



We have had the rare good fortune of being led in the anti-colonial struggle by Mahatma Gandhi. For him, ending the direct political subjugation of India by the British was a small part of a larger struggle to win back for the people of India a sense of confidence in them-selves, to shake off mental slavery and to rediscover themselves as people. He was acutely aware of the fact that mental slavery was not less but even more deadly than economic and political subjugation.

It has been more than four decades since India got rid of British colonial rule. Yet, despite Gandhi's creative use of Swadesh, we are more enslaved to the West now than under the direct rule of the British. When it comes to rhetoric, the Indian elite is ridiculously paranoid about western domination. They are forever hysterically screaming against

# Symbols of Mental Slavery

by  
Madhu Kishwar

sell-outs to multinationals and other power centres of the western world which are perceived as bulldozing us into following policies which are threats to our political, social, cultural and economic autonomy. This mindset is rather pervasive. Leftists, rightists, centrists all join the chorus of self-styled defenders against western conspiracies to enslave and bully India into following the evil ways of the West. Yet even when left alone, the best that the elite do in any field is to imitate the West mindlessly (indulge in a cheap and shoddy imitation of western ways and norms).

One unmistakable symbol of our mental slavery is the continuing spread in India of preference for the western mode of defecation and waste disposal. Its salient features are:

1. A chair like commode for defecation which probably is related to the cold climate in the western hemisphere which made it necessary to perform all activities away from the floor, especially when there was no central heating. In India, the same task is performed squatting on one's haunches. This is why a toilet with a chair style toilet seat is popularly called 'western commode' in India and the one which has a bowl for the squatting posture is considered 'Indian'.

2. The flush toilet (water closet) as a system of fecal and other waste disposal which is linked to large drains which are then emptied out into rivers. This is perhaps one of the most ecologically destructive of all the "advances" made by the west; it leads to the wilful pollution and poisoning of the earth's water resources.

When the British left India, they left behind WCs (meaning "western commode" not just "closet") in a few select places such as in colonial mansions of the gora sahibs, dakhungalows and circuit houses, fancy hotels and restaurants and in a few private bunga-lows in the civil lines area of every city meant for gora and brown sahibs. Today the western commode has spread like the plague — and with equally disastrous results. You now see WCs in train toilets (even those attached to second class compartments), cinema halls, student hostels, government housing complexes, cheap and fancy hotels — and of course in the private homes of the lower middle and higher urban strata. Likewise the system of pouring raw sewage into rivers in the name of building a modern drainage system is no longer confined to big metropolitan cities. It has spread all over the country, starting from small towns and even urbanised villages.

Its spread is a proof that the western educated elite who run the affairs of the country are so mindless in its efforts at aping the West that it is not even aware that it is covering itself with and ingesting shit in the process. This is because this elite is thoroughly alien-ated from its own culture and environment. In short even from its own being. Yet, this westernised elite enjoys such tremendous influence over the colonised minds that it can mesmerise vast sections of the population into doing with eagerness things that would have revolted them before being mentally colonised.

For instance, there is no evidence



## THE DREAM



that the World Bank or any other powerful multinational has conspired to facilitate the spread of the 'western commode' and the drainage system — both of which are extremely inappropriate and ugly transplants from the west; this besides posing major health hazards. It's our own elite which has done so. Contrast this with self-respecting Japan.

Japanese homes mostly have eastern style toilets for their own use. But foreigners are culturally distanced and respected by

providing WCs for their exclusive use.

### Imperial Throne of Sahibs

Why do I call the western style commode unhealthy and inappropriate? For several good reasons:

- Most Indians, especially those from rural areas, are used to the squatting posture for defecation. The Indian commode\* serves this purpose very well. In addition, the Indian commode provides good exercise for one's hip, knee and ankle joints — important for fending off arthritic joints. The squatting posture facilitates bowel movement because of the pressure on the stomach. It also provides pelvic-floor exercise and minimises the risk of perineal tearing

*\*What we call the Indian toilet goes under the name of "Turkish" in France and "Moslem" or "Arab" in Britain these days. In Japan it is called the "Eastern" toilet.*

## THE REALITY



during childbirth. Some Indians, unaccustomed to defecating on the WC's throne in a sitting posture, tend to squat on the commode, thereby creating a big mess all over it. In addition, one gets up feeling unclean because of the dirty water that comes splashing up from the receiving end of the western commode.

