

# JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

## **01. MURDER OF A METROPOLIS BY EQBAL AHMAD**

Smell, foul and pungent, greeted us on arrival at the airport. Stagnant rainwater, uncollected garbage and disgorging open manholes had turned the city into the world's largest sewerage network. . Outside the passenger terminal, we ran by chance into Mr. Hasan Jafri whose unfailing smile had obviously survived Karachi's atmospheric disaster. He offered us a ride which we gratefully accepted. "Oh, that, he exclaimed nonchalantly when I mentioned the pervasive smell, "one gets used to it. He mentioned other real' problems: "People are getting electrocuted on the road; four died last week..." He cited Karachi's electrocution statistics for the previous five years, and we speculated on the possibility of suing its municipal government for multiple manslaughters. . He was right about the smell. By next day, I was used to it. But the 'problems', all man-made remained. Following a rain shower earlier in the afternoon the city's culvertless roads were flooded, knee-deep in some sections where water had collected from the previous week's rain. Cars stalled, hitting potholes, manholes and piles of rubbish. It took more than one hour by car to travel less than two miles from Zainab Market to the Marriott Hotel. Remarkably, people remained calm, generally helpful to each other; some managed even to smile back at us. A relative had an explanation for the pervasive stoicism. "Life, he said, "is normally difficult here. The rains have merely accentuated the difficulties." This was an understatement. The same relative, a young architect, recounted how he has not been able to deliver a set of designs to a foreign group. "They were ready but we could not print them out. We have waited, five hours at a time, for the power line. It goes out sometimes before a sheet is printed. We have averaged six to eight hours a sheet." "But you told them about the power failures? I queried with, concern. "Why should they care," he snapped. "They are interested in the product they have contracted for, not my problems in producing it." His wife, a designer, says that in the last three weeks not more than three days worth of work has been done in her workshop. The printers who live in Landhi have missed work often because transportation is not available; also some of them live in kachcha homes which have collapsed; then there are the power failures. "We may be better off, she speculates, "if we do away with modern things like electricity, buses, telephones. We depend on them but our government does not know how to organise these things. " I reflect on their situation after they leave. They are talented, dynamic, and hard-working young professionals, just the kind a country relies on for fast growth. They came to Karachi from Lahore. Karachi is the magnet of educated and energetic Pakistanis. More than fifty per cent of the subscribers of English language dailies live there. But there, as in the rest of the country, they waste away. Their frustrations are palpable. Some leave the country and succeed elsewhere. Others become cynical, lose integrity, and join the unproductive race for fast bucks. . In the cafeteria of Marriott Hotel, an American business executive talked of his failed mission. He works for an international conglomerate and was here to explore investment opportunities in Pakistan. "Our chairman met some Pakistani high-ups. They convinced him that this was the place to invest in. So 'Aa came down." Well, how is it? "Some fast talkers they must be, he said of the Pakistan's official salesmen. "Aa will sink dough into the Gulf of Mexico before 'Aa invest good money over here." Like most American businessmen, this gentleman was down-to-earth in his reasoning. Sardar Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari would do well to hear him out before going off again on the hunt for another Asian Tiger. . "The elements are here; material (he represents a garment conglomerate), labour, enough skill for us to train people, and the wharf. We can bring in the machinery okay, and the designs, and train the supervisors. But this place is gonna be on vacation all the time. One hundred and twenty-nine days of government holidays! Add to that the mandatory leave every employer got to give each year. That's two weeks minimum. Then some sick time off. Then the phones don't work too good, and there is the law and order problem. The day I arrived, armed cops were all over, guns mounted on their vehicles, checking everybody. Not me. When I came back from Islamabad, Karachi was completely messed up. It just couldn't take a bit of rain. "But you could set up elsewhere in the country; up north," I ventured. "Sure enough, he said, "But if you ain't got the port you ain't got the country. No sir, not in a businessman's book." " Listening to these and other conversations for five dismal days in Karachi I have been reminded of a childhood story about the proverbial fool who, from an excess of short-sighted avarice, killed the hen that laid

the golden eggs. Karachi is Pakistan's only metropolis, commercial capital, and gateway to the world. With a contribution of around 40% of Pakistan's total revenue, it is the country's largest taxpayer. The direct taxes contributed 36.8 billion rupees to overall federal tax revenues for 1992-93. Karachi's share of this contribution was Rs. 31 billion. More than 50% of Pakistan's university graduates are resident in Karachi. The literacy rate for men in this city is the highest in Pakistan - at around 65%. It boasts of the largest urban female work-force, and the largest concentration of skilled labour - male and female. Half a million workers migrate to Karachi each year from all over Pakistan. Its population grows exponentially each year - five to seven per cent - while the infrastructure develops at less than half the pace in good years and not at all in bad ones. . This engine of economic and social advancement in Pakistan is being destroyed by systematic depredation and wilful mismanagement. It would take a volume to describe the ways in which this city is being ravaged by city politicians, provincial waderas, national leaders, bureaucrats, even the army leaders. The national and provincial governments invest in it barely a fraction of what Karachi pays them in taxes. A visitor is struck by the anomalies of government and politics in Karachi. Here I mention but one: as a rule, power is not broadly distributed in Pakistan; the provincial and federal governments here are centralised. Yet, Karachi is an irrationally decentralised city, a hodgepodge of overlapping administrative authorities of which the Karachi Municipal Corporation is but one - and moribund – part. . This decentralisation seems to me not accidental. It is easier to manipulate and rob a fragmented city. As Ardesir Cowasjee has been documenting in this space, politicians and bureaucrats speculate in the city's land, and pillage it in other inconceivable ways; for pecuniary gains they exacerbate its ethnic tensions, and sap its will and capacity for renewal and change. There are viable social and philanthropic organisations in Karachi more than anywhere else in this country. But their efforts are overwhelmed by the excess of corruption and neglect. . You can see that all over this dynamic, vibrant city, Karachi is refusing to die. Yet its will to live seems to be marked by a tragic insouciance. It gave birth to Pakistan's first non-feudal party which could have represented urban interests in an archaic political environment. Instead, it emerged a sectarian formation of neo-fascist style and the cult of personality as its ideology. It is home to modern industrialists who know how to make money, evade taxes, and defend their vested interests as they did recently - with strikes, lock-outs et al. They are capitalists in all respects except one: they care not to defend their city and build a metropolis. . The intelligentsia here narrates without end stories of frustrations and violence, kidnappings, briberies, and extortions. Without question marks, narratives normalise an abnormal place. Karachi is a microcosm, just a little ahead of the country.

