

DESTINATION: UNKNOWN!

(Continuing the account of our two intrepid travellers as they explore new Asian countries, seek out strange new cultures, and boldly go where no fan has gone before. In our last episode, the pair flew from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, where they examined several beaches at great length, met sf master Arthur C. Clarke and counted elephants. Proceeding to India they survived terrific temples, tedious touts and treacherous transport before stumbling upon Subcontinental science fiction. They stood in awe within rock-hewn caverns millenia old at Ajanta and Ellora and sensed their wonder at the Taj Mahal. In a fit of daring they flew to Afghanistan disguised as ordinary tourists, instigated the collapse of the Kabul regime, and escaped capture in the nick of time. And now, read on...)

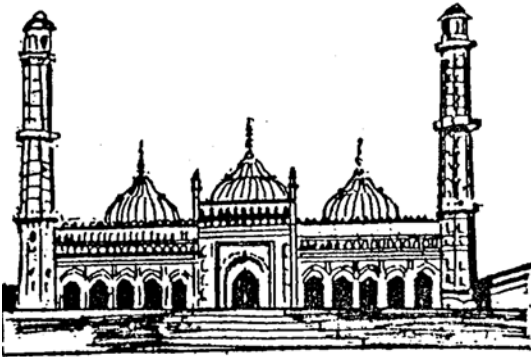
New Delhi is a thoroughly modern city, complete with skyscrapers, fast-food restaurants and crowded public transport. As the capital of the nation, it also has broad, tree-lined promenades along which prominent government buildings are strategically placed for maximum aesthetic and photogenic effects. Towards the city railway station this illusion rapidly diminishes, as you move into the dark, narrow alleyways of Old Delhi which surround the Red Fort and Juma Masjid. Further away is the Qutab Minar, a mysterious ancient iron pillar which has refused to rust over the centuries since it was erected. Excavations in its vicinity are continuing; a new village area was uncovered while we were in New Delhi. We also visited the Railway Transport Museum and saw a show at the Nehru Planetarium.

I'd like to tell you more about the Red Fort, Juma Mosque, Raj Ghat (Ghandi's memorial), various handicraft museums and the art gallery -- but I can't. Fact is, whilst Megan was tripping merrily through all of these sites, I was sitting alone near the very centre of New Delhi, typing the previous issue of this rag. The sacrifices I make for Mumblings!

The NIIT Computerdrome, as I said last issue, was quite a surprise to find. Having found it, I could not overcome the temptation to produce an issue of my zine there. It took me only three days to type, print, copy, collate, sew and mail the thing -- a record I fear I shall never match. In the rush, I made a few mistakes, such as reversing Ooty and Mysore on the map of our travels, but I have only two serious regrets. The first is that the Computerdrome's printer was so poor that #7 is very hard to read. The second is that very few people will ever receive an issue to read. Lacking time and money to send all copies out from New Delhi, I included the bulk of the run in one of two parcels I lodged with the Indian Postal Service. The clerk said I'd see them in four to six weeks. Four months later, as I write, there is still no sign of them.

The same day that Mumblings #7 was mailed out from New Delhi, we were on a train out of the capital en route to Lucknow. I wanted to make a brief stop there as it has been a major rail centre for many years, and thus promised an opportunity to photograph old steam engines. Once there, one very helpful fellow in the main station gave me a lift on his motorbike to the running yard for Y class (metre gauge) engines, showed me around, and then dropped me

off outside the broad gauge yard. Although I had official papers granting me permission to photograph here I was turned away. (I returned the next day, had a friendly chat to the yard manager, and found that there were no W class locos still running here!)



Lucknow was more interesting than we expected. It has been a stronghold of the minority Shiite Muslims for centuries and its centrepiece is the Great Imambara and a nearby mosque, shown at left. The Great Imambara is essentially a large audience hall made unique by the incorporation of a maze in its upper stories. We had fun exploring this labyrinth for an hour and then went to see an amazing archway topped by fluted trumpets