- Given the perennial water shortage in India, the WC becomes a

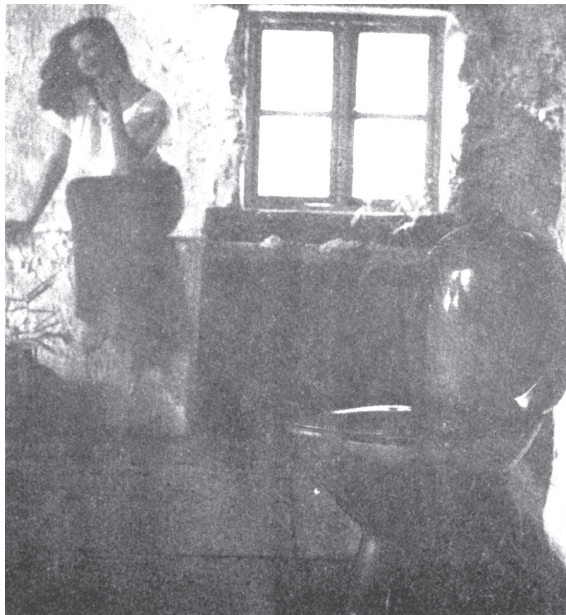


liability wherever it is installed. The Indian commode can be kept clean with a relatively small amount of water to get the shit drained out. For the western style commode you need more than a cistern full, amounting to almost 30 litres of water to flush off the waste af-ter every use including urination. If the water supply is irregular and the water tank doesn't get filled up, which is a frequent occurrence even in cities like Delhi, you have to pour bucket after bucket to get the mess down the drain.

- The use of the WC presupposes the use of toilet paper — something most Indians are uncomfortable with. In this age of ecological crisis, it is preposterous to waste so much paper, as it involves cutting down of thousands of trees, just to keep one's bottoms clean. Besides, the best of toilet papers doesn't do the job as efficiently as does water. While using the western WC which does not allow for an easy wash, Indians tend to use far more toilet paper than westerners because of the need to "feel clean". Also, the use of toilet paper causes irritation and is likely to cause hemorrhoids.

- When the WC is used for urinating by men, they end up with urine all over the seat. It is very unpleasant and unhealthy to sit on a sprayed seat cover. In the West, they are beginning to recognise this problem and in select public toilets, disposable seat covers are being provided so that the users' bottoms do not have to touch the pee sprayed toilet seat. However, this will lead to more paper wastage and cutting down of even more trees.

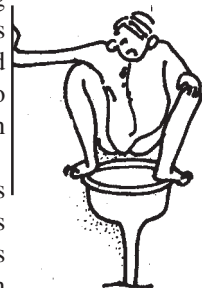
- Given the prejudice most Indians have about cleaning toilets themselves (unfortunately there is less prejudice against using unclean toilets), the task is left to poorly



**Waiting for her prince charming to come and occupy his legitimate throne**

equipped sweepers. As a result, even in middle class homes the WC is filthy. You can actually see them coated with dark brown sediments of excreta settled at the bottom under the water. In contrast, the Indian commode can be easily cleaned with even a simple broom and the dirt cleaned totally out of sight. Even if not cleaned properly, it is not as much a health hazard as is a WC because there is no need for body contact with the commode.

- In public places, the WCs are an even greater health hazard than in private homes. It is a common sight to find excreta floating in urine sprayed commodes in cinema halls, in student hostels, railway stations, airports, restaurants, office buildings, and practically every place where there are WC toilets. Except in five-star hotels, I have rarely found a really clean WC anywhere in India.



