

## Part III

# BUSINESS AS USUAL

### **555 Auctions (Going Going Gone)**

Auctions are nothing new to Sri Lanka. They were probably introduced during the period of Dutch colonial rule in the island three centuries ago. The Sinhalese word for auction *vendesi* itself has its origins in the Dutch word *vendutie*. These early auctions were possibly what are known as Dutch auctions where the auctioneer starts with a high asking price, gradually coming down, until a bidder decides the price is right and shouts out his acceptance. Being the first bidder to do so, he gets the goods.

That it was the Dutch system of auctioning that prevailed in the country is borne out by the fact that until as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century auctioneers in Galle were heard to urge the crowd *mayin kiyapan* (Say mine!). This implies the existence of a Dutch auction since “*Myn*” (Dutch for mine) could only be uttered by the bidders when the auctioneer himself is stating the price and the prices are descending. Be it as it may, in later times it was thankfully the English form of auctioning that prevailed, where the auctioneer starts with a lower price, with bidders competing with one another and offering increasingly higher bids till there are no more takers, the bidder who bid last bagging the item for that price.

What inspired father to be an Auctioneer I cannot say. Maybe it was his antiquarian tastes, for he loved old things, Another motivating factor would have been the closed economic climate of the mid-1970s when he commenced his auctions. The left leaning United Front Government led by Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike strongly discouraged and even clamped down on imports in pursuit of its vision of utopia - national self-sufficiency. Although an unpopular move as it led

to much privation, it was not without its beneficiaries, for it created a great demand for foreign goods of various descriptions including the more luxurious items like antique furniture which figured prominently in the auctions of the time. Just as the era of prohibition in the US, when alcoholic drinks were totally banned in the 1920s created a climate conducive for bootleggers to thrive, so did the era of the closed economy create the ideal environment for auctioneers to prosper, and prosper they did even years after the economy was opened up with the victory of the United National Party which pursued a laissez faire policy.



*Father the auctioneer. Beside him is mother and Zameen*

Father was already familiar with auctions when he embarked on it in the mid-1970s. His earliest exposure to it probably

came when he got into the used refrigerator trade based at his family home 'Darlington' when old fridges were repaired and painted all over to give it a fresh look by his helps Peter and Somay before being put up for sale at the Auction Rooms run by Auctioneer Earle H. Nicholas opposite the Maliban Kreme House along Galle Road, Colpetty. The man meant business; he had as his symbol a crown with two gavels on either side.

The name father chose for his business was *555 Auctions* after that well known brand of smooth taste cigarettes manufactured by British American Tobacco, a brand that is quite popular in Asia, mainly, it is said, because the number is thought to be lucky. What intrigued me was why father, a strict non-smoker who could not even brook the butt of a fag chose it as the name for his auctions, unless of course he was banking on the number bringing him luck. Islam is not a religion that allows its followers to believe in luck, and father may have later realized it. Nevertheless the name stuck.



*555 cigarettes which inspired the name of the auctions*

Father was one of the few auctioneers of those days, among other leading names being Dunstan Kelaart, Earle Nicholas and Schokman & Samarawickreme, not to mention Alexis Auction Rooms run by Alexis Siriwardhana of Killarney, Colpetty. He never thought of any of them as a threat, He had immense trust in himself and even went to the extent of declaring open S & A Auctions run by that aspiring duo of auctioneers, Nimal De Silva and Herbert Amarasinghe, in spite of the popular belief that opening a venture one was already in could bust one's business.

Father's earliest auctions were held at the grand hall of the Girls Friendly Society in Green Path, Colombo 7 on a more or less monthly basis, and this would, even in later times, continue to be the favoured venue.



*GFS down Green Path where father had his auction sales*

Besides GFS hall, he also held a few outstations like at the Galle Gymkhana Club inside the Dutch-built Galle Fort to

which he would resort to by motor bike, his underlings Somay, Joseph and Velu reaching the town with a lorry jam-packed with the goods to be auctioned off. Later times saw him having some of his auctions at the Municipal Cricket Club premises opposite St.Bridget's Convent and CNAPT Centre next to the Colombo National Museum. A few auctions were also held at the YMBA Hall, a sturdy rectangular building that lay by the road opposite the Savoy Cinema in Wellawatte. Its rear portion overlooked a canal and on the other side of its bank we could see what looked like crocodiles basking in the sun.

