, SAFDIC has since become an important South Asian library with over 5,000 books on social and natural sciences, international relations, security, literature, culture, human rights, environment, gender education, health, science and technology, peace studies and so on. The journal section is also fairly large, comprising publications mostly from South Asia, and containing the latest information and data on different aspects of the region. The databases are classified under different topical headings, including economy, education, health, family planning, constitutions and legislatures, women's empowerment, and science and technology. Relevant government publications and documents, and a comprehensive database on other subjects and issues directly relevant to South Asia, are being added. The the-



matic bibliography provides a comprehensive list on major South Asian issues, along with the names of institutions working in these fields. A clippings file of seminar papers, research and monographs published by well-known institutions in the region is being collected and put online.

SAFDIC was inaugurated on 31 August 2001 by the Chairperson of Sumitra Foundation, Manmohan Singh, (who was to become Prime Minister of India in 2004). He was keenly interested in how the journals available at the centre were gradually being digitalized to make information more easily accessible; SAFDIC is a member of the DELNET library network. A reading room with internet and photocopying facilities provides scholars with a valuable resource centre. SAF is now contacting various institutions engaged in South Asian studies to link up with its online network of

*The SAF Documentation and Information Centre has become an important South Asian library. It houses over 5,000 books on topics as varied as peace studies and other subjects concerning South Asia.*



databases in order to exchange information, accelerate research, and avoid wasteful duplication of books and documents. It was in the interest of promoting this link-up that I personally took up the matter with other South Asian institutions – the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka, Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology in Karachi, and the Area Study Centre of the University of Peshawar.

**A**gainst this background, ‘Information Technology’ was the theme of the First SAF General Conference held in Kathmandu on 11–12 December 2001. It was inaugurated

with a great deal of fanfare by the Prime Minister of Nepal, Sher Bahadur Deuba, and attended by the newly nominated SAF chairpersons, as well as most of their respective advisory board members. From the very outset, I had resisted pressure from my colleagues to go the way of similar conferences, in which scholars of South Asian studies participate along with the usual paraphernalia of retired officials and diplomats. Instead, the representatives of only three organizations that were actually working in the field were invited to speak. France and I had visited them earlier in the year and hoped that others would also benefit from

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their experience. These were: Grameen Communications in Bangladesh, Sarvodaya Telecentres in Sri Lanka, and the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in India.

Muhammad Yunus, a member of the SAF Bangladesh advisory board, had asked Nazreen Sultana to represent Grameen Communications. She described how technology intervention could help rural communities in Bangladesh. Through two pilot programmes – called the ‘Village Computer and Internet Project’ – connectivity was established in rural centres in Madhupur and Sharishabari using the internet and mobile phones. But as this method proved too expensive, a Grameen Digital Center was established in Mirzapur, Tangail and connected online via a link with the Grameen Communications head office in Dhaka. The experiment was expected to show the benefits from information and communication technologies and services in rural areas, and their social and economic impact.

Ariyaratne, of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, sent Harsha Liyanage as their representative. He described the ICT services that were being used in the Sarvodaya Telecentres, comprising a small IT unit complete with modern equipment, computers, the internet and e-mail, and operated by specially trained people, selected locally. The first Telecentre was started as a pilot project in 1998, at Kahawatta, Rathnapura, 80 kilometres from Colombo. This was followed by seven more Telecentres serving over 1,000 villages in eight districts: Kalutara, Galle, Badulla, Puttalama, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Gampaha. Sooryodaya, the cultural promotion unit of Sarvodaya, collaborates closely with IT units. The Sarvodaya field workers regularly visit village communities and help in organizing street performances. Villagers join in and perform their own folk dances, songs



and dramas. Education programmes are simultaneously relayed through mobile IT communication units for TV transmissions.

M.S. Swaminathan, also a member of the SAF India advisory board, was represented by Senthilkumaran, an IT expert. He described the activities of the Information Village Research Project in Pondicherry, which linked ten villages through a network of computers to provide information on health, crops, weather and fishing conditions to local communities. These technological tools are expected to bridge the economic and social divide between the haves and

*The former Prime Minister of Nepal, S. B. Deuba, lighting the traditional oil lamp to inaugurate the First SAF General Conference in Kathmandu from 11–12 December 2001, as SAF Nepal Chairman, B. B. Thapa and Nishchal Pandey (right) look on.*





have-nots. The project is designed to empower the villagers by providing them with knowledge and opportunity using the local language (Tamil), and in a multimedia format that allows them to interact with each other.

The animated discussion that followed showed there was considerable interest in these practical, grassroots presentations; several delegates intervened enthusiastically, wanting more information. The one person who was not carried away by the online euphoria was SAF trustee N. Ram. He said that although the information provided by the three speakers was very interesting, these projects were essentially experimental. He laid emphasis on the importance of conventional off-line education, as online transmissions have a long way to go before they can be effectively used and accepted by the rural communities in South Asia.

Over lunch, the SAF Pakistan IT coordinator, Zaheer Alam Kidvai, who was sitting next to me, commented on the curiosity among the delegates about the motive behind my spending all that money on promoting regional cooperation.

They could not understand why someone would give away all he had for a cause such as this. One of them, I was told later, had gone so far as to insinuate that the SAF was a 'front', actually funded by the government of India, and that I, a former Indian diplomat, was merely an agent. To be branded a secret agent of the government led by a communal political party was an insult that hurt me deeply. 'It is a long story that I will tell some day', I assured Kidvai. During the afternoon session, the question came up again, and my response was later summarized by Pakistani journalist, Beena Sarwar, in a piece she wrote in the *Nepali Times* (21–27 December 2001):

*Most objections were swept aside by Madanjeet Singh's personal account of his motives, his obvious sincerity and commitment – and solid financial credentials. 'I have not always had money. I have seen poverty', he said, talking about growing up as the son of a university professor in Benares. He tells one last story that shows why so many people have been won over by him. 'I was in Lahore four years ago, I visited Government College', he says. This was his*

*Representatives of three organizations that were working in the field were invited to speak at the First SAF General Conference in Kathmandu: Grameen Communications, Bangladesh; Sarvodaya Telecentres, Sri Lanka; and M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, India.*



*shouted ‘Punjabi wich gal karo!’ So I spoke in Punjabi and spoke my heart out. I told them you are talking of Kashmir? Indians and Pakistanis have destroyed Kashmir. I have been there, the houseboats are lying vacant, the beautiful lakes are choking with weeds ... Kashmir is of strategic interest only because India and Pakistan are fighting. There is not even any oil there, like in the Gulf to interest Americans.’ He continues: ‘When I finished, I thought I had overdone it ... the students are going to call me an Indian, a Communist ... but you know what happened? They stood up and applauded. Afterwards, the principal came up to me and said, ‘We don’t come together because we are both (unprintable expletive, which he said unhesitatingly).’ The genteel gathering at the conference in Kathmandu greeted the unprintable with stunned silence, and then laughter. Some were embarrassed at this unexpected demonstration of his Punjabiya, but he went on, unfazed: ‘Every time this issue comes up, I think of that. Now we have made nuclear weapons, and there’s a woman putting paper in the pot to feed her children. Aren’t we [expletive]?’*

**D**uring our previous Kathmandu visit, France and I had gone to Pingalsthan, Gaushala, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, and seen the remarkable social work being done by Anuradha Koirala, founder of Maiti-Nepal. The NGO was working to retrieve and rehabilitate destitute women, abandoned children, and bonded labourers. UNESCO had introduced me to Maiti-Nepal in connection with its ‘Programme of Integrated Education and Capacity Building for Adolescent Girls and Children of Asia’ and it was at UNESCO’s request that SAF had agreed to help the project in South Asia. My idea was that, in addition to the

*alma mater, thanks to having been asked to leave Benares and his state, Uttar Pradesh, after his prison sentence. ‘The auditorium was packed. I asked the students whether I should speak as a diplomat or an old student, and they*

*In a piece she wrote for the Nepali Times (21–27 December 2001), Pakistani journalist Beena Sarwar summarized my response as to why someone would give away all he possessed for regional cooperation.*



conventional vocational training – sewing, weaving, gardening, cooking – the vulnerable girls should be given training in computers, a skill that would help them to get ‘respectable’ jobs and thus overcome the cultural taboo that prevented them from being accepted back into society.

Anuradha Koirala came to see us during the Kathmandu conference and, on the recommendation of the SAF Nepal Chairperson, Bhek Bahadur Thapa, it was agreed to launch a programme in which the SAF IT coordinator in Kathmandu, Rajesh Lamichhane, would give computer training to a first group of twenty-five girls. The nine-month course, which started at Maiti-Nepal on 30 March 2002, expanded rapidly. The girls, having successfully completed their training, were able to teach many more colleagues. Additional crash courses have since been added in the

basics of computers and in multimedia systems, including creation and maintenance of databases and the use of scanner/printers. SAF is now considering the possibility of funding the training of Maiti-Nepal field staff by installing additional computers in fifteen branch offices in different parts of Nepal, as well as in several repatriation centres in India located in Delhi, Kolkata, Siliguri, Kishanguni and Pune.

The resolutions and guidelines adopted at the First SAF General Conference were primarily devoted to information technology and harnessing its utility at the grass-roots level for the benefit of deprived communities. SAF cherished the hope that online practical applications, as described by the three speakers at the conference, would help bridge the communications gulf between urban and rural areas, and open new vistas for the impoverished

*At the request of Maiti-Nepal, SAF agreed to launch a programme in which R. Lamichhane, the SAF IT coordinator in Kathmandu (right), would give computer training to disadvantaged women. This would help them get ‘respectable’ jobs and thus overcome the cultural taboo that prevented them from being accepted back into society.*



masses by training them in new skills and providing them with practical information regarding government, community, health, education, agriculture and the environment – information which is not readily available in rural areas.

At the same time, SAF accelerated people-to-people interaction among the youth of South Asia by holding the first SAF Scouts Friendship Camp in Bhutan on 21–26 February 2002. ‘Regional Cooperation’ was the theme of this camp, in which 550 girls and boys from all seven SAARC countries participated. At the end of a week of pageantry, dance and music, the youngsters developed a remarkable sense of comradeship and solidarity, thanks to the personal interest and enthusiastic participation in the camp’s activities by the education minister, Lyonpo Sangay

Ngedup. He sang, played musical instruments, danced and clapped hands along with the scouts as he raised slogans of friendship and regional cooperation. On the last day of the camp, participants exchanged clothes with each other so that one could not tell to which country they belonged. The SAF provided them with a free-of-charge community e-mail facility, which allowed them to remain in touch with each other for a period of one year, and encouraged them to use this facility to write essays and stories about their experiences at the camp when they returned home. It was also proposed that two outstanding scouts (one boy and one girl), who actively promoted the spirit of friendship, solidarity and regional cooperation, be nominated ‘SAF Goodwill Ambassadors’. The next venue of the SAF Scouts Friendship Camp was decided ‘democratically’ through ballot, and

*‘Regional Cooperation’ was the theme of the first SAF Scout Friendship Camp in Bhutan from 21–26 February 2002, a unique event in which 550 girls and boys from all seven SAARC countries participated.*



the scouts applauded with great enthusiasm as the Maldives won with a clear majority of votes. Each of them also signed a huge ‘thank you’ scroll in the shape of a Buddhist *thanka*, and they sent it to me at Villa Surya, as I was unable to attend this exciting event for health reasons.

France and I saw the camp in a documentary film produced by Ekushey TV, Bangladesh – the first of a series of DVDs on SAF Scout Friendship Camps. Ekushey TV had taken the initiative of starting this unique programme, produced by teenagers and seen by millions of youngsters in Bangladesh. The story documented how a group of scouts, living in the water-logged flat countryside of Bangladesh, took off in buses to Bhutan and within a few hours of driving along the winding roads saw, to their amazement, sights that they could never have imagined. They saw for the first

time the formidable snow-covered Himalaya Mountains. They found equally unforgettable their interaction with youngsters hailing from different cultural backgrounds in the SAARC countries, as they participated in the first SAF Scouts Friendship Camp in Bhutan. I enjoyed editing the documentary myself as I had once made a film in Rome on the Ajanta caves – together with the famous cinematographer Claude Renoir – which had won a Prize at the 1953 Venice film festival.

**T**he sense of satisfaction I felt at the successful conclusion of the friendship camp in Bhutan was shattered by the horrifying news that broke on 27 February 2002, about the burning of the *Sabramati Express* at Godhra in Gujarat, which took the lives of fifty-nine passengers. The gruesome

*The youngsters, who had different cultural backgrounds and were strangers when they arrived at the Bhutan scout camp, became firm friends; on the last day they exchanged clothes with each other so that one could not tell to which country they belonged. They sang, played music, danced and raised slogans of friendship and regional cooperation.*



images of the innocent victims on the Batala train that I had seen in Amritsar, which were buried deep in my heart for half a century, suddenly erupted like a volcano to haunt me again. The nightmare that followed the burning of the train at Godhra was even worse, as over 1,000 Muslims lost their lives and hundreds of children were orphaned; they were systematically attacked by communal fanatics. Thousands fled to refugee camps like the one where I had worked in Delhi in the aftermath of India's partition. I felt as if once again I was carrying a dying child in my arms to the hospital in New Delhi, with the doctor asking me casually: 'Is he a Hindu or a Muslim?' Now, as then, a sense of desolation descended on me because of this cold, cruel lack of compassion. My hatred against such fanatics mounted – those who commit such horrendous atrocities in the name

of religion, and yet claim themselves to be the custodians of an age-old civilization.

I wanted somehow to help the scores of orphaned children in Gujarat who had nowhere to go, and thought of the SOS Children's Village near Marrakesh in Morocco, which we had recently visited at the invitation of my colleague, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Princess Lalla Meryam, a sister of the King. We were greatly impressed with this well-organized village – to which orphaned and other disadvantaged children are brought from all parts of Morocco and given education and vocational training in handicrafts and agriculture. We were advised to get in touch with SOS-Kinderdorf International, the parent organization. It was founded by Hermann Gmeiner, who established the first SOS Children's Village in 1949 to help war-affected orphans

*The sense of satisfaction I felt at the successful conclusion of the scout camp in Bhutan was shattered when the Ahmedabad-bound Sabarmati Express was set ablaze on 27 February 2004 by a mob at Godhra junction, in which fifty-nine passengers were burnt alive and many others injured. Widespread rioting started in Gujarat and scores of men, women and children were killed and their houses burned, and thousands fled to take shelter in refugee camps.*



in Imst-Austria. Since then, hundreds of such villages have been established in over 130 countries.