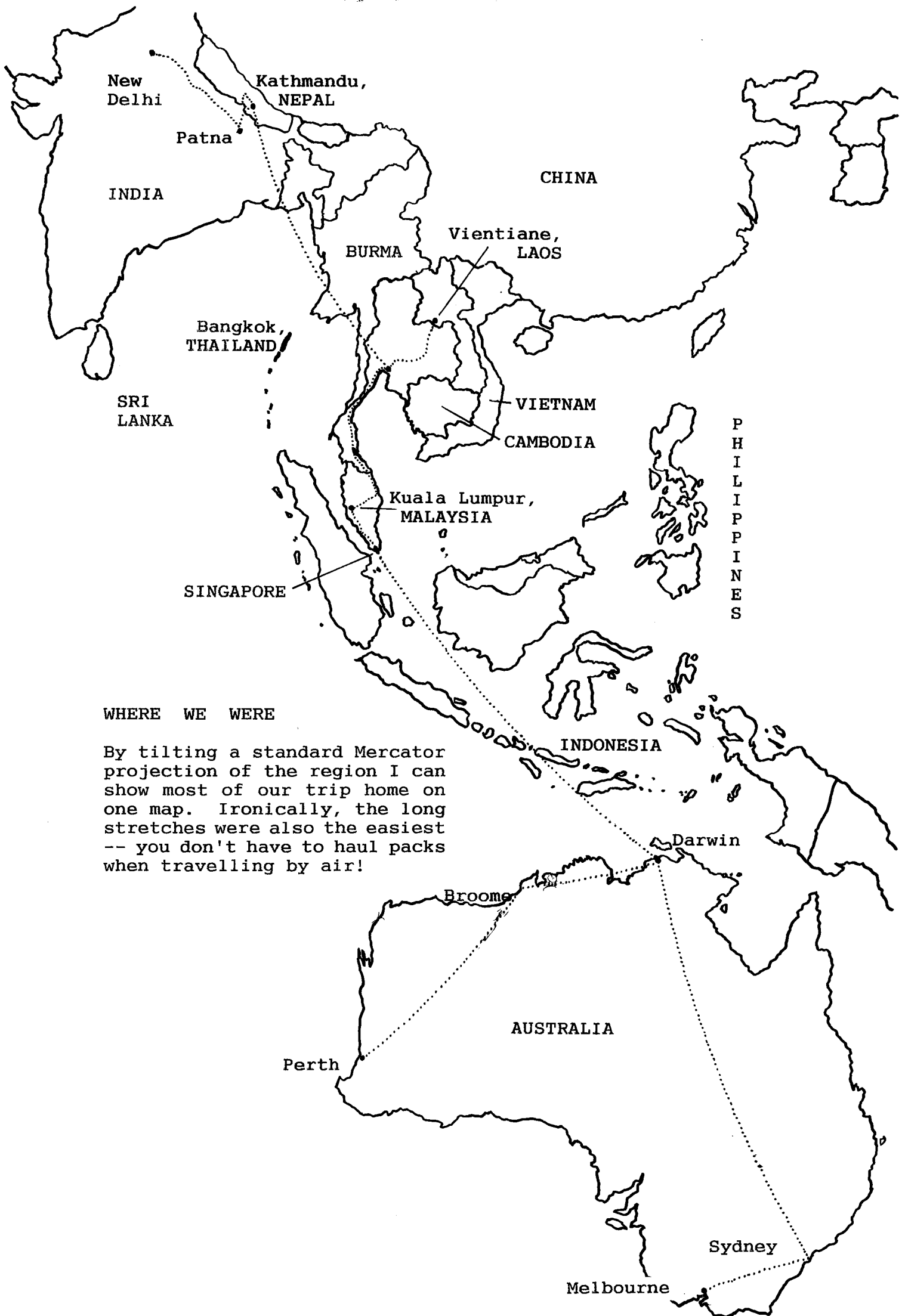
built in the same period. The main road runs straight through it.

By now (late April) the weather was getting quite hot. We hopped a train to Varanasi, upgrading our tickets to First Class when we noted the resemblance of the Second Class carriages to cattle cars. Varanasi is on the Ganges; indeed, it is most famous for the Ghats -- the steps leading down to the river -- upon which Hindu pilgrims perform their ritual bathings. We witnessed this, and cremations at the Burning Ghat, on a boat trip early the next morning. We had risen early to avoid the heat and the crowds but both reasserted themselves as we wound our way back to our hotel through the maze of narrow lanes.

Our intention all along had been to proceed to Darjeeling, in the far north-east, and cross into Nepal from there. As we had already observed, however, the higher population in the northern Hindi Belt puts a lot of pressure on the train services. Train bookings need to be made at least a week in advance and are completely useless if you're travelling in Second Class anyway. Second Class carriages are hopelessly overcrowded, with people standing, crammed together, on long-distance, overnight trains! So far, we had been able to avoid this horror. Not so out of Mughal Serai, the junction for northern routes out of Varanasi.

Unable to get a booking for any class, we bought 2nd Class tickets for the NE Express with the hope of upgrading on the platform. The Express was late in arriving and, sure enough, it was like a tin of sardines. No vacancies in upper classes. We hauled our packs up and down the platform, looking desperately for a hole we could squeeze into. At the last moment, room was made for us in the entranceway of one carriage. It was right next to the toilets, but we had enough room to sit on our packs and that was all we needed.

About an hour into this trip, an old man slouched against the wall opposite us patted my knee with his hand. Suspecting that he was a beggar, I kept my head in my book. A minute later, he did it again. I looked up. He grinned at me, and then pointed past me, to the floor in front of the toilets. Specifically, to the trail of urine flowing slowly towards us all.