It was the GFS hall, almost a stone's throw away from home, that was the most common venue for the auctions. The hall possessed an old world charm of its own, having a wooden floor and even a stage at the back facing the entrance while a little doorway further back led to a spooky looking place reputed to have been haunted, for it was said that if one slept upon a bed there, he would find himself on the floor the following morning.

Behind the building, in a little room attached to it much like an annex lived lonely old Miss Lockhardt, a fair Burgher dame with close cropped pixie hair. In the sunset of her years and on the brink of slipping into that long, long night, she would welcome us into her cosy home to keep her company, enticing us with her little brown cookies which she kept in a jar. The quaint, enchanting chamber, though small and snug, looked very much like the home of an elf or fairy, as it seemed somehow to exude a golden effulgence, the result no doubt of the bright yellow glow of the tungsten filament of an incandescent bulb acting on the little, amply furnished room, suffusing it with an amber tint.

To the right in a ramshackle little house lived the caretaker, a lean, mustachioed character named Simon and his family of one wife, two sons and three daughters. The elder boy Sunil, a bespectacled fellow in his teens was a Bruce Lee fan who very realistically regaled us with the stories of his hero including one where he plucked out an opponent's heart, while the younger boy Jayantha was a less imaginative happy-go-lucky

sort. Between the hall and the hostel for the old girls, formerly a palatial house known as '*The Tent*' was a bare ground which when when we dug a few inches revealed thickset sago worms, the whitish grubs of the Palm Weevil, which I imagined were the kind the Chinese used to shove live into coconuts to fatten them up for the table, perhaps another of Sunil's yarns.

The auctions here were like no other. Greeting bidders at the gates was a well manicured hedgerow of dark green bushes with little red berries the size of mustard seeds which led to the beautifully canopied porch of the hall. One might have even supposed the road took its name from the two hedgerows on either side that led to the hall forming a sort of crescent driveway - but not really. The street name was in fact an English rendition of the Dutch *Groene Weg* "Green Way" so called by the Hollanders of an earlier age who used it to convey the much prized cinnamon harvest from the nearby Cinnamon Gardens to the Colombo Harbour. The lofty hall was paved with hardy wooden floorboards and this formed the auction floor - the scene of the day's proceedings. A few items also to be auctioned that day would be prominently displayed outside in the front lawn, between the two hedgerows, among them tents firmly pegged on the ground as if a family of gypsies had camped there.

The auctions drew a considerable crowd, for father touted it well, getting posters pasted prominently in the parapet walls of the city and taking advertisements in the leading Sunday newspapers of the day. The posters were pasted on the city walls by some of father's stooges or hirelings the night before the auctions by smearing it with *paappa*, a crude glue produced by adding flour to hot water, though there were occasions when we too helped out in the nightly chore. The Sunday newspapers too carried black and white advertisements with some choice wordings. Here's a sample of one placed in the Weekend newspaper: *Grand Auction Sale of Household Novelties, Niceties and Necessities. You name it, we have it! Almost anything from the verandah to the kitchen.* It was of course very short notice, for the auctions were held that very

day, beginning at 9.00 am. Depending on word of mouth for publicity was of course not a good idea, for potential buyers preferred minimum participation, since more participants meant more bids which in turn could undermine one's own bid.