## **02. FEUDAL CULTURE AND VIOLENCE BY EQBAL AHMAD**

An inquiry into the roots of violence in Pakistan may begin with a critical look at the linkages between culture and violence in our society. Feudalism serves as the whipping boy of Pakistan's intelligentsia. Yet, to my knowledge not one serious study exists on the nature and extent of feudal power in Pakistan, and none to my knowledge on the hegemony which feudal culture enjoys in this country. In economic terms, feudalism is now but only one of many forces in our society, and certainly not the ascendant one. But the culture it bred over the century, remains. Culture almost always persists after the hegemon is weakened and gone. The tenacity with which the colonial culture has, after decolonization, held out and tightened its grip on Pakistan and India is a case in point. Its persistence is defined by the failure of the post-colonial elite to spawn alternative values and styles as foundations of a new culture. This challenge Pakistan's small and excessively consumption- driven, therefore cautious and West-obsessed, intelligentsia has largely ignored. Hence, the feudal culture continues to enjoy absolute hegemony, that is to say, it sets the norms of behaviour and its values are largely those of society. Barring a few Pirs, the feudal order is rarely based on ideology or ascription. Nor, unlike capitalism, does it derive its strengths from a process of constant growth in productivity. What defines the feudal order above all is its mastery of violence. Its members practise it, occasionally with some regard for local customs, and always; with scant respect for the law. The law-abiding feudal is an oxymoron. Any experienced district officer will tell you that among the powerful lords of rural Sindh, Punjab, Sarhad, and Balochistan it is the will and integrity of the government that makes the difference between law and lawlessness, civility and violence. Similarly, any hari knows, as the Hari Commission so accurately described some six decades ago, that violence defines the relationship between lords and peasants. An extraordinary example of the persistence of feudal culture is that in the last decade of the twentieth century the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has forced open private jails; entire families have been liberated from bondage - tortured and chained, women used, children misused. And a remarkable detail: these liberations

have been affected not by the state but by a private organization. It is failures of this magnitude on the part of the state - and the elite that controls it that help sustain feudal values in our society. Until such time as the state intervenes to enforce laws, and the intelligentsia actively promotes nonviolent values, the culture of violence shall continue to prevail. Rather, as social change continues at a rapid pace, traditional systems of social control become progressively dysfunctional and the state's administrative machinery continues to erode, violence shall augment in its varied forms. Violence has traditionally occupied a central and elevated place in our cultures. There are numerous manifestations of it in our social life. I shall mention only three: (i) the value we put on revenge, (ii) the violence against women which persists and has possibly augmented and, (iii) our abuse of children. Revenge is viewed by perhaps an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis as a natural sentiment. It is not merely accepted as normal in many areas of our social, political, and family life; rather, it is linked to the identity and honour of the individual, family, biraderi and tribe. Friends and relatives express solidarity when a man takes revenge while his adversaries proceed, more often than not, to avenge the avenger. To my knowledge, no annual statistics are compiled of revenge killings in Pakistan. Were it available the figure would run into the thousands. Pick a day, and you are likely to find a manifestation. Wife-beating is viewed by a large section of rural society as though it were a droit de seigneur. It is quite common also among urban dwellers especially in working and lower middle class milieu, and is known to persist in some educated upper class families. "Wife abuse is a fairly common phenomenon in Pakistan", says an extremely balanced and wise "Report of the Commission of Inquiry for Women" of August 1997, "[it] is also indulged in not only by the husband but also by other members of the husband's family. It can take the form of slapping, beating, torture, mutilation and murder."

Rape, especially gang rape, is becoming endemic. In the first nine months of 1997 over 100 women were reported to have been raped in Lahore alone; of these, 28 were victims of gang rape. Typically, the police registered only 35 of the over 100 rape Lahore cases reported to it - a phenomenon that adds to the inhibition against reporting. Actual instances of rape are estimated by human rights groups as being two-&-a-half to three times higher than those reported in the press. Yet, there is no let-up in official neglect of this scourge.

