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Buying India's silence

Everyone here has been so busy watching the ongoing fracas in Washington, that little note was taken of Mikhail Gorbachev's state visit to India. That's too bad. India badly needed to be asked some hard questions by the rest of the world about the crimes being committed by its Soviet friend and ally in Afghanistan.

Gorbachev was grandly feted by the Indians, hailed repeatedly as a "peacemaker," and bathed in fulsome praise that seemed as cloying as some of India's sticky desserts. These eruptions of flattery had much to do with the gift Gorbachev had brought for his New Delhi hosts: \$1.03 billion (U.S.) in new economic aid, repayable over a long term in rupees. No other nation gets such generous aid terms from the stingy Soviets.

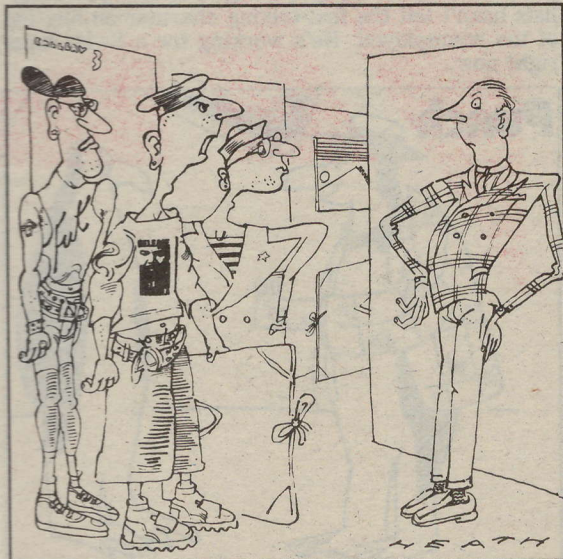
No surprise, relations between the two great Asian powers are extremely close — too close, in the view of some observers. To all the world, Rajiv Gandhi and Mikhail Gorbachev looked, last week, like the very best of pals. Important disagreements about Moscow's flirting with China, or India's reluctance to join in a Soviet-sponsored regional security alliance, were papered over with smiles and hugs.

In the midst of all this bonhomie, there was one matter that was carefully avoided in public by both Indians and Soviets alike — Afghanistan. Their mutual silence was thunderously loud.

India, readers will recall, has been one of South Africa's most vocal detractors, regularly blasting Pretoria for violations of human rights, racism and aggression. Washington is another favorite and frequent target of Delhi's self-appointed moralists who wax indignant over SDI or Nicaragua.

Yet about Afghanistan, which is only some 400 miles from India, the heirs of Gandhian morality have said little more than a faint "tut, tut."

Punch



"I'm not just some first-year art student -- this is my agent, and this is my financial adviser."

ERIC
MARGOLIS



To date, the Soviets have killed at least one million Afghans. Some 5.5 million are now reported refugees. According to the latest United Nations report on Afghanistan, released just last week, the Soviet Union — *Gorbachev's Soviet Union* — and its Afghan puppet regime are guilty of massive abuses of human rights.

The UN cites mounting terror bombings of the civilian population, widespread torture, savage reprisals, unlawful arrests, and particular outrages against children.

Also this past week came renewed reports of the tactical use by the Soviets of poison gas — the much feared, mysterious "Blue X."

What has been New Delhi's response to the massacre and torture of civilians 400 miles away? India is one of the few non-communist nations to recognize the puppet Kabul regime of Dr. Najib. It also has the dubious distinction of recognizing that other outcast creature of the Soviet Union, the Kampuchean (Cambodian) regime of Heng Samrin. India's official policy on Afghanistan is to "deplore the presence of outside forces" in that wretched land. In other words, New Delhi simply follows the Soviet line which claims that the Afghan resistance is nothing more than a bunch of CIA-backed bandits.

To underline the point, the small number of Afghan refugees in New Delhi were locked up by the police during Gorbachev's visit. India did not want to risk its favored guest being embarrassed by irksome people waving signs about genocide and torture. It's one thing to lambaste those wicked South Africans, but quite another to speak ill of the great benefactor from the north who sells India steel mills, power stations and mining equipment for a mere raga or two.

And arms, don't forget arms. Today, 70% of India's arms, munitions and defence industrial base are of Soviet origin — and on bargain terms that even East Europe does not often get. New, state-of-the-art MiG-29s are now arriving in India — before they are in full squadron service in the USSR. A few harsh words to Moscow and vital spare parts might be delayed in transit or even cut off.

It will be years before India manages to reduce its dependence on Soviet arms, years in which New Delhi's resident moralists will have to confine their strictures to the West's many sins.

India is a great and majestic nation. Modern India was founded by two of the noblest men of our century, Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, as a symbol of human rights and decency.

Soviet steel mills and MiGs now seem to have bought New Delhi's silence over Afghanistan. A silence, I think, that shames the memory and tradition of India's founders.