I got in touch with the Secretary-General of the organization in Vienna, Richard Pichler, and he referred me to Siddhartha Kaul, Deputy Secretary-General responsible for Asia. As a result of a series of meetings and discussions, it was proposed that – as SAF and SOS-Kinderdorf have much in common – areas of cooperation be identified within the framework of the SAF objective of promoting education and regional cooperation. Siddhartha Kaul suggested that the two organizations might cooperate in South Asia by jointly holding vocational training camps, a programme that would encourage teamwork and a spirit of cooperation between the participants. Accordingly, I placed this item on the Agenda of the SAF chairpersons' first annual meeting, which was to be held in Beaulieu-sur-Mer in France from 9–11 April 2002.

Thanks to Jeet, we had purchased a beautiful Moorish-style villa, an architectural design brought from Spain to the Côte d'Azur by the famous writer Somerset Maugham. It had belonged to Princess Kika Borghese, who had married my buddy Francesco, whom I had known since the good old 'dolce vita' days in Rome. Located at Beaulieu-sur-Mer (literally 'beautiful spot on the sea'), Kika had lived there for over twenty years. She wiped a tear as she handed over the keys of the villa to us. We renamed it Villa Surya.

Villa Surya was chosen for this meeting because I felt that staying together under the same roof in a congenial environment on the Côte d'Azur would, as it were, 'break the ice' and enable the SAF chairpersons to get to know each other informally. My invitation was gladly accepted by all seven, along with their spouses: Kamal Hossain (Bangladesh), Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup (Bhutan), Inder Kumar

*I was greatly impressed with the SOS Children's Village near Marrakesh in Morocco, which I had recently visited at the invitation of my colleague, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Princess Lalla Meryam, a sister of the King. Orphaned and other disadvantaged children are brought here from all parts of Morocco and given education and vocational training in handicrafts and agriculture.*



Gujral (India), Ibrahim Hussain Zaki (Maldives), Bhekh B. Thapa (Nepal), Salima Hashmi (Pakistan) and Lakshman Kadirgamar (Sri Lanka). The logistics of arranging transport, dinners and lunches at home and in restaurants, as well as going sight-seeing and visiting museums, was not an easy task, but one which France managed cheerfully. During their stay they saw the masterpieces of impressionist art by artists who had lived and worked on the French Riviera, and visited Italy and Monaco, countries that are within an hour's drive of Villa Surya.

Among the most enterprising guests was Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup, Bhutanese Minister for Health and Education. He had started his own project to raise money for the Bhutan Health Trust Fund, established to provide drugs and vaccines free of charge to the needy people of Bhutan – collecting \$1 from each donor for every kilometre he walked. The target of the fund was \$24 million and he had already collected \$2 million, walking over 500 kilometres. He continued his walks on the Côte d'Azur. While the other guests went to restaurants and tourist places, driving along the winding roads, he would take shortcuts, walking straight up the hills to meet them. In comparison to the steep terrain of his country – I still remember climbing up to the Tak-Sang monastery with much effort – the treks here seemed like child's play to him. I also promised to make a contribution for the kilometres he walked along the French Riviera.

Looking after the charming guests was a real pleasure, but France had not expected to run around and manage the affairs of the security guard who had accompanied Kadirgamar from Sri Lanka, and the French security men whom the Indian Embassy in Paris had sent to look after Gujral. Amusingly, the

*Thanks to my son Jeet, we acquired a beautiful Moorish-style seaside villa, an architectural design brought from Spain to the Côte d'Azur in France by the famous writer Somerset Maugham.*





gun of Kadirgamar's security guard was misplaced during the stopover in Rome, and after frantic efforts was recovered at Nice airport just as his wards were leaving. Gujral's French security guards arrived after midnight looking for a hotel; they had neglected to make a reservation in a tourist resort where hotel reservations are made months in

advance. 'Go and sleep on the beautiful sandy beach in front of Villa Surya', France suggested. Later, after telephoning a number of hotels, she found one by chance, to which she herself drove them in the wee hours of the morning.

At Villa Surya, it was not all play and no work: on the contrary, the first SAF meeting turned out to be extremely

*The first meeting of SAF chairpersons was held at Villa Surya from 9–11 April 2002. It was attended by Kamal Hossain (Bangladesh), Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup (Bhutan), Inder Kumar Gujral and his wife (India), Ibrahim Hussain Zaki (Maldives), Bhekh B. Thapa (Nepal), Salima Hashmi and her husband (Pakistan), and Lakshman Kadirgamar and his wife (Sri Lanka).*

important and productive. The chairpersons were pleased with the report I presented about our travels in SAARC countries and they gladly approved the action-oriented projects and activities so far undertaken. An important resolution stated that no national project would qualify for SAF support and funding unless the proposed project was linked to similar educational and development projects in at least two other SAARC countries. It also stated that the SAF chapter proposing the project would make a contribution in cash or kind to match the funds provided by SAF. They realized that worldwide experience has shown that no NGO can function effectively and sustain itself unless all the participating partners share costs and responsibilities and thus have a stake in the success of the projects. Another significant resolution adopted by the chairpersons concerned Afghanistan: since it is a part of South Asia, a way should be found to help this country, which is in dire need of assistance as a result of the devastation caused by war. They decided to set up a committee comprising Inder Kumar Gujral, Kamal Hossain and myself to study the feasibility of incorporating Afghanistan as the South Asia Foundation's eighth chapter.

It was a happy coincidence that Lakshman Kadirgamar's birthday, on 14 April, fell about the same time as mine (16 April). So all the chairpersons and their consorts joined in cutting the cake and we sang Happy Birthday together at Villa Surya on 15 April 2002. It reminded me that Charlie Chaplin, too, was born on 16 April. He loved playing tennis and had asked me if I played the game as well when he had come for a drink in my apartment in Rome. 'Yes indeed', I had responded, repeating the same words which had once enabled me to get admission in Government College in Lahore: 'I am a tennis player. I used to play in

several inter-collegiate tournaments for my university in Benares.' So he invited me to come to Vevey where he lived in Switzerland, saying: 'We will play tennis and celebrate our next birthday together.'

The chairpersons were happy that in a period of barely two years SAF had been able to accomplish so much, and complimented France and me for working so hard to keep so many projects going all by ourselves. 'At my age, that is what keeps me alive', I told them. But after their departure, I began wondering if so many disparate projects, however effective in themselves, really drew the SAARC countries together and promoted regional cooperation. I had already given up the idea of building the 2,000 medical clinics run on solar energy that I had originally proposed to UNESCO in the framework of SAARC regional projects. The Bastar undertaking had proven that the amount of money required for solar-energy systems could be better spent on distance learning in the remote and mostly poorer areas of South Asia.

**I**t was among the tribal communities in Bastar that I had recognized the enormous potential of distance learning for the socially and economically backward rural communities living in isolated villages located deep in Lohandiguda forest. In an area larger than Switzerland, where there are hardly any roads or transportation facilities, it was impossible for youngsters to commute long distances to go to school; obviously, distance learning was the only solution.

My interest in distance learning grew when Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO since November 1999, appointed two stalwarts of distance learning to key positions at UNESCO: Sir John Daniel, Vice-Chancellor of

the Open University, in the UK, to head of the Education Sector; and Abdul Waheed Khan, formerly the Vice-Chancellor of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi (IGNOU), to be his Assistant Director-General of Information and Communication. In South Asia, distance learning had come a long way since the School of Correspondence Course (SCC) was first set up under the chairmanship of D. S. Kothari at Delhi University, in 1961. This led to the establishment of IGNOU in 1985, and ten more institutions of distance learning in several Indian states. In other South Asian countries, the Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad, Pakistan, was the first to start in 1974, followed by Sri Lanka Open University in Colombo and Bangladesh Open University in Dhaka. It occurred to me that should the open universities in South Asia jointly design courses of study, they would avoid duplication of work and costs and at the same time develop a spirit of regional cooperation among teachers and students alike.

I hardly knew any of the vice-chancellors/rectors of these open universities personally and first thought of writing a paper on the subject to send to each of them in advance, before inviting them to Villa Surya. But then my characteristic impatience got the better of me, and I picked up the telephone and invited eight of them, introducing myself as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, and telling them how thoroughly the SAF chairpersons had enjoyed their stay on the Côte d'Azur earlier that year. Surprisingly, my invitation was accepted without exception, and all the invitees showed up for the meeting at Villa Surya from 28–29 September 2002. I was especially happy that the Director-General of UNESCO personally nominated Abdul Waheed Khan to represent him at this meeting.

Most of the participants already knew each other, and in the informal environment of Villa Surya the meeting progressed rapidly. It was chaired by Jamilur Reza Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of BRAC University. After Abdul Waheed Khan described the role that UNESCO played to promote distance learning, it was unanimously agreed that within the framework of South Asian studies, courses should be designed jointly by the open universities in SAARC countries. Jamilur Reza Choudhury was already working on a pilot project at BRAC University with a view to linking courses on South Asian studies with other institutions and universities in SAARC countries. The establishment of such a network, he stated, would promote regional cooperation, as it would enable students to qualify not only in South Asian studies, but also allow them wider options when choosing subjects offered by other universities in the SAARC region. He also suggested that students could benefit greatly by attending lectures by eminent professors and experts on the subject from different countries delivered through video-conferencing, whose cost had significantly gone down with the development of IT. Several suggestions were then proffered regarding the common subjects to be offered, such as protection of the environment, sustainable development, teacher-training and human rights.

Among the participants assembled was also Naveed Malik, the rector of the newly established Virtual University in Lahore. I was much impressed with his efforts to introduce online virtual education in a developing country such as Pakistan. Jeet (who was visiting Villa Surya at the time) and Naveed found they had much in common, as both had gone to MIT. Jeet's software company was a pioneer in creating 'virtual offices' and its Dynamo system was also used



From left to right: Uma Coomaraswamy, Open University of Sri Lanka; Naveed Malik, Virtual University (Pakistan); Suresh Raj Sharma, Kathmandu University; Abdul Waheed Khan, UNESCO Assistant Director-General; Madanjeet Singh, SAF Founder; Jamilur R. Choudhry, BRAC University (Bangladesh); Ahmed Ali Maniku, MCHU (Maldives); Suresh Garg, Indira Gandhi University (India); Ershadul Bari, Bangladesh Open University; and Altaf Husain, Allama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan).

*Eight vice-chancellors of South Asian open universities met at Villa Surya from 28–29 September 2002. They formed a steering committee to jointly design courses, thus avoiding duplication of work and costs and developing a spirit of regional cooperation.*

to transmit the Harvard Business School courses online. This cutting-edge technology excited me, as I saw in it a panacea for the future development of education. So I recommended to the delegates that while the open universities would have to continue using the conventional methods of delivering distance learning – books, video and television – SAF’s ultimate objective might well be to adopt avant-garde virtual education through satellite transmissions.

**T**he meeting concluded with the recommendation of a Post Graduate Diploma course in South Asian studies, to be developed jointly by a group of vice-chancellors of open universities in SAARC countries according to a fixed time schedule, and to be launched in January 2004. A Steering Committee of the SAF Learning Initiative (SAFLI) was constituted, comprising the vice-chancellors of open universities attending the Villa Surya meeting: Jamilur Reza Choudhry, of BRAC University in Dhaka; Ershadul Bari of Bangladesh Open University in Dhaka; Suresh Garg of Indira Gandhi Open University in New Delhi; Ahmed Ali Maniku of Maldives College in Malé; Altaf Hussain of Allama Iqbal Open University in Islamabad; Naveed Malik of Virtual University in Lahore; and Uma Coomaraswamy of Open University of Sri Lanka.

Because time was very short, I proposed that the SAFLI Steering Committee recommendations be considered by all the vice-chancellors of Indian open universities at a meeting in New Delhi where the first Regional Conference for the SAARC countries was taking place from 22–24 November 2002 on ‘Youth in the Contemporary Information Society’. This international conference was originally proposed by Abdul Waheed Khan at the First SAF General Conference in

Kathmandu; it was then decided that SAF and UNESCO would jointly organize this event in Delhi and share the costs. The reason for holding the two events together was simple; by interacting with many IT experts from all over the world, the Indian vice-chancellors would become aware of the latest developments in information technology – thus laying the groundwork for the gradual introduction of online distance education, as envisaged at the SAFLI meeting at Villa Surya.

I was glad that all the vice-chancellors of open universities in India assembled concurrently for the meeting at SAF premises in New Delhi. They included: H. P. Dikshit and Suresh Garg of Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi; V. S. Prasad of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad; K. D. Vasava of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad; Surabhi Banerjee of Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata; G. S. L. Devra of Kota Open University, Kota, Rajasthan; R. K. Singh of Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University, Bhopal; Usha Singh of Nalanda Open University, Bihar; D. P. Singh of U. P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Allahabad; N. S. Rame Gowda of Karnataka State Open University, Mysore; and B. P. Sabale of Y. Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik.

Inaugurating the meeting, the former Prime Minister of India, I. K. Gujral, stated that a cooperative joint venture such as this would enable SAF to define the direction for future development of distance learning. Suresh Garg then apprised the participants of the details of the Villa Surya proposals, reiterating that the Post Graduate Diploma course in South Asian studies would be developed according to a fixed time schedule. He said that the work done by different universities in the SAARC region on the design and development of curricula would be reviewed by the second Steering

Committee meeting, scheduled for the next month in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He informed them of the decision taken at Villa Surya that, in the event of any university failing to complete the task assigned to it, another institution would be assigned in its place. It was also agreed that the membership of the SAF Academic Council would be enlarged to include all the vice-chancellors of Indian open universities; Suresh Garg would be the content coordinator and Zaheer Alam Kidvai the IT coordinator. The recommendations were unanimously accepted and endorsed.

