

Media

Spoils Of Sycophancy

FOR all those journalists who think they belong to a thankless and poorly-paid profession, there is hope on the horizon. It comes from the latest impresario to champion the "welfare and relief" of India's toiling journalists: Jinendra Kumar Jain, 42. From obscure beginnings as a small-time publisher, Jain has used every 'journalistic' rung to hop a step higher, and come very close to the Gandhi family. Last fortnight, Jain had the satisfaction of seeing his fast train to fame—the Journalists Welfare Foundation (JWF) which he launched on May 13 last year—steam into its destination.

On December 13, front-page display advertisements in Delhi newspapers welcomed the "journalists of the country" who had written prize-winning essays on the JWF's theme: 'Nehru and India'. The advertisements' space had been donated by big companies like the Delhi Cloth and General Mills (DCM), Grandlay Cables, Pure Drinks (the Campa bottlers), and the Walchand Group of Companies.

All roads leading to Mavalankar Auditorium, the venue of the award-presentation ceremonies, were straddled by huge arches, bedecked with banners heralding the event and sponsored by public sector units like Punjab National Bank and the India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC). Jain's name was prominently emblazoned on the banners and advertisements. It was evident that J.K. Jain, MP (Rajya Sabha) and self-styled benefactor of journalists, either possessed extraordinary persuasive powers, or was invisibly propped up by some powerful backers. The advertisements, which appeared in newspapers countrywide, cost a minimum of Rs 1 lakh.

The JWF was truly munificent. It gave away three top prizes and 51 consolation prizes in both the Hindi and English categories. The two first-prize winners (Arup Kumar Dutta, a free-lancer from Jorhat, Assam, in English and Pradeep Pant, an AIR employee of Delhi in Hindi) got return air tickets to the UK, Switzerland, West Germany, France and Italy and Rs 2,000 in cash. The second-prize winners (R.K.K. Menon of the *Mail* in Madras in English, and Gopal Sharma Sathi, a Gwalior free-lancer in Hindi) got return air tickets to Kathmandu and Rs 1,000 in cash, and the third-prize winners (Basabi Mookerjee, a

Delhi free-lancer in English and Krishna Mudgil of Bahadurgarh, Haryana, in Hindi) return air tickets to Bombay and Rs 500 in cash. The 102 consolation-prize winners were given items ranging from tape-recorders and transistor radios to suit-pieces and saris. Looking pleased and yet sheepish, the top prize winners all parroted warm Nehruvian sentiments and eternal gratitude to Jain.

Rewarding Experience: The amazing thing, however, was that out of 188 valid entries, as many as 108 people had won some prize. Jain had an ingenuous explanation for this flood of largesse: "Nehru's name is being maligned, and all the entrants praised

although the quality of the winning essays left much to be desired, the judges said the essays had been written with "vision and intellect". They acknowledged that the competition was "like a referendum on Pandit Nehru." The winning essays, along with goodwill messages from Indian dignitaries as well as the British High Commissioner and the Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal, were contained in a lavish 130-page hardbound souvenir (advertisements: 30 pages at an estimated revenue Rs 3 lakh) that was distributed free to the audience. After Information and Broadcasting Minister Vasant Sathe released the souvenir, the hall echoed with rustling cellophane as the audience eagerly fell on the packages of souvenirs.

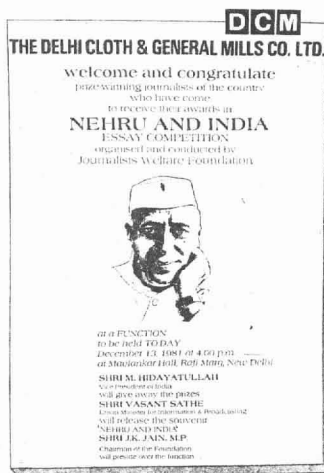
Mysterious Funding: This unseemly exhibition only delighted the man who orchestrated the show. But J. K. Jain was singularly reluctant to divulge all but the

most innocuous details of the manner in which he did Nehru proud. The souvenir, for instance, did not carry a single acknowledgement of donations in kind or cash. No details of the awards' income and expenditure were forthcoming. Jain did admit that the JWF's corpus was a little over Rs 1 lakh, of which he personally had donated Rs 11,000. But, said Ajit Gopal, chief public relations manager of Indian Airlines, who was one of the English essay judges: "What impressed me was that the JWF did not spend a paisa of its own money on the entire affair." One of the organisers, who wished to remain anonymous, revealed that the show must have

cost at least Rs 10 lakh—and each of the 10,000 souvenirs must have cost at least Rs 25 to produce. INDIA TODAY discovered that the airline tickets were donated by Air-India and Indian Airlines and the tape-recorders and radios by Weston.