WHERE WE WERE

By tilting a standard Mercator projection of the region I can show most of our trip home on one map. Ironically, the long stretches were also the easiest -- you don't have to haul packs when travelling by air!

I yelled to Megan and we leapt to our feet as fast we could, but were not quite quick enough to save our packs from soaking up some of the flow. We did manage, in our flurry, to drop the books we'd been reading into the puddle which formed at our feet. All of this created great amusement among those within the carriage proper who could see what was happening, yet, strangely, had just the opposite effect upon us. Eventually, chivalry and/or pity triumphed and a man offered Megan his seat. When Patna came at last, two hours later, we pulled our bags off and listened with disbelief as the station master advised that the morning train was likely to be even more crowded. In great despair, we allowed a rickshaw driver to bear us away to the hotel of his commission.

In the morning, we studied our map. Re-evaluating our priorities (#1 now becoming to get OUT of India) led us to realize that Nepal was only an eight hour bus ride away. We hauled our freshly washed packs down to the dusty bus station after breakfast.

Nepal looked much like India, initially, but we were so happy to be out of India that we tried not to notice. Once we got off the low grasslands the weather became much cooler and the scenery much more spectacular. We arrived in Kathmandu in time for a rainstorm, the first in over a month and the start, unfortunately, of the rainy season in Nepal. We never caught even a glimpse of the Himalayas.

We did see some fascinating architecture in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. These three ancient city-kingdoms occupy most of the Kathmandu Valley, which is watched over by the eyes of Buddha atop Swayambhu. Each city has a Durbar (Palace) Square which hosts more temples per square mile than anywhere else we've been. The red-brick-and-wood pagoda-style temples are very distinctive; most have tourist shops beneath their eaves. Even the eaves are an attraction, bearing intricately carved figures of the Hindu gods, and, often, erotic scenes on their struts.



One of the temples in Kathmandu is home to the Kumari Devi, or living goddess. She is a young girl chosen periodically according to a set of very stringent characteristics (including age, eye and hair color, voice, and horoscope) determined by ancient legend. She and her family are permitted to reside in the temple, and she performs ceremonial duties, until her first serious loss of blood. This may be by accident or menstruation.

Another shrine is quite unique, consisting of a lump of wood into which thousands of small coins have been nailed. This is supposed to cure toothache. From the number of dental offices surrounding the shrine, we guessed that it doesn't always work.

After a few days of tramping through bazaars, past monuments and shrines and other tourists, we decided to head for Pokhara to do some hiking. Ironically, we found ourselves hiking sooner than we expected when a mudslide created a massive traffic jam on the road halfway there. We slogged over 3 km of muddy road, boarded a twin bus on the far side of the blockage and arrived in Pokhara just as another thunderstorm broke.

It rained every day we were in Nepal, in fact. Happily, the rains came at a foreseeable time each day so we could plan around them. It clouded over as we strode up a hill overlooking Pokhara one day, but we made it to the village atop the peak in time to enjoy a true Nepali lunch before the torrent poured down. As soon as the sun reappeared we whipped our cameras out for a beautiful shot of the lake and town below before beginning our descent. We should have waited a moment or two longer -- the sky was swept crystal clear by the passage of the storm and the towering Annapurnas, only 20 km to the north, were revealed in sharp detail. It was a beautiful, awe-inspiring sight. Pity our view was obstructed by the bulk of the hill we were almost a quarter of the way down!



Giardia prevented us from tackling any more strenuous hikes and we had to be content with rowing on the lake, visiting a cave on the outskirts of Pokhara, and taking in a programme of traditional Nepali dancing. The last was excellent. As our health improved, we also sampled a local drop, Star Beer. Its label states: "Made under German technical collaboration". We suspect this enables the Nepali brewery to share the blame; it was absolutely dreadful.

Next came white water rafting. We had booked this adventure with some apprehension, never having done any serious rafting. Contrary to our expectations, we found ourselves the only two passengers in the rubber raft, being thus outnumbered by the crew of three. We were given the "privilege" of sitting in the bow and naturally got soaked within seconds of pushing off from the bank. The water was freezing but the sun was warm and rapids were not so frequent as to keep us permanently saturated, so we loved it.

We didn't realize just how good a deal we'd made until another raft crammed with a dozen tourists rushed past. They were all paddling madly according to strict commands shouted by their skipper. In lovely contrast, our craft had mounted oars used mostly by the crew and we dipped our ineffectual paddles in the water only at the rare request of our captain. In short, we lazed around and watched the sheer cliffs and forested slopes slide by for two days.