As a result it is becoming increasingly difficult in the cities to relieve

oneself outside their homes. The problem is most acute for women, who unlike men do not urinate standing and are very hesitant to relieve themselves in open public places, an art well mastered by the men of this subcontinent.

Even though the WC is a positive inconvenience from every point of view, it seems to have become a status symbol for any "modern" home or building. How did millions of Indians get conned into using the WC? Making a "modern" home or building requires hiring "modern" specialists — architects and engineers — whose planning for any "modern" construction must include a WC. Why? Because

the text books and syllabi used in our colleges of engineering and architecture are a copy of what used to be taught in British or American universities several decades ago.

It is the same with the manufacturers of bathroom and toilet fittings. Their energies are focused on copying models of bath tubs and toilet seats designed in the West. Our designers/ manufacturers have never thought of making the slightest improvement in the design of what we consider as the 'Indian' commode, though it could do with some modification such as an easily removable cover on top of the commode. Since the reigning style in the West is to use a chair like commode, they keep introducing newer copied models of the WC which are then vigorously pushed into the market through advertising companies which in turn lift ideas and ads from western magazines.

Rarely do I recall having seen an Indian commode in any advertisement of bathroom fittings. The advertisements present pictures of luxurious bathrooms in pink and blue

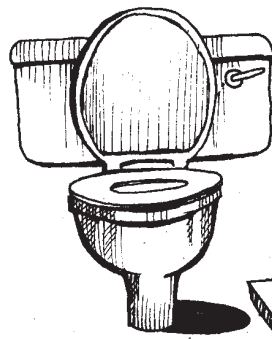
with "modem" fittings presided over by the WC. It is projected as a veritable *Takhte-e Taus*. These bathrooms obviously have nothing to do with real living conditions in Indian homes, including upper class homes. Their come-hither appearance in ads seduces gullible Indians into installing

this nuisance their homes. So strong is the association of a modem bathroom with a western commode that today it is unthinkable for an urban family building a house to do without the WC. The architects, the contractors, the ceramic manufacturers are all part of the conspiracy to project the WC as the final hallmark of having arrived at modem Swing. We sit on a WC, therefore, we are.

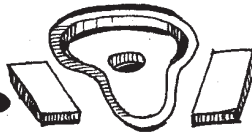
Americans who invented the idea of the bathroom as a "temple" at least figured out effective ways of keeping their "temple" clean. In India, because we have forgotten our own culture's notion of hygiene and have begun copying the designs without regard to the wherewithal that goes with it, including getting over our hangups against touching anything connected to excreta, in turn our bathrooms have become areas of filth and stink.

The disease spreads, and unlike any ordinary disease, which is avoided, if at all possible, by those who are in an area where there's a high risk of contracting it, these disease carrier commodes are avidly sought after. People pay fancy prices for having them installed. I'm told the price of a good quality WC is ten times that of an Indian commode.

To have or not to have a WC in the house is to define one's place in the social hierarchy. It is another matter how you use it! This is considered the most authoritative



## NEW SOCIOLOGY



certificate and proof of being modern (often used as a synonym for being westernised) as well as being above the riff raff. For instance, bungalows of ow brown sahibs must have WCs but their servants must use Indian commodes. Likewise, Lower Income Group flats built for peons and clerks shall have Indian commodes but those meant for officers and class I employees shall be installed with WCs as status symbols. In the college where I used to teach, the principal's bathroom and the toilet room for the teaching staff had WCs, but the toilet for Class II and Class IV staff had an Indian commode. No five-star hotel will ever allow an Indian commode on its premises but *dharamshalas* meant for ordinary *janata* are not 'honoured' with WCs. An elite university like JNU has to have a certain number of WCs even if it means that half of the toilets are unusably filthy all the time, but a school in a harijan *basti* will be sanctioned Indian commodes.