With painstaking and risky effort, women's groups and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) have been documenting the crime against women. HRCP estimates that nationwide a woman is raped in Pakistan every three hours, and "nearly as many minors become victims as adults". In a majority of instances they also suffered violent assault either before or after the crime, and many commit suicide. The ultimate form of violence against women, murder and mutilation, is widely accepted as a mechanism for restoring honour - a practice institutionalized in customs like Karo Kari, in areas of Sindh, Balochistan, the NWFP, and southern Punjab. To these have been added now a new horror - stove burning - of which spot hospital checks indicate victims in the thousands. Notable, as they co-relate with my argument on feudal culture, are two facts: [i] 80% of the violent crimes against women are committed in rural areas, 20 % in the urban; and [ii] almost all victims of the reported cases of sexual assault were working class women. (Dawn, October 29, 1997) Since from their infancy children witness violence as an integral part of adult behavior, males and females alike grow to accept it as a normal, even preferred, mechanism for achieving one's objective or affecting behavior change. There are scant laws to treat domestic violence as crime, and the police are known to routinely discourage registration of cases in domestic crimes. Violent treatment of children is even more common than that of women. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child' remains a central tenet of our upbringing of children. It is extravagantly interpreted and excessively practiced in schools no less than in homes. To be sure, physical abuse of children is less prevalent today in educated upper and middle class families; than a few decades ago. It remains, nevertheless, widespread in other strata of society. In the absence of available data it is impossible to identify its comparative prevalence along class or rural/urban lines. For a host of reasons, including studies on Latin American countries, I surmise that among the urban working class, lower middle class, and lumpenproletariat child abuse is more widely and more excessively practiced than in rural areas. In the religious schools (madaaris), which have proliferated exponentially in the last two decades, pupils are routinely administered physical punishment; the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has exposed instances even of children being kept in chains, for months even years at a time. There exists a considerable body of literature indicating that abused children often become abusive and violent adults. If they are serious about eliminating the high rate of violence and crime in Pakistan, the least that our governments can do is to legislate against these practices. Laws, after all, are not merely links between crime and punishment. They also set the moral and behavioral standards for citizens of this and coming generations. Yet, the sensitivities of our ruling establishment are such that during nearly a decade of representative governments not one government has deemed it important to repeal a dictator's laws - the hudood, qisas, diyat, and blasphemy laws are prime examples - which devalue the

humanity of women and minorities in our society, promote retrograde attitudes, and invite murder, mutilation, and communal violence. I have not spoken to one official, in this government or the last, who was willing to defend these laws and practices. To the contrary, all have found them, as any sensible and humane person would, repugnant and harmful to society. Yet, even this government, which commands a majority large enough to repeal constitutional amendments, has failed so far to act on a single of the many sensible recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry for Women which was headed by an eminent jurist, Mr. Justice Nasir Aslam Zahid of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The failure is of course another surrender of responsibility to opportunism, a phenomenon not uncommon in politics anywhere. So the responsibility falls ultimately upon us. The government's inaction underlines, after all, the absence of organized opinion strong enough to counter the loud pressures of right-wing religious groups whose archaic perspectives on Islam conform neither to the tenets of religion nor to the needs of society.

### **03. BETWEEN PAST AND THE FUTURE BY EQBAL AHMAD**

There has existed throughout history an ironic relationship between the past and future. Those who glorify the past and seek to recreate it almost invariably fail while those who view it comprehensively and critically are able to draw on the past in meaningful and lasting ways. People who have confidence in their future approach the past with seriousness and critical reverence. They study it, try to comprehend the values, aesthetics, and style which invested an earlier civilization its greatness or caused it to decline. They preserve its remains, and enshrine relevant, enriching images and events of the past in their memories both collectively and individually. By contrast, peoples and governments with an uncertain sense of the future manifest deeply skewed relationships to their history. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiries into the past, neglect its remains but, at the same time, invent an imagined past -- shining and glorious, upon which are super-imposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own time. The religion-political movements of South Asia bear witness to this truth. Many Hindus and Muslims alike glorify their history -- that is what they imagine to be their history -- in ways that separate them from the other; rather, pit them against each other. Thus for decades many Muslims viewed the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb as symbolizing the strengths and virtues of Muslim rule in India. On their part, Hindu nationalists presented the Maratha chief Sivaji as an embodiment of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. In reality, both were tragic figures out of cinch with their own history, signalling the decline of Indian statehood, and the rise of a European empire in India. In this instance, as most recently in the Babri mosque affair, history became a casualty of communal myth making. In the summer of 1990, I visited Ayodhya and Mathura while researching the campaign which militant Hindu movements -- BJP, VHP, RSS, and Bajrang Dal -- had launched to demolish the Babri Mosque and build a temple on the site which they claimed was the real birth place of Lord Rama two thousand years ago. I was particularly amazed at two features of this campaign. The Hindu revivalists had put out an enormous body of publications and educational material on the alleged excesses of Muslim rule in India, and Hindu resistance to it. Apart from books, colorful posters portrayed in graphic detail the presumed atrocities and heroism of the Hindu-Muslim encounter in India. Narratives in prose and songs were also available by the dozens on audio cassettes. It seemed impossible to stem this tide of invented, poisonous history. To their lasting credit, the most eminent among India's historians openly and consistently debunked the revivalists' claims, in the short run they had little success. Subsequently, their impact was not inconsiderable, and the ire against them has risen in direct proportion to the decline of BJP and its ancillaries. "Inn historians kay liye Hindustan men koi asthan naheen hai", says a ranking BJP leader.