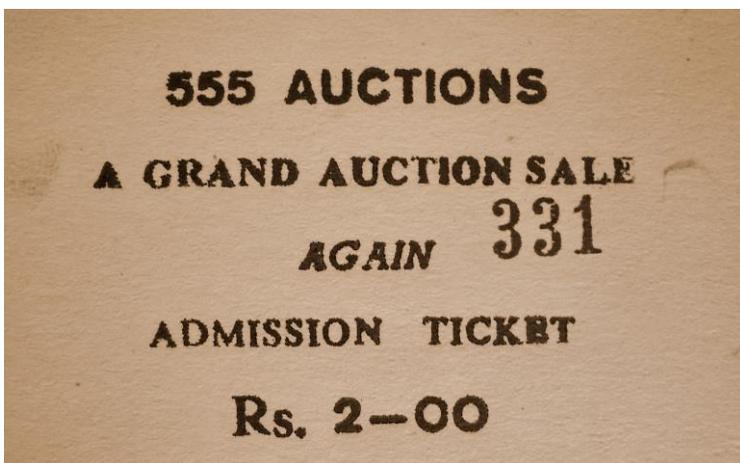
**555**  
**AUCTIONS**

TODAY  
AT  
9 A. M.  
AT THE  
GFS. CENTRE,  
58, GREEN PATH  
COLOMBO 7.  
REGRET NOT  
MISSING  
OUR  
GRAND  
**AUCTION**  
**SALE**  
OF HOUSEHOLD  
NOVELTIES  
NICETIES  
AND  
NECESSITIES  
YOU NAME IT!  
WE HAVE IT!!  
ALMOST ANYTHING  
FROM THE VERANDAH TO  
THE KITCHEN.  
ADMISSION BY  
TICKET Rs. 2/-

**WAZIR G HUSSEIN**  
AUCTIONEER & VALUER  
**555 AUCTIONS**  
201, Generals Lake Road  
Colombo 7 Phone 26465

*555 auctions advertisement, Weekend newspaper. June 1980*

The auctions were usually held on Sundays, with Saturday the day before being kept for 'on view' when potential buyers could come have a look at the items to be auctioned off the following day. When the big day came, not all were really welcome, in spite of a banner at the entrance proudly proclaiming *555 Auctions. Another grand sale again!* Entrance was not free, but by admission tickets priced at Rs.2.00, not so much for the money, but to deter the riff raff from taking it as a form of entertainment. In fact one of the ads taken in a weekend newspaper frankly put it: *As usual to avoid undesirables. Admission by ticket Rs.2/.*



*555 auctions ticket priced at 2 rupees to keep out undesirables*

Nay this was serious business, and father intended to keep it that way. Simon, the caretaker of the premises was assigned the job of selling the tickets under a large umbrella, though it was not always easy going for him since there were the occasional upstarts who made him feel the heat in spite of the shady canopy over his head. One, I remember, almost came to fisticuffs with the poor fellow. And to think there was a time I thought father made his money selling the tickets. It was only

later that I learned from mother that he kept a tidy sales commission, as much as 15 percent, for every item sold.

And when it all started, the auction floor was one big marketplace, only that the activity, rather than being dispersed all over, gravitated at a particular spot at a given time before moving on to the next nearest item to be sold so that the entire length and breadth of the hall and all that in-between experienced similar activity, the entire proceeding being like a set of dominos tumbling upon one another in pre-determined order. Father would move from place to place, showing off to the bidders the item to be auctioned and describing its merits in great detail before calling out a starting price, which would be successively raised by each bidder.

The final bid needless to say was the last one. If there were no more takers, the item would go to him or her that bid last, but not before father had uttered the parting words: *Going once, going twice, going, going gone!* and struck the object with his gavel, a hammer with a hard black triangular piece of plastic stuck on to a steel handle. It sometimes happened that before he could say *gone!* a buyer made another bid, spurring a further flurry of bidding.

It was of course in father's interest that the item in question get the highest possible bid, for the higher the bid, the higher his cut. In later years, when the auctions were not doing that well - the result, little doubt of cheap imported goods flooding the market - uncle Fazly had got into the habit of making superficial bids to up the previous bid, which he sometimes overdid, for father could sometimes be seen glowering at him oblivious to what the people around might think of it. He very well knew that the overly keen bidder, the stay-at-home-boy he was, could not afford the goods and that he would have to pocket it out.