This madness will go on and on, spreading filth and disease even in middle and upper middle class homes because the primary consideration for installing it is "status", not convenience. It makes hundreds and thousands of our public toilets unusable, a source of filth, disease and discomfort. They will only stop being used when the Indian style commodes, which are more hygienic and easy to maintain, are discovered

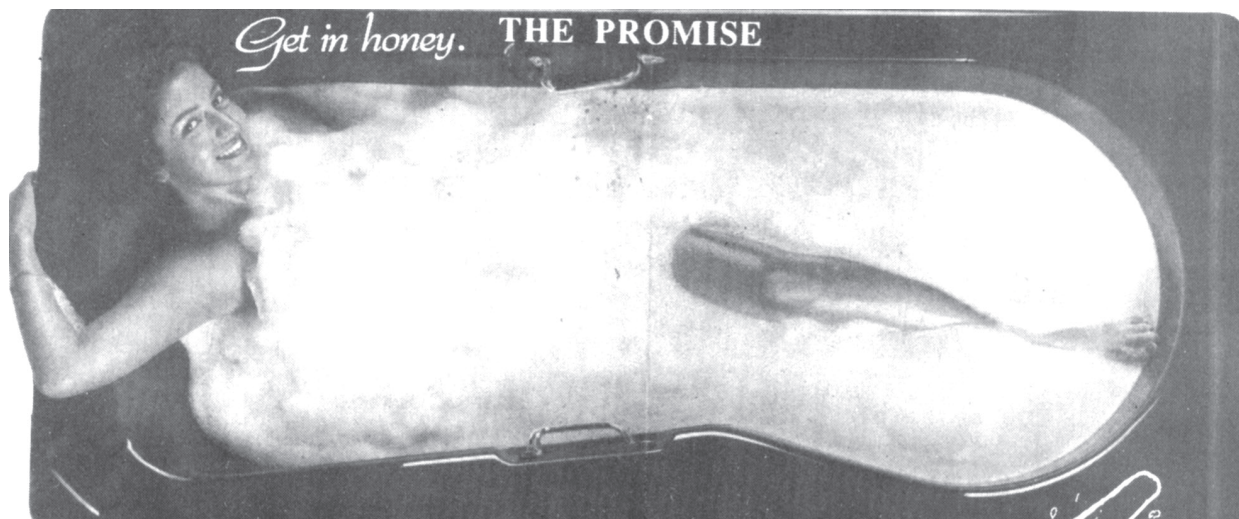
by a Jane Fonda in America who will make a videotape on healthy toilet habits, displaying how she uses her own commode. Or maybe if the Green Movement in Eu-rope adopts it, then the health movement activists in India and the appropriate technology *wallas* will start holding

international and national workshops in Bangkok, Berne and Bonn to devise strategies for weaning the Indians away from the unhealthy western toilet and getting them to adopt the previously despised Indian commode.

Perhaps when the Ford Foundation, the WHO, IBRD or the UNDP and the World Bank will begin to jjiive lib-eral grants for holding workshops on the art of 'ethnic squatting', some of our innovative dancers and musicians will happily devise specially choreographed pieces on the theme. It is then that our papers will bring out special colour supplements to convince us of the virtues of Indian commodes.

Hand in hand with the spread of the WC goes another architectural monstrosity—the joint bath cum toilet room, something altogether alien to our cultural norms. No matter how hard one tries to kill the smell with deodorants, it's not really pleasant to bathe in a room from which someone has just emerged after using the toilet. As homes and bathrooms become smaller with the shortage of space, one ends up having to literally rub shoulders with the WC while bathing.

Add to it the proliferation of bathtubs requiring almost 200 litres of water per bath. They are a cruel joke given our perennial water scarcity. In any case, most Indians do not feel properly bathed by merely soaking themselves in soap water. Most of us end up taking a shower after a session