The phenomenon holds also in Pakistan. There are, however, underlying difference between it and India. One is that during crucial periods of our history, governments have favored the distortionists and actively discouraged historical research, instruction, and inquiry. The other significant difference is that because our institutions of higher learning rapidly deteriorated and also because our insecure rulers -- Mohammed Ziaul Haq occupies the highest place in this pantheon -- needed the crutch of inverted history, in Pakistan historians did not thrive and history ceased as a subject of serious study. Hence in Pakistan the inversions of history are greater and embraces such contemporary subjects as the birth of Pakistan and the views and personality of its founding father. But few subjects have suffered greater disfiguring as Islam and Muslim history. On a daily basis Islam and its history have been invoked in Pakistan for more than four decades. Yet, during all these

years neither religion nor history have been accorded serious attention in this country either from the state or society. I know of not a single noteworthy work on these subjects to have been published in Pakistan. The curriculum of deeniyat, a compulsory subject in our schools and colleges, is almost entirely devoid of a sense of piety [taqwa] spiritualism [roohaniyat], or mysticism [tassawuf]. At best it is cast in terms of ritualistic formalism. At worst, it reduces Islam to a penal code. As for history, any historian of Islam would shudder at what passes here for instruction in Islamic history. Three years ago, I queried an M.A. class in this subject at a major Pakistani university. None of the 25 odd students there had an inkling of the issues which defined the first major schism in Islamic history -the khawarij movement. None gave a satisfactory explanation of the Ash'arite doctrine and its place in Muslim theological development. And only one had an inkling about the Mu'tazila -- woh achay log naheen thay. Unki fikr men dahriyat ke anaasir thay (They were not good. people, There were elements of atheism in their thought.) 'We are witnessing', I had then thought, 'the end of history in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> (Francis Fukuyama had not yet come out with his arcane thesis about history's end.) I was wrong of course, for this sort of ignorance, being widely cultivated in our colleges and universities, can produce a history of sorts. The history thus produced shall bear but a remote, formalistic relationship to the past, and provide no positive links whatsoever to the future. For the past is not being viewed critically or creatively in most post-colonial societies. Take the Muslim world as a whole. For three centuries, it has been in steady decline. Yet, few Muslim intellectuals have inquired with a degree of rigour and honesty into the causes of this decline. It is only when one identifies the problem that one seeks solutions. In the 19th century, Syed Ahmed Khan inquired loudly into the causes of Muslim decline; and sought to overcome it with reformist zeal. The little that the sub-continent's Muslims accomplished in subsequent decades, they owed largely to his critical intellect. Similar efforts were made in the Ottoman empire, and among Iranian constitutionalists of the late Qajar period. The Muslim tragedy is that subsequent generations failed to build meaningfully on this reformist beginnings.

Politics are at the roots of this failure. For politics shape the intellectual environment. Isolated, illegitimate rulers no less than sectarian movements employ history and religion as ideological weapons and manipulative devices. Their appeal falls often on receptive ears. When the present is painfully replete with inequalities and frustrations, and the future holds little promise people, specially young people, turn to the past. The less they understand the past, the more they are prone to glorify, imagine, and invent it. The past then becomes the anchor of their hopes and their frustrations. The phenomenon is often, and wrongly I believe, identified as fundamentalism.

## **01. THE JARGON DISEASE BY ROBERT FISK**

I once received an invitation to lecture at 'The University of Excellence'. I forgot where this particular academy was located – Jordan, I think – but I recall very clearly that the suggested subject of my talk was as incomprehensible to me as it would, no doubt, have been to any audience. Invitation rejected. Only this week I received another request, this time to join 'ethics practitioners' to 'share evidence-based practices on dealing with current ethical practices' around the world. What on earth does this mean? Why do people write like this? The word 'excellence', of course, has long ago been devalued by the corporate world – its favourite expression has long been 'Quality and Excellence', invariably accompanied by a 'mission statement', that claim to self-importance dreamed up by Robin Cook when foreign secretary (swiftly ditched when he decided to go on selling jets to Indonesia) and thereafter by every export company and amateur newspaper in the world. There is something repulsive about this vocabulary, an aggressive language of superiority in which 'key players' can 'interact' with each other, can 'impact' society, 'outsource' their business or 'downsize' the number of their employees. They need 'feedback' and 'input'. They 'think outside the box' or 'push the envelope'. They have a 'work space', not a desk. They need 'personal space' – they need to be left alone – and sometimes they need 'time and space', a commodity much in demand when marriages are failing. These lies and obfuscations are infuriating. 'Downsizing' employees means firing them; 'outsourcing' means hiring someone else to do your dirty work. 'Feedback' means 'response', 'input' means 'advice'. 'Thinking outside the box' means, does it not, to be 'imaginative'? Being a 'key player' is a form of self-aggrandisement – which is why I never agree