*Father's auctions looked a bit like this*

The auctions brought together a lot of people who seemed to enjoy bidding against one another. A bid usually superseded another by ten Rupees, but there were those rare exceptions, one such being from an Iraqi embassy official who rather than bidding for an item at the usual 10 rupees had this habit of increasing his bid by a mere 5 rupees. Father found the haggling rather irritating and took a potshot at the fellow: “*What Mister, you come from a country with a lot of oil !*”. Unruffled, the Mesopotamus shot back: “*Mr.Wazir, do you think every Iraqi has oil in his backyard ?*”

Father had a knack for swaying the crowd. Standing tall above the sea of heads - he often used a chair to stand upon, the better to be seen and heard - he would throw his voice about to tout his wares. His flair for the English language he put to good use, sometimes even stretching it a bit too far in his characteristic style of grandiloquence. His descriptive power was remarkable, so much so that he could describe an antique in such detail that one would have thought he were a

seasoned arts connoisseur. He would also throw in some humour for good measure, cracking a joke or two to liven up the folk huddled around him so that it sometimes seemed more like a razzle dazzle showbiz stunt than your usual auction sale.

Added to this was his stentorian high timbred voice that never seemed to go hoarse despite almost an entire day of verbal fire. During the short intervals he would rejuvenate himself by gulping down copious quantities of King coconut water, an energizing and cooling beverage that possibly had a refreshing effect on the area about the vocal chords that took most of the strain.

What was most memorable about the auctions was the vast variety of items put up for sale that day. These were spread out higgedly piggedly or sat calmly cheek by jowl with one another.



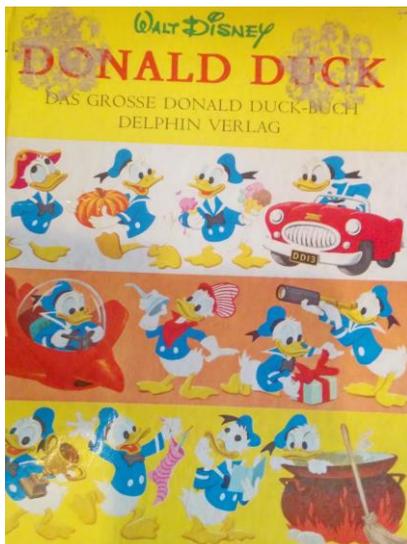
*Antiques such as this were often sold at the auctions*

So much so that even a veteran museum curator popping in on the day before the auctions, when it was open to the public to view, might have been entranced with the array of goods on display, for it were as if an entire museum representing different eras and realms had been put up for sale on a piecemeal basis. Here were long stately beds and tall majestic cupboards; regal grandfather clocks and placid-looking gramophones; rickety rocking chairs, sedate night lamps and sparkling crystalline chandeliers; glassware, brassware and silverware; cutlery, crockery and camping gear; Chinese porcelain vases and ornate Persian carpets; pricey curios and cheaper knick-knacks and bric-a-bracs of various substances, shapes and sizes and on occasion even vinyl music records and well illustrated books - all for a price of course.

Since the auctions were held in the weekends, we kids often made the most of it, inspecting and admiring the stuff that interested us most and sometimes even conspiring to coax mother to purchase those that caught our fancy. Among the few items we acquired in this manner were some Walt Disney books and imported packets of seeds of flowering plants. Some of the books came as huge lots to be auctioned off probably from some embassy official or expatriates of European origin. Some were in German including a couple of hard cover Walt Disney story books like *Mickey Maus* and *Donald Duck*, while at least one, a black and white comic book of *Popeye* was in Dutch. These had a story behind them as well. It happened one night that we espied the stuff sitting cosily in a large coffer at the GFS and informed mother about it. She told us very plainly it was not in English, but in some other lingo.

We would not budge, maintaining that they were in English, since when seen from above about a couple of feet away that's what it seemed like. German and Dutch, like most other Western European languages are written in the Roman script just as English is, and this we would learn when mother got the lot for us. In the days and months that followed, we tried to unravel the stories by avidly going through the pictures, but without much success. We did have a series of German

language primers titled *Familie Baumann* which father had bought in the times his tourist resort Sihina Beach Village was doing well, but we did not have the patience to study the language just to make out the stories.