**W**hile the meeting of the vice-chancellors was being held in the main building of the SAF premises, the First SAF UNESCO Info-Youth Regional Conference for SAARC countries took place in a large *shamiana* specially erected next to the SAF Documentation and Information Centre

(SAFDIC). Some thirty-five participants from all SAARC countries attended the Conference, together with representatives of UN Agencies – UNICEF, UNDP, UNIDO and UNFP. They discussed the current situation of youth in the information society; strengthening information capacities and schemes for youth at a national level; prospects for facilitating information exchanges and improving communication channels; promotion of youth-related information services; publicity and visibility; online expansion of multilateral collaboration; funding of activities for and with youth in the information society; collaboration among youth information structures; specialized governmental institutions; intergovernmental organizations and NGOs; and the identification of major problems and challenges facing the South Asian region.

In the concluding resolution of the conference, the participants unanimously agreed: to appeal to their respective



*The delegates to the first SAF-UNESCO Regional Conference for the SAARC countries on 'Youth in the Contemporary Information Society' (22–24 November 2002) were briefed by Madanjeet Singh in the conference hall of the SAF-India office in New Delhi. Some thirty-five participants attended the Conference, together with representatives of UN agencies – UNICEF, UNDP, UNIDO and UNFP – and discussed the current situation of youth in the information society.*

governments to accelerate the process of regional cooperation and integration by eliminating the costs of non-cooperation that the people of the region have been bearing for too long; to promote people-to-people contact, unhindered by diplomatic and consular restrictions; to strengthen mutual understanding, regional solidarity, cooperation and development; to identify common denominators of cultural heritage in the region; and to learn from the experience of the European Community by putting behind damaging national rivalries and forging cooperation to enhance the quality of life. Finally, they emphasized the importance of the SAF youth movement in the promotion of South Asian regional cooperation.

Within a month, the second SAFLI Steering Committee meeting was held in Dhaka. The Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, whom I had personally requested to participate, inaugurated the meeting on 12 December 2002. Earlier, SAF trustee Ram had introduced me to him and he had very kindly invited France and myself to dinner at his residence in Porter's Lodge in Cambridge in the United Kingdom. It was indeed a great honour to visit the eminent intellectual and the Master of Trinity College, an institution with which numerous luminaries have been associated, such as historian G. M. Trevelyan, philosopher Bertrand Russell, scientist Issac Newton, novelist Vladimir Nabokov, and especially my mentor Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.

We were glad to arrive on time at Cambridge University as the clock of the ancient tower struck twice, first on a low note and then on a much higher one. On entering the formidable Great Gate, time seemed suddenly to have slipped back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when most

of Cambridge's major buildings had been built. As we were admiring the beauty and size of Trinity's well laid-out courtyard, Amartya Sen himself walked up and welcomed us most cordially. He was delighted with the bottle of his favourite Bordeaux wine that we had brought him, a secret France had discovered from Ram. He took us straight to the kitchen, telling us how Trinity College had been founded by Henry VIII in 1546, how the Michael House had existed since 1324, and how King's Hall was established by Edward II in 1317.

Entering his living quarters upstairs, we found that it was not a home but a museum in which he and his charming wife Emma were living. It reminded me of the Russian Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg; all four walls were covered with numerous ancient paintings of medieval characters, staring at us from all directions through the heavily gilded picture frames. With their martial beards and pointed moustaches they seemed as intimidating as perhaps they were in real life; the well-fed, plump ladies looked just as severe, showing off their extravagant jewellery and intricately embroidered dresses. I sat down carefully in a fragile antique chair, looking for some space on a table cluttered with all kinds of books and journals, to place my book, *This My People*, which I had brought for him. The book containing images of the poverty-stricken Indian people seemed as incongruous here as Amartya Sen himself and his writings: *On Economic Inequality and Poverty and Famine*, for which he won the Nobel Prize.

The Nobel laureate then put on the rather worn-out academic gown that he had probably worn at his graduation from Presidency College in Calcutta in 1953, and led us ceremoniously to the dining hall and instructed us about the rules and



Seated from left to right: *Kamal Hossain, Chairperson of SAF-Bangladesh; Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize laureate; Madanjeet Singh, SAF Founder; and Jamilur Reza Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of BRAC University, Bangladesh.*

Vice-chancellors (unless otherwise indicated) standing from left to right: *Ershadul Bari, Bangladesh Open University; Hom Nath Bhattarai (Member Secretary) UGS Kathmandu; Ahmed Ali Maniku (Vice-Rector) Maldives College of Higher Education; Jagar Dorji (Director) National Institute of Education (Bhutan); Suresh Raj Sharma, Kathmandu University; Altaf Hussain, Alama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan); Uma Coomaraswamy, Open University of Sri Lanka; Suresh Garg (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) Indira Gandhi Open University (India); Zaheer Alam Kidvai (SAFLI IT coordinator Pakistan); Naveed Malik (Rector) Virtual University of Pakistan; and Khalid Aftab, Government College University (Pakistan).*

*Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen inaugurated the second SAFLI Steering Committee meeting on 12 December 2002, attended by vice-chancellors of open universities and other institutions in SAARC countries, as well as other delegates.*



regulations to be strictly followed. France was told to walk on the right side of the long rectangular table and sit on the right-hand side of the host, while I was to walk along the left side and sit on the left-hand side of the Master of Trinity College. Meanwhile, all the other invitees – about ten professors and scholars – stood respectfully at a distance. We performed the drill perfectly, upon which the other guests approached the table and stood behind their assigned chairs. A uniformed official called a ‘manciple’ then walked up from the left side of the host with a paper on a silver tray and placed it on a podium-like table, the lectern. Amartya Sen picked up the paper and while we all stood listening, he solemnly read out a sermon in Latin. I could not resist asking him during the dinner if he was obliged to perform this medieval ritual every night, to which he smiled and replied: ‘Yes, indeed!’ After dinner, the host led us to a special ‘wine and brandy room’ in which we were once again segregated from the others, as the Master of Trinity College sat with his special guests in one corner, pretending to drink wine and brandy.

Without his very British medieval mask, Amartya Sen was quite another man when he inaugurated the SAF meeting in Dhaka, his home in pre-partition India. The nostalgia was poignantly written on his face. The Nobel laureate was in great form, delivering an excellent address to a distinguished audience comprising all the vice-chancellors attending the second SAFLI Steering Committee meeting, as well as delegates who had come to participate in another conference on South Asian cooperation arranged by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka. Emphasizing the need for twin commitments – reach and quality – he highlighted that creating a consciousness of quality and addressing

issues of heritage in an authentic perspective were absolutely necessary and fell within the domains of those who cared for records. He explained why it was essential that widespread literacy at the grassroots level go hand-in-hand with excellence of knowledge. The Chairperson of SAF Bangladesh, Kamal Hossain, highlighted the role of regional cooperation for peace and development, and summarized the rapid progress that the SAF Learning Initiative had made in a matter of a few months since the programme was first conceived at Villa Surya.

In my presentation, I spoke optimistically of the possibility of using virtual modes of transmitting distance learning, discussed earlier at Villa Surya, and of how I expected SAF to cooperate with fathom.com. An educational website such as this, I thought, would be eminently suitable for the SAFLI courses, jointly designed by the open universities/institutions in SAARC countries. At the time, I was planning to contact Columbia University to enquire if SAF and fathom.com could cooperate, especially now that SAF had the possibility of using an AsiaStar satellite link to provide two-way communication for distance education in the remote areas of South Asia.

The working session of the meeting on 13 December in Dhaka was attended by all the members of the Steering Committee who had come to Villa Surya, as well as by Hom Nath Bhattarai, Member Secretary of UGC (University Grants Commission) in Kathmandu, Nepal, and Jagar Dorji, Director of the National Institute of Education in Thimphu, Bhutan, who had not been present at Villa Surya. Khalid Aftab, Vice-Chancellor of Government College University, had also been invited to the meeting in Dhaka in connection with a proposal to build a library of South Asian studies in my alma mater.



*As in other parts of South Asia, the Basant Spring Festival is celebrated enthusiastically in Bangladesh. People wear yellow clothes, they dance in the streets, and young girls colour their hands and feet with red henna-like brides.*

The meeting began with a welcome address by Jamilur Choudhury, then Suresh Garg informed them of the Indian vice-chancellors' meeting in New Delhi. He told them about the proposal to launch a Post Graduate Diploma course to develop multipurpose flexible modules in conjunction with the existing courses of different universities. He also mentioned the need for teacher-training, special education for the disadvantaged, pre-primary education and extended educational programmes. During the discussions, it was generally felt that because environmental protection and sustainable development in the region were of immediate relevance, a Post Graduate Diploma course in Environment and Sustainable Development (PGD-ESD) should be launched as the first programme of the series in South Asia studies.

Jamilur Reza Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of BRAC University, hosted a dinner at the Gulshan Club in Dhaka, followed by a cultural programme with traditional Manipuri dances performed by well-known Bengali artist Tamanna Rahman and her troupe, and we heard 'Rabindra Sangeet' sung by Shama Ali and Sadi Mohammed. I was happy to find that the Bengalis had so far been able to protect their rich culture from the destructive orthodoxy of the fundamentalist onslaught. In my vote of thanks I mentioned that one of the oldest Bengali books, *Gorakhvijaya*, was written by a Muslim, Abd-ul-Karim, just as Muslims were authors of many a *padyavalis* – poems singing the love of Krishna and Radha. Bengali culture in particular emphasized the element of love, which changed asceticism to mysticism. Several religious sects attempted to harmonize Hindu and Muslim religious traditions at different levels. The story of the Rajput heroine Padmavati, originally a romance,

was beautifully recorded in Hindi by the sixteenth-century Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi and later by the seventeenth-century Bengali Muslim poet Alaol – a tradition which inspired such modern Indian poets as Rabindranath Tagore and Muhammad Iqbal.

A living embodiment of this cultural syncretism is the Bangladeshi poet, writer and journalist, Taslima Nasreen, the laureate of the 2004 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence. On the United Nations Day of Tolerance on 16 November 2004, the US\$100,000 Prize was attributed by an international jury presided over by Andrés Pastrana Arango, former President of Colombia, on the recommendation of the former Prime Minister of India, Inder Kumar Gujral, and awarded by the UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura.

Taslima Nasreen started writing when she was 15 years old, beginning with poetry in literary magazines, and afterwards editing a literary periodical called *Senjuti* (1978–1983). She was the president of a literary organization while in medical school, where she staged many cultural programmes. After obtaining her medical degree in 1984, she worked in public hospitals for eight years. A qualified physician, her first book of poetry was published in 1986. *Lajja*, her second book (1989), which described her struggle for women's rights and freedom of expression, became a huge success. Since then she has written twenty-four books of poetry, essays, novels and short stories in her native language, Bengali; some of which have been translated into twenty different languages. She has received several distinctions, including the Indian literary award Ananda Puroshkar, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and the Kurt Tucholsky Award from Swedish PEN.

*At a dinner hosted by Jamilur Reza Choudhury at the Gulshan Club in Dhaka, traditional Manipuri and other dances were performed by well-known Bangladeshi artists, and Rabindra Sangeet was sung by Shama Ali and Sadi Mohammed.*





The speech she delivered accepting the Prize received a long and standing ovation from about 1,000 people who attended the function at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

*'Bangladesh', stated Nasreen, 'is a nation of more than 133 million, a country where 70 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, where more than half of the population cannot read and write. Nearly 40 million women have no*

*A living embodiment of Bengali secular culture is the Bangladeshi poet, writer and journalist Taslima Nasreen. She was awarded the 2004 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence by UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, on behalf of an international jury presided over by Andrés Pastrana Arango, former President of Colombia. Her acceptance speech received a long and standing ovation at a well attended event in Paris on 16 November 2004.*

*access to education nor do they have the possibility of becoming independent. With the country's strong patriarchal tradition, women suffer unbearable inequalities and injustices. They are considered intellectually, morally, physically and psychologically inferior by religion, tradition, culture and customs. As a result, the fundamentalists refuse to tolerate any of my views. They could not tolerate my saying that the religious scriptures are out of time and out of place. They were upset at my saying that religious law, which discriminates against women, needs to be replaced by secular law and a uniform civil code. Hundreds of thousands of the extremists appeared on the streets and demanded my execution by hanging.*

*'Humankind is facing an uncertain future. In particular, the conflict is between two different ideas, secularism and fundamentalism. I don't agree with those who think the conflict is between two religions, namely Christianity and Islam, or Judaism and Islam. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between the East and the West. To me, this conflict is basically between modern, rational, logical thinking and irrational, blind faith. While some strive to go forward, others strive to go backward. It is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not. My pen is the weapon I use to fight for a secular humanism.'*

The Chairperson of the SAF Bangladesh chapter, Kamal Hossain, has been able to secure Taslima Nasreen's protection by the Supreme Court against the Islamic fundamentalists who are threatening to kill her. Human rights are not an internal political matter of a country. It has an international dimension, as forcefully pointed out by the Iranian 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi: 'Human rights,

including the freedom to read and write whatever one wishes, are universal values that transcend national boundaries.' The recent events in Nepal where parliamentary democracy has been suspended by the King and journalists illegally detained, is as disconcerting as the arrest in Malé, without trial, of the eminent international civil servant Ibrahim Hussein Zaki, chairman of the SAF chapter in Maldives.

The Second SAF General Conference was held in Colombo on 18 February 2003, at Taj Samudra Hotel. It was inaugurated by the President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, at a well-attended meeting that began with a pre-recorded video message by the UNESCO Director-General, Koïchiro Matsuura, who was unable to attend. The Chairperson, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, welcomed the eminent gathering of diplomats, scholars and vice-chancellors and rectors of open universities in South Asia. The Vice-Chancellor of Sri Lanka Open University, Uma Coomaraswamy, then introduced SAFLI to the distinguished audience and I proposed the vote of thanks.