Our one stay overnight was also memorable. We put in at a small, sandy beach at the base of a very steep hill near Mugling and were given tea as the crew raced the clouds overhead to see whether tents would go up before rains came down. During soup and crispy pompadoms it began to sprinkle. Darker, more ominous clouds began to gather on the horizon. One of the crew gestured to huts on the top of the hill and said that we might be more comfortable up there for the night. "Oh, we'll be right in the tent," we said.

It began to rain harder so we moved our meal inside the tent. A moment later another Nepali appeared and said we really ought to move to the hilltop. "Hey, we've been camping before," we assured him, a bit annoyed that he should take us for wimps. "Oh, no," he said. "It's not that." And then he explained that if the rain was heavy that night, the sluice-gates of the hydroelectric dam just upstream might have to be opened. In which case, the entire beach would be swept away!

[Continued on p.12]

A Passing Glance at
SCIENCE FICTION IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

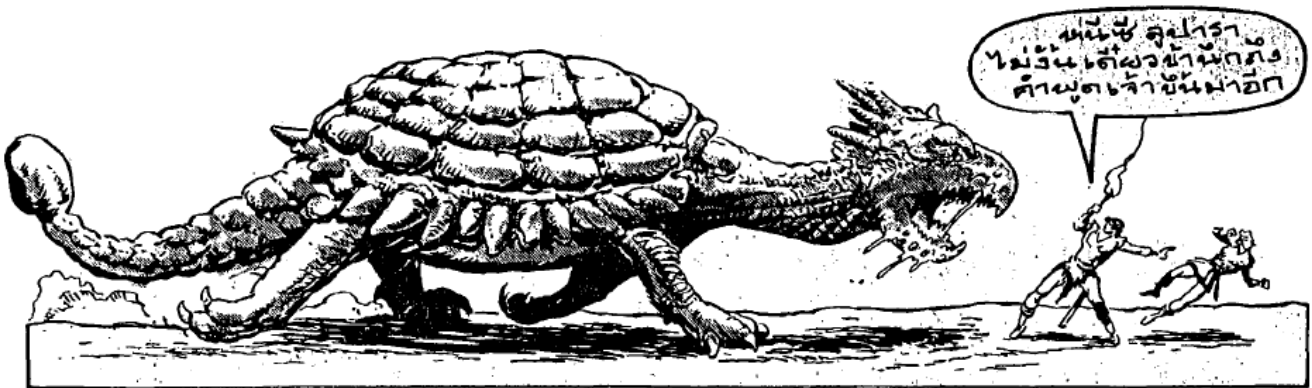
Unlike Pakistan and India, we did not spend very much time in the countries discussed here, so I can provide only a very superficial review of sf publishing and fan activities therein. Even on this basis, though, it wasn't hard to spot the correlation between the countries' level of development in material terms with the amount of sf published.

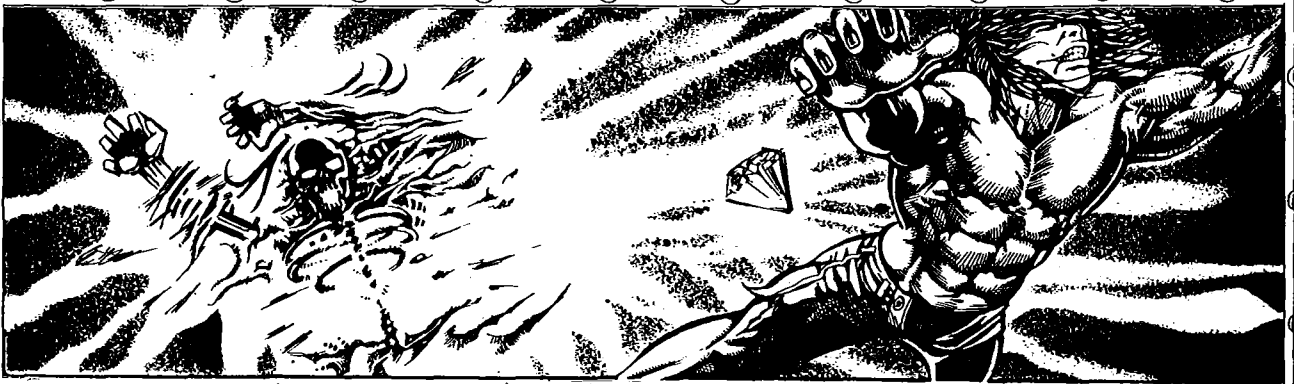
Economically, Nepal and Laos were the poorest of the countries we visited, so it is little surprise that we found no evidence of indigenous sf in either country. In the case of Laos, this is a colossal understatement, for there is virtually no publishing activity of any kind there. Some textbooks and a few government-controlled newspapers consisting of rough, legal-size paper printed on spirit duplicators -- looking for all the world like fanzines from the 1950s! -- are about it. The Lao National Library contains only historical banana-leaf documents and a very small, haphazard collection of books donated by Laos' various benefactors over the years (France, the USA and the USSR). Browsing the shelves, I had to smile when I recognized one of the titles by its distinctive orange and black cover -- it was H.W. Hall's Science Fiction Book Review Index, 1923-1973!