*Our Donald Duck in German still with me*

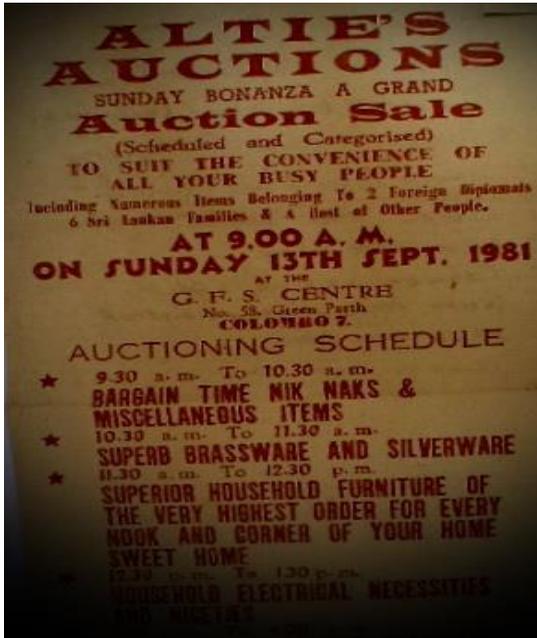
As for the imported seeds which came in flimsy little colourful packets, we were certainly captivated by these and anticipating a bloom in blossoms sowed these in a specially prepared bed in our backyard, only to discover that they would not as little as sprout even after a week or two. The seeds were either not suitable for our climes or had expired. The truth is that much of the stuff that found its way to the auctions were outdated, and indeed this was one of the draws, especially for old timers who clung to the notion: *the older the better*. Thankfully foodstuffs, even those of foreign provenance, did not come under the hammer, for had they, father would likely have lost a lot of his hard-earned money settling fines for selling food unfit for human consumption, or still worse,

fighting lawsuits from victims of food poisoning, which could have been very, very damaging to his reputation.



*The seed packs we got from the auctions looked like this*

With time, 555 Auctions gave way to what was called ‘*Alties Auctions*’ named after little brother Altaf who happened to be father’s pet and after whom he also named a pony called *Alties Girl*. An auction like any other held on Sunday mornings at the GFS in the early 1980s, offering among other items ‘*household furniture of the very highest order for every nook and corner of your home sweet home*’, it gradually lost its steam, being affected in no small way by the influx of imported goods that were flooding the market at very competitive prices.



*Alties Auction handbill.1981*

It eventually shifted to the rear portion of a commercial premises down Green Path becoming a more or less permanent feature, in other words a showroom where items were sold at a fixed price, before dying a slow death as customers, now drawn to the newer imported stuff to be seen in almost every shop, became increasingly scarce.

## No business like food business

There is no business, they say, like food business. Little wonder father got into the processed food trade, having seen some really bad times with the auctions and his tourist resort, Sihina Beach Village.

The trade of his choice was spicing choice cuts of meat with a piquant concoction of chilli and garlic, which when sauted or fried, made a very hearty meal. It was quite addictive really, even to us kids. The 400 gms packs of beef and chicken were turned out at a small workshop in Wattala with the help of a few hired hands though there were even occasions we kids used to help out. Father used to say it was alright to pack a bit more meat, but not less. Each pack sold for only Rs. 19 back then.



*Bahera Beef Pack. This specimen somehow survived*

He called this simple range of meat products ‘Bahera’ no doubt inspired by one of his business heroes Naleem Hajjar whose popular brand of poultry products known as Bairaha had become a household name by then. Whether he wanted to exploit the similarity in name or simply thought that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery I cannot say. What I do know is that father admired Naleem Hajjar, the astute entrepreneur from the coastal town of Beruwala who started off as a gem merchant before putting his energies into poultry farming. Its near namesake Bahera, though quite popular in Colombo at

one time, did not make it as big as father had anticipated. He eventually lost interest in it and it died an untimely death.

However, this was not to be the last of father's forays into the food business. In a couple of years he had come up with the idea of a mobile restaurant at the Galle Face Green similar to but smaller in scale to that already run by another Muslim businessman simply known as *nana* (Big Brother), actually a resident of Slave Island known as Sulaiman Farook who had started off as a green gram seller on the green. The man had given his sobriquet to his fast food outlet which was also known as *Nana's*, a name which would in time spawn a number of similar businesses bearing similar names that would mushroom near the walkway fronting the sea, in the process dwarfing the original *Nana's* that once did a brisk business nearer the Galle Road where it enjoyed a virtual monopoly till father came into the scene.