to be a ‘key speaker’, especially if this means participation in a ‘workshop’. To me a workshop means what it says. When I was at school, the workshop was a carpentry shop wherein generations of teachers vainly tried to teach Fisk how to make a wooden chair or table that did not collapse the moment it was completed. But today, a ‘workshop’ – though we mustn’t say so – is a group of tiresome academics yakking in the secret language of anthropology or talking about ‘cultural sensitivity’ or ‘core issues’ or ‘tropes’. Presumably these are the same folk who invented the UN’s own humanitarian-speak. Of the latter, my favourite is the label awarded to any desperate refugee who is prepared (for a pittance) to persuade their fellow victims to abide by the UN’s wishes – to abandon their tents and return to their dangerous, war-ravaged homes. These luckless advisers are referred to by the UN as ‘social animators’. It is a disease, this language, caught by one of our own New Labour ministers on the BBC last week when he talked about ‘environmental externalities’. Presumably, this meant ‘the weather’. Similarly, an architect I know warned his client of the effect of the ‘aggressive saline environment’ on a house built near the sea. If this advice seems obscure, we might be ‘conflicted’ about it – who, I ask myself, invented the false transitive verb? – or, worse still, ‘stressed’. In northern Iraq in 1991, I was once ordered by a humanitarian worker from the ‘International Rescue Committee’ to leave the only room I could find in the wrecked town of Zakho because it had been booked for her fellow workers – who were very ‘stressed’. Poor souls, I thought. They were stressed, ‘stressed out’, trying – no doubt – to ‘come to terms’ with their predicament, attempting to ‘cope’. This is the language of therapy, in which frauds, liars and cheats are always trying to escape. Thus President Clinton’s spokesman claimed after his admission of his affair with Monica Lewinsky that he was ‘seeking closure’. Like so many mendacious politicians, Clinton felt – as Prime Minister Blair will no doubt feel about his bloodbath in Iraq once he leaves the need to ‘move on’. In the same way, our psychobabble masters and mistresses – yes, there is a semantic problem there, too, isn’t there? – announce after wars that it is a time for ‘healing’, the same prescription doled out to families which are ‘dysfunctional’, who live in a ‘dystopian’ world. Yes, dystopian is a perfectly good word – it is the opposite of utopian – but like ‘perceive’ and ‘perception’ (words once much loved by Jonathan Dimbleby), they have become fashionable because they appear enigmatic. Some newly popular phrases, such as ‘tipping point’ – used about Middle East conflicts when the bad guys are about to lose – or ‘big picture’ – when moralists have to be reminded of the greater good – are merelyashionable. Others are simply odd. I always mixed up ‘bonding’ with ‘bondage’ and ‘quality time’ with a popular assortment of toffees. I used to think that ‘increase’ was a perfectly acceptable word until I discovered that in the military sex-speak of the Pentagon, Iraq would endure a ‘spike’ of violence until a ‘surge’ of extra troops arrived in Baghdad. All this is different, of course, from the non-sexual ‘nobrainers’ with which we now have to ‘cope’ – ‘author’ for ‘authoress’, for example, ‘actor’ for ‘actress’ – or the fearful linguistic lengths we must go to in order to avoid offence to Londoners who speak Cockney: as we all know – though only those of us, of course, who come from the Home Counties – these people speak ‘Estuary’ English. It’s like those poor Americans in Detroit who, in fear and trepidation, avoided wishing me a happy Christmas last year. ‘Happy Holiday!’ they chorused until I roared ‘Happy Christmas’ back. In Beirut, by the way, we all wish each other ‘Happy Christmas’ and ‘Happy Eid’, whether our friends are Muslim or Christian. Is this really of ‘majority importance’, as an Irish television producer once asked a colleague of a news event? I fear it is. For we are not using words any more. We are utilising them, speaking for effect rather than meaning, for escape. We are becoming – as the New Yorker now describes children who don’t care if they watch films on the cinema screen or on their mobile phones – ‘platform agnostic’. What, Polonius asked his lord, was he reading? ‘Words, words, words,’ Hamlet replied. If only . . .

## **02. THE JARGON DISEASE BY ROBERT FISK**

We journalists are students of human folly. Palestine, Iraq, the Gulf, Persia; for more than a hundred years, our Western meddling in the Middle East falls under that label ‘folly’. A ‘foolish . . . and expensive undertaking that ends in disaster’ is how one dictionary defines this. I suspect it also contains an unhealthy mix of vanity and hubris. A few days ago, standing on the wave-thrashed rocks above the old Lebanese Crusader port of Enfeh – yes, Richard the Lionheart (he who spoke French, not English) spent a night here to escape the storms – I was able to contemplate that the most sublime as well as the most ridiculous folly always seems to occur at sea. For just as Captain Smith insisted on steering the Titanic at full speed into the North