The third SAFLI Steering Committee meeting was held on 19 February at the Hilton Hotel in Colombo, where all the members were staying. The vice-chancellors/rectors of open universities and representatives of other institutions in the SAARC countries formally adopted the decisions taken at the two previous SAFLI meetings in France and Bangladesh, and were endorsed by the vice-chancellors. The leitmotif of the meeting was to promote lifelong, secular learning that emphasizes humanism and celebrates the rich heritage of South Asia's unity in diversity at all levels and sections of society. The decision was cemented to offer a



Seated left to right: *Uma Coomaraswamy, Vice-Chancellor, Open University of Sri Lanka; Salima Hashmi, Chairperson, SAF-Pakistan; Kamal Hossain, Chairperson, SAF-Bangladesh; Madanjeet Singh, SAF Founder; H.E. Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, President of Sri Lanka; Lakshman Kadirgamar, Chairperson, SAF-Sri Lanka; Jeet Singh, SAF Trustee; Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup, Chairperson SAF-Bhutan; I.H. Zaki, Chairperson, SAF-Maldives; Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, Chairperson SAF-Nepal.*

Vice-chancellors (unless otherwise indicated) standing from left to right: *Mohsen Tawfik (UNESCO Regional Director) New Delhi; Usha Singh, Nalanda Open University (Bihar); D. P. Singh, U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University (Allahabad); G.S. L Devra, Kota Open University (Rajasthan); Surabhi Banerjee, Netaji Subhas Open University (Kolkata); Altaf Hussain, Alama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan); Pema Kinley, Director General of Education of Bhutan; Jamilur Reza Choudhry, BRAC University (Bangladesh); Ershadul Bari, Bangladesh Open University; Suresh Garg (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) Indira Gandhi Open University (India); Hom Nath Bhattarai (Member Secretary) UGS, Kathmandu; V.S. Prasad, Dr B. R. Ambedkar Open University (Hyderabad); R.K. Singh, Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University (Bhopal); N. S. Ramegowda, Karnataka State Open University (Mysore); and B. P. Sabale, Y. Chavan Maharashtra Open University (Nashik).*

PGD-ESD (Post Graduate Diploma course in Environment and Sustainable Development), together with optional IT courses for added credits. The timetable and costs and other details were specified and, to give the courses a good start, SAF agreed to fund totally the first PGD-ESD modules. The

administrative structure was also defined, headed by SAF chairpersons and comprising an Executive Board (steering committee) and an Academic Council of all the vice-chancellors of open universities and other institutions interested in distance education in South Asia.

*Inaugurated by the President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the Second SAF General Conference was held in Colombo on 18 February 2003. It began with a pre-recorded video message from UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura.*

One important principle reiterated at this meeting was that it is from grassroots projects that regional cooperation essentially draws its enormous strength to build a future of peace and stability in harmony with nature. Hence it was decided to pay special attention to basic education and teacher training for deprived communities, with local input to achieve the widest possible reach. It was decided that SAFLI would cooperate with NGOs working for the much-needed education of abandoned children as, for example, were doing Maiti-Nepal and the fifty-some SOS villages that SOS-Kinderdorf International had established in South Asia.

I was happy with this change of direction, which essentially meant that South Asia Foundation would be going back to its founding principles of grassroots activities. My confidence in online education for the marginalized and disadvantaged communities was shaken following the failure of a number of colleges and universities in the United States to make their offering of learning opportunities over the internet profitable. The bursting of the IT bubble exacerbated the trend, leading institutions such as Temple University and New York University to close or downgrade their e-learning ventures. Then I learned that fathom.com, about which I had spoken so enthusiastically in Dhaka, was also closing in March 2003. In fact, Altaf Hussain of Allama Iqbal Open University and some other educationists had already expressed doubts about the prospects of using online systems, especially in the rural communities of developing South Asian countries, even though IT and computer literacy were rapidly becoming part of the life and culture of young people.

In the evening, President Chandrika Kumaratunga hosted a dinner in honour of the SAF chairpersons, to which

she also invited the famous Chitrasena Vajira dance group to perform. As she entered the hall, she bypassed all the important guests standing in front rows and went straight to pay her respects to the elderly dance guru, Chitrasena, in the third row. This ancient South Asian tradition is universally observed among all artists, irrespective of religion, and dates back to the masters of classical music in India who are mostly Muslim, some tracing their *gharanas* (music houses) to the time of Akbar the Great (1556–1605). The Sri Lankan group of accomplished dancers, in colourful traditional costumes, was led by Upeka, the daughter of Chitrasena. Even though the form was similar to Indian dances, the style was distinctly local.

A number of dinner tables had been laid out on the extensive lawns of the palace under a large *banyan* tree, and the President very kindly invited me to sit in front of her as the chief guest, while her younger sister, Sunethra Bandaranaike, sat on my right. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned to them that the recently discovered enthusiasm in the West for women's empowerment was no novelty in South Asia. The pervading influence of matrilineal culture gave legitimacy to women's rights and empowerment throughout the subcontinent's history. It exists in the traditional culture of many tribal communities, as for example the Khasis in the Indian state of Meghalaya, where the inheritance of property and succession run through the female line, passing from mother to youngest daughter.

I told the President that it was this matrilineal culture, still practiced in Kerala at the grassroots level, that had helped many women accede to power – her own mother, Sirimavo Dias Bandaranaike, had been the world's first female Prime Minister, and now she herself was ruling the



country. The Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, effectively ruled over the largest democracy in the world. This deeply rooted culture transcended Islamic injunctions against women, enabling four generations of Begums, originally from Turkey, to defy Islamic orthodoxy and rule Bhopal for over a century (1819–1926) during British colonial rule. Benazir Bhutto ignored the *jihadis* and became the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan, and two remarkable women in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khalida Zia, have been alternating at the helm of power since the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991. The influence of South Asian matrilineal culture has been felt further east, where it has legitimized the rule of Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the Philippines.

The day before, the SAF chairpersons had visited an SOS Children's Village about an hour's drive from Colombo. Siddhartha Kaul showed them the grassroots activities of the youngsters in the village, especially in the field of organic agriculture. He proposed that cooperation between SAF and SOS-Kinderdorf might start by organizing an Environmental Work Camp at the Malpotha SOS Vocational Training and Vacation Centre in Sri Lanka, with the participation of an equal number of boys and girls from each of the seven South Asian countries. This would enable them to learn about the rural lifestyle and environmental issues, while at the same time fostering a spirit of cooperation and friendship.

**T**he theme of the second SAF Scouts Friendship Camp, held on Feydhoo Finolhu island from 16–22 February 2003, was 'protection of the environment'. The chairpersons flew to Malé early the next day, 22 February, and were



received at the airport by Ibrahim Zaki, the SAF-Maldives chairperson. He had flown home a day earlier with Jeet to help him arrange his concert. Jeet had agreed to entertain some 180 youngsters participating in the camp. As the chairpersons' stay in Malé was very short, Zaki had prepared a very tight programme. It began with a call upon the President Abdul Gayoom, followed by a series of scout functions designed on the pattern of the first camp in Bhutan, including an elaborate exhibition of handicrafts. A number of stalls displayed beautiful products from each of the seven countries and the guests enjoyed a variety of traditional dances performed by both boys and girls.

The climax of the camp was the concert that Zaki had helped Jeet arrange on the remote island of Bandos. Miki, as Jeet calls himself as a musician, had come to the Maldives a week earlier with the rest of his group, Dragonfly – Peter Parcek, Steve Scully, Marc Hickox and Brother Cleve – putting considerable effort into setting up quite a

*At a dinner hosted by President Chandrika Kumaratunga at the palace in Colombo, a group of accomplished dancers in colourful traditional costumes, led by Upeka, the daughter of guru Chitrasena, performed traditional Sri Lankan dances.*



*The success of the grassroots activities of the youngsters in the Environmental Work Camp at Malpotha, Sri Lanka, set the tone of SAF and SOS-Kinderdorf cooperation in the fields of organic agriculture and environmental protection.*

*Following page: Arriving at Maldives, we stood spellbound looking at the picturesque surroundings as the rising sun revealed the transparent underwater garden, home to hundreds of species of multicoloured fish, coral and shells.*





professional stage. Before the concert began, an open-air dinner had been arranged, at which I narrated the incredible story of how Jeet had retired as CEO of his software company. I told the guests that when he had come to Villa Surya for my last birthday on 16 April 2002, I had given him a piece of my mind. Ever since his company had succeeded so well, I hardly saw my only son anymore, as he was shuttling madly around the world in his private jet, visiting some ten ATG offices in Europe and Asia. Once he came to Paris for a three-day meeting of the ATG offices in Europe, promising to spend some time with me, but I saw him just for two hours for lunch before he left hurriedly, as something had come up in Frankfurt. I was very upset and reminded him of his promise at the start of his career that he would work until the age of thirty-five, earn enough money to live on, and then go

back to his first love, music. ‘Now you are thirty-seven’, I told him, ‘What happened to your music?’ Jeet scratched his head, and soon after returning to Boston, he resigned as CEO of ATG. Since then, he has settled in St. Barthes in the Caribbean, devoting himself full-time to music – he composes his own music and songs, plays guitar and is the lead singer of Dragonfly. He has already produced a series of CD recordings, some of which he brought to the Maldives as gifts for the scouts.

A number of scout officials had resisted my suggestion that the youngsters should mostly travel overland to the Maldives, as I wanted the scouts to have the same exciting teenage experiences I used to have, travelling by train across India from Trivandrum to my college in

*Jeet, whose stage name is Miki Singh, arrived in the Maldives with his group of musicians: Peter Parcek, Steve Scully, Marc Hickox and Brother Cleve. He founded the group Dragonfly and, since resigning as CEO of ATG, has settled in St. Barthes in the Caribbean, where he devotes himself full time to music. Among his many fans worldwide is our dog Wasa, at Villa Surya in France.*



Benares. My view was vindicated when, upon our return to Villa Surya, I received several enjoyable letters from the scouts describing their journeys and experiences. One very charming (unedited) write-up by a 13-year-old Nepalese youngster read:

*All the boy and girl scouts were very interested and excited for the Journey and Camping as the team started from Kathmandu on 10 Feb by a minibus at 6.30 AM according to the journey schedule. At 8.00 AM we took our breakfast on the way. We took our lunch at 11.20 AM in a café cottage Narayan Gadh, Chitwan. It was very nice. At 14.30 PM, we arrived to Bhairahawa, Sunauli. After refreshment and cold drinks we started our journey by rickshaw from Sunauli*

*Nepal to Sunauli India. We got in a minibus at 16.40 PM and we arrived at Gorakhpur, India, at 19.00 PM. We stayed in Siddharth Hotel. The train's (Rapti Sagar Express 5222) departure time was 4.30 PM. on 11 Feb. So we came to the Railway Station Gorkhppur at 4.00 AM. But Trains was late for four hours. So it came at 8.00 AM.*

*The whole members of the team was very curious and excited because it was a long journey and some of the members had never seen train or railway station. It was a long train journey. It took 72 hours. Lunch, dinner, breakfast, tea, coffee, cold drinks was available in the trains' dining car. So it became easy and comfortable for us for edible things. At the same time we had arranged in Gorakhpur slice bread, butter, jam, biscuits oranges grapes bananas*

*'Protection of the Environment' was the theme of the second SAF Scout Friendship Camp, held on Feydhoo Finolhu island in the Maldives from 16–22 February 2003. It was an amazing experience, especially for girls and boys coming from landlocked countries, such as Nepal and Bhutan, who had never seen the sea.*

*to use in the train journey. It is very easy to get every necessary thing on the railway stations in India. Each participant was happy and enjoying the Journey. Singing and dancing together we passed the three days journey by train in very good condition. Other passengers were also happy enjoying and used to come to us to join and thank us. We got down from the train in Thiruvananthapuram at 5.00 AM on 14 Feb. We went to Bharat Scouts and Guides, State Headquarter, Kerala. We became fresh and took our breakfast in a hotel and started for the Airport at 8.00 AM by taxi. Bajaj Travels had arranged our air tickets so we got chance to fly all the member by the same flight from Thiruvananthapuram to Malé by Indian Airlines at 10.30 AM.*

*We landed on the Malé Airport at 11.45 AM. After completing the essential formalities we came out of Malé airport. After taking cold drinks we went to a ship and from there we were brought to Feydhoo Finolhu, Island where the Camp was to held. It was hot for us. Bhutan team was there. It was a tremendous wonderful and exiting surprise for the team members of a land locked country to see the coloured water, green and blue of the sea and ships. Every member began to move here and there to see the marvellous sight of the Indian Ocean. In the evening we talked with Maldivian people and put our queries about Maldives. They were very friendly. We enjoyed much talking, bathing in the ocean moving around the island and shore, collecting corals talking each other and watching the ships. Everyone was making new friends, writing address and exchanging cards and other materials. It seem to be same family. Friendly environment was everywhere. Major part of the programme included singing and dancing, water Activities, night fishing, excursion to resorts and inhabited Island, were all very interesting and exciting.*

**T**he 'Protection of the Environment' theme of the SAF Scout Friendship Camp in Maldives was practically demonstrated six months later at the SOS Vocational Training and Vacation Centre in Malpotha, Sri Lanka, from 12–21 August 2003. The 'Environmental Work Camp', in which forty young people participated, provided them with the experience of working together in a rural environment and realizing the benefits that accrued from protecting the environment and sustainable development. They learned how important it was to respect ecological principles and live in harmony with nature. The teams devoted a lot of time to clearing the overgrown areas in Green Valley and New Land, as well as working on the two other small SOS-Kinderdorf projects in close proximity to the Malpotha farm. They also prepared vegetable and herb beds for planting, weeded out cultivated areas, planted vegetables from nurseries, made compost and dug pits to control soil erosion. They filled large animal fodder bags with the earth from the pits and gave a helping hand to preventing soil erosion in the Green Valley by buffering the banks of the stream with the loaded bags.