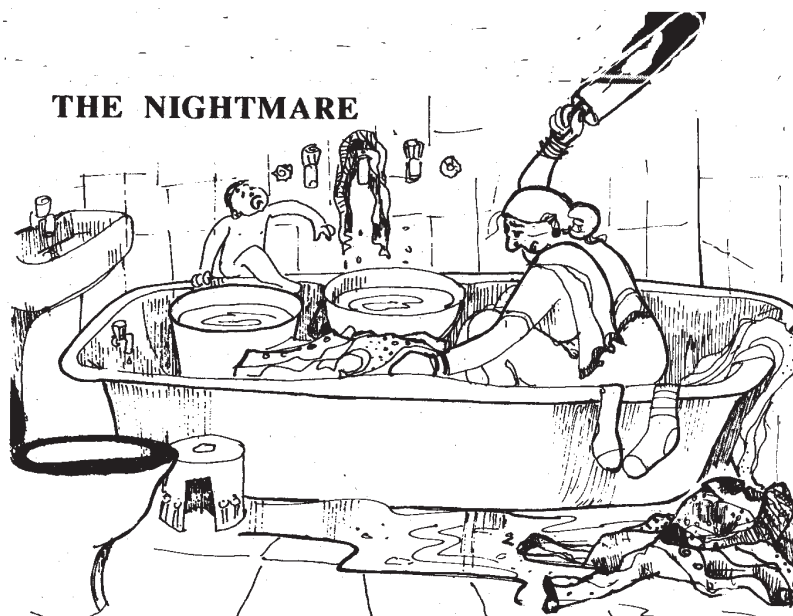


in the tub. Mostly people just sit in the tub and have a bucket bath! Worse still is the plight of housewives and maids who have to wash and scrub clothes inside the tub because there is little space left for such necessary functions after “modern sanitaryware” has been installed in cramped bathrooms.

#### **The ‘Modern’ Sewerage System**

While the WC messes up people’s homes and their personal hygiene, the modern sewerage system is a threat to the entire ecological system.

I remember years ago when an eight-year old son of a friend from a Punjab village came to Delhi on his first visit to a big city, one of the first things he quizzed me about was Delhi’s *big ganda nallas* (sewerage drains). When he learnt that these big *nallas* carried fecal and other waste to the Yamuna, he was aghast. He said: “But in the villages they use all kinds of fecal waste (human and animal) as manure. Why are they making a *ganda nalla* out of it here? How do you drink Yamuna water if all this filth is poured into it?” This eight year old child had more wisdom than our engineers and, town planners because he had gained his knowledge from lived experience and not from imported books and syllabi. The millions of drains that go to form the *big ganda nallas* are constructed at



phenomenal costs. Laying down underground sewerage pipes is very expensive. The raw sewage in these drains and *nallas* is poured into rivers, thus making their water polluted not only for human beings but even for fish. Many of the world’s rivers are totally dead because even fish and other water creatures cannot survive in them, leave alone reproduce. Thus, raw sewage systematically turns the life supporting bounties of nature into sources of disease and death even while we have to still depend on the very same riverwaters for drinking and other needs. Countries where sewage

water is beginning to be first treated before being allowed back into the river have to spend huge amounts of money for the purpose. So we have the absurd system of first dirtying them mindlessly, spending billions in the process and then have to spend many more billions to “purify” the filth choked water to make it portable—in the process having to add all kinds of chemicals to it. In a country like India which is forever facing water shortages, where millions of people do not have access to clean drinking water, it is a crying shame that billions of tonnes of “purified” water are used in our flush toilets and poured into



rivers which become filthy. Millions die every year due to water-borne diseases. The infant mortality rate in India is amongst the highest in the world. Almost 80 per cent of these child deaths are caused due to water-borne infections which are primarily due to pollution of our country's water resources. In fact water-borne diseases account for a very large proportion of all diseases in India.

