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OPINION

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PILGRIMAGE

GAURI DESHPANDE

THE sky looks like it does anywhere else in the world. The roads are full of fashionable shops, full of glittering consumer goods and warm, cheerful people. Sleek cars rush by and stop at traffic lights or next to tall, glass-and-concrete towers to disgorge important-looking, well-dressed businessmen. Parks resound to the laughter of children and the fluttering of pigeons. Young lovers stroll by under the willow trees lining the banks of Peace River. A few enthusiastic foreigners have hired a punt and are trying to bring it back to the bank without overturning it; laughing instructions are being shouted at them from friends standing on the bridge. The sun is a couple of hours away from setting and is pouring mild winter sunshine on the sprinkling of snow still to be seen under trees.

And in the centre of this busy, smiling, modern, oblivious city stands a charred, broken, skeletal ruin; without pity, dignity or grandeur. A monument to the inhumanity of human beings. Hiroshima. The city, which, for my generation changed the meaning of life and death and huinan endeavour. The city to which our conscience returns the way a murderer is said to return to the scene of his crime. We are the unfortunate generation; or rather, the first of the unfortunate generations. We grew up inheriting the guilt of our fathers, we grew up paying for their sins, we grew up without going to war, and yet continuously surrounded by war and violence and the ultimate threat which Hiroshima personified. We are the first generation that learnt to live with total annihilation. I doubt if anyone even remembers poor Russel and Ban the Bomb. We are the first generation which learnt to forget. There was so much to forget, you see. It is not much use to say that man has always been inhuman to fellow man, that Alfred Nobel is as much to blame as anyone, or, for that matter, Bacon. First of all they were not brought up by a generation steeped in humanitarianism. They believed, for instance, that if you were foolish enough to be born an untouchable, you had to suffer for it. They believed in annihilating their enemy mercilessly with whatever means they had at hand. They knew not the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention. And, second, whatever destructive weapons they had ingeniously invented could not harm many more than their direct enemy. It is not that man's inhumanity to man had ever been in doubt before, but Hiroshima proved conclusively that he was also capable of exercising all his mental capacities to the hilt to

indulge it. Hiroshima also proved the ultimate futility at the heart of human progress. Which is why it changed, for my generation, not only the destiny of humankind, but also the meaning of its endeavour. If this is what human endeavour was going to lead to, why indulge in it? Ours was the first generation, as a whole generation, to ask that, and receive no answer. Because it was not possible to regain Paradise after Hiroshima.

Which is why the Peace Park, the ruined Industry Promotion Hall, the Memorial Cenotaph with the continuously enlarging list of names of A-bomb victims (it started out with the 95 thousand six hundred and 85 victims killed on August 6, 1945), and the Peace Flame drew my feet to themselves. If I cannot have Paradise, let me then properly embrace Hell.

And Hell it is. You enter it after paying a small fee. And you do leave all hope behind as with every step you take, your heart breaks. Our world has had a surfeit of horrors. There is Auschwitz, there is Vietnam, there is the Gulag Archipelago. What more can three small rooms in Hiroshima display? But they do. In almost an understatement. There are few horror-photographs of damaged victims; there are a few objects of sentimental value—a schoolgirl's lunchbox all twisted and melted, found 2 km. away from the epicentre, metal Buddha images half eaten away by the heat, thick steel safes crumpled like cardboard with a family's savings still pittifully held together as charred remains in charred money-clips—; and there are objects of military interest—aerial photographs of what looks like a fallow field, but is actually the 13 km. area surrounding the epicentre, 13 kms. of what used to be a busy, bustling river-town and port. As objects in a horror-museum go, they are not many and, at first sight not particularly horrifying. But the small details being to register one by one. Two litre glass bottles melted and fused together. Glass bottles? Do you know the temperatures at which glass melts? A white blouse with peculiar shaped holes in it. The caption says it was found 3 km. away from the epicentre. And you realise with a shock that the funny shaped holes are the black flowers printed on it. The photograph of the buckled walls and steel doors of a warehouse 900 metres away. A stack of china plates fused together. A pitted and scored granite tombstone which looks as though it might have come from Ajanta, but is only thirtyfive years old. Anything you thought could not possibly melt has melted. Anything you thought of as permanent (after all, you say, as permanent as the hills!) has buckled and crumbled. It hardly comes as a surprise to see what has happened to the human beings, when you read that the temperatures within a few seconds of the bursting of the bomb in the atmosphere were well above a hundred thousand centigrade. Have you not suffered agonies for days because you spilt the boiling tea-water of just 100 centigrades on your hand? People were surprised that I was in tears. I was myself. I am not a sentimental woman. I am very seldom in tears. To me, fury is a much more natural reaction than sorrow. The concentration camps, the political prisoners, social injustice, Vietnam, all found me