Atlantic ice in 1912 because he wanted to impress the Americans with her speed, so – nineteen years earlier – Vice Admiral Sir George Tryon of HMS Victoria, not far from where I was standing, decided to put the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet through the fastest and most dangerous naval man oeuvres known to man in order to impress the Ottoman Turks. Off Enfeh today, the wind cracks off the sea – I've noticed how the treacherous tides here always make the sea heave in small mountains down the coast – but Christian Francis, a Lebanese–Austrian diver, still sets off daily from a semi-derelict hotel to look at the wreck he has discovered 480 feet beneath the surface. His enthusiasm – for history as much as for diving – is infectious and he happily printed off for me the one thing I more and more come to love in journalism: archives, papers, the official records that the ‘centres of power’ produce to justify their folly – or to pass the buck. In this case, the whole sorry story was contained in the Royal Navy’s court-martial proceedings of 1893 ‘to enquire into the loss of Her Majesty’s Ship Victoria’. Tryon, it appears, was a Smith in the making. A stern disciplinarian – ‘taciturn’ and ‘difficult’ were among the lesser characteristics that his subordinates identified in him – he also had, like Smith, a reputation as a fine seafarer; he was, in fact, every schoolboy’s nightmare, an impressive man who wanted obedience rather than initiative. So when on 22 June 1893 – with the Ottomans watching from the ancient city of Tripoli to the east – Tryon ordered his two fleets of eleven ships to turn 16 points and sail at speed towards each other, none of his subordinates said a word. At the last moment, the ships were supposed to turn again and sail alongside each other in the opposite direction. Tryon’s men were too fearful to question this insanity. One who hesitated was his deputy, Rear Admiral Albert Markham, aboard HMS Camperdown; he received a testy flag message from his commander: ‘What are you waiting for?’ With Aeschylean inevitability, the 14,000-horsepower, 11,000-ton Victoria – one of the first British ironclads and the first naval vessel to be built with a steam turbine – collided with Camperdown, which tore into Tryon’s ship 12 feet below the waterline, opening a 28-foot gash in her hull. Last words are a journalist’s favourite weapon against the dead, and the Admiralty provides us with a couple of classics to run alongside Smith’s alleged remark to the Titanic’s owner after colliding with the iceberg: ‘Well, you’ll get your headlines now, Mr Ismay.’ In Tryon’s case, surrounded by his appalled but silent junior officers as the Camperdown bore down upon him, the Vice Admiral shouted: ‘Go astern, go astern.’ And then, as his great ship shuddered with the impact and began to turn over, his boilermen doomed as they vainly tried to keep the Victoria heading back to the coast, and his deck crew drowning as the vessel rolled over on top of them, Tryon announced – and you can imagine the Blair-like relief of the Admiralty – ‘It’s all my fault.’ He thus doomed himself for ever as the man who took his flagship to the bottom. Watching from the shore, the Ottomans were indeed impressed. In all, 358 British seamen were killed, including Tryon, who was held entirely responsible for the greatest peacetime disaster in the history of the Royal Navy. Disgrace in a land battle or in the air is somehow mitigated by time. Grass, as the American poet Carl Sandburg observed, always covers the graves. Aircraft fragments disintegrate in the air. But beneath the seas, like the Titanic, our folly remains sacrosanct and eternal. For young Christian Francis, provoked by old fishermen’s stories and the Admiralty documents he read in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, has found Tryon’s flagship 480 feet down, remarkably intact and – even more extraordinary – standing vertical, its bows buried deep in the Mediterranean seabed, its huge twin propellers pointing upwards and illuminated by the faint Mediterranean sunlight. Francis works with two British divers and three Poles, and they all produced their amateur videos for me. Shoals of fish sweep past the propellers. I could read the Victoria’s name on the stern. There is Tryon’s cabin, the iron landing from which he saw the Camperdown approaching, the Victoria’s ten-inch rear gun still in place, her twelve side-cannons still mounted to repel the Germans she would never fight in the First World War. For Victoria – how we love the ‘might-have-beens’ of history – would surely have fought in the Royal Navy’s greatest battle of the conflict. Incredibly, Tryon’s deputy was none other than John Jellicoe. His escape that day off Lebanon probably did for the German High Seas fleet, when Jellicoe met them off Jutland in 1916. Francis treats the wreck as a British maritime grave and merely looks through the cabin windows – there is a silver salver visible through one of them – but presumes there are still bones, Tryon’s included, in the buried part of the Victoria. Poor Tryon. His flagship stands up like a tombstone and it is the only vertical wreck in the world – nose in the mud, rear in the air for ever. But do we learn from it? Oh do we indeed? I had been talking to the Poles who were diving on the Victoria for an hour before I realised that they were the men who had prowled through the Baltic wrecks of the world’s greatest sea tragedies: the Goya, the Wilhelm Gustloff and the General von Steuben. As many as 18,000 Germans, most of them civilians, went down on these ships – compare this with the 1,500 on

the Titanic – in the frozen winter of 1945 as the Nazis tried to evacuate their people from Danzig before the Soviet advance into Germany. The Russians sank all of them. One of the Poles punched at his laptop, and there in front of me were real skulls and bones, a German helmet, a belt, the remains of a shirt. ‘The Polish authorities wanted to examine a skull and we brought one back to shore,’ the Pole told me. ‘It was identified as that of a woman in her thirties.’ Hubris again. The helmet was proof that the Wehrmacht was also aboard those vessels. But the majority were civilians and the Russians still idolise the submariners who killed so many civilians at sea between 30 January and 16 April 1945. It puts Admiral Tryon in the shade. A ‘foolish . . . and expensive undertaking which ends in disaster’ might as well define the human practice of war. The sea can no longer hide its secrets. Our folly is enshrined there – if we want to examine what it means.

## **01. LAHORE: BLOOD ON THE TRACKS BY WILLIAM DALRYMPAL**

It is barely dawn, and the sky is as pink as Turkish delight. Yet already, at 5.45 a.m., Lahore Central Station is buzzing like a kicked hive. Bleary-eyed, you look around in bewilderment. At home the milkmen are abroad at this time, but no one else. Here the shops are already open, the fruit and vegetables on display, and the shopkeepers on the prowl for attention. ‘Hello my dear,’ says a man holding up a cauliflower. ‘Sahib - what is your good name?’ ‘Subzi! Subzi! Subzi!’ ‘Your mother country?’ A Punjabi runs up behind the rickshaw, waving something horrible: a wig perhaps, or some monstrous vegetable. ‘Sahib, come looking! Special OK shop! Buying no problem!’ Lahore station rears out of the surrounding anarchy like a liner out of the ocean. It is a strange, hybrid building: the Victorian red-brick is imitation St Pancras, the loopholes, battlements and machicolations are stolen from some Renaissance palazzo - Milan perhaps, or Pavia - while the towers are vaguely German, and resemble a particularly extravagant Wagnerian stage set. Only the chaos is authentically Pakistani. As a tape of the Carpenters’ greatest hits plays incessantly on a Tannoy, you fight your way through the surge of jammed rickshaws and tottering red-jacketed coolies, through the sleeping villagers splayed out on the concrete, past the tap with the men doing their ablutions, over the bridge, down the stairs and on to the platform. In the early-morning glimmer, Platform 7 seethes with life like a-hundred Piccadilly Circuses at rush hour. Porters stagger towards the first-class carriages under a mountain of smart packing cases and trunks. Further down the platform, near third class, solitary peasant women sit stranded amid seas of more ungainly luggage: cages and boxes, ambiguous parcels done up with rope, sacks with lumpy projections - bits of porcelain, the arm of a chair, the leg of a chicken. Vendors trawl the platform selling trays of brightly coloured sweetmeats, hot tea in red clay cups, or the latest film magazine. Soldiers wander past, handlebar moustaches wobbling in the slipstream. The railways are now so much part of the everyday life of the subcontinent that it is difficult today to take in the revolution they brought about, or the degree to which they both created and destroyed the India of the Raj. Before the arrival of the railways in 1850, travel in India meant months of struggle over primitive dirt roads. Just fifty years later, tracks had been laid from the beaches south of Madras to the Afghan border, more than twenty-three thousand miles of railway in all. It was the biggest, and most costly, construction project undertaken by any colonial power in any colony anywhere in the world. It was also the largest single investment of British capital in the whole of the nineteenth century. By 1863 some three million tons of rails, sleepers and locomotives had been shipped to India from Britain, in around three and a half thousand ships. Engineers had looped tracks over the steepest mountains in the world, sunk foundations hundreds of feet in to the billowing deserts, bridged rivers as wide and as turbulent as the Ganges and the Indus. It was an epic undertaking, even by the standards of an age inured to industrial heroics. The railways also brought about a social revolution. There could be no caste barriers in a railway carriage: you bought your ticket and you took your place. For the first time in Indian history a Maulvi who spent his days contemplating the glorious Koran might find himself sitting next to an Untouchable who skinned dead cows. Moreover, as journey times shrank, India became aware of itself for the first time as a single unified nation. As the bullock cart gave way to the locomotive, a subcontinent disjointed by vast distances and primeval communications suddenly, for the first time, became aware of itself as a single geographical unit. It was the railways that made India a nation. Ironically, a century later, the same railways’ also made possible the irreparable division of the subcontinent. The partition of India and Pakistan on 15 August 1947 led to what was probably the greatest