Hunting in Nepal was more rewarding, in that English-language sf is easily available. The areas heavily populated by tourists, such as Thamel in Kathmandu, offer many secondhand bookstores which thrive on the rapid turnover of stock brought in by the backpackers. Some of these had a better selection of recent sf than we have here in Western Australia. This abundance of foreign sf may be one reason I never found a single example of Nepali science fiction.

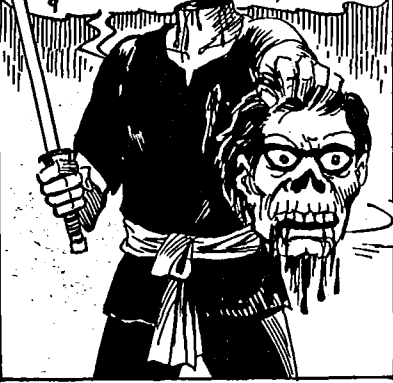
Western sf can be found in Thailand, too, particularly in Bangkok. Like Pakistan, a number of paperbacks and magazines like Analog, Omni and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine are imported. The amount of local product was not immediately apparent, though I did find some examples. The most mature was a Thai film about a robot housewife. I did not get a chance to see the film, but its review was favourable and from memory it was a light comedy.

In the far north of Thailand I was surprised to come upon a Thai edition of Conan -- the comic book. Here's a sample:

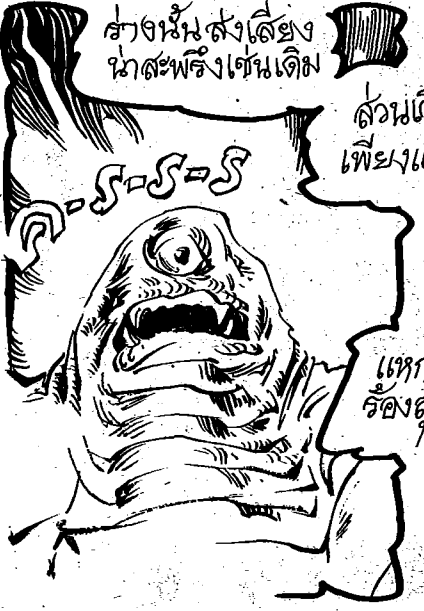




มันคงยังไม่เสียแพ้วได้
เพื่อบนตชบ! ขี้จะหาข
แต่ในใต้ก็ตายเมื่อขี้ได้
กุดหัวเค็งแจ่มเงาไหน!



ช่างมัน! ส่งได้ของ
ในตะพริ่งเต็นเดิม



ล้วนดีอีก
เพื่อง่ายๆ...



AmooXamil. ๗

In the far south of Thailand I found thin, digest-sized comics reminiscent of the EC horror comics of the early 1950s. Most sell for 1 Baht (about 4 cents) and contain 16 pages of crude, violent drawings like those opposite, at bottom and centre left.

The illo at centre right comes from a Malay children's book; the border and top illustration are from a beautiful Malaysian magazine entitled Fantasi. It is not entirely devoted to sf and fantasy but does feature very good graphic and "komik" art of genre interest. It is in Bahasa Malay, as are a number of sf books for children.

Another example of regional sf I found was a play review published in The New Straits Times. Written by an Indonesian playwright and staged by actors from Indonesia and Singapore, Orde Tabung ("The Order of the Test-tube Generation") envisages a future in which test-tube born people will no longer respect or love their elders and will rule autocratically until overthrown. The reviewer found this "a bit too far-fetched...the set of values [assumed] is simply unacceptable...it's unthinkable that the test-tube generation would treat the "conventional people" like pariahs". Clearly distressed by the play's attitude, the reviewer at least praised the "rousing" musical score and the performers. In a side comment he added:

"Incidentally, our local theatre staged a play which had an almost similar theme--"the happenings in the year 2000"--Kelas 20/20 by Rahim Razali...[in which] the future generation...is more tolerant, respectful and above all appreciative of their forefathers."

(And, thus, more acceptable to the reviewer, it would seem.)

Few of you will be surprised to learn that sf was most highly in evidence in Singapore. Academic Kirpal Singh is well known for his works of history and criticism in the genre, a number of Singapore writers have published works, and Locus has featured meetings of fen from the Science Fiction Association (Singapore) with authors including Brian Aldiss. Kirpal Singh organized the first sf course in Singapore in 1975 and has edited a collection of short stories, Singapore Science Fiction as well as books like The Stellar Gauge (jointly edited with Michael Tolley).