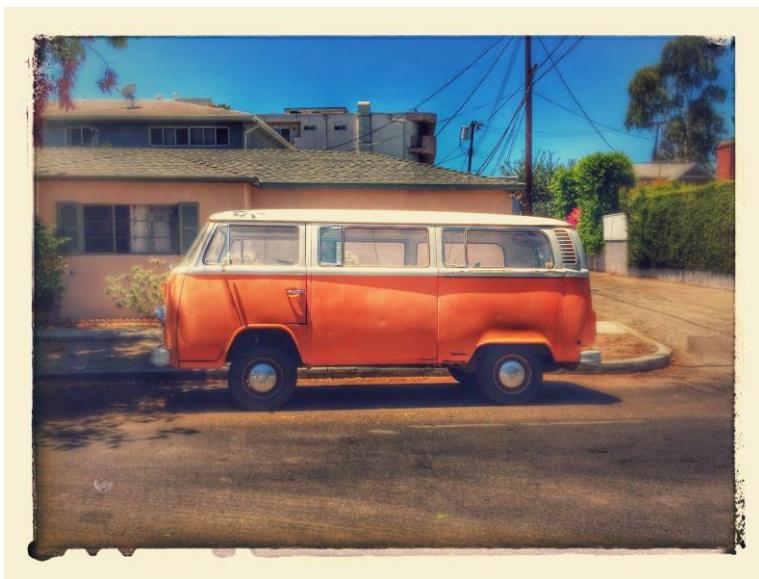


*One of the many spots at Galle Face called NANA'S*

Father did not give him any real competition though. He would have, had he taken a name after *Nana's* as many others

did later. Though he himself had once basked in the glory of another's business, as he did *Bahera*, he simply could n't bring himself to calling it *Naanaa's* or *New Nana's* or even *Wazir Nana's*. Unlike Nana's which employed many Muslim youth and included tantalizing barbeques, ours was a much more modest venture, selling fried chicken, French fries and sandwiches to the hungry visitors of the green.

Our parents did much of the preparatory work for the day's business, spicing the meats and cutting the spuds into strips after which they would be loaded into the Volkswagen van we had, along with a few small tables and some white linen. By late afternoon or early evening, father and two or three of us boys would get into the van and pulling into a parking lot between the green and Galle Road would get to work, setting up the tables to form a U shape with the van strategically placed at its opening. Father, sometimes assisted by a help or two who made their way to the green, would fry the meats and chips while we kids would do the serving.



*Father's VW Van looked like the one in this picture*

This continued for a year or so before father decided it was not making the money he had anticipated and called it quits. We missed it though, for we enjoyed doing our little part amidst the inviting aroma of the fried meats and the cooling breeze of the sea as the sun sank into the ocean yonder, tinting the waters with a glistening gold and bathing the sky in a brazen orange before taking with it its light and casting that dark veil we called night.

Father also toyed with the idea of getting into the making of strawberry jam; not the cheap artificial stuff made from a kind of local pumpkin, but the real thing. Strawberries were then been grown in the hilly climes of Nuwara Eliya in special enclosures that looked very much like airport hangers but served the purpose of glasshouses. He likely got the idea when we visited the home of mother's classmate Nirmali who worked at the GFS. That was when her husband remarked that artificial strawberry jam made out of ash pumpkin was good business, only to have father remark that he did n't believe in artificial things. It had to be natural or nothing.

As there were no books available on the topic, he placed an order to get one imported at a leading bookshop like Gunasena's or Lake House. Sure enough, the book arrived after a few weeks and father rushed to receive it. 'Strawberry Jam' it sure was, but not about the jam. It was a play in the form of dialogues, probably the play of that name by Bruce Fisk, a British black comedy about two spinster sisters. The book he brought home in good humour, but with it died his plans to get into jams. It was too great a risk as this simple incident had proved and he did n't intend taking any more.