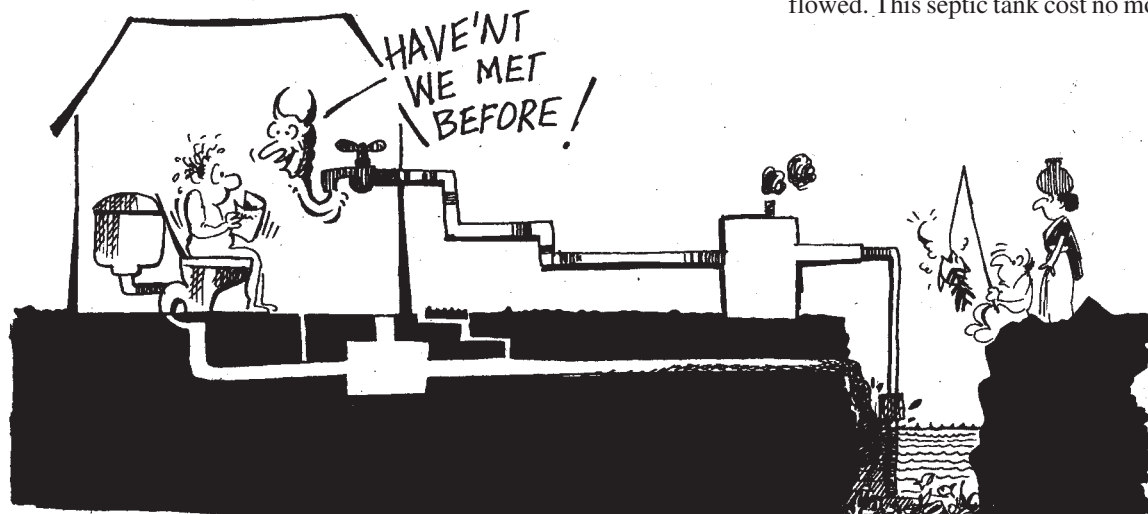
The western sewerage system has been adopted despite the fact that we can ill afford the expensive processing plants required to make the system work. Consequently, we are pouring untreated sewage water into our rivers. This callousness is all the more appalling given that in our culture, rivers are treated not just as sources of water but as objects of worship. The myths and legends which bestow a halo of sacredness to the rivers of India are not a thing of the past. Even today millions throng for a *snan* at Haridwar, Varanasi, Nasik and various other pilgrimage centres that grew around our sacred rivers, testifying to the continuing veneration for rivers at the popular level. But our own policy makers act with the same irreverence towards them that our British rulers did. They do not know that urban centres in ancient India had well developed drainage and waste disposal systems.



Of course we do not need to recreate in the twentieth or the twenty first century what was done at Mohenjo Daro thousands of years ago. But surely we need to evolve these systems keeping in mind our natural resources, our social values and our cultural habits. Gandhiji did precisely that when he developed simple but efficient and sophisticated dry latrines which required very little water and effort to keep them clean. They do not require a full cistern of water to flush away the fecal matter. In addition these latrines have the advantage of recycling all of human waste matter into energy. The fecal matter goes into septic tanks and gets converted into manure and gas — thus contributing to the solution of another perennial problem—that of

fuel and fertiliser shortage. Gandhiji demonstrated this to be a viable system. Despite the availability of this far more appropriate waste disposal and re-usage system for several decades now, it has not been taken seriously. It exists only at the peripheries, propagated by voluntary organisations such as *Sulabh International* — but only for the poor and marginalised groups of our society, who are not seen as deserving the “modern” sewerage system. That is precisely why it has failed to spread. No five-star hotel, cinema hall, university or elite residential area would ever think of installing it, for it is seen as being appropriate only for J. J. colonies or poor villages. It will get to be taken seriously only when suburbs of London or Paris decide to adopt it.

Recently, on a trip to Kanpur, I had occasion to visit friends in a new though not yet fully “developed” suburb called Vikas Nagar. The friend whose house I was visiting explained somewhat apologetically that their colony did not yet have all modern amenities such as underground sewerage pipes. Since this friend lived in a fairly modern house, I asked how they managed to have their flush toilets function. He showed me the septic tank they had built wherein all the waste water and fecal matter flowed. This septic tank cost no more