Tesseract, the journal of the SFAS, is glossy, impressive looking and contains a good range of fiction and articles concerned with sf and related genres. I bought a recent collection of stories by one of its members, Terence Chua, called The Nightmare Factory to read on the plane to Darwin. The range of his material -- from Western mythology to Doc Savage to cyberpunk -- both startled and dismayed me somewhat. It demonstrates a familiarity with American sf that borders on dependence; I would have enjoyed the book more if there had been something more identifiably "Singaporean" about it.

Is such a thing possible? If critics can perceive national voices in American, British and Australian science fiction, why not in the writings of Singaporeans, and other Asian nationalities? Or might they already exist, undiscovered and unappreciated by readers in the West, as is the case with Indian sf? I wonder...

THE READER SQUEAKS

Harry Warner, Jr, Hagerstown, Maryland

7 February 1992

The sixth Mumblings arrived four days ago, a bare week after the date on its postmark. I envision a Pakistani postal system which sends fanzines up the rope of a conjuror, where favorable winds zip them across one or more oceans until the smog hovering over North America grounds them and United States postal workers complete the job of getting them to destination.

I keep telling myself that I mustn't let myself feel dizzy and disoriented when I read of sightseeing by fans in the more obscure parts of the globe...I can't recall any other fan describing a trip into a salt mine.

I suspect that there might be some Pakistani sf published in book form many years ago, since such books have turned up in many other nations that had little or no contact with the English-language science fiction tradition. As for Pakistani fandom, wouldn't the colleges be the natural place for isolated fans to get in touch with one another, since there aren't any conventions or letter sections to create contacts?

One good way to learn the elements of another language is probably invalid in the case of Dari. I picked up a fair knowledge of French, German, Italian and Spanish because I'm so interested in music and bought many records containing operas and songs in those languages with both original texts and translations printed on the back of the album or in separate booklets. Listening to the singers over and over, following the words in both the original and translation, gives you a wonderful repetitive drill although it doesn't help much if you want to speak and write fluently in those tongues. I doubt somehow if Dari has been used as an opera libretto language very often.

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Harry Pol, Nieuwegein, The Netherlands

9 February 1992

I was at the British Fantasycon a couple of months ago and got to meet my favourite author (at this moment in time) Dan Simmons. He's been winning awards left, right and centre these past few years (including the Hugo for his novel Hyperion) and generally driving his publishers up the wall for lack of a genre to which he can safely be pinned down. His new novel The Hollow Man should be out next month.

He also did a reading from a book he was working on which was very intense. The story took place in Roumania just after the recent upheaval and describes the hideous orphanages. Before he could finish the reading however, a con organizer walked up and said his time was over. So he had to stop after three-quarters of the story ...he was the GoH for crying out loud!

William M. Danner, Kennerdell, Pa.

28 April 1992

I enjoyed the contents [of #7] and was flabbergasted by that outer cover. Why didn't you give a bit of information about it, as you usually do about such things? It's about the most grotesque thing I've ever seen and I can't help feeling sorry for that little green man. I suppose it's silk-screen work, and I never before saw any silk-screen work so intricately detailed and so impeccably printed. Only complaint about #7 is the miserable dot-matrix print, but I suppose you had to make do with what was available.

[Yep. The cards I used as an outer cover each had information on their reverse -- all I did was buy them at the Orissa State Emporium in New Delhi. It looks like they were silk-screened, with fine detail added by hand.]

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Harry Warner, Jr, Hagerstown, Maryland

29 April 1992

I won't receive a more colorfully covered fanzine this year or perhaps this decade than your latest. The nobleman or deity or whoever the gentleman on the cover may be seems to have had a mystic effect on India's postal system, too, because this issue came two days ago.

Unless Indiana Jones starts to publish fanzines, nobody has a chance to equal your descriptions of exotic locations and stranger peoples. Remember, the fandom I entered in the late 1930s got all excited when several New York City fans made the trip of 150 or so miles to visit Philadelphia fandom. We may have dreamed at that time that an era would arrive when fans from the West Coast of the United States would see its East Coast fans with their own eyes. But the concept of fans from Australia traveling in much of Asia where they used computer equipment to create a photocopied (I assume)[correctly] fanzine would have been so fantastic...

It's odd that Asimov didn't get back to you about Dr Calvin's birth notice. He was congenial with fans and usually gave credit where it was due. Of course, we all mourn his passing. I have this strange idea that fate should make an exception for all the older writers of science fiction and permit them to live at least until the start of the 21st century, as a reward for having speculated so much about the future.

The information on India's science fiction stories and fans is fascinating... Who knows how many or how few years in the future a worldcon may occur somewhere in India or another Asian mainland nation?

[Colombo in 2001 would be appropriate, don't you agree?]