Two lectures with slide shows on conservation, environment and agricultural development in South Asia were specially arranged for the vocational training camp. These presentations raised the participants' awareness of the importance of organic farming and the damaging effects of commercially cloned agricultural products. The impact of the lectures on participants was apparent from the questions they asked and the discussions that followed. They realized the enormous economic potential of employing improved methods of agriculture and acquiring professional skills for gainful employment. Above all, they developed close ties



*The 'Environmental Work Camp', in which forty girls and boys participated, was held at the SOS Vocational Training and Vacation Centre in Malpotha, Sri Lanka, from 12–21 August 2003. The youngsters learnt about the enormous economic potential of employing improved methods in agriculture and acquiring professional skills for gainful employment.*

with each other as they worked and played together, learned to cook different kinds of food from each other and had fun singing and dancing as they exchanged information regarding their respective cultures. The huge success of the vocational training camp encouraged SAF and SOS-Kinderdorf to hold similar camps in all South Asian countries in rotation, starting with Bangladesh in 2004.

Meanwhile another down-to-earth project had been proposed by Ahmed Khan Tareen, Vice-Chancellor of Kashmir University (at present the CEO of SAF chapter in India). His idea was to select a number of young, educated but unemployed girls from the remote and isolated villages in the Kashmir valley, and bring them to the Institute of Home Science in Srinagar for a nine-month pre-primary teacher training course. A diploma would be given at the end of the training after an annual exam. Then some equipment, charts and toys would be offered as an incentive before they went back home to build pre-primary schools in cooperation with the local communities. In this way, they could teach children and at the same time train other teenage girls to become pre-primary school teachers in their own environment. He wanted SAF to give his university a grant, as his request to local authorities had fallen on deaf ears. It was an excellent proposal, but I could not provide him with funds without approval of SAF chairpersons, a time-consuming procedure. However, as my family originally came from Kashmir, I wrote a personal cheque for twice the amount that Tareen wanted, on the condition that the work on the project would start immediately so that France and I could see the results by October 2003, when we were planning to visit Jammu and Kashmir.



Indeed, when we arrived in Srinagar on 17 October, the project was in full swing. We met with the thirty-three young girls from far-off villages, who had been chosen on the basis of merit, and we were also shown the house that had been rented for them in Srinagar. They were running it themselves, cooking, cleaning and also using it to hold vocational training lessons. The programme had since been named 'Phool-Ban Nursery Schools' and I asked its director, Neelofar Khan, if we could visit some of the villages from where the girls were selected. She drove us to see two villages, relatively close to Srinagar, accompanied by the two girls whose families lived there. The dusty, pot-holed road we took was incongruous with the picturesque landscape and the warmth with which the families of the two girls received us. At Ganderbal, the villagers were

*The 'Phool Ban Nursery School' programme is among the most successful SAF initiatives. A number of girls from the remote villages in the Kashmir Valley are selected, trained and then sent back home to give pre-primary education in their communities. One of the Kashmiri girls, Afroza Bano (on my right), receiving training in Srinagar was from the village of Ganderbal, where her community was already building the school where she would teach when she returned home.*





already busy hand-building the wooden structure of the school where Afroza Bano would teach after the completion of her training. Her family thanked us profusely for giving Afroza the opportunity to become a teacher and serve her community. They gave us Kashmiri sweets to eat, the customary offering at the start of a new enterprise.

Another village to which one of our students, Rubeena, took us was called Alustang. Here we saw a larger school building under construction on a site donated by a rich farmer. Walking through the narrow paths hedged on both sides with mud walls, we had to avoid stepping in a stream of sewage flowing in the middle. Rubeena seemed embarrassed and told us that hygiene was a part of the training and education at the Institute of Home Science in Srinagar, a subject she would also be teaching when she comes back

to teach at Phool-Ban Nursery School in Alustang. Since then, the pre-primary education programme has turned out to be a great success. Besides Afroza Bano in Ganderbal and Rubeena in Alustang, thirty young women have opened up their own primary schools in remote villages of Kashmir.

A similar course of vocational training for girls was started at the request of the Vice-Chancellor of Jammu University, Amitabh Mattoo, at the Kalamkari College of Education. Unlike in Kashmir, these young girls were recruited through the *panchayats* in Kathua and Samba Tehsil. We visited the college, and were greatly impressed by the manner in which they were making handicrafts and learning skills such as tie-and-dye, block printing of textiles, *papier mâché*, and basket and toy-making. There was also a course in computers, management and entrepreneurship,

*The vocational training for girls at the Kalamkari College of Education in Jammu includes handicrafts, and skills such as tie-and-dye, block printing of textiles, papier mâché, and basket- and toy-making.*

*Pripta Devi's parents welcomed us in their village, Sata, in Samba Tehsil, and in another remote village, the family of Shallu Rani also expressed their heartfelt gratitude for having given their child the opportunity to learn skills.*

so that on completion of their training, they could use their skills in gainful employment in their rural communities. Here, too, we were taken to two villages, but unlike in Kashmir, these were far away from the town of Jammu, so that it took us a whole day to reach the Tehsils (districts) in which they are situated. First we went to a remote village, Sata, in Samba Tehsil and met with the parents of Pripta Devi. Her father was busy thrashing hay in front of their hut; he saw us coming and rushed to get some gur – sugarcane balls given to guests as a customary offering. The other village, where the parents of Shallu Rani lived, was located in a more picturesque spot on the bank of a sparkling stream. The families of both girls expressed their heartfelt gratitude to us for having given their children the opportunity to stand on their own feet. The warm welcome with which they received us had the same down-to-earth sincerity with which peasants express their feelings in rural areas.

Our stopover in Delhi on the flight home was short, as the next day we were flying straight to Kabul. This was a sequel to a long story that had begun on 12 March 2001 with the criminal destruction by the Taliban regime of the colossal fifth-century Bamiyan Buddha idols and other invaluable works of art in Afghanistan. Like most people, I was very distressed by what Koïchiro Matsuura had termed ‘a crime against culture’. He had stated: ‘It was abominable to witness the cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, of the whole of humanity.’ A month later I wrote to the Director-General, proposing that as the principal custodian of cultural heritage worldwide, he might wish to take the initiative of launching a campaign for their restoration

and preservation. I suggested that there were numerous traditional sculptors and stonecutters in South Asia, especially in India and Nepal, who could be effectively employed to reconstruct the invaluable Bamiyan idols, and that the South Asia Foundation would gladly contribute a substantial amount should UNESCO adopt the project.

Consequently, my donation of US\$1 million was announced at the First Plenary Session of the International Committee for the Safeguarding of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage, held in Paris on 16 June 2003. The meeting was attended by Afghanistan’s Minister of Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdoum Raheen. I could not attend, as at the time my friends, the former President of India, K. R. Narayanan, and his wife Usha, were visiting us at Villa Surya. So, on Koïchiro Matsuura’s advice, Raheen himself came to Villa Surya to thank me for the donation, accompanied by Ambassador Zaheer Aziz, Permanent Delegate of Afghanistan to UNESCO. The presence of President Narayanan was a happy coincidence, as he very kindly agreed to preside over the meeting on 17 June 2003, at which UNESCO was represented by François Langlois, a director in the culture sector. I took this opportunity to draw the Minister’s attention to the resolution, adopted about a year ago by SAF chairpersons at Villa Surya, to study the feasibility of incorporating Afghanistan as SAF’s eighth chapter. I explained to him that Afghanistan’s membership would benefit his country by participating in all the ongoing SAF projects in the field of education and training. To give him an idea of SAF’s activities, I handed him a copy of the SAF resolution and two DVDs about SAF Scout Friendship Camps in Bhutan and Maldives.

At lunch, Raheen saw and enquired about a large sculpture of the Buddha that I had placed in a grove at the



edge of the Villa Surya's lawns. Shortly after the destruction of the invaluable Bamiyan idols, I had commissioned a famous Nepalese artist, M. R. Sakya, and he had made this beautiful bronze piece in the image of the Buddha 'Bhumis-parsa', which means, 'the earth is my witness'. I told the Minister that it was the Buddha's response to people who doubted that he had in fact achieved enlightenment. The statement is as valid today, as the whole world is dismayed by the destruction of the Bamiyan idols. From the Buddha's

birthplace in Nepal, I had also brought a sapling of the *bodhi* tree under which Gautama, the Buddha, had achieved enlightenment, and had it planted beside the Buddha sculpture – copied from an illustration in my book *The Sun in Myth and Art*. This masterpiece was installed in Villa Surya on my birthday on 16 April 2001.

Soon after his return to Kabul, the Minister sent me a letter of thanks for the warm hospitality he had enjoyed at Villa Surya, and expressed his pleasure at having personally

*Afghanistan's Minister of Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdoum Raheen, came to see me at Villa Surya on 17 June 2003, accompanied by Ambassador Zaheer Aziz, Permanent Delegate of Afghanistan to UNESCO, and François Langlois, a director in the Culture Sector at UNESCO. The meeting was presided over by the former President of India, K. R. Narayanan.*

met with President Narayanan, about whom he had heard so much already. He informed me that his government had officially accepted his recommendation to join SAF and participate in its activities, and extended his government's invitation to me and France to visit Kabul and Bamiyan valley and see for ourselves what could be done for the restoration and preservation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

Accordingly, we visited Kabul from 23 to 29 October 2003. During our stay we met with a number of VIPs including A. Abdullah, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Mayor of Kabul, Anwar Jekdalek. We discussed matters of mutual interest with Younus Qanooni, Minister of Education and Sharif Faez, Minister of Higher Education. The two Ministers for education showed keen interest in SAF's activities; Sharif Faez proposed that, to start with, a distance learning department be set up either in Kabul University or in the University of Education, with the aim of developing it into a full-fledged open university. He was glad to learn that his colleague Raheen would be attending the Third SAF General Conference in New Delhi, and suggested that M. Akbar Popal, President of Kabul University and Islamudin Muslim, in charge of the University of Education, should accompany the Minister to India and participate in SAFLI Academic Council meetings.

**T**he day before we flew to Bamiyan, the Director of Kabul National Museum, Omara Khan Massodi, took us to see what was left of the collection once considered amongst the finest in South Asia. For thousands of years, Afghanistan was a crossroads for trade from India, Iran and Central Asia. As a result, many treasures and artifacts had been discovered and collected. Many of its pieces have been



*Shortly after the destruction of the Bamiyan idols in Afghanistan, a large bronze sculpture of the 'Buddha Bhumisparsha', made by the famous Nepalese artist M. R. Sakya, was installed at Villa Surya on my birthday on 16 April 2001.*



dated as far back as pre-historic times. One of the museum's largest displays was the magnificent Bagram Collection, discovered in 1939 by archaeologists excavating a Kushan fort; it contained an amazing 1,800 pieces from India, Rome, Greece, Egypt and Central Asia. The Kabul Museum also had one of the largest displays of Greek and Roman coins found near Kabul. These treasures and many others were tragically lost when the Kabul Museum was bombed in 1993, and artifacts were looted. The then President Muhammad Najibullah had anticipated the danger of attack from the mujahedeen rebels, and under his instructions the remaining treasures were locked in dozens of crates, boxes and steel vaults and locked up in the basement of the Museum, or transferred and hidden away in the cellars of a number of palaces.

The Director also told us that in late February 2001, when the Taliban decided to destroy all pre-Islamic statues and objects in Afghanistan, their leader Mullah Omar

provided his fundamentalist followers with hammers to break the locks of the vaults and ransack whatever they found in the Museum. They destroyed most of the statues and numerous other artifacts that had survived the previous looting and destruction as a result of war. It was then that they also destroyed the two giant fifth-century Buddhas from Bamiyan, and other ancient historical statues in Ghazni. However, Omara Khan Massodi was hopeful that many of the treasures, which were hidden away outside the Museum, might still be found; they are part of one of the richest collections in South and Central Asia, ranging over 5,000 years of civilization at the heart of the Silk Road.

**O**n the eve of our departure for Bamiyan valley, we spent a very pleasant evening with the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, who invited us to his Haram Sara Palace. He vaguely remembered me as the young cultural

*The Director of the National Museum in Kabul told us that in late February 2001, Taliban gangsters came with hammers, broke the locks of the steel vaults stored in the basement of the Museum, and ransacked the entire collection of invaluable historical treasures dating from the eighth century BC to the late nineteenth century.*



*Having known the former king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, since his exile in Rome when I was a diplomat at the Indian Embassy, we were invited to spend an evening with him at his Haram Sara palace in Kabul.*



attaché at the Indian Embassy in Rome in the early 1950s, at the time Zaher Shah was living there in exile. A great lover of Indian music, I met with him at my Ambassador's residence when he came to listen to classical music performed by a well-known Ustad, and he asked me then to invite him whenever Indian musicians visited Rome; once he had visited my Parioli apartment as well.

Next morning, accompanied by the Deputy Minister of Information and Publication, Abdul Hamid Mobarez, we were flown in a special United Nations aircraft to the Bamiyan valley that lies northwest of Kabul in the Hindu Kush, an hour's flight from Kabul. On cloudy days, aircraft cannot land on the narrow strip of the Bamiyan airport, which is located at an altitude of 2,590 metres. Flying over Kabul River, the parched, dusty stretch of land reminded me of my UNESCO Silk Road expeditions in the early 1990s, when the former Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, had nominated me as his representative, since I had

already travelled extensively along the Silk Road covering the entire span of the Himalayas to compile the book, *Himalayan Art*.