On close examination, Jain's entire "journalistic" career is seen as having been designed to help him vault into the august company of the country's rulers. Eight years back Jain was a nobody. Since then, however, he has metamorphosed into an excellent example of the present-day Congress(I) animal, using a clever combination of the printed word, show-biz, sycophancy and proclaimed concern for his fellow-men to clamber on to the gravy train.

Prior to 1973 Jain made a business out of publishing business directories, which attract many advertisements and spin money, and then an aviation-tourism magazine. But these ventures did not endow him with much clout. So, in January 1973, Jain launched a tabloid Hindi evening, *Dooran*



The souvenir and the advertisement: calling all Nehruphiles

his role. As journalists are busy people, I thought they would enter only if they were promised something in return."

The list of lollipops did not end there. At Mavalankar Hall arrangements had been made for refreshments and what Jain thought would be an overflow crowd: even special closed-circuit TV sets had been set up in a huge pandal outside. One competition judge spoke rapturously about the "sumptuous spread" on the menu after the ceremony. Inside the auditorium Weston Electronics technicians taped the entire programme on colour video. The invitees mostly seemed to be a hand-picked lot of VIPs, ministers, diplomats, MPs—and journalists.

From beginning to end, Jain took great care to see that the competition was a public-relations plug for Jawaharlal Nehru. Significantly, no journalist of any national standing entered it; those who did were mostly small-town scribes, many not even full-time journalists. There was no working journalist on the judges' panel for the English entries, and



Jain (right) with Hidayatullah and Sathe: on the Nehru bandwagon

Desh. Even today *Dooran Desh* does not sell more than 5,000 copies. But it is an unabashed mouthpiece of the Congress(I).

During the Emergency, Jain used his journalistic status to get close to Sanjay Gandhi. He worked himself on to the 20-Point Programme Implementation Committee in Delhi—and then showed how canny he was by sticking with the Gandhis during the Janata regime. Friends of Sanjay remember that he used to make it a point to accompany Sanjay to all his court appearances and kick up a row every time. He proved useful, too, in keeping tabs on other journalists and their loyalties. When Mrs Gandhi was arrested and lodged in Tihar Jail for a week in December 1978, Jain joined the protests and courted arrest himself. Inevitably, he befriended the men who formed Sanjay's inner court, Kamal Nath in particular.

Sweet Adversity: Jain's wife Nirmal appears to have contributed most to his closeness to Mrs Gandhi. In October 1977, Jain and his wife accompanied Mrs Gandhi to Tamil Nadu. At Madurai they were attacked by a violent mob, and Nirmal was hit by a stone and hospitalised. "She was half dead," says Jain, "and Madam came and sat by her bedside for 20 minutes." Jain demonstrated his gratefulness by organising what

had by then become a Sanjay staple: blood-donation camps.

These ties paid off after Mrs Gandhi was re-elected in 1980. Shortly before Sanjay died in June that year, Kamal Nath persuaded him to give Jain a ticket for the Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh. In July 1980 Jain finally had the satisfaction of occupying a seat in the Upper House. Other parliamentarians recall that he went around for the first few days wearing a picture of Sanjay on his lapel. In the Rajya Sabha, he has acquired a reputation for being one of the most abusive Treasury Bench members.

Political gains have not prevented Jain from harping on his journalistic credentials. His dexterity is proved by the fact that his Sanjay label has not removed him from the post-Sanjay power structure. The essay competition was therefore an ideal way to reaffirm his loyalties and use the Nehru stick to beat the Opposition with. The day after the award ceremony, Mrs Gandhi met the winning journalists and said that the Opposition was "conspiring to malign Nehru and deny him his great contribution." She praised Jain for his initiative.