migration in human history. More than twelve million people packed up and left their homes and their countries. Muslims in India headed en masse for Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs made their way in the opposite direction. In the course of the mass migration, suppressed religious hatreds were viciously unleashed: over a million people lost their lives in the riots and massacres that ensued. Yet Partition would have been impossible without the railways; and it was on the railways that much of the worst violence took place. Lahore station was the eye of that whirlwind. The fate of Lahore remained uncertain until the final maps of the boundaries between the two nations were released on 14 August. In the event the city went to Pakistan, just fifteen miles from the Indian border, and Lahore and its people were torn apart. Thousands of Hindus and Sikhs fought their way to the station to flee to India. At the same time train after train began arriving from south of the border carrying hundreds of thousands of Muslims to their new homeland. The station became a battleground. On the night of Independence the last British officials in Lahore arrived at the station. They had picked their way through gutted streets, many of which were littered with dead. On the platforms they found the railway staff grimly hosing down pools of blood and carrying away piles of corpses on luggage trolleys for mass burial. Minutes earlier a last group of desperate Hindus had been massacred by a Muslim mob while they sat waiting quietly for the Bombay Express. As the train finally pulled out of Lahore, the officials could see that the entire Punjab was ablaze, with flames rising from every village. Their lives' work was being destroyed in front of their eyes. The massacres of Partition brought the Raj to a cataclysmic close. Now, only half a century later, that period can seem as distant as that of the Romans. But the buildings - like Lahore station - still survive. They are the keys which can unlock the history of a period, a history which, though it may seem impossibly foreign, is as much part of the British heritage as that of the Indian subcontinent. With its great round bastions and tall machicolated towers, Lahore station may look like the product of some ~sH6rt-iiVed collaboration between the Raj and the Disney Corporation, but it was in fact built in deadly earnest. According to its architect, William Brunton, the whole station had a 'defensive character', so that 'a small garrison could secure it against enemy attack'. The twin towers may look as innocent as Swiss cuckoo clocks, but they were designed to be bomb-proof, while the loopholes across the facade are not the mock arrow-slits they appear to be, but placements for Maxim guns, drawn down carefully designed lines of fire. Even the cavernous train sheds could, in an emergency, be sealed with huge sliding metal doors, turning the whole complex in to a colossal fortified bunker. Straddling the Grand Trunk Road leading south to Delhi and Calcutta, Lahore is marching-distance from the North-West Frontier. At the time of the Great Game the Victorians saw it as an important defensive post against a potential Russian invasion through the Khyber Pass. Moreover, the station was built in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and for that reason it was designed to function both as a station and as a fort. Brunton was particularly pleased with the masonry, which he called 'the best in the world' and which he felt confident could survive even full-scale howitzer fire. In the event, however, Brunton's extraordinary architecture was never put to the test. Instead, in the course of the late nineteenth century the station became a symbol of the surprisingly profitable partnership Britain developed with its greatest colony. For India took to the railways in a way that could not have been imagined by the British engineers who first drew lines across the plains of the subcontinent. Just as India has always seduced and transformed its conquerors, so in the same way it slowly took over and indigenised the railways. Soon the stations were inhabited by whole villages of people washing, sleeping and cooking in the ticket halls, arriving days early for a train and building encampments on the platforms. Within a few years something quintessentially English had been forever transformed in to something quintessentially Indian. Then there was the bureaucracy. Somehow the idea of multiple forms, triplicate missions and strict codes of practice - ideas that originated in Crewe perhaps, or maybe Swindon - took on a new lease of Indian life in the plains of the Punjab, in the hands of Hindu bureaucrats brought up from birth with gods who had multiple incarnations, three faces and the strictest of codes of practice regarding their representation and worship. The hierarchy of the railways seemed directly to echo the Hindu caste system, with a pyramid that rose, rank after rank, from the lowly armies of sweepers through the parcel clerks, goods clerks, booking clerks and special ticket examiners to the twice-born apex of stationmaster and general manager. For the -Muslims too, there may have been something appealing in submission to a railway timetable at once as merciful, omnipotent and loftily inflexible as the great Koran itself. The railways were the ultimate symbol of all the Raj prided itself on being: pioneering and up-to-date, intrepid and impartial; on the cutting edge of the Industrial Revolution. Even today harrumphing Home Counties colonels will point first and foremost to the railways as a symbol of everything