The Silk Road was used by traders for their merchandise, and also by the missionaries who carried the message of Buddhism. Founded in the sixth century BC, Buddhism was spread by the monks across Central Asia along this route, as the religion began expanding northwards from the foothills of the Himalayas in the third century BC under its most influential convert, the Indian emperor Ashoka. In China itself, Buddhism was introduced probably as early as the first century BC, with communities of Buddhist monks in existence by the first century AD. Learned Buddhist monks became valued as palace advisors, and it was through imperial and aristocratic patronage that Buddhism made its first substantial progress in the empire. Because of its importance along the Silk Road, virtually every stage of Buddhism's advance is chronicled in the caves near Dunhuang,

*Accompanied by the Deputy Minister of Information and Publication, Abdul Hamid Mobarez, France and I were flown in a special United Nations aircraft to the Bamiyan Valley, which lies northwest of Kabul in the Hindu Kush, an hour's flight from Kabul. On cloudy days, aircraft cannot land at the Bamiyan airport, located on a cliff at an altitude of 2,590 metres.*



*The vertical rock-face of the Bamiyan Valley is very similar to the landscape of Dun-huang in China, which I had visited during the UNESCO Silk Road expedition. Bamiyan's massive cliff face is covered with numerous ancient caves, some of which still contain sculptures of Buddha and fragments of wall paintings.*



where some 500 cave temples are located in the Magao Grottoes. They contain numerous sculptures of the Buddha and beautiful wall paintings of his life, and incarnations that were made between the fourth and tenth centuries.

So in the early 1990s, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to see the intimate connections between Himalayan art and the wall-paintings and sculptures in the famous Mogao caves at the edge of the Gobi desert in north-west China. Starting from Xian – famous for its life-size terracotta warriors and horses of the Qin emperor, discovered in 1974 – I had travelled some 10,000 kilometres to Kashgar by road, covering part of the journey on camels along the Takla Makan desert. These travels resulted in the publication of my UNESCO book, *The Sun in Myth and Art* (1993), a compendium to which some thirty scholars hailing from different nationalities all over the world contributed. My participation

in the Silk Road expeditions brought home to me the realization that there was no book or tradition that has the last word: Krishna is depicted as *asura* (demon) in a Dunhuang painting and not a *deva* (god) as worshipped in India. The Chinese scholar who described the legend explained that the Dunhuang painting of Krishna is depicted in the Chinese tradition of the *Rig Veda* in which the supreme god Indra destroys thousands of '*krishnas*' (blacks) as his enemy. *The Sun in Myth and Art* transcended the limited Indian notions of my earlier books and made me realize that there was a world beyond with its own cultural connotations that has over the centuries interacted with and fertilized our own South Asian civilization. Distortion of facts and misinterpreting history books to fan nationalist ego or petrifying the brains of children in the fundamentalist Islamic madrasas, is no less a 'a crime against culture' as the calculated destruction



*Starting from Xian (right) I travelled some 10,000 kilometres to Kashgar by road, covering part of the journey by camel.*



of cultural properties of the world heritage as at Bamiyan. Bamiyan's massive cliff face is covered with numerous ancient caves excavated during the rule of the Kushan Dynasty. The great statues of Buddha that were destroyed by the Taliban date from that period. Bamiyan is first mentioned by the Chinese travellers Fa-hsien (around AD 400) and Hsüan-tsang (in AD 630); folklore has it that when Hsüan-tsang first saw the figures, they were decorated with gold and fine jewels. By that time Bamiyan was already a centre of commerce and of Buddhist pilgrimage.

Luckily it was a clear, bright day when we landed at the Bamiyan airport. I felt the altitude and was advised to rest for some time in the two-room airport office, where I met with half a dozen German scholars and experts who had come on a similar mission led by Christian Manhart, an official from UNESCO's Culture Sector. Later, he drove us to the base of the gigantic empty caves of the destroyed great Buddhas and to numerous smaller grottoes, and we saw that a great deal of restoration work was already being done by a number of international agencies to reinforce the crumbling

*Some 500 cave temples are located in the Mogao Grottoes near Dun-huang at the edge of the Gobi desert along the Silk Road, of which 45,000 square metres of the walls and ceilings are covered with exquisite wall paintings and beautiful stucco sculptures.*



*The great statues of Buddha, since destroyed by the Taliban, had been excavated during the Kushan Dynasty.  
The larger of the two Buddhas was 53 metres high.*



porous rocks from the top of the caves. The caves are in various shapes and sizes, and the interiors of some still bear traces of fine fresco painting. In the seventh century Bamiyan was ruled by local princes who were the first to become Muslims in the eighth century. The Saffarid ruler captured Bamiyan in 871; and after changing hands several times, the town was destroyed and its inhabitants exterminated in 1221 by the Mongol invader Genghis Khan.

**O**n our return from Bamiyan, we met with President Hamid Karzai at his Gul Khana Palace. We had to cross a number of security barriers manned by Afghan and American security guards. He received us very cordially and thanked me for my donation of US\$1 million for the restoration and preservation of Afghanistan's cultural monuments. The President concurred with the advice of his Minister of Information and Culture that a Madanjeet Singh

Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage for the training of Afghan specialists and others from South Asia be set up, and he approved Raheen's recommendation that a suitable site for the Institute would be the former war-damaged International Press Club in Kabul. The President directed that the restoration of the building should start as soon as the tripartite agreement had been signed by his government, UNESCO and myself. He was happy to learn that Afghanistan had become a SAF member, and on my request nominated Raheen to serve as the chairperson of the SAF Afghanistan chapter and permitted him to attend the Third SAF General Conference in New Delhi from 14–15 December 2003.

I had taken with me a set of my books for the President, and also carried a copy of *Himalayan Art*, which France had found by chance while browsing in the bookshop of the Intercontinental Hotel, where we were staying. 'Look! See

*President Hamid Karzai thanked me for the donation of US\$1 million for the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, to be used for the training of Afghan and other specialists from South Asia. He identified the war-damaged former International Press Club in Kabul (right) as a suitable site for the institute.*



what I found', she whispered to me as she picked up the book from a dusty shelf among some second-hand books. I was pleasantly surprised, for I myself did not possess a copy of the book, published way back in 1968 and long since out of print. The book carried a dedication: 'To Sardar Ibrahim Shaiffi, with personal regards and best wishes, René Maheu, Paris, 29 December 1969.'

René Maheu was well known as one of the most successful director-generals of UNESCO, but I did not know who Sardar Ibrahim Shaiffi was. It was President Karzai who told us that Shaiffi was then a respected Education Minister of Afghanistan. He laughed as France told him how she did not reveal to the shopkeeper that I was the author until we had paid for the book, as otherwise he would surely have raised its price.

Soon after our return to France, Mounir Bouchenaki, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture, sent me the 'Memorandum of Understanding' for the establishment of the Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage in Kabul for the training of Afghan cultural heritage specialists. The agreement, to which Afghanistan's Minister of Information and Culture had already affixed his signature in Kabul, was signed in Paris by UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura and myself on 22 March 2004. The salient provisions of the seven-article agreement specify the responsibilities of each of the three parties: SAF was to open a bank account in Kabul and provide funds in instalments, totalling US\$1 million; the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture would restore, adapt, rehabilitate, furnish and equip the Institute, and would be responsible for

*A great deal of restoration work was already being done by a number of international agencies to reinforce the porous rocks crumbling from the top of the caves.*



its management; and UNESCO would assist in the implementation of the training courses, jointly with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome, the Indian National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property (NRLC) in Lucknow, and other specialized institutions. They would provide expertise in the following domains: evaluation of equipment needs; identification of manufacturers of the required equipment; identification of a training curriculum adapted to the needs of Afghanistan in different fields, such as museology, the conservation of museum objects, museum management, mural painting conservation, architectural restoration and site management; identification of suitable candidates; and appointing highly qualified teachers in the areas concerned.

*The agreement for the establishment of the Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage in Kabul was signed in Paris by the UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura and myself on 22 March 2004.*

'I commend Madanjeet Singh's excellent initiatives to foster regional cooperation through the medium of education and to offer a real chance to so many disadvantaged students across South Asia to make a difference in the world', stated the Vice President of the European Commission, Margot Wallström. 'Furthermore, I think it is a wonderful idea to have an Institute for Cultural Heritage in Kabul, considering how relatively recently Afghanistan's cultural heritage was destroyed by the Taliban.'

**T**he construction of the Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage in Kabul set a precedent and the UNESCO Director-General, Koïchiro Matsuura, has since agreed to provide consultancy assistance to other similar institutions of excellence that SAF intends to build in each

*Construction of the Madanjeet Singh Institute for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, in cooperation with UNESCO to restore the former war-damaged International Press Club in Kabul, is proceeding on schedule.*



of the other South Asian countries. SAF is already committed to contribute \$1 million to the proposed SAARC Cultural Centre in Kandy, Sri Lanka; support the SAARC Centre of Forestry in Bhutan; establish an Institution of Human Rights and South Asian Common Law in Dhaka, Bangladesh; a centre of South Asian Studies at the Government College University in Lahore; build a campus for the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ), Chennai, India; and a 'sister institution' in Pakistan to house the School of Visual Arts at the Beaconhouse National University. Likewise, the European Commissioner, Ján Figel', has agreed to the possibility of cooperation between South Asia Foundation and the European Commission in the field of education, training, culture and multilingualism, subjects for which he is responsible.

Afghanistan has effectively become a part of South Asia as far as SAF is concerned. Its membership as the eighth chapter of SAF was also significant because the SAF youth movement had forged ahead of the SAARC, to become its vanguard rather than trail behind it as its second-track NGO, even though the aims and objectives of SAF remain in conformity with the spirit, purpose and principles of the SAARC charter. Afghanistan's membership of SAF tacitly suggests that, much like the expanding EU family, SAARC, too, may have to enlarge its membership to include Afghanistan and eventually, Myanmar – should its democratically elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, once she is free, decide that her country belongs to the South Asian family rather than ASEAN relatives.

**I**n October of 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence, but the rulers of Myanmar

*On 3 October 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the 2002 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence. However, since then, the rulers of Myanmar have prevented her from receiving the US\$100,000 prize. She is now spending her ninth year in detention and no one has been allowed to see her. Myanmar's military dictators ignore the appeals of the United Nations and the wider international community to let this woman of peace go free.*

have prevented her from receiving the US\$100,000 Prize. The atrocious situation in Myanmar is well described by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in a piece in the *International Herald Tribune* dated 7 October 2004, excerpts from which read:

*My fellow Nobel Peace laureate, the Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, is now spending her ninth year in detention. No one has been allowed to see her in the last seven months. Fears grow for her personal security. Myanmar's military dictators ignore the appeals of the United Nations and the wider international community to let this woman of peace go free. If only as much noise, money and effort was spent supporting the peacemakers of this world as is made in support of the use of war. If only those governments that claim to be against war showed their determination to support those at the front line of peace. If only those who say that for them war is the last resort proved this by supporting those struggling for non-violent solutions to avert such last resorts. Where are the statesmen, the visionaries of our time, with regard to Suu Kyi's non-violent struggle for freedom? The words of protest at her detention from world leaders ring hollow when they do not translate into action. Whatever one's view of the war in Iraq, it continues to divide the world. Questions over whether diplomacy had been fully exhausted, whether there was a legal basis for the decision, whether the true aims of the war have been revealed, all persist. I don't want to go into these questions here. But the sincerity of governments on both sides of that divide are being tested by Myanmar. Are both sides truly committed to helping end the rule of oppressive dictators, and to using all non-military means at their disposal to do*

*so? With Myanmar, the answer so far has been a tragic no.*

*Suu Kyi and the people of Myanmar have not called for a military coalition to invade their country. They have simply asked for the maximum diplomatic and economic pressure against Myanmar's brutal dictators. Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, won 82 per cent of the seats in Myanmar's 1990 election. The generals in power refuse to honor the express wishes of a nation. Instead they perpetrate their own brutal rule with 1,300 political prisoners, more child soldiers than any other country on earth, lower health spending than any other country, and rape used as a weapon of war. The International Labor Organization has called the regime's systematic use of forced labor a 'crime against humanity.' The international response to this barbarity has been so weak that the generals can smell the inertia; they feel they can continue to get away with these things without sanction.*

*Just as Nelson Mandela no longer belongs only to South Africans, I believe that in the future Suu Kyi will be a shining light for Asia and the world. ... Ultimately the Burmese people will prevail. Neither systems, nor governments nor dictators are eternal, but the spirit of freedom is. We must continue to ask the question, whose side are we on? We cannot be neutral in the face of such barbarity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that in the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. For those who know oppression, inaction is the most painful.*

**I**t was at the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ) in 2002, that SAF first developed an innovative group scholarship programme in which scholarships are given annually to a young woman and a young man, selected from each of





*The SAF Group Scholarship Programme was first developed in 2002 at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India. Sixteen Madanjeet Singh scholarships are given annually, to one girl and one boy from each of the eight South Asian countries.*



the South Asian countries, to study jointly in a number of institutions in South Asia. Students admitted to ACJ study in one of the two media streams – print or broadcast – both of which have a strong online component. The course equips young people not only with the necessary professional skills but also the broad knowledge, integrity and social commitment to make them outstanding journalists. By becoming a SAF member, Afghanistan benefited immediately in the field of education. In July 2003, two Afghan students, Sohila, a journalist in the Bakhter Information Agency in the Ministry of Information and Culture, Kabul, and Zaryalai Nawabi, a civil servant, arrived in India and joined the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai. They have since returned home after completing their studies successfully.

The ACJ example was emulated by the School of Visual

Arts at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, Pakistan. The University is a non-profit initiative and one of Pakistan's first private institutions, with schools of visual arts, media and communications; liberal arts, social sciences and information; and communications technology. The students learn the fundamentals of art, design and theory, comprising creative principles such as colour, composition, space, volume and texture, as well as computer-aided design and technical drawing. They are also introduced to a range of materials and techniques in two- and three-dimensional art and design. The first group of SAF Madanjeet Singh scholars from all the South Asian countries has completed the courses. One Indian student managed to sneak through the back door on a three-month tourist visa, which the Pakistani authorities have subsequently renewed. On the other hand, the two students from

*SAF Group Scholarship Programme recipients at the School of Visual Arts, Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan. Here the students learn the fundamentals of art, design and theory, including creative principles such as colour, composition, space, volume and texture, as well as computer-aided design and technical drawing.*



Seated left to right: Surabhi Banerjee, Vice-Chancellor, ISNOU (Kolkata); Rita Thapa, Chairperson, SAF-Nepal; H.P. Dikshit, Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU, New Delhi; S.M. Raheen, Chairperson, SAF-Afghanistan; I.K. Gujral, Chairperson, SAF-India; Madanjeet Singh, SAF Founder; Lakshman Kadirgamar, Chairperson, SAF-Sri Lanka; A.W. Khan, Assistant Director-General, UNESCO, Paris; Salima Hashmi, Chairperson, SAF-Pakistan; and I.H. Zaki, Chairperson, SAF-Maldives.

