

All Statues Have Feet of Clay

By Manoj Das

The Anglo-American war in Iraq had many aspects to it, but the most poignant image to many was that of the dramatic collapse of Saddam's larger-than-life statue in Baghdad's Firdaus Square.

Ordinarily a statue is an inanimate semblance — sometimes accurate and sometimes grotesque — of a hero (who can turn into a villain in another time). But a statue is a symbol of much more: of the fascinations of a particular age, the sway of a personality, machinations, a collective ego motivated by the ideology of the day.. In the main, however, all depends on what the motivating force was behind its making — was it the subject himself? Was it his sycophants, or was it the result of a popular demand?

A statue being commissioned by the subject himself of course compromises its very credibility. Its most vulgar manifestation in our own time was in the Dominican Republic. The president, Generalissimo Trijulo, managed to erect over 2,000 statues of himself. The process of demolition began within hours of his assassination on May 30, 1961. In south India, huge hoardings of political and film personalities appear and disappear with great regularity, a sort of indication of who is in power and who is not.

And what could have become the world's most valuable statue (in monetary terms) never made it to completion — no sooner had the magnificent pedestal been given the final touches, the project had to be abandoned. This was because its model, 'Napoleon' Jean Bedel Bokassa, president of the Central African Republic, was overthrown and his government toppled. He had crowned himself Emperor — he placed the crown on his head with his own hands as there was no one exalted enough to do it for him. He also changed his country's name to Central African Empire on December 4, 1977 in a ceremony costing £10 million. But two years later, there

was nothing. He was nowhere on the radar screen.

Why do so many leaders hanker after statues? The reason is simple; it verges on the infantile. Psychologist Otto Rank diagnosed four streams of man's urge for immortality: (1) developing a belief in the indestructibility of the soul (Otto Rank is only analysing a process, not questioning its truth); (2) hitching one's wagon to the star of an ideology that one 'knows' would survive one; (3) trying to leave behind a great deed or creative work that should outlive one's physical life and, at the most common plane (4) ensuring continuation of one's line through offspring. We can very well add to this list the erection of the statue. The more unsure a dictator is about his place in history, the keener he grows to ensure his survival and glorification through erection of statues. Nobody would dare remind him of the second century Roman thinker-statesman Marcus Cato's statement: "I had rather people should ask why no statue had been erected in my honour than why one had!"

But the last word on the statue culture had been pronounced by poet P B Shelley in his *Ozymandias*, a stirring and effective antidote to ambition: "I met a traveller from an antique land/ Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone/ Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,/ Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,/ And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,/ Tell that its sculptor well those passions read/ Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,/ The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:/ And on the pedestal these words appear:/ "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:/ Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"/ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/ The lone and level sands stretch far away.



THE SPEAKING TREE