they like to think the British 'gave' to India. Yet the railways were not works of charity. They were sound commercial enterprises, and the private investors who put up the initial capital saw their money returned many times over. Nonetheless, the railways did inspire a real feeling of esprit de corps among those who worked for them, a spirit which survived until very recently. Walking around the station one day this summer, I met Abdul Majeed. He was an old man with hennaed hair and heavy plastic spectacles. He wore a sparkling clean salwar katneez, and sat on a magnificent throne raised on a mahogany dais above Platform 1, underneath a plaque with the message: 'Our objective - Speed Cum Safety.' Abdul Majeed told me that he had retired from the Pakistani railways ten years earlier, but he still chose to come to the station and sit in the information booth: 'I spent forty years in the railway department,' he said, lowering his face shyly. 'I come back to this station because I am loving these railways of Pakistan - to them I have dedicated my life - and because my colleagues are my best friends. I remarked to Mr Majeed how many of the older men in the Pakistani railways seemed to regard its running almost as a sacred duty. 'I think we should,' replied Mr Majeed. 'I always took my duty as a sacred duty, just like my religious function. I never came to the station without washing myself, just as I prepare for my prayers in the mosque.' I asked him how the railways had changed in the forty years he had been part of them. 'Sahib,' said Mr Majeed, 'it's not only the railways. The change is in the general sphere of life.' 'In what way?' 'In the shape of corruption, in the shape of requirements, in the shape of evils, in the shape of thinkings, in the shape of harassment, in the shape of sabotages. Now the young men are not so dutiful, I think. There has been big change.' 'You think corruption has eaten in to the railway system?' 'Sahib, you can imagine. When I was working as a stationmaster, people used to adjust their watches by the passage of trains. Now we adjust our watches from the public. Today there is no punctuality. Yesterday's train arrives today and today's train arrives tomorrow. No one thinks to mention it when a train comes in ten or twelve hours late. Things are very bad.' Abdul Majeed, it emerged, was born in the half of the Punjab which is now part of India. Expelled from his ancestral village at Partition, he and his family were made to walk to a refugee camp in the monsoon rains. There was no drinking water or facilities for even the most basic sanitation. Soon cholera broke out. 'In the camp my mother died at about two a.m. due to cholera,' said Abdul Majeed, eyes still lowered. 'The same day my father died at fourteen hours.' 'You lost both your parents on the same day?' 'Yes. We buried our mother that evening, then buried our father on the morning of 9 October.' 'You had to bury them yourselves? "Yes; we buried them ourselves near a mosque, offering our religious prayers. I was just fifteen years old. The following day we were made to walk to the new place from where we had to catch a train. In the crowd, my younger brother was separated from the rest of us. I never saw him again. In the morning, when the train passed the Beas river I looked down and saw hundreds of corpses scattered in the riverbed from point to point, being eaten by crows, dogs and kites, giving bad smell. After many hours we eventually crossed the Pakistan border from Atari at about fifteen hours. We were stunned when people said "Pakistan zindabad!" [Long live Pakistan!]. They welcomed us and gave us food and water. We had not eaten for four or five days. Then we thought, we are still alive. 'Pakistan's birth-pangs had also been India's Holocaust. Everyone you met had their story, but the most horrific were told to me by Mr Majeed's elderly friend Khawajah Bilal, who had had the unenviable job of being the stationmaster of Lahore in 1947. 'I have been coming to Lahore station since I was a student,' Khawajah Bilal told me as we sat on a bench outside what had once been his stationmaster's office. 'Before Partition took place the station was a landmark of beauty. The platforms were clean and the carriages were spotless. The people were calm and quiet. The staff were well dressed. The uniforms they wore were immaculate. The buttons were polished, the braid was golden and shone under the lights. All that ended with Partition.' 'What happened?' I asked. 'On 14 August I was on duty. We heard an announcement that Partition had taken place. Soon after that the killing started, the slaughter began. Everywhere we looked we saw carnage and destruction of human life. There was no law and order, even when the soldiers came and made a barricade with barbed wire outside the station. Despite their presence, many were being killed - on the platforms, on the bridges, in the ticket halls. There were stabbings, rapes, attempts at arson. I had my charpoy in the stationmaster's office: I didn't dare go back to my house. But at night I could not sleep because of the screams and moans of the dying coming from the platform. In the morning, when the light came, bodies would be lying everywhere. 'One morning, I think it was 30 August, the Bombay Express came in from Delhi via Bhatinda. We found dead bodies in the lavatories, on the seats, under the seats. There had been around two thousand people on this train. We checked the whole train, but nobody was alive except one person. There had been a massacre when the train stopped at Bhatinda. The sole survivor

told us he had approached the train driver, an Englishman, who gave him refuge. He hid the man in the watertank by the engine. When the Sikhs arrived they could not see him so they went away and he survived. Only one man out of two thousand. After that every train that came from India was attacked. We used to receive one hundred trains a day. Every one was full of corpses.' Listening to these horror stories, it was clear that for the people of India and Pakistan the horrors of Partition were not just the stuff of history, consigned to the memories of a few old men: for most people they were still livid scars, unhealed wounds which were still poisoning relations between Hindu and Muslim, India and Pakistan, half a century later. Today the old main line from Lahore to Delhi, once the busiest in India, is hardly used. These days only one train a week passes from Lahore station down the line to India - and that is largely empty.