Vice-chancellors (unless otherwise indicated) standing from left to right: D.P. Singh, UPRTOU (Allahabad); Islamuddin Muslim (Advisor) University of Education (Afghanistan); M. Akbar Popal, President, Kabul University; B. P. Sabale, YCMOU (Nashik); M.S. Palanichamy, TNOU (Chennai); R.V. Vyas, VMOU (Kota); Ershadul Bari, BOU (Bangladesh); Jamilur Reza Choudhury, BRAC University, Bangladesh; Suresh Garg (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) Indira Gandhi Open University (New Delhi); Uma Coomaraswamy, Open University of Sri Lanka; Zaheer Alam Kidvai (SAFDIL IT coordinator Pakistan); Suresh Raj Sharma, Kathmandu University; P. Ramaiah-BRAOU (Hyderabad); Altaf Hussain, Alama Iqbal Open University (Pakistan); R.K. Singh, MPBOU (Bhopal); Dasho Zangley Dukpa, Royal University of Bhutan; K. Sudha Rao, KSOU (Mysore); and J. Ahmed Khan Tareen, University of Kashmir (Srinagar).

Pakistan are still awaiting visas to join the ACJ in Chennai, India. It is hoped that with the recent *rapprochement* between India and Pakistan, young people will not be prevented from choosing the Institutions in which they would like to study as unfettered education is a part of their human rights.

**T**he Third SAF General Conference on 14 December 2003 in New Delhi took a giant step forward with the participation of Afghanistan as the eighth chapter of South

Asia Foundation. For the first time a delegation from Afghanistan attended, led by the Minister of Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdom Raheen, accompanied by M. Akbar Popal, President of Kabul University and Islamudin Muslim, Advisor at the University of Education. This event was a significant landmark also because the vice-chancellors/rectors of South Asian open universities had jointly designed and completed in record time a Post Graduate Diploma course in Environment and Sustainable Development

*The third SAF General Conference in New Delhi on 14 December 2003 was a landmark – the vice-chancellors/rectors of South Asian open universities completed designing a joint Post Graduate Diploma course in the Environment and Sustainable Development (PGD-ESD), and SAF launched an unprecedented programme to offer over 10,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships to disadvantaged students across South Asia.*

(PGD-ESD). Among the new joint projects it was decided to upgrade the PGD-ESD to a Masters-level programme and continue adding to SAF's repertoire of distance learning by jointly designing courses on teacher-training, human rights and so on. Furthermore, it was agreed that, as there are no open universities in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives, departments of distance learning should be set up in suitable institutions. As SAFLI was no longer a mere initiative but had become a programme of distance education, its name was changed to SAF Distance Learning (SAFDL).

The highlight of the conference was the launch of an unprecedented programme to offer 10,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships to disadvantaged students across South Asia. It is an integral part of SAFDL and available only to youngsters from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds in the region. Scholarships are also allocated to SAF-affiliated organizations, such as SOS Children's Villages and Scouts Associations in South Asia, subject to SAF membership, which is free of charge. Each member is required to sign a pledge stating that 'a dynamic South Asian culture of peace and democracy can emerge only through promotion of regional cooperation, nourished with the energy and idealism of youth.' The universities and institutions managing the scholarships programme are required to organize an orientation meeting of selected students before the commencement of courses; arrange a mid-term seminar to make students aware of the merits of regional cooperation; and ensure that before the diplomas and certificates are awarded, the students enrol as many colleagues to SAF membership as possible – thus creating a strong lobby for regional cooperation in South Asia. To start



with, 6,000 scholarships have been reserved for the ten open universities in India, administered by SAF-India chapter, New Delhi, and the remaining 4,000 scholarships have been allocated to the open universities and institutions in the other seven countries, to be administered by their respective SAF chapters.

I was greatly touched by Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar's suggestion that the 10,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships programme be launched by the SAF chairpersons on my eightieth birthday. In Colombo, the award ceremony was unavoidably delayed and some of the 1,000 scholarship certificates allocated to the Open University of Sri Lanka were handed over to the first batch of 120 needy young students on 14 September 2004, at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. The

*A meeting was organized in Lahore by the SAF-Pakistan Chairperson, Salima Hashmi, at which 1,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships were announced by Altaf Hussain, Vice-Chancellor of Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad.*



selections ensured gender balance and a wide geographic distribution from all parts of Sri Lanka, including students from the thirteen underprivileged districts. They were enrolled for the Certificate in Pre-school Education, the Advanced Certificate in Pre-school Education and the Post-graduate Diploma in Education.

*The SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarship award ceremony in Colombo was conducted by Lakshman Kadirgamar, after the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Dinesh Gunawadene, inaugurated the event by igniting the traditional oil lamp.*

The proceedings of the function were conducted by the SAF Sri Lanka Chairperson, Lakshman Kadirgamar, after the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Dinesh Gunawadene, inaugurated the ceremony by igniting the traditional oil lamp. It was attended by a large number of people, Ambassadors of South Asian countries and other members of the diplomatic corps, government officials, as well as members of the University Grants Commission. Several NGOs working to help economically disadvantaged youth were also present along with the students' parents and well-wishers. In his address, Lakshman Kadirgamar paid tribute to the SAF Founder's unwavering dedication to promote unity within the region and the economic and social advancement of young people by providing them greater access to higher education. The vice-chancellor of the Open University of Sri Lanka, Uma Coomaraswamy, said that the scholarships had given a tremendous boost to the rural, marginalized students who otherwise could not access the University due to their inability to pay fees for courses. Two recipients of the scholarship also spoke on the occasion and thanked the SAF Founder for the great opportunity he had afforded them to pursue a university education.

Salima Hashmi, the Chairperson of the SAF Pakistan chapter, organized the function in Lahore a few days before my birthday, as she wanted to participate in the scholarship award ceremony at Preet Nagar, my spiritual home in India. In Lahore, the function was widely covered by the local media as 1,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships were announced by Altaf Hussain, the Vice-Chancellor of Allama Iqbal Open University. He set up a special scholarships unit at the University to deal with the subject and identify deserving candidates among the



disadvantaged, marginalized youngsters living in remote areas of Pakistan.

The event in India was held at the Preet Nagar Cultural Centre, near Amritsar. Some two years ago, I had agreed to the request of Uma, a daughter of Gurbaksh Singh, to fund the construction of the Centre in her father's memory along with another eminent writer, Nanak Singh. This rather imposing building, facing a water reservoir, had since been completed. It has two auditoriums, one inside and the other outside, which will be used for cultural performances of folk artists, dancers, singers and dramatists. At my suggestion, Indira Gandhi National Open University agreed to cooperate with SAF to establish a SAF-IGNOU Distance Learning Centre on one floor of the building to provide education to the deprived youngsters living in villages along the India-Pakistan border.

On the eve of the function in Preet Nagar, the Vice-Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, S. P. Singh, hosted a dinner attended by a large number of people – scholars, artists and officials – as well as my relatives and friends who had come from all parts of India and abroad. I was happy that Pratap Singh, one of the group of eight who had been imprisoned with me in Mirzapur jail, was present at this function; all the others had unfortunately passed away, except Harbans Singh, who was busy at the time running for election in Lucknow. I was glad that, easily crossing the India-Pakistan border at Wagah, Salima Hashmi and her husband Shoaib brought with them a number of my good Pakistani friends, including Shah Taj Qizilbash, the 1998 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize laureate. They were accompanied by a group of well-known Pakistani musicians, Baber and Javed, and a famous composer, Arshad Mah-

*Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and Uma Coomaraswamy, Vice-Chancellor of Open University of Sri Lanka, handed over part of the 1,000 scholarship certificates for Sri Lanka to the first batch of 120 needy and socially and economically disadvantaged students on 14 September 2004, at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, Colombo.*



mood. Their Punjabi folk songs cast a spell over the guests at the dinner and they were clamorously applauded repeatedly.

Next morning we were all driven to Preet Nagar in cars and buses on a dusty, bumpy road; the deeper potholes had been recently filled up with stones by local authorities as a result of Uma's persistent efforts. We arrived in the afternoon and were glad to learn that at lunch about 1,000 children from nearby villages had been treated to a *langar*, a free meal. As scheduled, I then inaugurated the Gurbaksh Singh Nanak Singh Cultural Centre and the SAF Distance Learning Centre. Later, after inaugural speeches in the well-furnished auditorium, I handed over the token SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarship certificates to three girls and three boys – five of whom belonged to the schedule castes. Since then, it has been decided to install half a dozen more computers

at the Centre to enable students in an adjoining government school and others in the neighbourhood to come and learn how to use them.

Recently a well-known French journalist named Patrick Glaize interviewed me, and among other things wanted to know why, at my ripe age of over 80, I was working day and night without respite and had given away all I possess to fund my two foundations. 'Do you expect your dream of South Asian Union to materialize during your lifetime?' he asked. 'Political miracles do happen', I told him. Just before the Berlin Wall crumbled, the West German Ambassador in Washington was asked if East and West Germany would ever unite. 'Not in my lifetime', he replied emphatically. Six months later his Embassy was happily celebrating the

*The Gurbaksh Singh Nanak Singh Cultural Centre in Preet Nagar was opened by me on 16 April 2004, when I presented SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarship certificates were given to three girls and three boys – five of whom belonged to the schedule castes. It was decided to install more computers at the SAF-IGNOU Distance learning Centre to enable students in the neighbourhood to come and learn how to use them.*



*Punjabi peasants living in the deprived and marginalized villages along the India-Pakistan border express their gratitude to South Asia Foundation and the SAF founder, Madanjeet Singh, for facilitating the education of their children.*





disappearance of the Wall that had divided his country since the Second World War. The fifty-year old artificially created wall by the colonial vested interests between India and Pakistan is easier to demolish than the 500 years of entrenched enmity between France and Germany. The landmark agreement and the start of the bus service between the two divided parts of Kashmir, on 7 April 2005, will help in transforming the Line of Control (LOC) into the Line of Cooperation along the peace (*aman*) bridge at Kaman, which was

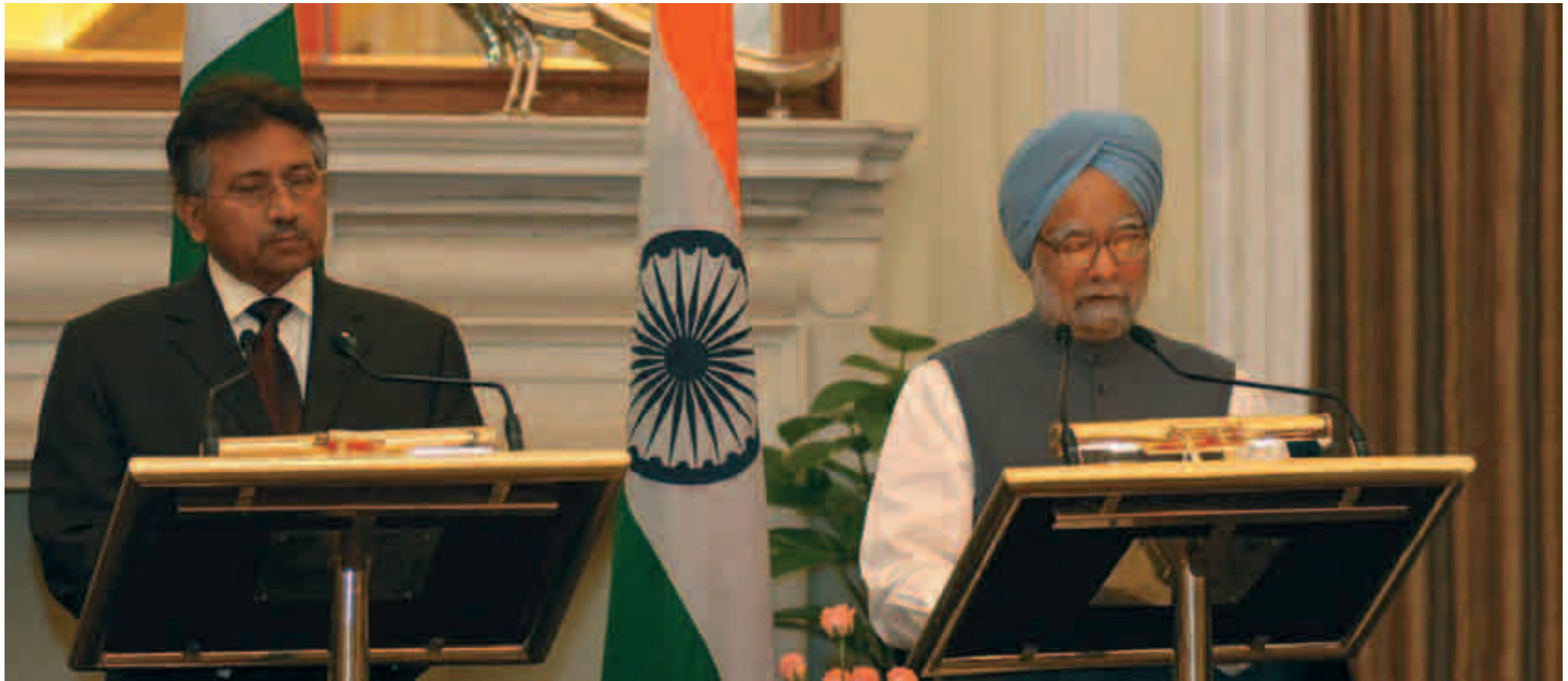
destroyed by Kabaili tribesmen; an act of death and destruction I myself witnessed in 1948 at Uri, my ancestral home. At the grassroots level, SAF would help repair the damage inflicted by the communal conflict on Kashmir's secular, Sufi culture through education and people-to-people interaction and between the deprived communities and social orphans in the SOS Children's Villages, two of which are now under construction in Srinagar and Muzaffarabad.