But the majority of Jain's party colleagues dislike him and have nothing but uncharitable things to say about him. One

senior party member, who said it was embarrassing to share his Rajya Sabha bench with Jain, said: "Jain is nothing but a cunning operator, and none of us can understand why Mrs Gandhi tolerates him. But this is the kind of man hovering around her these days." Other Congress (I) leaders, who also wished to remain unnamed, said that Jain was a "contact man" who can put any industrialist wishing to meet the prime minister in touch with her.

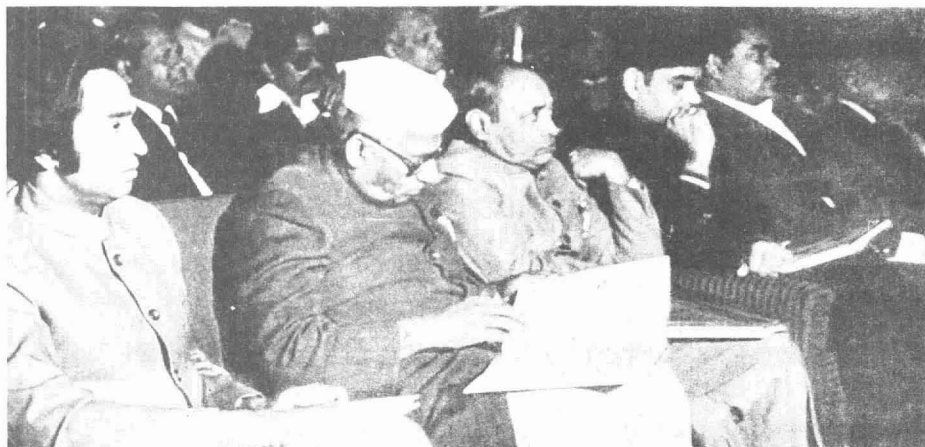
Durbari: A stocky, swarthy man who wears Nehru jackets and a cloying perfume, Jain has clearly no shortage of funds at present. He has chosen to make his officially allotted bungalow on Delhi's Balwantrai Mehta Marg his 'office'. Thickly carpeted and cluttered with armchairs, its walls decorated with framed pictures of Jain with Sanjay and Mrs Gandhi, the place is obviously designed to be a durbar.

Jain told INDIA TODAY that the JWF has, besides him, two other trustees: K.C. Jain, an income-tax advocate, and R.L. Jain, a "social worker" and, he admits reluctantly, a close relative. So far, says Jain, he has not thought about what the JWF will do in future. Strangely, it donated Rs 2,100 to the Handicapped Society in Delhi. As for journalists, Jain (who lists "public functions and get-togethers" as his pastimes in the Rajya Sabha Who's Who) has interesting plans. "Many young journalists go and drink a lot at embassies and other parties," he says, "and if they meet with any tragedy then the JWF will help their families."

Kamal Nath, when contacted by INDIA TODAY, said Jain was doing a good job. He admitted that he had helped organise the awards because Jain was "very close" to him. "These awards are not for the likes of Nihal Singh or Arun Shourie," he said.

Between the lines of praise that Jain drew, however, one fact clearly stood out: at one stroke, Jain had co-opted nearly 200 journalists into the Nehru "revival". Watching the Mavalankar Hall show, one senior journalist sourly remarked that Jain was obviously a "front man in the campaign to subtly control the press". That the awards were a semi-party affair was proved when Jain called upon Vasant Sathe to have his ministry officially publish the Nehru essays in "all national languages" and have them distributed nation-wide. At the same time, Jain asserted that he would try to get journalists more governmental largesse like telephone and gas connections and subsidised rail travel. It was clear that while ruling party leaders regularly castigate the press for its "irresponsibility", men like Jinendra Kumar Jain would prefer to wave a host of goodies before his gullible and potentially sycophantic brethren. Said another disgusted journalist: "Obviously, the JWF stands for Jain's Welfare Fund."

—CHAITANYA KALBAG



(From left) Nath, Sharma, Rao and Patil at the awards ceremony: no shortage of funds