Among the few books that father had in a box-like appendage that stuck out of the head of his bed were big titles like *Handbook for the Ceylon Farmer* and *Animal Husbandry* and a slim volume on *Banana Cultivation* which perhaps reflected his intended forays into more ventures of the kind. That nothing came out of them is not surprising.

## **Bang Bang !**

There are some things in life that come with a lot of noise and when the din has died down are hardly if ever heard of afterwards. Uncle Nazir's pet project, *Bang Bang* was just that, gone almost as soon as it had come, as if from a smoking gun.

Conceived in the aftermath of the free economy ushered in by the UNP regime in 1977, this grandiose building project in the Pettah, the commercial hub of Colombo was the first of its kind, offering the shoppers of the time (early 1980s) what shopping malls like Liberty Plaza and Majestic City offer people today, a non-stop shopping experience under one roof.

The brains behind the project, uncle Nazir, was a self-made man with a head for business. A well-groomed man with a sturdy build, fair complexion, moustache and a mole over his left eyebrow, he seemed to have what men call the *Midas Touch* where everything one touches turns into gold, sometimes to one's detriment as well.



Uncle Nazir in his heyday

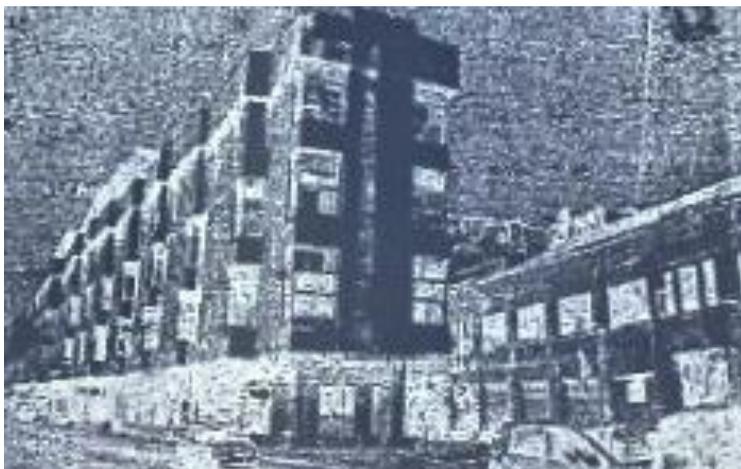
Having amassed a fortune in the cloths trade, importing reels of expensive cloth from India and elsewhere and selling them to local manufacturers, he was a millionaire by the tender age of thirty or so and soon set his sights on putting his new found wealth to good use. And what better way of accomplishing this than by means of something solid and tangible, a lasting monument to one's entrepreneurial genius and indeed to one's ego; what better indeed than a large imposing building which men would behold with awe and talk about for decades, nay centuries.

It was probably his frequent business visits to Japan and other parts of the Far East with its grand and glitzy buildings that inspired uncle Nazir to think big. Within a few years, he not only conceived and planned the building of his dreams, but also executed it to perfection, so much so indeed that no other modern building could match it in terms of design, function and elegance when it was built in 1979. It was modern as modern could be then and in many respects well ahead of its time as far as the country was concerned.



*Uncle Nazir in Japan early 1970s*

Officially called Capricorn Towers, it stood tall, like a modern-day castle despite being built on just fifty perches of land that had earlier housed the Colombo Fire Brigade. It was idyllically placed, like a fortress, in a peninsula of land, rather V-shaped, between Reclamation Road and Bankshall Street in the Pettah facing the Khan Clock Tower. The façade of the four-storeyed complex, standing tall above the rest of the buildings in the environs was in itself quite impressive, not to mention its colourful innards, totalling about a hundred cells, which were a hive of activity. Still it was nothing compared to what was originally planned, a 12-storeyed edifice with a revolving restaurant on the topmost floor. Uncle Nazir was a man with big ideas that were far ahead of his times.