More important economically, is the understanding

*The Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, assisted by the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mufti Sayeed, flagging off the departure of the bus service from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad on 7 April 2005, while Kashmiris from all walks of life wait to get application forms and bus tickets, thus transforming the Line of Control (LOC) into the Line of Cooperation.*



*Jubilant bus passengers crossing from the Pakistani side of Kashmir on the bridge of Peace (Aman) at the Line of Control (LOC) welcomed by their relatives and friends with garlands and sweets. The bridge is located by the Kaman post near Uri, once my ancestral home.*



reached on building a ‘peace pipeline’ that would originate from Iran’s South Pars gas field and traverse south-western Pakistan to the India border, bringing gas to the energy-starved Indian subcontinent. Natural gas is the cleanest fossil fuel, and a steady supply of it in the region would help slow carbon emissions that would otherwise contribute to global warming. This economically necessary, environmentally friendly and security enhancing \$4 billion win-win initiative would be the most economical way to get natural gas from the Gulf to India, providing Pakistan annually with \$600 million to \$700 million in transit fees, which would

also create jobs in the restless regions of Baluchistan and Sindh. This stand-alone project – like the integration of the coal and steel industries of Western Europe, which sowed the seeds of the European Economic Union – shall inevitably lead to the South Asian Economic Union, hopefully using the Sasia as the common currency.

The European Commissioner, Joe Borg, reflected Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s introductory remark that ‘if the ambitious goal of integrating the economies of the South Asian nations is realized, our nations, which bear the ignominy of having among the largest number of deprived

*Overwhelmed by the sentiments of their peoples’ yearning for regional cooperation and a durable peace, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Parvez Musharraf, announced in a joint declaration on 18 April 2005, that ‘the peace process was now irreversible’.*



people, could well mirror the European Union in its singular effort to integrate the economies of many nations.’ Joe Borg elaborated:

*It seems to me that there is a strong case for further economic integration of the region. In terms of trade and investment, South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world economy. SAARC accounts for 20% of the world’s population but only 1% of world exports, 1.3% of world imports, and 0.7% of global FDI. Intra-regional trade amounts to a meagre 4% to 5% of SAARC’s total*

*trade (2001: \$6.5 billion against \$143.4 billion), comparing poorly to roughly a half in NAFTA or ASEAN and close to two-thirds in the ED. Political problems, high tariff and non-tariff barriers and extensive negative lists concur to make intra-SAARC trade relations particularly difficult.*

*The political will expressed by SAARC Member States in the Islamabad Summit Declaration of January 2004 to work in the direction of creating a South Asian Free Trade Area is therefore to be welcomed. In the European Union economic integration has helped us overcome centuries of bloodshed and rivalry and to build an ever more united*

*The Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh congratulate President Parvez Musharraf on Pakistan’s success during the international cricket matches in India. (right) Thousands of Pakistani fans who came to India to watch cricket matches were welcomed with open arms as guests in Indian homes, while vendors refused payment for the souvenirs they wanted.*

*political family of Member States. The adoption of the common currency by so far twelve Member States is one of the tangible outcomes.*

*In the interest of peace and prosperity in the region and the world one can only hope that the nations of South Asia advance in a similar direction and that this will ultimately lead to positive results. For its part, the European Union has repeatedly expressed its interest in building global partnerships and alliances with the countries of South Asia and would be happy to support any cooperation and integration initiative among them.*

In fact, economic and commercial cooperation was among the principal agreements reached during President Parvez Musharraf's recent visit to India at the invitation of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. In a joint statement on 18 April 2005, both leaders agreed that enhanced economic and commercial cooperation would contribute to the well-being of the peoples of the two countries and bring a higher level of prosperity for the region. They decided to reactivate the Joint Economic Commission and also agreed that the Joint Business Council should meet in the near future. In this context, it was agreed that the Ministers of Petroleum and Natural Gas would convene in May to explore cooperation in the sector including the issue of gas pipelines across Iran, Pakistan and India.

The two leaders assessed positively the progress that had been made so far through confidence building, people-to-people contacts, and enhanced areas of interactions, and determined to build on the momentum already achieved. Conscious of the historic opportunity created by the improved environment in relations, the irreversibility of

the peace process, and the overwhelming desire of the peoples of the two countries for durable peace, they recognized their responsibility to continue to move forward towards this objective.

In this spirit the two leaders addressed the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and agreed to continue discussions for a final settlement in a sincere, purposeful and forward-looking manner. They were satisfied with the discussions and expressed their determination to work together to carry forward the process and to bring the benefit of peace to their people.

The two leaders decided to increase the frequency of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service and establish more meeting points along the LOC for divided families, trade, pilgrimages and cultural interaction. They also decided that trucks would be allowed to use this route to promote trade and agreed to operationalize additional routes including that between Poonch and Rawalakot. They agreed to start a bus service between Amritsar and Lahore and to religious places such as Nankana Sahib. It was also decided to re-establish the Khokhrapar-Munnabao route from 1 January 2006, and agreed that the Consulates General of the two countries in Mumbai and Karachi respectively would be opened before the end of the current year.

'Today, Pakistan and India can be jointly proud of showing how sincerity, flexibility and courage can lead to bilateral achievement of peace and harmony', stated President Musharraf, addressing the plenary of the Asia Africa summit in Jakarta on 23 April 2005. 'While we must optimize bilateral negotiations for conflict resolution, powerful multilateral conflict resolution mechanisms need to be institutionalized for the cause of regional and global peace and political sol-

identity formed on the base of the two core areas of economic cooperation and socio-cultural relations.’ A day later, at the signing ceremony of the New Asia Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP), aimed at boosting economic and political relations between the two regions, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also advocated reforms of international financial and global trading systems. He said that the architecture of international institutions needed to be democratized and made more representative and sensitive to the needs and aspirations of poorer countries. ‘In the context of the present global challenges, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a formidable organization of which Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the moving spirits, remains a valid and effective instrument to ensure the creation of a more just and fair global order.’

**I**t was a good omen that Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf’s latest Indian visit, to watch a cricket match between Pakistan and India, began with his paying obeisance at the Dargah of famous Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer. Chisti, like Kabir and Nanak, had proclaimed that Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Zoroastrians and Hindus were all striving toward the same goal, and that the outward observances that kept them apart were false. This spiritual connotation has been interpreted well within the mundane game of cricket that has transcended boundaries, reached out to the hearts and minds of the people, and opened up doors of friendship. ‘What we are witnessing now is public opinion manifesting itself not only on the cricket field, but everywhere, be it the bazaars, the shops or the restaurants – a very positive development of which the political leadership on both sides must take cognizance’, stated Shaharyar Khan, chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board.

**S**oon after the charter of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on 8 December 1985, I coined the word *Sasia* for South Asia’s common currency. It was obvious to me that by learning from European experiences, the Sasia could bypass many a hurdle that the Euro had to cross since its conception in 1950; the date that marked the creation of the European Payments Union (EPU) as a component of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation and a basis for currency convertibility in Europe. This was followed by a series of steps leading towards economic integration – the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951); the Treaty of Rome (1957); the European Monetary Agreement (1958), and so on until Euro banknotes and coins began circulating from 1 January 2002 and became a part of daily life for over 300 million Europeans living in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain.

These countries benefited from a common currency that propelled free flow of trade and commerce, promoted monetary and economic integration of the region, and above all, helped to build and consolidate new democratic structures based on economic cooperation and harmonious socio-cultural relations. As with the Euro, the Sasia may help to promote stability, peace and communal harmony in South Asia. Human rights, for example, are of particular concern to the people of a region where terrorists and religious fundamentalists are increasingly encouraging communal and ethnic conflicts.

At the last general elections a year ago, the people of India threw out of office a government led by a communal party.

*The election result is a tribute to the strength and vibrancy of our democracy, and to the wisdom and maturity of our electorate, wrote Sonia Gandhi in her letter to me dated 1 June 2004. They have so decisively rejected the politics of divisiveness, and reaffirmed its faith in our pluralistic culture and our cherished traditions of tolerance and secularism. All of us are overwhelmed and humbled by the enormous trust reposed in us. It will be our endeavour now to bring back values and principles to political life, and revive the spirit of service and selflessness which has been the historic legacy of the Congress Party. Our aim is to reorganize the Party, at every level, as an instrument that is actively engaged in working for the welfare of the people, and development of the nation, and that remains sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of every section of our society. It is an enormous task, and one in which we would value your good wishes and support.*

*I wish you success in your many laudable activities with the South Asia Foundation, stated the President of the Congress Party.*

As a citizen of India it makes me proud to belong to the world's largest democracy with a Hindu majority, a Muslim President, a Sikh Prime Minister and a Christian as the leader of the largest political party. I do believe that history is not merely a series of accidents. It is a never-ending struggle between the reactionary, divisive warmongers and the people striving to realize their dream to live peacefully in cooperation with each other in a society where men and women love reason, despise hatred and violence, shun darkness, turn towards light and praise virtue – people whose minds are sensitive, whose hearts are generous and spirits free.

**T**he *Sasia Story* is far from concluded, for, as stated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his Introduction, *It is only realistic to admit that much more needs to be done to realize this vision.* Indeed, from the outset I was warned against investing all I possessed in the vast and daunting undertaking of promoting regional cooperation. But I was not discouraged. The merit I have earned and the sense of satisfaction I have derived from helping to educate deprived communities at a grassroots level is worth far more than all that I gave away; not to mention the hand of friendship and cooperation extended to me by people representing all sections of society in India and other South Asian countries.

At present South Asia Foundation is investing in long-term projects that are both tangible and intangible: to build institutions of excellence in each of the South Asian countries, to jointly design courses of studies in the SAARC open universities, and to offer over 10,000 SAF Madanjeet Singh scholarships annually for deprived and marginalized students. It has vindicated the South Asia Foundation's cardinal objective of creating a secular youth movement of peace and regional cooperation, marching forward on the two legs of education (in the classroom) and people-to-people interaction (in the playground). I am convinced, now more than ever, that even if I do not have the good fortune of living long enough to see and use the *Sasia*, the common currency of the South Asian Union, a new generation of young people, including my son Jeet, who is now the SAF President and the other Trustees of the South Asia Foundation, shall no doubt conclude *The Sasia Story* to 'live happily ever after' in a spirit of true friendship and regional cooperation.

*The groundswell of friendship was not only invoked on the cricket fields but also touched the hearts and minds of people from all walks of life. It has vindicated South Asia Foundation's objective of promoting peace and regional cooperation in South Asia by creating a secular youth movement through education and people-to-people cultural and economic interaction.*







## PHOTOGRAPH ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the photographs in this book were taken by Madanjeet Singh and France Marquet, except the ones reproduced on the following pages which are gratefully acknowledged.

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**Bangladesh:** Abir Abdullah/Drik, 143, 179; Md. Main Uddin/Drik, 177; Rubaiyat Mansur/Drik, 141; Abdul Malek Babul/Drik, 142; Grameen Communications, 160.

**Bhutan:** Royal Government of Bhutan, 130, 131, 132.

**China:** Wang Guanmin, 200, 201.

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**India:** Gurmeet Thukral, 91; Shiv Kumar Arora, 41, 42; National Gandhi Museum, 55; Nehru Memorial Library, 11; The Times of India, 44, 167, 218; Press Trust of India 216, 217, 223; Associated Press (Prakash Singh) 219; Frontline (Nissar Ahmad) 216, (Murali Kumar) 219; Benares Hindu University, 20; My Own Film Company, 134, 186; M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 160; Asian College of Journalism, 208; The Sufi Sage (Mughal School 17<sup>th</sup> Century) by Indian painter Bichitr, 92; Bharat Kala Museum, Varanasi, 15; Photomedia, New Delhi, 10.

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**Sri Lanka:** Chitrasena Dance Co., 184; Sri Lanka Photo Library, 136, 138; Open University of Sri Lanka, 212, 213; Sarvodaya, 160; SOS, Sri Lanka, 185, 190.

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*The Sasia Story* has been published in English, French, Spanish and other major European language editions by UNESCO in cooperation with the European Commission.

It will also be published in the following South Asian vernacular editions: Assamese, Bangla, Dari, Dogri, Gujarati, Hazara, Hindi, Kanada, Kashmiri, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Pushto, Sikkimese, Sindhi, Sinhalese, Tajik, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and Uzbek.

For information visit: [www.southasiafoundation.org](http://www.southasiafoundation.org)

Congratulations on a splendid publication. *The Sasia Story* is a splendid tribute to the people of the region and to the author.

*Desmond M. Tutu*  
Archbishop Emeritus, Nobel Peace Prize laureate

I commend Madanjeet Singh's excellent initiatives to foster regional cooperation through the medium of education and to offer a real chance to so many disadvantaged students across South Asia to make a difference in the world. Furthermore, I think it is a wonderful idea to have an Institute for Cultural Heritage in Kabul, considering how relatively recently Afghanistan's cultural heritage was destroyed by the Taliban. Keep up the good work!

*Margot Wallström*  
Vice President of the European Commission

*The Sasia Story*, published in cooperation with the European Commission, recounts Madanjeet Singh's lifelong search for common cultural and economic denominators to foster and strengthen cooperative initiatives. He strongly believes that in today's fast-moving and ultra-competitive world, regional cooperation is indispensable and no country can safeguard its security and economic well-being unilaterally. His teenage experiences of poverty led him to establish two foundations devoted to helping marginalized and disadvantaged communities in South Asia.

*Koïchiro Matsuura*  
Director-General of UNESCO

Madanjeet Singh, a painter and a distinguished photographer, is an internationally known author of several books on art and other subjects. His first UNESCO book, *INDIA, painting from Ajanta caves* (1954), was published in its World Art series. *Himalayan Art* (1968) focused on his exploration of the unique and fascinating cultural heritage in Himalayan region; *The Sun in Myth and Art* (1993) highlighted the intercultural interaction among civilizations which resulted from his extensive travels by land and sea as part of UNESCO's Silk Road expeditions; and *The Timeless Energy of the Sun* (1998) marked the launching of the UNESCO World Solar Programme (1996–2005).