than Rs 2,500 because all it involved was digging a big pit with a strong *metal cover*. This septic tank made the sewerage system redundant—no need for underground sewer pipes and all the rest of the paraphernalia. It would be functional for five to seven years after which a new pit would be dug right next to the old one which would be emptied out beneficially because by then all the fecal waste would have been converted into high quality manure while the water would have seeped out of the pit to replenish the pool of ground water underneath. This system is clearly not only much more hygienic but also incredibly cheap compared to the underground sewerage system. In addition, it has the advantage of usefully recycling waste matter *without any costs* whatsoever. Yet, within no time this will be overtaken by the “modern sewerage” system as soon as the Kanpur municipality can direct its “development” activity towards this new suburb. Those of you who are familiar with Kanpur would know that the main city is like a sprawling slum with open sewers which carry the city’s filth to the holiest of our holy rivers — the Ganga. Modern development of Vikas Nagar will inevitably entail its joining the network of filth carrying drains, polluting the city environment as well as water supply sources.

The spread of these mindless inconveniences symbolises our mental slavery; we fear thinking through things for ourselves, we do not take our social and cultural environment seriously when planning not just the country’s economy, but even our own day to day living. Even our dreams and aspirations of the good life and our ideas of cleanliness are not our own; they are mere imitations of western commercial ads.

For those who find this statement rather fanatical and hyperbolic, it would be interesting to recall that our lawyers and judges still insist on wearing black cloaks which make them

look like vultures, apart from causing physical discomfort, especially during the summer months. They aren’t think of a more appropriate dress code. Our elite clubs still have rules left behind by the British about not allowing entry to anyone wearing Indian clothing. The brown sahibs aren’t change the rules or they wouldn’t know who to model themselves after.

Fashionable Indians have taken to eating with knives and forks even though our *roti sabzi* or *dal chawal* do not lend themselves to these appliances. Our modern office buildings are designed to resemble those in Toronto and New York with sealed windows and no provision for ventilation or natural light, making it necessary to have lighting and central air-conditioning function all through the day with no regard for our weather conditions and our perennial power scarcity. In our eagerness to ape western architecture we forget that we are a sun-rich tropical country.

When HMT recently introduced special children’s watches in India it did not occur to their “designers” to use one of the playful characters from Panchtantra. Their inevitable choice was Mickey Mouse. Our industrialists aspire to nothing better than giving us potato wafers and other western junk food for snacks and aerated drinks resembling Coca Cola in the name of providing ‘modern’ foods. It is worth remembering that even the radical *samajwadi* George Fernandes when he was the Minister for Industries could go no further than replacing Coca Cola with Double Seven — a poor imitation of “the real thing.” Even he dare not think of encouraging *maltha*, *kanji*, *thandai* or *sattu* as drinks, unless some American multinational discovers its virtues and *maltha* can come back as “buttermilk” and *sattu* as Horlicks, through foreign collaboration. We begin to discover the virtues of Yog only when it returns to us from the

West as Yoga performed by Hollywood actresses to the tune of Beethoven.

This colonised mindset is no longer the bane of the urban educated elite. They have vigorously ensured its spread through their control of the government machinery with its myriad rules, procedures and the hegemonic influence of the *babus* who run it. This is borne out by the following story told by a friend who was doing a study on panchayat institutions years ago. In a Tamil Nadu village, the people complained to him they had not been able to hold panchayat meetings because the government had not constructed or provided a panchayat bhavan in the village. My friend asked: “Why can’t you hold the meetings elsewhere, for instance in the school building during periods when it is not being used?” The reply was devastatingly simple: “The school is in use every day except Sundays. How can we hold a meeting on a Sunday? Government rules do not permit conducting any official business on a Sunday.” Why not on Sunday? Because it is the Lord’s Day. And which Lord? The Western Lord bequeathed by our colonial masters. In recent years, the British have relaxed the rule about not conducting official business on the Sabbath day. However, the rule has stuck on in India merely because the Indian ruling elite is too frightened to make its own rules and laws.

Today, our biggest handicap is that we as a people, especially our ruling elite, suffer from a poverty of native imagination. We have lost the habit and confidence of being able to think things through for ourselves. Unless we rediscover that strength and confidence, all the noises against western imperialism that our political and social elite are so fond of making will continue to sound hypocritical and appear as the childish tantrums of a slavish and infantile people. □