*Bang Bang Building*

At the time, it seemed to us more than just a mall, call it a mini city, for it had it all with countless shops occupying as many as three spacious floors selling a vast array of imported items from toys and books to the latest gadgets the material world had to offer. It also had a little restaurant, *Cap's Corner*, run by uncle Nazir's lady friend Noor Mubarak. Those who

stepped inside often found it hard to break away as if entrapped in a spider's web, for it was all so inviting. Not only could one shop in air-conditioned comfort, but also move from floor to floor by means of a state-of-the-art escalator, perhaps the first in the country, from the large open central area.



*The building Bang Bang was supposed to evolve into*

Bang Bang was like a new world to us kids, beginning with the sleek black and yellow escalator which we would step onto with great expectations, as if on a one-way joy ride to paradise. It was all so captivating; the well stocked shops so delightful to behold, each one of them a gigantic treasure trove for us little ones with plenty of toy guns, plastic soldiers and books of various descriptions that never failed to fascinate us. We were mesmerised with this pearly white or bluish grey aquarium with glass face, peering through which we could behold a plethora of water life in diverse forms including not just ornamental fish, but also clams and little crustaceans.

We never made a show of it that we were the bigwig's nephews, even to the shop folk who thought of our presence more as a nuisance since we often handled toys and browsed through books without buying them. Fascinated as we were with the stuff, we simply did not have the money to pay for it. The pocket money we were given hardly sufficed for an ice cream or two or to play a few coin-operated arcade video games such as *Space Invaders* and *Galaxian*, zapping alien invaders with a laser canon, to which one parlour was wholly dedicated. The only substantial item I recall buying despite several visits to the place was a set of light yellow toy cowboys on horses which came with a colourful cardboard house.



*Galaxian and Space Invaders, popular arcade games. 1980s*

We were at least fortunate to have access to the building; there were some who were not blessed even with this privilege, for the street urchins were strictly kept away by a security guard posted at the entrance. I can still recall his attempts, some vainly, to keep the ragamuffins out, for they often came

in a pack, enabling a few of their number to make a dash past the entrance into a world of glitter and glamour.

Those who ran the show could not care for their likes, for looks mattered in a business like this. Dirty-looking boys seen prowling about the building might convey a bad image of the business to better-off shoppers and even repel them, notwithstanding the annoyance caused to the poor fellows who would no doubt have enjoyed the ambience of the place as any of us. But image mattered and those at the helm spared no pains to boost it, often at great cost. Bang Bang's ads on television went with the sound track *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* after the 1968 musical film of the same name which featured a revolutionary flying car devised by eccentric inventor Caractacus Potts and which was named as such after the noise its engine made- *Chitty Bang Bang*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*...



*Bang Bang's ads were influenced by this musical*

Bang Bang also made it in the news such as when a leading weekend newspaper reported during the Sinhala New Year season when the place bristled with shoppers, how a sharp-eyed guard had detected a man who slipped past a sales girl by slipping on a pair of trousers over his pair of jeans. The paper quoted the guard as saying: *“The man went in wearing blue jeans and then I saw it had suddenly turned brown”*.

However Bang Bang’s fortunes were not to last long, for like many other big-time booming businesses in the city, it sank into decline with the depressing post-1983 climate, losing most of its tenants who brought it its revenue, and eventually its shine and luster that once added so much glamour to the heart of Colombo City. Within as little as ten years since its roaring entry into the big city, it had become but a shadow of its former self with a lackluster exterior and a rather dark and gloomy interior, a far cry from the days that once were. In later times people would attribute its downfall to the fact that its owner had erected a large mural near the entrance with the Arabic Words *Bismillah* (In the Name of God) not horizontally in the Arabic fashion reading from right to left, but vertically Jap style, an act which some seriously contended would have invited the Divine Wrath.

With time, uncle Nazir would become increasingly reclusive, presiding over the once grand building like a feudal baron in a palace fast falling into ruin and taking a suite in it as his home. All this while his parents and siblings quietly lived in the house that was actually his - the Umma House of our childhood. He eventually returned home when his parents had passed away and his siblings had gone their separate ways, only to suffer bouts of memory loss. It took its toll on him, virtually turning him into a shell of his former self before he died of a heart attack and large bedsores on the buttocks while under the care of a sister.