You realize, of course, that your next issue will be an anticlimax if you don't tell how it felt to be the first fan in outer space.

[Sorry, no can do. Most of the time I was spacesick.]

[continued from p.6]

We grabbed our packs and started a frantic scramble up the near-vertical, wet scree slope as it began to rain hard. They made room for us in the upstairs of a family hut. Water soon gave way to hail -- deafening on the tin roof; it sounded like radio static at full volume -- followed by more rain and a spectacular display of thunder and lightning. We played cards by candlelight until late.

The next two nights were spent in another hut, this one with a thatched roof. We were outside the Royal Chitwan National Park, a truck and jeep ride away from where the rafting had ended. Inside the park we had great fun attempting to spot animals on foot, jeep and elephant. The highlight was seeing rhinos in the wild. A jungle walk guide advised us of the proper evasive action to take should one of the beasties charge at us -- run in a zig-zag pattern to the nearest tree -- which left us anxiously scanning the horizon for (1) rhinos and (2) trees.

For the first half hour there were neither. Suddenly, there came a rustling in the tall elephant grass. Hearts leaping, we peered into the field of nightmares and saw ... a spotted deer!

Apart from birds, we saw little else until we approached the river. Then the guide gestured to us to stop. He had smelt a rhino and, sure enough, a few of us saw the back end of it as it snorted and trotted away. A few minutes later we passed another tourist group sitting up trees, crept up to the water's edge, and saw a family of three rhinos wallowing in mud. It was remarkable to watch them and see the plates on their hides.

Later we did it all again, by jeep (seeing less because of the noise it made) and again on elephant-back (seeing more for the same reason). I'd only ever ridden an elephant once before, a long time ago at a circus, so it was fun getting used to the slow, rolling gait. Chitwan encompasses areas of jungle, temperate forest and savannah and the elephant ride took us through all three at a leisurely pace. This was a highlight of our trip and something I would highly recommend to anyone heading for Nepal.



All too soon we were back in Kathmandu, preparing to return to more familiar territory. We'd both been through Bangkok a number of times by now and thought we knew what to expect. After seeing a copy of The Bangkok Post on board our 747, we weren't so sure. We were startled to find large areas of the newspaper blank -- the Thai government had prohibited full reporting of the pro-democracy demonstrations which had been attacked by police the night before. The city appeared normal to Megan and I as we rode a taxi to our hotel, but the situation was tense and stores were being ordered to close early. We applied for visas to Laos the next day and were on a train north as soon as we had them.

I've written about Laos before. Practically all of it is jungle except for a small plain upon which Vientiane sits. The original capital further north fell from favour when the king was toppled



after the Vietnam War and somehow the new communist state managed to reconcile itself with the popular religion -- Buddhism. Until 1992 Laos had only one bookstore, which carried mainly Russian & Vietnamese works. A new store catering to English-language readers was opened in May by an American.



I still found it all very strange, But relaxing. Megan loves it, having worked there for a year, and we spent our time catching up with her friends. We had great fun describing the Pakistani way of life to the Laotians. Given their relaxed lifestyle, they found it very hard to believe in a society which shuns alcohol (theoretically), restricts women's activities, and arranges marriages.

Back in Bangkok, the situation was returning to normal but we had no desire to stay long. We met some friends from Peshawar and holidayed a few days with them on Koh Samui, an island in the south of Thailand. Then we rode another train to the Malaysian border.

Another Muslim country, we were curious to see how Malaysia would compare to Pakistan. We were relieved to find that it is not as strict about its religion, though many women do wear scarves over their heads and outfits similar to the shalwar kameez. Tolerance of other religions seems to be much higher here, however, and the country overall was much more developed than we were expecting.

Kota Bahru was our first stop. We didn't get a lot done there as Haj observances meant many shops and most museums were closed. We did see demonstrations of top-spinning, coconut-drum beating and kite launching before hopping a bus to Rantau Abang.

The opportunity to "see the giant turtles" as illustrated in the guidebooks was not to be missed. Somewhat mischievously, not to say suspiciously, the guidebooks forget to mention a few pertinent facts. Like that the turtles are nocturnal, preferring to struggle up the beach at 4 a.m. rather than any time during bright sunshine (when those photos were taken). And that you'll be socked a "guide fee" and separate "transport fee" to be taken, at 4 a.m. in the morning, one kilometre down the road. And that, once there, you won't be allowed to use torches to actually see anything.

Anyway, we were there, so we did all this, along with forty or so fellow chumps. We hit the beach and our crowd became hushed with excitement at the imminent prospect of watching hordes of giant turtles swarming up the sand. After a short walk, a circle formed ahead of us. This must be it! Giant turtles! Eagerly we pressed forward, jostling for a good position...

To see a dark shape on the sand.