boiling with fury, waiting to get my hands on 'them'. But not Hiroshima. Hiroshima leaves you weeping. For there is no cure for Hiroshima. You are Hiroshima. You have created it in the name of progress. It is the price you paid for your curiosity. It is the price you paid for all that is for ever thrown in your face as the advantages of civilization—cheap energy, fast travel, instant communication, stored knowledge, a visit to the moon, cure-all medicines. When you couldn't bear your headache and took the first aspirin, there was Hiroshima inherent in that action. You are what you are, and Hiroshima happened because of what you are. It is possible in an ideal world and with enough fury to eliminate Auschwitz or Gulag. It is not possible now to turn the clock back and undo Hiroshima.

My young daughter was bored and listless. "Why do you want to waste your time looking at melted lumps of metal and charred bits of cloth? Let's go and feed the Swans on the river." I suppose that's one way of trying to undo Hiroshima. And it's the way that Hiroshima at any rate seems to have taken. As we came out to feed the swans, a shining Japan Airlines jet took off for glamorous destinations in the red and gold dying sunshine, and roared above Hiroshima, above the rivers Peace and Clean that meet there and pour into the sea.

STINK IN HIGH PLACES

W. M. AITKEN

THE musk-deer which provides an essential ingredient for the world's growing perfume industry is on the verge of extinction. This shy and harmless creature lives at high altitudes in the Garhwal and Nepal Himalaya. Although a protected species on government lists this doesn't mean the future of this antlerless herbivore is guaranteed. In the international smugglers' market musk is said to fetch five lakhs for a kilo. Since the animal is officially protected even the big names in the scent world have to buy on the black.

The musk sac is found only on the male of the species. ("Musk" is derived from the Sanskrit word for testicle.) It is the size of a potatoe and the characteristic odour is caused by a secretion from the stag's rutting glands. One can perhaps ponder on the fact that the smell that excites a female musk deer, when dabbed behind the ears of a mortal woman has exactly the same effect on her male admirers.

It is almost impossible to prevent poaching because of the big money involved. Even the sincere wild-life warden will find a bribe of Rs. 40,000/- difficult to resist. Getting the musk pods out of the country provides no problem as they take very little room in the diplomatic 'bag'. Obviously there is a well-oiled chain of command from the Paris salon to the village shikari.

During a recent trek to Nanda Devi Sanctuary (which is musk terrain) I learnt from the porters that the animal is fairly easy to trap. Two men beat it up towards a hidden gun. Of course they can't always distinguish between the male and female and the wrong animal gets

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shot. Since the Sanctuary is 60 kilometers from human habitation there's not much chance of the forest guard hearing the shot. Also the shikaris are using improved equipment which enable them to exit from the less likely parts of the Sanctuary. The 1977 World Wildlife Fund Report on the Sanctuary by Lavkumar Khacher notes the feature of a poacher's footpath which is open to the hardy for a good part of the year.

The Indian Government's genuine concern for preserving wild-life can be seen from the various projects started to study the threatened species and in the case of the musk-deer, to attempt to breed in captivity.

I visited one of these attempts at Kotmuniya near Berinag in Pithoragarh District, U.P. There is something pathetic about a lone deer imprisoned behind a high barbed-wire stockade in the middle of an oak jungle. At only 8000 feet one wonders if the musk-deer can acclimatise, it prefers the higher slopes with birch trees near the tree-line, another 4000 feet above. I hope by this time they have been able to catch a mate for the lonely deer I saw: A sleek greyish-blue gentle creature with a white rump and blackish pricked ears. One was impressed with the prodigiously muscled haunches that nature had provided for its race for life from the snow-leopard.

Now it has a more ruthless enemy than the leopard. If men have hunted the musk deer mercilessly for profit, now they are beginning to make amends. I was happy to see the genuine love the field workers had for their rare charge. It's a terribly lonely life for a government servant, and without enthusiasm for the cause, the animal would be exposed to that terrible disease of human boredom.

Another project near Kedarnath has begun to record scientific data about the animal's habits. A lot of myths have already been shattered. It seems the animal remains in its own territory even during heavy snowfall and doesn't migrate as earlier assumed.

Of course the greatest contribution science could make to the preservation of the musk-deer would be to produce an exact synthetic equivalent for its scent.

(To be continued)

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