All eyes peered into the darkness expectantly. And peered. And continued peering. The Dark Shape did not move. Presently a few of us drifted away to cast cursory glances at strange markings in the sand which led up to The Dark Shape. Were those giant turtle tracks? None of us knew. Tiny, fluorescent sea critters tried to console us by glowing brightly whenever a wave washed over them. But they, too, disappeared into darkness before we could get a decent look at them.

Megan eventually found me sitting on the beach, watching the stars (which were visible) and asserted that The Dark Shape was, in fact, a giant turtle. Moreover, it was now active.

And so it was. Occasionally a flash of pale gray and a spray of sand accompanied by a grunt would disturb our senses. But a Dark Shape manoeuvring in the darkness is still no spectacle and even the most optimistic Dark Shape watchers eventually called it a night. We stumbled back to the buses and then back to bed.

One other thing the guidebooks forget to mention is that it's damn hard to get a bus from Rantau Abang. Plenty of them go past -- it is on the main highway -- but few deign to stop for low-lifes like backpackers. Eventually Allah smiled upon us and a taxi with one couple already aboard pulled up. Later that day we arrived in Kuantan, from where we flew to Kuala Lumpur in early June.

KL is a modern, sky-scrapered city identical to any in the West, except cleaner. It is also home to one of the best aviaries I've ever seen -- a huge, covered area housing a tremendous number of colorful tropical birds -- as well as an orchid garden, deer and butterfly parks. These, the excellent National Museum and famed National Mosque combine to form a cultural centre quite close to the central business district. It can be difficult to walk from one to the other, however. Kuala Lumpur is similar to Los Angeles and other cities of the automobile era in that concrete roadways criss-cross the city and make life hell for pedestrians.

The city appears to be growing rapidly and tourism must be booming. We observed a lot of new buildings going up, many of them luxury hotel complexes. Unfortunately, most of the older hotels with character have disappeared -- our first two choices were gone, yet they'd been listed in a guidebook only two years old. We stayed in one of the concrete boxes to celebrate Megan's birthday and then moved to a cheap Chinese flophouse for the rest of our stay.

Our last stop in Malaysia was Melaka. Quite a centre for tourists today, this used to be a sleepy old town with a long and convoluted history. Originally a small Malay fishing village, it developed as a centre of trade, particularly between China and the Middle East, until taken by Portuguese forces in 1511. A Portuguese fort was maintained by the Dutch after its capture but was almost completely destroyed by the British later. They wanted to prevent Melaka from competing with Singapore.

Architectural remnants of all these past reigns still stand in the town. A sound and light show incorporating many of them summarizes

the complex local history with gusto. The mosques are particularly interesting as the normal assembly hall and tower structures are pagoda-like, showing the Chinese influence. Very odd looking.

The bus to Singapore was swift and efficient, taking us through customs at the border and dropping us off right above one of the "suburban" Metropolitan Rapid Transit stations. Too bad we didn't have any Singaporean currency! Surrounded by high-rise apartment blocks, we had to hike to the nearest money-changer before we could take the sleek and (dare I say) futuristic MRT train into the city.

With only one full day to spend here, and vastly different shopping strategies, Megan and I split up to blow the rest of our money separately. The laptop computer I'm typing on at this moment is one of the items acquired that day. We met up that evening to rest our feet and enjoy a puppet performance of The Lord of the Rings at Singapore's port complex. This was done by a Canadian troupe; they managed huge puppets augmented by laser light effects. Condensing Tolkien's massive work into just three hours meant they had to skip a few wee parts and skimp on others -- staging the battle of Minas Tirith with only eight characters on stage being a notable example but it was fun. And a great finale to our trip.

At long last, we returned to Australia on June 20th. Setting down in Darwin, we visited my sister and her husband for a week before heading home -- Megan to Melbourne and myself to Perth. It's oddly disconcerting (to say the least) that, having travelled some 20,000 kilometres together overseas, we now find ourselves separated by 2,500 km in our own country!

And there you have it. We skipped Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia on this journey -- had to leave some places to go to next time! Just when that might be I can't say. At present, we don't even know who will be moving where to join the other, though Megan has gained an edge by finding a job in Melbourne. Yikes!

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Faced with so many unknowns, how could I choose any other pulp to emulate on the cover? The incomparable Edd Cartier was the artist for Eric Frank Russell's Sinister Barrier when it helped launch Unknown in 1939 and again when Fantasy Press put it between hard covers in 1948. I've borrowed this illustration from the latter. On the back cover is a last reminder of Nepal. The small fillers on pages 5, 6 and 12 are also from that land of majestic mountains. The fiery faces gracing page 13 are from a Lao book used to teach young monks how to decorate temples there. You'll see more of these in future issues.

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A little late, here's number 8. I don't know where I'll be issuing the next issue from but any letters and/or blank cheques can go to:

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- AUSTRALIA -

